

EDITORIAL

Higher education policymaking in an era of increasing marketization

This issue is dedicated to Gareth Williams and to the memory of David Watson, two higher education policy analysts of distinction

The links between higher education and society are simultaneously both stable and unstable: stable in that they reflect the persistent values, needs, purposes, anxieties, and aspirations of that society, yet unstable because the *tightness* of the links may vary over time, as do perceptions of the ‘usefulness’ of higher education.

When society is stable, universities – and higher education systems at large – are usually left to their own devices, and the relation becomes one of seeming autonomy for the universities. When there is societal instability, the links and their implicit promises are soon questioned, and demands multiply for higher education either to ‘deliver’ on its function or for its function to be reformulated, its promises fulfilled. This is happening now in the UK, especially in England, and significant changes in the relationship between higher education and society have been taking place. There is a shift in power from the state to the market, so that the ends of the state are giving way, or have already given way, to the ends of the market. So the question for higher education – posed initially by the Thatcher governments – is becoming not ‘What is higher education?’ but rather ‘What is higher education *for*?’

This special issue of the *London Review of Education* focuses on the evolution of higher education in the UK with an emphasis on contemporary policy discourses and an implicit foregrounding of that second question, ‘What is higher education *for*?’ Until recently, access to higher education was perceived as a welfare right embedded in an emerging knowledge economy, but there has been a steady transition to a new political framework characterized by different forms of coordination among the institutional policymakers. With particular, though not exclusive, reference to England, the papers examine the emergence of differing forms of institutional and structural change in higher education policymaking. The intention is to explore the growing pluralism within the system. Is it simply a question of increased institutional diversity or is that also accompanied by greater hierarchy and stratification? Each of the papers offers its own interpretation of why and how change has occurred, and reflects on future trends. In all the articles, how to understand the changing character of higher education, how to analyse its social role, and how to specify its relationships to policy are unifying themes. The essays are an excursion into a difficult terrain: the epistemological framing of higher education within the context of new state modalities.

Filippakou and Tapper start their overview with a sketch of the expansion of the higher education system through the emergence of the new 1960s universities as an innovation ‘of its time’. However, that world has changed and those ‘new’ universities that constituted and co-evolved within it now function in a differently constituted world. The authors contrast the original steering of the change process by state and quasi-state institutions with the more contemporary emergence of state-regulated market pressure as the force for change in higher education. The next two papers then present examples of institutional and structural change to

illustrate further this trend. **Salter et al.** examine the expansion of medical-school student numbers in England. They argue that this initiative has been a direct result of government policy, although policy implementation was delegated to the state apparatus and also led to a struggle between higher education interests and the General Medical Council for knowledge control. **Temple et al.** report on recent research aimed at assessing how the management of the undergraduate student experience in English higher education is changing in the light of the new tuition fee regime introduced in 2012, as well as other government policies aimed at creating market-type pressures within the higher education sector. They suggest that a distinction was observed between research-intensive universities and those that are largely dependent on income from teaching, the latter occupying weaker market positions. They argue that these different responses to a changed environment point to the creation of two distinct English university types: one strongly managerial with 'the student as customer' orientations, and a smaller group with less centralized, more collegial cultures.

Palfreyman and Tapper place the increasing marketization of English higher education in its wider historical and political context, and suggest that at its heart the payment of tuition fees by home-based undergraduates looms large. They offer an opinion piece suggesting that the issue is still far from resolved, and argue for the continuation, albeit with some accompanying reforms, of student tuition fees repaid through income-contingent loans. The articles by **Caruana** and **Montgomery** each provide precise examples of the direction in which marketization and change in higher education are heading: transnational partnerships in a global environment. Caruana reviews research on transnational higher education through the lenses of 'network power' and 'dissensus', and suggests that there is a need for more research on the 'entrapping' aspects of global social relations to provide a counterweight to the influence of dominant paradigms. With particular reference to China, Montgomery discusses how transnational partnerships between universities can illustrate the changing political, social and cultural terrain of global higher education, parts of which are accentuating inequalities in the system.

Parry reminds us of how short is the policy memory on higher education within modern-day governments and their agencies. He examines college higher education in England during two distinct periods, 1944 to 1966 and 1997 to 2010, and argues that both saw attempts to expand courses of higher education outside the universities. According to Parry, the two episodes highlight very different assumptions about what types of institution should be involved in what kinds of higher education. The interconnectedness of further and higher education is also explored in Ainley's and Dennis's essays, which show how the changing political terrain shapes decision-making and institutional change. **Ainley** argues that the changes to both further and higher education that are already well underway are revealed by what can be called the model of the 'Business Studies University', in which large parts of higher education are seen as further education. This, he suggests, is creating a new single FE (or nominally FHE) sector – what Palfreyman and Tapper (2014) call 'tertiary education' – which now combines 'all post-18 education whether delivered in further education colleges or within universities'. **Dennis**, using a philosophical lens, critiques the current Conservative Government policies of austerity that seem to suggest that, if education beyond compulsory schooling serves no particular purpose beyond the privatized learning needs of the individuals or the corporation, state withdrawal from its provision is entirely justified. She concludes that the sector has adopted an ethics of survival as a necessary response to austerity and deregulation and, taking the lead from Biesta (2008), she suggests that education is reduced to 'learnification' – a set of market-based relationships.

Finally, reflecting on all the above papers, **Williams** re-examines the inherent tension between the collective public and individual private benefits and responsibilities of higher education. He suggests that the emergence of mass – and later near-universal – higher education

changed the way it was viewed by governments. Partly because it was making much larger claims on resources, but also reflecting broader ideological changes that laid much greater stress on the relations between costs and benefits to individuals and particular groups in their economic and social activities. He concludes by arguing that it is no longer possible to take for granted that higher education is intrinsically a public good, and in the last analysis higher education cannot be understood except in the context of the wider social and political environment in which it is located.

If, in that context, we ask ‘What is higher education?’ and ‘What is higher education for?’, we might answer something like this. In a society dominated by the demands of the market, by consumption, there is an absolute demand that higher education overall should question itself and its relations to policy, whether it has as one of its central principles the theoretical condition of knowledge. These will be principles focused on ethics and, therefore, how these might be established. They are essential for any *legitimate* higher education system to be confident in a market-dominated society. They constitute an unassailable reason for the centrality of higher education as an academic subject.

Thus, there is a large agenda ahead for those concerned with ‘higher education’ and with its scope of enquiry and purpose. This issue aims to draw out some of the principle issues posed for higher education policymaking in an age of marketization. But mapping that field, and fashioning the theories, epistemologies, and methodologies of higher education, makes for a very big task ahead.

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Notes

The coda is collection based on a seminar held at the UCL Institute of Education in London on 12 November 2015, honouring **David Watson**’s many and varied contributions to higher education policy, scholarship, and practice. A teacher of extraordinary charisma, he inspired generations of students, practitioners, and many of his colleagues.

This special issue was prompted by a conference symposium – *The Shifting Political Terrain: Changing Expectations of Higher Education* – held at the annual conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education in December 2014. I would particularly like to thank Simon Marginson and the anonymous reviewers for their generous support of this special issue, and to acknowledge Pat Gordon-Smith’s central role and sustained energy in seeing it come into being.

References

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