



PERGAMON

Higher Education Policy 14 (2001) 197–199

—HIGHER—
EDUCATION
—POLICY—

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Editorial

Policy-making: perspectives from Eastern Europe

One of the main tasks which lies at the heart of comparative higher education and particularly the policy dimension of that vast field, is the study of the way in which other cultures and nations make provision for and impart order upon, higher learning. Rather more subtle are the differences in process and procedure which are nevertheless vital if the interpretation thus conveyed is to have dimension and depth. Unravelling the complex interplay between process and structure is a delicate task even within the historical and political setting of one system of higher education,¹ let alone extending it at the same time to others.

Yet, it is precisely this comparative perspective within the general setting of policy-making in higher education which has undergone an expansion virtually without precedent in the course of the past two decades. Certainly, comparative analyses are not new. Forty years ago when higher education in Western Europe, for instance, stood on the threshold of becoming a mass phenomenon, various government commissions and enquiries examined what was taking place at the same time in other systems. The British Report of the Prime Minister's Committee, chaired by the economist, Lionel Robbins, is not untypical of this interest and curiosity. Others followed this self-same practice. However, foreign practices and ways of 'doing things' remained a largely marginal undertaking, subordinate to the basic purpose which remained solidly anchored to the task of determining priorities within a national context.

It is precisely this 'complementary' nature of comparative analysis which has changed so radically over the course of the past two decades, though in saying this, obviously the particular circumstances, the state of development and the priorities envisaged by individual governments will show marked difference in chronology and in timing. Not all national systems — and still less those who shape them — will necessarily be influenced by or agree with, the weight which the comparative perspective has assumed in the general thrust of higher education's onward progress. But the fact that some may afford less attention to what is happening elsewhere in no way invalidates the general notion that to an increasing extent whatever the national agenda for higher learning it is increasingly shaped — some might even say, constrained — by what competitors and neighbours are doing. Why this re-definition of perspective has taken place is, of course, not difficult to explain. Indeed, it is situated within the logic of international competition itself, irrespective of whether one agrees with the social and economic consequences of that particular ethic, or not. Moreover, *soit dit en passant*, whatever

¹ For a classic example of this approach undertaken for the United Kingdom see Tony Becher & Maurice Kogan (1992). *Structure and process in higher education* (2nd ed.) London: Heinemann.

statesmen of varying stature would have us believe, competition is not ‘all sweetness and light’, even though in this latter day edition of Dean Swift’s *Battle of the Books*, the spiders of this world often have recourse to the argument of the bee to attain their ends.

In effect, when we raise our heads beyond the parapet of our immediate concerns and interests, be they teaching, research, administration or leadership, we cannot fail to be struck by one amazing development. That development rallies around two fashionable issues which, themselves, are inextricably bound up with the comparative dimension and more to the point to its strengthening and its advancement. They are, on the one hand, the notion of ‘globalisation’ and, on the other, ‘internationalisation’. Where one draws the line between the two is, not surprisingly, coming to occupy the minds of scholars and decision-makers across the planet.

The higher education community is very far from standing aside from this general debate. Indeed, it is centrally concerned both as an instrument for perpetuating and disseminating these programmes, quite apart from sometimes suffering the consequences of their actions and convictions. There is a view which distinguishes between globalisation and internationalisation on the grounds that the former is taken up with the tentacular spread of economic hegemonism whilst the latter is concerned more with spreading the principle of equity between nations and peoples and thus, as van der Wende makes plain in her exploration of current policies of internationalisation within the European Union, a co-operative ethic may have its place.

Nevertheless, if the debate over the place and weight accorded to competition or to co-operation will certainly gather weight, it in no way detracts from the fundamental fact that issues which are inseparable from the comparative perspective in higher education policy are, perhaps for the first time since the State assumed responsibility for higher education, now at the forefront of the agendas of nations. More to the point, national priorities and the options that lead to their determination can no longer wholly be discussed without reference to it. This is not to say that the policies of individual systems of higher education are determined by what is perceived as going on beyond national frontiers. In certain instances, such may indeed be the case — and here one thinks of certain systems where an unfortunate trajectory of development is hobbled by an immense burden of debt. But by and large, the nation state is still the prime lever for change. It is, however, under a certain obligation — whether as a result of trade agreements or as a consequence of being part of a trading bloc seeking to move beyond commerce as its sole *raison d’être* — to take some account of the international dimension, either to judge the efficiency of what it has changed or to change in order to meet what it may conceive as a threat to the viability of its higher education coming from without.

It is against this backdrop that the current issue of Higher Education Policy is placed. Reconstructing higher education in Eastern Europe is a particularly good illustration of the general intensification of international exchange and co-operation in policy-making. But, as always, what emerges as intention at the level of national administration is not automatically followed by action at the establishment level. Interestingly, Tomusk’s account of developments in Estonia seems to support the contrary proposition, namely that initiatives taken by individual establishments are not always of great persuasiveness

when system-wide legislation is being drawn up. Indeed, as he makes abundantly clear, even in systems so deeply grounded in top down decision-making as the latter day Soviet system in Estonia, circumstances do sometimes arise that open the way for initiative at the establishment level.

By contrast, Thomas' blow by blow account of the positions taken by different interest groups engaged in negotiating the framework and context for future legislation, give us an interesting insight into the tensions all too evident on such occasions.

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