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EDUCATION
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Editorial

Key Issues

Introduction

Depending on one's theology, confession is said to be good for the soul.

And whilst those who submit articles to journals may sometimes doubt whether Editors, as a species, are endowed with the high qualities and virtues which accompany such a condition, it has nevertheless to be admitted that sometimes, confession is good for them too.

Higher Education Policy, as its readers know, is a journal arranged around themes. A theme based journal is, as many contributors realise, no small challenge and most particularly so when members of the higher education community send in unsolicited articles. There are many ways of dealing with this flattering situation. But one consequence is all too often that colleagues who submit the fruits of their research for publication find that the time taken to 'fit them in' to a theme is longer than decency—and patience—are prepared to endure. When many excellent articles flood in, editorial imagination comes under great strain to find some element which perhaps coincidentally, binds them together. Sometimes, the over-tried wits of the Editor produce a happy formula. Sometimes not.

This issue, however, has been more than unusually delicate. And one has to confess, the title 'key issues' is not overly satisfying. Satisfaction is absent for the simple reason that 'key issues' is neither inspiring nor sufficiently precise a title to bring together around a central theme the range of articles included in this number. Yet, the questions which are raised are amongst the most crucial to our community.

Power and Influence

Who is seen as having power and influence in systems of governance? By its very nature, this is a perennial and central question and one that crops up whenever systems of governance are revised or subject to change in goals and priorities. Blackwell and Cistone explore this topic in the context of Florida. Their

findings will be of more than passing interest to those whose systems of governance are, as is the case in such widely different systems as Australia, South Africa and most of the Western European not to mention East and Central Europe, in a state of relative volatility. Many of the changes in the latter systems have been based on the assumption that, whether in the interests of democracy or efficiency, power and influence ought to be more broadly shared. Sharing power, as Blackwell and Cistone point out, is not something that higher education leaders see as a dominant concern. The question this finding poses is, of course, whether such a view has long been shared in Florida or whether it reveals something more generic to systems of governance as they develop over time. If one takes the latter perspective, then it may well be argued that the perceived absence of faculty and students as influential actors may well be the inevitable concomitant of systems of governance, stable, mature and established. And that the initial push to internal power sharing is gradually eroded as time and student generations pass and attitudes change.

Equity and the Social Dimension

An equally crucial issue is raised by Jameson who examines higher education reform in Peru. His argument—and it is one which is beginning to receive closer attention as part of the sub debate over the social consequences of policies of ‘globalisation’—is that reform which pays attention only to a particular economic model and which ignores the ‘human resource aspect’ of higher education is as unlikely to achieve its ends, as are top down, system wide reforms. The proposal Jameson puts forward is interesting in that it appears to combine a dash of what was once known as ‘positive discrimination’ by bringing higher education into the reach of the most able students from ‘marginalised and threatened groups’. Certainly, such a proposal injects a welcome element of ‘equity’ all too often ancilliary where not wholly absent from the debates on higher education’s role in planetary competition and efficiency. But it raises other issues, no less delicate. If the talented from ‘marginalised and threatened’ groups are to be brought in to the academic vestibules of the ‘global economy’ what are we to do with the less talented sons and daughters of the ‘profiteers’ of the same? Exhort them to pay their way by going abroad and leaving the places they vacate to the more meritorious? Are the principles of ‘equity’ therefore to be stratified by income level—and applied to some, whilst giving the freedom of the market only to those who can pay?

Orthodoxies under question

In many respects, Jameson’s contribution may be seen as having a certain generic similarity in perspective with Galbraith’s article on system thinking. Both are involved in putting established orthodoxies to the question—the former in the

domain of reform dominated by economics; the latter choosing rather to focus on the wisdom received from corporate thinking in the form of techniques of control and verification taken up by university administration. And both suggest that the generation of fewer perverse effects would be one of the benefits of a less mechanistic application of techniques which have credibility only inasmuch as they are confined to the short term.

One of the criteria often cited as evidence of institutional wealth and hellfare on which the fortune of Departments, Faculties and universities intimately depend is the level of external research funding. If this item has always been present as a pointer to institutional standing, it has over the past decade taken on other overtones as the image of the university merges, with varying degrees of reluctance, with that of a private sector firm. Yet, at the heart of what is increasingly regarded as one of the prime pointers to excellence and repute is the decision of the individual researcher as to which of the many funding sources he or she should apply for support and backing. Bogler's examination of rewards and costs associated with that decision, undertaken within the setting of the United States, opens up this 'black box' to scholarly scrutiny.

Quality, coherence and innovation

Quality and evaluation are amongst the main focal issues in contemporary higher education and, over the years, Higher Education Policy has paid close attention to the leverage these two developments have exercised over changes in different systems of higher education. Amaral's analysis of competency based quality evaluation in Brazil throws an interesting light on one of the unavoidable problems which any system of higher education faces during a period of intense diversification—namely, how to maintain a basic understanding of what precisely is happening and, from a slightly different perspective, in which domain should elements of inter institutional comparison, standardisation and control be inserted.

There are many solutions to hand. Benchmarking is one. Greater curricular coordination—what is often lauded in Europe as the 'internationalisation of the curriculum'—is another. From an historian's standpoint, the policy embarked upon by the Brazilian authorities as a novel solution to a difficult situation, wafts with it a strange odour of familiarity, at least to those well versed in some of the time-honoured practices in certain systems of higher education in Continental Europe. New though national diplomas might well be in Brazil, they are a well-tried device in Belgium, France, Italy and Spain. Nor are they entirely bereft of problems. They may indeed be a boon for public opinion, as Amaral notes. But, they also play no small part in ensuring that, from the standpoint of curricular innovation, they produce an effect not dissimilar to the phenomenon well-known to captains of ships in convoy—namely, that the convoy proceeds at the pace of the slowest ship. Whether this is a good thing for the 'research universities', a country's equivalent to the greyhounds of the Ocean, is a rather different matter, however.

Shape of things to come

Finally, our selection of ‘key issues’ is rounded off by an article from the pen of Martin Trow. Arguably, it sits somewhat differently in the panoply of those concerns which envelop higher education today. Unlike other contributions which form this number of *Higher Education Policy*, it is more in the nature of an exploration of the ‘shape of things to come’ than being a dissection of Christmas past or an analysis of Christmas present. Once they have read Trow’s carefully weighed vision, few will doubt that the combination of life long learning and the new information technologies is indeed a potent force for further change, a force which is already with us even though, in most cases, we have yet fully to digest the consequences and repercussions still working their way through higher education from reforms and revisions early in the decade.

Technological change and life long learning need to be examined from other standpoints than the technically deterministic or the technologically utopian. Since the Center for Higher Education Studies at the University of California Berkeley is current girding itself up to do precisely this, new findings and results should be forthcoming before too long. *Higher Education Policy* would hope to be one of the learned journals privileged to disseminate them.

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