EDITORIAL

Universities live in a state of tension with their external environment. For some, such tension may be creative, providing the stimulus and challenge which summon up new initiatives and inventiveness on the part of the institution and faculty to devise new ways to meet change. For others, that same tension can be a debilitating influence, weakening morale, undermining research and contributing not to the common good but to a new kind of equality — the equality of shared misery and general misfortune. Whether external tensions lead to the former or to the latter is, in part at least, a function of resources, for regardless of whether these come from the public purse or from private coffers, it remains a fact that the university stands in a position of greatest dependence on the external environment for such provision. But it is also a function of how the university conceives its mission vis-à-vis society. Until very recently, the university viewed itself — and this view was largely underwritten by governments — as an institution for transmitting knowledge and the pursuit of unfettered fundamental inquiry. What knowledge was developed or, to reverse the usual process, which type of knowledge had access to a university-base in research, were both determined internally by academia. There was, in short, a balance between internal control over knowledge, vested in the university, and external agreement that this responsibility should still remain a university affair.

To be sure, this state of equilibrium rested in turn upon other elements of tension. Prime amongst these was the degree to which the nature of that knowledge and, more particularly, its impact on the political mobilization of the student body, resulted in political dissent — a matter of perennial concern in certain countries. There exists, in short, an additional tension between the university as an opinion-former amongst the young, developing alternative visions of society, and the university acting as an instrument of enculturation and political socialization — between the university acting as the discussion point for social change and being the recipient of settled decisions designed to accommodate change as perceived by external authorities. And, last but not least, there exists the tension which sets the nature of the relationship of the university to society that turns around the concept of ‘freedom’ — freedom for whom to do what? The latter is, not surprisingly, an issue of enduring centrality to both parties since, depending on the way it is defined, so the nature of ‘academic autonomy’, its range and extent, are set down.

The history of the university is littered with incidents and examples which illustrate these tensions as, too, the solutions reached to resolve them. For all that, it is clear that the development of mass higher education has, if anything, transformed these occasional strains into a permanent condition. There are many reasons for this, prime of which is the massification of higher education itself. The more the resources invested in higher education, the closer attention will be paid by the public or its representatives to what might crudely be seen as the yield on public monies. And the higher the percentage of the age group attending such establishments the greater the public involvement. Certainly, in the last decade or so, the main form in which such tension emerged, took the form of financial restrictions, precipitated in some cases by the oil shock of the mid-seventies and, in Third World countries, by the fall in raw commodity prices which arrived somewhat later. Regardless of the specific cause, the response of governments has been broadly similar — the setting up of review bodies or ad hoc commissions in certain cases with the mission of seeking out means of ensuring more efficiency in the use of resources or, alternatively, creating permanent bodies charged with continuous monitoring and the evaluation of institutional performance with the same end in view. The various Commissions to inquire into the state of higher education in Nigeria may be seen as typical of the former way of proceeding, the establishment of the National Evaluation Committee in France an example of the latter.

These examples can perhaps be seen as particularly clear illustrations not only of one of the points of tension, but also of another process which often follows, namely the taking over of functions previously located inside the academic domain itself: in this particular instance, the substitution of internal self-appraisal, operated by academia, by external evaluation undertaken by agencies reporting directly to government. It is in this particular context that Dr Ajayi's article is located and may be seen as a case study at institutional level of the way in which tensions resulting from resource limitation are transmitted to that level, as too, their direct consequences for the establishment concerned.

A further source of continuing tension between public, university and government is the question of access. This issue will be explored further in a forthcoming issue of *Higher Education Policy*. Suffice to note here that this particular dimension is one of special delicacy. For in effect, countries faced with budgetary compression also face the dilemma of deciding at which point it should bear down. Should it concentrate on overall student numbers and replace what was often a policy of ‘open access’ to those holding a particular qualification? Should it, on the contrary, install some degree of restricted entry? Or should policy be more indirect and reduce building and equipment grants in an effort to uphold established policies of access? The answer is by no means clear and appears to depend, in the last resort, on the volatility of the student body and the type of pressure it can bring to bear on a given country's political institutions.

It is very much a moot point whether, in the long run, policies based on permitting a deterioration in unit costs will not turn out to be the greater of two evils. Restrictions on access may run the risk of student protest. But overcrowding, ageing equipment and deteriorating

physical conditions, and an increasing emphasis on teaching rather than research, which is often the concomitant when economies are made on staff appointments, have long-term effects on the intellectual production of the university, which are repaired only with great difficulty.

Thus the tension between access and institutional efficiency is not the least of the issues facing higher education at the present time. Yet, the drive to efficiency has many faces: improvements in graduation rates, attempts to reduce the duration of studies and finally, the perennial question of the type of qualifications held to be essential for national development and the way in which higher education ought to meet them. Against access stands the other general *problematique* of productivity, its definition, its measurement and its attainment. This latter aspect can be viewed as part of that broader process, mentioned earlier, namely the externalization of evaluation and performance. But what, at first sight, seems a relatively straightforward task of assessing the intellectual output of higher education, rapidly takes on an increasing complexity as one seeks to extend and to operationalize the notion beyond the Exact Sciences. In 'hard paradigm areas' where there is wide agreement on what constitutes originality and scholarship, performance indicators and productivity measures have some meaning. In other academic disciplines and, above all, in what are often known as the 'value sciences' — politics, history and sociology, for instance — assessment of what constitutes 'productivity' is far less cut and dried. Different disciplines, as students of higher education, if not national administrators, are aware, stand as a species of 'academic cultures' very different in their modes of publication, levels of output and forms of working. Across the board comparison of 'productivity' between, say, a Physics Department and a Department of Sanskrit, is scarcely likely to be helpful or revealing. How, for example, is one to compare the quality of an article shared amongst six Chemistry lecturers with one article penned by an historian which, like as not, has taken not a few years in the archives to assemble the appropriate material? How is one to compare 'productivity' in fields where team-work and collaboration predominate? The issues raised in the article by Dr Torres et al touch on the central point of tension between academic work and public accountability in all countries where governments are seeking ways to relate resource allocation to scholarly 'output'.

A further source of tension lies in the process of 'prioritization' which, in the majority of cases where there is a current issue, revolves around the external profiling of subject disciplines not in function to student demand, but to what is held to be the national interest. Simply expressed, this tends to involve greater emphasis being placed upon what are perceived as 'production-related' disciplines — engineering, computing genetics and bio-technology being the most obvious. Behind such a development, which is as marked in the industrialized as in the developing world, lurks the more subtle question of 'relevant knowledge', how is it constituted and who defines it as such? And, as a subsidiary issue, the consequences of such judgement for those areas which, implicitly, are deemed 'less' relevant, where not irrelevant.

Against this somewhat conventional perspective stands another, rather broader in scope and certainly no less tension-generating than prioritization, which, in effect, distinguishes between disciplines already established and weighs them in the balance of the Common Weal. The second perspective is that of the right of different types of knowledge to have access to higher education. This is rather more radical. Certainly, it may be presented as a particularly original interpretation of the 'democratization' of higher education in that it involves bringing into academia forms of 'know-how', found in the community which, largely pragmatic in nature, are transmitted by experiential learning rather than formal training, or have been in the recent past. The recent debate in Sweden over the place of midwifery and child-minding is one example of this. Others come as part of the drive towards 'the expert' society and involve groups seeking to increase their standing and status in society by the creation of courses at degree level which serve to 'certify' their future members. The advent of 'Death Studies' for future undertakers in certain American establishments could, at a stretch of the imagination, almost Mitfordian in nature, be seen as part of this trend.

Now the question this poses, along with other calls to include what are seen as socially or economically appropriate 'areas of experience' as part of the university, is surely, to what extent can such courses be assimilated and yet retain the notion of the university as a place of higher learning? What criteria should operate in deciding what to include? The state of the market? Social relevance? That the area constitutes a problem of such enormity that only the university has the capacity and the ability to pose remedies? On such criteria alone, since we are all mortal, 'Death Studies' are indeed most appropriate! And finally, is it realistic, at a time when certain established fields of culture and scholarship are under threat, licentiously to press forward with the academization of 'experiential' or 'relevant' learning?

Not all the issues raised in this editorial are explored by the contributions in the section devoted to this theme. But they do touch on many of these aspects and, within the perspective of the interrelationship between the university and its environment, pose in an especially acute form the nature of the tensions that exist between that institution and external society. It is perhaps perverse to say so, but the increasing burden which is being thrust on the university to be more efficient, to be more 'relevant', however crass the individual proposals in themselves, testifies to the continuing belief in the centrality of the university in society. The danger which hides behind such attention is that the university becomes a species of intellectual 'dumping ground' for priorities which have not thoroughly been thought out in terms of possible alternatives for their institutional location and responsibility.

Several years ago, the field of political science came up with the concept of the overloaded state, a notion which, reduced to its barest expression, took the view that the business of

government had become so complex that the machinery of state could no longer deal with it in all its minutiae. The solution to this condition was for central administration to delegate much of what could be termed 'tactical' administration down to a lower level, reserving for itself those affairs of strategic importance. This concept has resulted in not a few industrialized countries undertaking, with obvious variations, measures to decentralize. From the 'Overloaded State', we now see the emergence, in theory if not always in practice, of the 'Off-loading State'. The issue this poses, and it does so with great acuteness in the case of the university, is "What are the consequences of the 'Off-loading State'?" It is not exaggerated to argue that the 'Off-loading State' leads in no small space of time to the 'Overloaded University' and that any issue which involves some degree of training, learning or formation beyond the postsecondary level is, almost by Pavlovian reflex, assigned as part of the social responsibility of the university which, by definition of being so designated, *must* be taken up by that same institution. Whether the university is suited to do so, whether it is capable without distorting its mission of teaching and fundamental research is another question entirely. But, it has to be said, the university at the present time, is singularly powerless directly to hold out against this spiralling burden. Whether this is because, as some may claim, with the massification of higher education the clear vision of what the university stood for has become blurred, or whether the vision itself has become an historic irrelevancy at a time of singular change, is a matter that philosophers, futurologists and policy analysts may debate — perhaps fruitfully. Either way, it is surely one of the more deleterious results of the tension between university and society that, as the pressure from the latter on the former increases, it does so precisely at a time when the university appears unable to put its case clearly to the polity — and to be heard. That, surely, must be the ultimate tension between the two.

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