Editorial

Reform – Contemplated and Reconsidered

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Although it is decidedly unfashionable to say so, there is still a place for history in the policy sciences and especially so when we turn our gaze to higher education. Obviously, to historians, this is a truism very near to banality if not outright insult and treason. Still, there is a weighty argument to be made, which may serve to cast a new light upon the place of history in the affairs of the university and the burgeoning Knowledge Society. It does so by placing a little more weight upon History as evaluation, which is not to say it did not perform this function with grace and persistence for many years, though the technicians of the art evaluatory tend to trip lightly over this activity.

In many respects, the work undertaken by the rising numbers of Agencies of Judgement, Committees of Evaluation and Consortia of Quality has more than a little similarity to the historian's *metier*. Both after all, are involved, though in lesser degrees, in tracing outcome against intent, though equally obviously, their time scales differ drastically. Indeed, a reasonably good case could be made for arguing that it is the demands of expedition, speed, of our political masters and their agendas, which have compressed the basic historic purpose of comparison and evaluation into its modern mode. Nor would the historian necessarily disagree with this.

The time elapsed between statement, policy and institutional evaluation — 4 years in the case of France, for instance — is too short for the classical forms of historical evidence to be organized, marshalled and sifted through. However, where History comes into its own and evaluation most decidedly assumes a somewhat blunted dimension is in the long term. It always has, of course. But it is rare indeed for Agencies, Committees of Judgment to be taken up with assessment in the long term — perhaps for the equally obvious reason that being over-pressed with the present, they possess neither the mandate nor possibly the interest to turn attention to the long term, or for that matter, their own part in it.

Yet when policy moves in fashions across frontiers, as it does (the greatest fashion of all being 'globalization' which has yet to claim some reasonably plausible historical roots), there is much to be said for having a long-term assessment, if only to remind us that fashion, despite flexibility, adaptability and performance, is precisely that — short-term and all too often ephemeral. Even so, in the long-term — and by this one might plumb for a minimum of 10 years — what is important in any policy is surely what it has endured and what

it has finally secured, as opposed to what was expected and which formed the basis of its first, and often over-scrutinized, impact and subsequent evaluation.

There are other reasons for justifying the long term, primarily because the consequences predicted in the short term often shape our perceptions and immediate understanding of what is expected. And, *faute de mieux*, immediate expectations rapidly assume the status of embedded wisdom. As a result, the type of evaluation often undertaken in the immediate aftermath of national implementation reflects such immediate priorities. What is less dwelt upon are how far such short-term expectations in effect mutate into long-term achievements on the one hand, or turn out to be downright erroneous when reviewed from a longer time perspective on the other. Still, there are enough pointers to suggest that the height of short-term fashion, where it does not turn out to be gall and wormwood in terms of expectations dashed (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Birnbaum, 2000), has its limitations. And for that reason, some revision is required. In short, the time to look at reform is precisely the moment when it ceases to be fashionable and when sufficient material, direct and indirect, has accumulated to permit an assessment of the policy, establishment, or practice that in an earlier age was the center of such a brouhaha.

The focus of the article by Sarah Guri Rosenblit is on Open Learning, which has gone through a number of changes in the course of the past quarter century. From being a radical instrument — perhaps the most radical to have emerged under what may now be seen as the ‘welfare state consensus’ — in driving forward the principle of access to higher learning, Open Learning has acquired other ideological propellants in the intervening period. On the one side stands a continuing engagement to ‘redressing’ social inequity. To this have been added more recently other forms of distance teaching which, while relying on broadly similar technologies and methods of diffusion, endorse a very different ethic and now stand at the forefront of what is often presented as ‘alternative providers’. Their main ideological driving force is part of that shift that now defines knowledge — and education by extension — as a saleable and more to the point, a universally deliverable, commodity. Leaving aside this conflict of purpose, Guri Rosenblit turns our attention back to some of the basic issues, which have been with Open Learning almost from the very first: who is best positioned to benefit from the experience of open — or e-learning? What are the barriers that hold up the application of the ‘new technologies’? What is the cost? And what have been the assumptions made about student capacity to fall in with ‘new learning styles’?

Of themselves, questions such as these are far from novel. Indeed, they stood at the heart of the unremitting struggle for legitimacy those establishments which pioneered them faced from ‘main-stream providers’ to wit, the classical university, grounded in the three unities of place, student age and length of

study. Reviving these questions in no way detracts from the hard-won respect the longer-established Open Learning systems now enjoy. Indeed, by posing them we may also register at the same time how far their achievements are substantial and have stood the test of time. That said, these same issues put e-learning on its mettle to show that it still possesses that capacity to meet the shifting educational demands, a capacity that, 35 years ago in the United Kingdom, it demonstrated without peradventure.

Orr's analysis of developments in Czech higher education hones in less upon long-term performance of systems so much as the techniques to 'steer' them and adjust their goals. Orr's time frame is more restricted than Guri Rosenblit and is confined to the past 15 years. The central issue he explores is the role that 'coordination networks' play in shifting the balance from a high degree of institutional autonomy towards a more judicious balance between state and university.

Rodruiguez Gomez and Casanova Cardiel take a more classical and political perspective in their examination of higher education policy in Mexico. Reform is clearly considered as an inextricable part of the political process, with the focus on higher education as a subset of presidential policy covering the terms of office of Salinas de Gortari, Zedillo Ponce de Leon up to 2000 and from 2001 onwards of Vincente Fox. Different though, the perspectives are in comparison with the Czech Republic; there remain certain generic and shared tensions. How to accommodate the demands of 'the market' with those of society?

A similar dichotomy runs through Mehralizadeh's account of reforms in the management of Iranian universities. There too we see tensions between planning as an exercise of political intent as against what is presented as a socio-cultural model of university. Unlike the other articles in this issue of Higher Education Policy, Mehralizadeh is less engaged in contemplating a reform that is embedded and deserves further reflection so much as commenting on change that is currently in train. Nevertheless, that evident tension — however indirect — appears to be present between government dirigisme and the transition to what he terms 'university-based management'. Whether the model he supports will settle into Iran's Universities is, one feels, very much a matter on which the jury still remains out.

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References

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