



Editorial

Monsieur de Talleyrand-Périgord's Qualities

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Flexibility and adaptability figure, we are told, among the most desirable of contemporary qualities — although whether they are virtues is a rather more dubious proposition. One of their more outstanding practitioners whose name History has retained — often for wildly differing reasons — was Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, duc de Benevento, a delicate spirit of infinite adaptability, who cultivated flexibility with such nicety that it ensured a sparkling career in which moral ambiguity was exceeded only by opportunism and double-dealing. Monsieur de Talleyrand-Périgord began his public life as a Regicide in the France of the Revolution, moved onward and upward to become Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Corsican Ogre, and later, discharged similar responsibilities on behalf of the Bourbons during their Restoration that followed Buonaparte's final drubbing at Waterloo. For many, Monsieur de Talleyrand-Périgord stood as 'a pillar of falsehood, a prodigy, a phoenix of duplicity'¹ — a title greatly deserved, if not always well earned.² Regularly, he rose from the ashes of those earlier and finely calculated betrayals he had so ably engineered. In the art of treason, his was a rich experience, rarely equalled, never surpassed. So it can come as a surprise to none that in practicing this activity he took a view both cynical and pragmatic. 'Treason, he remarked, is simply a question of dates.'

Relevance and Fashion

The same might be said of relevance. Ostensibly, relevance involves the bending of effort towards an immediate over-riding goal the perceived outcome and consequences of which promise advantage, utility and, in the widest sense, payback to those embarking on such a course. And very obviously relevance, like treason, is a question of dates if only for the fact that in higher education yesterday's relevance all too rapidly is held to mutate into today's irrelevance. Or, to use a descriptor much employed by labour market economists and specialists in curricular design and innovation, yesterday's 'curricular match' becomes today's 'qualification mismatch.' However, like most key words that accompany the fluctuating fashions in higher education policy, relevance is far from being neutral. The more one mulls over the term, the more obvious its ties with values, which, if more often than not, hide behind a smokescreen of

'operability', are nonetheless present. To the wary, then the first question that springs to mind when the felicitous phrase is unearthed for the umpteenth time of asking must surely be, 'Who is doing the defining?'

It is an important question but one all too often left floating in the air. For relevance — like gastronomy and a slim waistline — is a condition so ideal that none in their right minds can come out against it. As principles, all three command wide consensus. Consensus lasts, however, just as long as each interest, group, stakeholder, constituency or Estate can entertain the happy illusion that within bounds of relevance their very own particular agenda may be advanced at the same time as it advances the programme of others. The problem begins when the desirable principle acquires operational expression, becomes a national priority and begins to assume institutional embedding. It is at this point that the inevitable *denouement* sets in as one interpretation of 'relevance' comes to command more clout than the remainder which all too often have acquiesced and thrown their lot in with the torrent of prior rhetoric in the hope that their own agenda would perhaps benefit from a little unexpected favour along the way.

Relevance Interpreted in the Setting of Higher Education

Yet, the significance that 'relevance' has acquired over the past quarter century in the domain of higher education policy is not confined only to the notions of immediacy, although its appropriateness largely derives from that other basic credo of our times, namely the permanence of change and the speeding up of the same. As Geiger's article shows with considerable deftness, redefining 'relevance' has brought about major shifts in the relationship between the world of university research, with funding councils and agencies, with government and last but very far from least, with the 'productive sector'.

The ideology of 'relevance' drags in its wake a number of very substantial consequences not simply for the relationship between university, society and production. It has direct bearing on the basic frame within which academic work is carried out, quite apart from vexed and delicate questions of possession, ownership and reward that sometimes flow from the fruits of academic labour. This change in the frame — and for that matter, in the fundamental ethic that drove academic work forward — has been described in various ways. It has been interpreted as the 'externalization' of control exercised over academic productivity by systems of accountability, evaluation and performance; (Kogan, 2006) as re-aligning academic procedures and norms from collegiality towards managerialism, a conversion justified on the grounds that being close to 'business practice' they are for that reason, efficient

— a curious example of Faith Resuscitated in the modern age; or, viewed from a perspective of a previous era, such an evolution may be interpreted as the growing penetration into academia's 'private life' of practices once confined to its public life (Trow, 1975).

An Astounding Historical Watershed

There is, however, another perspective, which sees these three interpretations not as competing with, but rather as complementary to, one another. Such a viewpoint argues that each of these different aspects represents singular and individual facets in a rather more consequent phenomenon and one of primordial importance in the history of the university. That phenomenon is an inextricable part of the concept of relevance itself — namely, the substitution of 'productive time' for 'academic time'. Indeed, the replacement of the latter by the former is one of the direct and most significant outcomes that follow upon introducing immediate 'relevance' into the judgmental equation of institutional performance. It is a development of quite astounding implications.

For the best part of nine centuries, the one element over which academia had great if not total mastery was precisely over time — time to teach, to learn and to acquire knowledge. To be sure, universities tend no longer to consider their mission '*sub specie aeternitatis*'. Nevertheless, the days are not too distant when the pursuit of higher learning was still possible without major research grants simply because the prime value — time itself — was academia's principle and unique capital. That is what tenure and its granting are all about — the pursuit for knowledge irrespective of the time it might take (Neave, 2006b).

Time as Academic Capital

Academia's command over its own time was the essence of academic freedom, even in the days when knowledge itself was revealed rather than scientific (Neave, 2006a). From this perspective, Evaluation and assessment regularly undertaken as national exercises are not simply procedures for verifying whether what the university does is 'relevant' when set against the priorities identified by the authoritative representatives of external society and shaped by external agencies of public purpose. They are also the essential levers that ensure 'academic time' mutates into, and is replaced by, 'productive time'. In truth, even if this explicit purpose is nowhere written into the list of objectives assigned to such agencies of Quality Assessment, Accreditation, Audit or Public Accounts variously associated with regular scrutiny of institutional performance, the acceptance 'relevance' as a pervasive norm, guiding policy at system level, moulding strategies of adaptation and voluntary compliance at



institutional level, is very clear. It is also very recent. Indeed, Geiger's exploration of its unfolding in the United States shows how very new this particular revision is in historic terms — not more than three decades at most.

To be sure, there are various technocratic terms that disguise the reality of the shift from 'academic time to 'productive' time — 'time budgeting' is one, 'speeding up institutional response' another. This is merely a linguistic sleight of hand that in no way undermines the essential truth that the conversion of 'academic' time into 'productive' time is a direct outcome of applying a particular and externally driven concept of relevance to both academic productivity and output. Seen in this light, redefining academic time without a shred of doubt represents one of the most significant historic reversals that contemporary higher education policy has accomplished as a condition of moving towards a so-called 'Knowledge Society'.

Contrary Perceptions

That what constitutes 'relevance' today is, for the most part, externally determined, rests on a number of unpalatable and largely unjustified assumptions, not least of which the unspoken belief that those activities, forms of learning and study not directly in line with external orthodoxy, are at very least, 'children of a lesser god' or at worst, 'irrelevant'. There are however, two dimensions involved here — content on the one hand and deliverability on the other. If as Geiger's study shows, relevance is both discipline related and research linked, then clearly there are large areas of higher education which by the same token are neither one nor the other. Such a view supposes that relevance, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder, the research council or the private foundation. In short, those who consume the creative products of academe determine relevance, a slogan that the Knowledge Society extends to students in the conviction that they it is who know what skills they need to become 'employable'. In both cases, however, it is the university's function to serve and to provide what is needed, rather than to define 'relevance'. From this it is but a short step to concluding that consumption is a prime pointer in determining what type of knowledge is valued and at the same time a good enough pragmatic definition of what is indeed 'relevant'.

Pragmatism and Conflict

Such consumer pragmatism is doubtless fine for the marketing of detergents and other olfactory and aromatic products. But the relevance that comes with research-based technologies, with the reorganization of units of knowledge generation, temporary, shifting and flexible replacements of the medieval

structure of Faculties if taken on a wholly quantitative basis, is subject to several not inconsiderable paradoxes. The first of these must surely be that such a perception does not appear to correspond to the choice of study to which the large majority of first-degree students are attracted. Does this mean that the greater part of those studying in higher education deliberately opt for ‘irrelevance’? How are we to reconcile one notion of relevance that has its being in industry, research councils and government which has to do with academic output and productivity in the research domain with another that rests on a personal perception of employability that is the prime concern at undergraduate level? This latter aspect is tackled by Claire Smetheram’s investigation into the different ways in which qualification, employment and career are perceived by some of the formally most brilliant products of British higher education.

This is no small matter, not least because of the inherent tensions the two very different definitions generate inside the individual university, quite apart from the consequences that follow for the standing, reputation and public perception of the individual establishment. Are such conflicting priorities — which is another way of describing the different operational outcomes that flow from very different perceptions of relevance — fully able to co-exist in one establishment? Are such establishments typical of the particular system in which they have their being? Or, are they, on the contrary, part of an elite sector within the nation’s provision of higher education?

It is here that Teichler’s article on higher education development in Western Europe over the past three decades is particularly interesting. The rise of what was once known as ‘short cycle’ higher education during the late Sixties and early Seventies gives us a useful clue to changes in the notion of relevance. In contrast to the university, *stricto sensu*, short cycle higher education was conceived as driven, and its curricular offerings shaped directly, by the private sector labour market, and distinct from the traditional ties the university enjoyed with public sector employment and the liberal professions. Relevance as construed within the setting of the British Polytechnics, the French University Institutes of Technology and later, the German Fachhochschulen, was held to be ‘applied’ in the sense of providing a vocational training short term and, above all, terminal as opposed to a theoretical education and, which did not — at least in principle — open the highroad to research or research training.

The Notion of Economic Relevance

In short, in Western Europe, the notion of economic relevance did not have its roots in the university and still less in the research domain. Rather, it took shape in policies designed at one and the same time to accommodate a buoyant

social demand for higher education — massification — and to draw a line between labour market demands at undergraduate level on the one hand and to control, if not protect, that part of the higher education system which undertook research training from the consequences of what was then seen as massive expansion at undergraduate level, on the other. Economic relevance, in its European version sought less to re-designate the mission of research so much as to confine the notion of short-term immediate applicability to the first degree and to institutes the main characteristic of which was their dedication to teaching.

By and large, this was not a successful initiative, though both the British Polytechnics and the Norwegian District Colleges fared rather better than most. There is little point in discussing why this policy failed, other than to say that in countries where admission to university was not selective, the more ancient establishment retained all its powers of attraction. What is important to retain, however, is the attempt to set a clear boundary between those establishments of higher education where research was internally driven and those where undergraduate training subscribed to an explicit and immediate application to the market. In a curious manner, although the general context in which this policy of clear institutional differentiation was both novel and unprecedented — as were the pressures from the first period of massification in Europe, which lasted from the early Sixties to the mid Seventies — the solution embarked upon was not. Indeed, an exceedingly good case can be built around the argument that the policy of economic relevance was a species of ‘match replay’, a revival of an issue that had been fought out across many of Europe’s systems of higher education from the latter part of the 19th century and well on into the 20th.

Then as later, the main point of contention revolved about whether the purpose of the university extended to its direct involvement in ‘applied’ work. By extension, it also engaged an equally vexed issue, namely whether institutions with an ‘applied mission’ could at all be regarded as *bona fide* universities or whether they should be assigned a separate status on the periphery of the world where the freedom of learning, scholarship and disinterested enquiry formed the university’s over-riding and singular *raison d’être*. The stance taken in Germany — then the template of what has recently been termed the ‘research university’ — and other countries that drew their inspiration from German practice was to hive off establishments of ‘applied knowledge’ and very particularly Engineering or Technological establishments whose title — *Technische Hochschule* — clearly set them apart from the University. A similar distinction was also to be seen in France, though the range of establishments that fell into the category of ‘*écoles d’application*’ went far beyond Engineering and included those specialized institutes linked to particular Ministries, *corps de l’Etat* and which trained future members of the French civil service and French technocracy (Kessler, 1986).

The Notion of Pertinence

The interesting aspect of this enduring vision of the European university lies less in the determination to keep the ‘applied’ dimension at arm’s length so much as a very different interpretation of what constituted ‘relevance’ in the social advance of knowledge. The Idealist notion of scholarship as disinterested and as an unfettered activity to be pursued in ‘solitude and loneliness’ did not preclude either its use or its usefulness. What it did *not* embrace was the use to which knowledge was put and still less the decision as to how it should be used. That the priorities about which areas of fundamental knowledge were to be developed were internally decided by academia in no way prevented others from taking them up and suiting them to their own purposes. The responsibility of *application* had then little or no place inside academia. Thus, one ought perhaps to draw a distinction between these two perceptions of the usefulness of knowledge. One possibility would be to see the classic notion of ‘disinterested knowledge’ in terms of ‘pertinence’ the better to distinguish it from economic relevance.

The Qualities of Modernity as a Heritage of History

Whatever the contemporary qualities we attach to the university post Bologna, and whatever the weight we lay upon the qualities the university may now see as advantageous to cultivate, these are clearly and irretrievably different — and radically so — from the preceding visions of the university — even those that accompanied the onset of mass higher education, let alone those that marked its elite forerunner. The post Bologna University is, if the truth were out, the product of two remarkable displacements.

The first of these is the infiltration into the university *stricto sensu* of that vocational mission — which four decades ago was explicitly assigned to short cycle higher education — a mission which receives operational expression in notion that the purpose of higher education is the acquisition of skills, competences, techniques almost exclusively defined in relationship to the world of work.

The second is a no less noteworthy. It may be seen as the logical extension of ‘vocationalism’ into the domain of research and research training — namely, that particular purposiveness, which once exclusively identified and set apart those establishments whose knowledge was primarily developed for its application. Naturally, the exact path that individual national systems have taken to carry out this literal ‘*Umwertung aller Werten*’, will differ in pace, procedures and the policy leverage brought to bear. And it will very certainly be an area where the student of comparative higher education and higher education policy has much to contribute in teasing out national idiosyncracies.



It is, however, highly unlikely that the path to the latter day version of ‘Application’ and knowledge defined as applicability that the focus on research-based technologies represents, will follow the same path in Europe as the trajectory Geiger traces in the United States.

Startling Implications

Yet, the implications that follow are far-reaching indeed. In both cases, the drive towards vocationalization and the push towards the university’s assuming full responsibility for the development and advance of research-based technologies amount to little less than redefining the mission of the *university* in terms of those very priorities that an earlier generation of policy makers assigned to the *non-university sector* of yesteryear. Nor can it be wholly coincidental that those establishments chosen by Burton R Clark the American sociologist and prime theoretician in the matter of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ (Clark, 1998, 2004) as archetypes of that very particular vision of the university, were largely Engineering establishments. Succinctly stated, the very qualities that in Western Europe set this type of establishment literally beyond the Pale in the Idealist and Humboldtian vision of the university, have now drawn them to the center of the stage — as one of the most compelling referential models for university development in the early years of the 21st century. Vocationalism, applicability and application, the essential difference that in earlier times set aside the non university sector and the ‘Schools of Application’ from the mainstream university are now those very values that serve as criteria for judging whether the individual university and, by extension, the particular national system of higher education, has made the transition towards a new version of ‘modernity’.

His Last Bow

I am tempted to bring this Editorial to a close with a quotation from the old American ballad ‘Frankie and Johnny’ — a song so ancient that I doubt anyone less than canonical age can possibly remember it. The ballad goes thus:

‘This story has no beginning;
This story has no end,
All this story goes to show
There ain’t no good in men.’

The latter belief, naturally one disputes. But for the former, it is as true for higher education as it is for the saga of institutions, the goings-on of their

denizens and for the life of learned journals. As I step down from an exceedingly long — and, from my standpoint, a highly stimulating and a very happy — Editorship, I can perhaps permit myself one indulgence before handing over the pencils red and blue, those unkind tools of Editorial Office, to Professor Jeroen Huisman, of the University of Bath (UK) whose incisiveness and learning will now urge *Higher Education Policy* forward and ever upward. That indulgence is simply to thank all those — and they are not a few — who over the years have seen *Higher Education Policy* as the best place for their thoughts and findings to be offered to the world of learning and scholarship. Thanks are due for one very personal reason. You all contributed hugely to that one thing Editors get for nothing but which they rarely acknowledge — a first class ‘*éducation permanente*’. It will be very difficult to find so excellent a series of lectures and de facto tutorials without having to pay a price that cannot but be high indeed!

Guy Neave

Notes

1 O'Brian, Patrick (1981) *The Surgeon's Mate* (London: Fontana), p. 373.

2 Compared to the reputation he enjoyed amongst contemporaries, this is perhaps a charitable view. On Talleyrand's elevation to the Office of Vice Chancellor of the Empire, the sinister Joseph Fouchet, Minister of Police and Talleyrand's arch-enemy, suggested it was the sole vice Talleyrand lacked! The Imperial opinion was even less kind. Napoleon, with the forthrightness that so often characterises the soldier, described him as ‘A turd in a silk stocking’.

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