

EDITORIAL

ON PROCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the more intractable and thus enduring issues in higher education is whether it ought to be seen as a means to achieving a greater purpose or something that stands as an end in itself. Since this is a good philosophical dilemma, it will continue to be debated with temporary conclusions intervening now and then for as long as people have the time, curiosity and wit to do so. There is, then, no permanent answer good for all time nor, for that matter, one that is wholeheartedly embraced by all disciplines at one time. Both opinions will continue to coexist, though one may appear to predominate. But, such predominance has never tended to be absolute. Other events and other personalities intervene to upset that which was once the established view. And so the dialectic goes on, taken up and reworked, and the terms of discourse altered in keeping with fashion, political convenience and, last but not least, the pleas of particular interests.

Not surprisingly, the relationship of means to ends has, in its various forms, been a central part of the debate in higher education since public interest focused on that institution, a development which may generally be said to have been the work of the Sixties. The twin goals of a socially equitable and an economically efficient society have long occupied a goodly part of the debate at public level, though from time to time a few unrepentant 'traditionalists' have argued that the experiences of higher education required no further justification other than that it stood as an end in itself. There is much to be said in support of such a disinterested view. What is equally evident, however, is that such a leisurely attitude, which might be appropriate when less than five per cent of an age group go on to 'higher' learning, very swiftly comes under considerable pressure to justify itself in utilitarian terms when the numbers of those studying go beyond fifteen per cent, and inevitably so when more than twenty-five per cent find some accommodation in post-school 'training'.

Most of the articles in this issue of *Higher Education Policy* concentrate on that dimension in the study of higher education identified with process, rather than with structure, to borrow from the title of a well-known work by Becher and Kogan. Now that the 'market-driven' university seems to have triumphed for as long as politicians and their voters are prepared to believe that free trade is the lesser of many evils – which may not be a state as permanent as its adepts would wish – attention in the world of researchers and policy identifiers has tended to focus on those dimensions associated with meshing what the university ought to do to meet market-determined demand and in accordance with market-determined criteria of efficiency.

Thus, over the last three to four years, attention has gathered weight around means, rather than ends, in the fond hope that we are now all agreed on the desirability of the university being 'market driven'. Since ends are agreed upon, or assumed to be agreed upon, which is far from being the same thing, we seek to bolster their legitimacy by concentrating increasingly on the means to ensure them, whether these means are by systems of management, systems of evaluation or, the latest of all fads, quality assurance. These fields are, in effect, instruments to achieve a particular end. They concentrate around the process of higher education, as techniques of administration or, as Michael Bourn's article shows, provide refinements of techniques in place. The same might be said, of course, of academic mobility as we have commented in earlier issues of *Higher Education Policy* devoted to this theme. It may be a way to develop better employability for the individual student; or as a way of cementing an alliance between nations. Or, last but not least, creating a new international community. But, whether it has to do with the former or the latter, it is still a means for achieving that purpose.

Nevertheless, those who wish to debate the broader purposes of higher education would do well to bear in mind that until means and processes have been sorted out, the ability to move towards the grander vision will remain hostage to the failure to master the basic details contained in process.

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