



Editorial

The Marketeers and the Marketizing: the American Eagle and the Chinese Dragon

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In this number, *Higher Education Policy* focuses on the issue posed by the introduction of ‘marketing’ higher education — perhaps the major strategic change that shapes all aspects of contemporary higher education and which has become central to the fundamental way in which the policy of higher education is framed, thought about, proposals drawn up and change urged forward. The topic itself has, naturally, been dealt with exhaustively and will continue to be so, both in this journal and elsewhere. From this perspective, then there is not much that is new under the sun. Rather more unusual is what might be termed the ‘angle of viewing’. Rather than building the theme around a series of analyses from a range of different systems and countries, we have decided to examine this topic from the standpoint of two only. These two systems are the US and the People’s Republic of China. There are excellent reasons for doing so.

The ‘Marketeering’

For the best part of the past decade and a half — and in specific instances, even earlier — the profile, practices and achievements of the former have served as a ‘world referential system’ (Neave, 1998), have influenced governments, anxious to ‘modernize’ their provision of higher education, and shaped the agendas of inter-governmental organizations that seek a convincing pragmatic base to bring the performance of higher education into line with their ideological commitment to neo liberalism, to the demands of the market and with the demand — now held to be universal — for value for money. Though there are signs, here and there — and Latin America provides an excellent example — that alternative models are being sought actively often from Europe — nevertheless, the notion of higher education now being an integral part of a world market in the economy of services, merely serves to underline the influence that the US continues to exercise over the imagination of policy-makers, their servants and their consultants. This is not to say that the US has a monopoly. In the marketing of higher education and its provision both within its region and beyond, Australia has been and remains an ambitious

player and its example has, in turn, influenced others, not least the UK. Nevertheless, though there are certainly contenders on the ‘world market’ for students, the US remains by far and away the most enduring example of higher education driven by market forces (Clark, 1983). It is then quintessential of ‘the marketeers’. Indeed, if we regard the ‘commodification’ of higher education — that is, higher education conceived as a tradable and purchasable good, which is the logical extension of higher education shaped by ‘the market’, then the claim to be the pioneer in this second stage of development falls equally to the US.

The ‘Marketizing’

There is, however, the reverse side of the medal. For though one may have teaching, learning and training facilities available — in part, because of demographic stagnation which is the case in Western Europe — there is little point in ‘putting them on the market’ if there is nobody willing to purchase such a commodity. ‘Marketeers’ have to sell to someone and while it may be argued that ‘appetite comes with eating,’ the fact remains that the largest source of potential demand no longer lies in the advanced economies so much as in those that are swiftly moving towards this condition, above all those in South East Asia — Malaysia, India and above all China. All three are moving very rapidly towards a market economy where they are not taking over the role of being the manufacturing base of a world ‘hi-tech’ economy. Though here and there voices of disagreement have spoken on the consequences this may have for students less able to command resources sufficient to bear full-cost fees (Tilak, 2005), there can be little doubt that these systems are firmly committed to ‘marketizing’ and see higher education as a means to lever this transformation forward.

Indeed, if one examines the sheer numbers involved, the world’s largest system of higher education may still be the US. It will not be so for very much longer. Rather, it will be in China — and that very soon. Over the coming 15 years, if the projections set out in the article by Xie Zuoxu and Huang Rongtan are the shape of things to come, the number of students in Chinese higher education will more than double from around 11.2 million to more than 22.5 million by the year 2019. Projections rarely turn out to be accurate. That is not the point, however. The point is that in terms of sheer volume there is very little doubt that the geo-political re-definition of higher education’s equivalent of the world map, which such a rate of increase represents — irrespective of the numbers actually attained — is an historic development of quite massive importance and most especially so for those rich countries which seek to subsidize the higher education of their less well-off students by



reaching out or attracting the richer students in countries at present less well-off than they.

It is against this overall backdrop that the articles in this number of Higher Education Policy have been brought together. In both cases, few of them directly address the issue as it is posed here. Rather, each is concerned with developments interior to each system or, in the case of Douglass' comparison between the US and the UK, follows the theme of Access and Equity. However, the themes Douglass analyzes in terms of the policy for Access and Equity that have emerged over the past decade in the US and are now center stage in the UK find a certain resonance in the contributions from researchers in the PRC. How is equity to be ensured? By closer agency oversight, which seems to be the solution for which Britain is opting? For more institutional incentives and greater institutional latitude which many of the articles from China see as the key to adaptation? How is the challenge of student numbers redoubling over the coming decade to be faced in China? How are scarce human resources to be brought optimally to bear at institutional level, which is the burden of Zhang Guoliang's concern as Vice President of Dalan University of Technology? This latter is, of course, a recurrent problem for most systems of higher education seeking rapidly to modernize or to close a perceived gap between where they are at present and where they would like to be in the reasonably foreseeable future. Europe faced a similar situation in the 1970s and, as the generation of academics recruited as higher education drove onwards towards massification reaches retirement in the coming half decade, is likely to face once more.

How far a system of higher education can expand successfully without creating tension either among the 'consumers' — students and others under training over the 'quality of the services provided' — or similar disquiet among those who face a greater burden in providing it — academic staff or the nation's research capacity where it is concentrated in universities — is a conundrum faced both by mature systems in the advanced economies just as it is in those with the ambition to be so shortly. Nor is the solution simply a matter of applying the panacea of information and communication technologies to teaching, learning and training. For while such technologies may indeed provide a network of coverage and permit those establishments providing such facilities to generate more revenue and even to use such an instrumentality eventually to solve some of the staffing problems that may stand in the offing by supplementing the national supply of highly qualified academic resources with overseas recruitment, this has yet to be systematically applied beyond the undergraduate level. And, even then, as an article in the previous issue of Higher Education Policy made plain, the techniques of distance teaching and the demands they make upon the individual learner are not always as suited to the needs of the isolated learner as was once believed (Guri Rosenblit, 2005).



Finally, there is one other issue that runs as a Leitmotif across higher education both in the US and China. It is which higher education sector — public or private — will in effect bear the burden of sustaining the nation's vitality? This central question derives from what are obviously very different circumstances. As Parsons points out in his examination of 'Power Reconstructed' in US higher education, the 'new context' in the US is not friendly to expanding public support of the higher education enterprise. In addition is the fragmentation of both state and federal higher education policy-making as well as a rise in the level of conflict over publicly funded student aid schemes. In China, as Futao Huang's analysis suggests, the issue appears more pragmatic. Hitherto, the main burden of accommodating growth has fallen upon regular public universities. If expansion is to continue, he argues, new types of establishment will have to emerge which are unlikely to follow the patterns currently displayed by private institutions. If the balance to be achieved between private and public sector higher education remains obscure — institutional diversity is very certainly something that will not be avoided.

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References

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