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Chapter 8. The Expansion of Higher Education: A Consideration of Control, Funding and Quality

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Since the Robbins Report of 1963, higher education in the UK has undergone major expansion, changing it from an elite to a mass system. This chapter explores the changing socio-economic context in which this transformation has taken place, and considers how the expansion of higher education has raised issues of control, quality and funding.

Introduction

The Dearing Report on Higher Education published in 1997 (NCIHE, 1997) was the first officially-sponsored examination of the higher education (HE) system in the United Kingdom (UK) since the Robbins Report of 1963 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). Dearing was asked to solve immediate problems and to look ahead to the future. His vision was that higher education should contribute to the development of a learning society:

> Over the next 20 years, the United Kingdom must create a society committed to learning throughout life. That commitment will be required from individuals, the state, employers and providers of education and training. Education is life enriching and desirable in its own right. It is fundamental to the achievement of an improved quality of life in the UK. (NCIHE, 1997, p.1)

However, the immediate problem which the Dearing Committee had to deal with, and which is seen to have created the impetus for the inquiry, was the financial crisis in higher education of the 1990s, brought about by the combined effects of underfunding and expansion (Watson and Taylor, 1998).

This chapter examines the expansion of higher education in the UK, and how it has changed from an elite to a mass system. The first part of the chapter considers changes to the socio-economic context, and their impact on the role and purpose of higher education. The second part of the chapter explores how the higher education system has expanded in response to these changes and considers two key issues - funding and quality - which have grown in significance with the expansion of the system. These issues can be seen to highlight the problems of a system with elite instincts and traditions, challenged by an agenda of inclusion and widening participation.

Higher Education in the Global Knowledge Economy

The idea of a university

The traditional image of higher education is of an elitist university sector for a minority of academically successful young people, who attended public schools and grammar schools. Although this image is very different from the higher education system in the

UK today, it reflects traditions on which the modern sense of the university in Western cultures is based, with origins reaching back to the renaissance.

The mediaeval universities were groups of scholars who formed themselves into self-governing guilds. They later became established as formal foundations with designated powers to award degrees. The idea of a university meant a mutual recognition of the members of the guild or association and a common language (Latin). Both masters and students shared the common goal of enquiry (Barnett, 2000, p.72). From these origins the university in the nineteenth century came to be seen as a site of universal knowledge, meaning that it should represent an openness towards knowledge. The university was a place for teaching and searching for truth. The purpose was to expose students to the best thinking and knowledge in the world (Smith and Webster, 1997).

The modern sense of the Western university has been based on these foundations, drawing on Enlightenment concepts of human reason, including the belief that certain things matter, such as a willingness to search for truth, respect for others, tolerance of rival views, a willingness to be self-critical, and a commitment to putting forward new ideas (Barnett, 2000). The pursuit of knowledge and social justice are seen as the basis for a better world and academic freedom to engage in intellectual enquiry and critique is considered essential.

These foundations have faced strong challenges in recent times. The world in which we now live is ‘a disturbing place to be in’ (Barnett, 2000, p.78), characterized by the breakdown of certainties, a feeling of crisis, and a sense of fragmentedness, often defined as the ‘postmodern condition’ (Bauman, 1997, p.20). The university, the knowledge it engages with, and the value system on which it is based, are more uncertain and subject

to question, and are open to challenge and change. Performance, outcomes and standards are presented as 'the new faiths' (Barnett, 2000, p.168).

Moreover, higher education is no longer the sole domain of long-established universities. Following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, the university sector includes 'old universities' which existed pre-1992, and 'new universities' which were polytechnics and colleges of higher education before the 1992 Act. In addition, higher education is provided by colleges of higher education, and by further education colleges, which are officially part of the Learning and Skills sector.

Changes to the socio-economic context

The changing nature of higher education reflects wider changes to the social and economic context. The hallmarks of the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century are rapid economic, technological and social change, which have had a major impact on all aspects of people's lives, changing both the nature of work, and the way we live. Technological innovation and cheaper transportation costs mean that companies can move production to where costs are cheapest, leading to competition between labour markets across the world (Clarke and Newman, 1997). While Fordist mass production of standardized products still continues, it is widely believed that Western capitalist economies need to concentrate on high-value goods produced in low volume in order to remain competitive, which requires an investment in high skills. Furthermore, there is the emergence of what is described as the knowledge economy, based on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information (Clarke, 2001). In the knowledge economy, increasing numbers of workers need to utilize and be able to respond to

changing forms of knowledge (Jarvis, 2000).

There is no doubt that the achievement of competitive advantage has impelled educational expansion (Halsey, 1997). Brown and Lauder (1995, p.21) talk of 'global knowledge wars' to describe how knowledge is now seen to be a crucial factor in gaining competitive advantage in a global economy, with education and training forming a central part of economic policy-making. As Ashton and Green (1996) explain:

> Rarely if ever has the education of the large majority of the workforce been seen as the central lever of economic growth. Now, however, as twentieth century capitalism draws to a close, a new consensus is emerging among politicians of many different persuasions, among scholarly writers and among popular feeling, a consensus that the salience of a nation's education and training system is becoming the key item in the struggle for economic superiority (Ashton and Green, 1996, p.1).

The changing economic context places new demands on higher education. The belief that there is a limited pool of talent is no longer acceptable. Brown and Lauder (1995) suggest that 'education and training systems must be organized on the premise that all rather than a few are capable of significant practical and academic achievements' (ibid, p.27) and they believe that given the right motivation, at least 80 per cent of the population is capable of achieving the intellectual standards required to obtain a university degree.

Changes to the nature of work mean that employers seek new skills and qualities in graduates. There is extensive debate about the changing nature of knowledge. Specific disciplinary knowledge, technical skills and qualifications are not enough; employers want generic personal and interpersonal skills, such as communication, negotiation and teamwork as well, so that employees can work with others and engage in project work.

They seek people who can cope with flexibility and change and who are capable of applying knowledge to unfamiliar contexts (McNair, 1997). A long-term career with one employer is no longer typical, and graduates need to be prepared for a portfolio career (Brown and Scace, 1997), comprising a number of different jobs over their working life.

While economic change often appears to dominate debate, higher education has wider purposes which go beyond preparing people for employment. Coffield and Williamson (1997) emphasise that higher education has ‘a role to play in public life, in helping people to understand their world in a critical way and in promoting active debate about democratic values and morality.’ (ibid, p.4) and Dearing’s vision for the future quoted at the beginning of this chapter highlights such broader purposes for higher education. Here too, society has undergone major changes. Globalisation and communication technologies have had a major impact on cultural and value systems. With much wider access to other cultures, people are confronted with different value systems, which challenge ‘our notions of who we are, and where the boundaries are around our own identity.’ (McNair, 1997, p.101)

The complexities and uncertainties which people now face are often defined in terms of risk and individualisation drawing on the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991). For both Beck and Giddens the certainties of the industrial era are at an end, and scientific knowledge is no longer trusted as the basis for progress - the only certainty is uncertainty. There are new kinds of risk, particularly risks associated with scientific and technological developments.

The increasing complexity of the world means that individuals have to cope with a surfeit of knowledge and information. This is not just within their immediate environment.

Individuals now have to understand the wider context in which they live and work, and this means dealing with multiple frames of reference over and beyond their immediate situation. Giddens (1994) explains this by saying that 'individuals more or less have to engage with the wider world if they are to survive in it.' (ibid, p.7) They have to become more reflexive about their own lives, and actively plan and develop their own biographies.

The risks and uncertainty inherent in the changing social context create further demands on higher education. The development of knowledge, and of personal qualities such as breadth of mind, self-reliance, flexibility and adaptability need to be understood in the new circumstances in which we live. Barnett (2000) sees the role of higher education in this context as enabling students to handle uncertainty in such a way that they are able to act effectively.

The Expansion of Higher Education in the UK: Changes to Structure and Funding

Expansion to the higher education system in the UK needs to be understood against this backdrop. The changes which have taken place since the Robbins Report of 1963 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963) are connected to the increasing demands made on higher education to be responsive to social and economic pressures, challenging the autonomy and self-determination which universities may have enjoyed in the past (Kogan, 1993). The expansion of the system has brought with it major concerns related to funding and quality. Underlying both of these concerns are issues related to control of

higher education. This second part of the chapter outlines the expansion and restructuring of the UK higher education system since Robbins, and considers how the tensions in creating a more widely accessible and inclusive system can be seen clearly in questions relating to funding and quality.

From an elite to a mass system of higher education

Following Trow (1973) a higher education system can be defined as elite, mass or universal. An elite system serves the purpose of reproducing leading positions in society, whereas mass or universal systems are intended to provide a much broader supply of white collar professionals and technically-qualified staff. For Trow, a higher education system ceases to be elite when more than 15 per cent of the eligible population participate. It is considered to be mass when 15-40 per cent participate, and it becomes universal when more than 40 per cent is enrolled. Trow uses this formula to argue that expansion of the system forces it to change. This does not mean that it changes uniformly. Elite and exclusive institutions may continue to exist in a diversified mass system, but on their own they cannot sustain mass forms of higher education.

By the beginning of the 1990s, all three major political parties in the UK, Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats, shared the view that a mass system of higher education was inevitable for the 21st century (Halsey, 1997). However, this was not reflected in coherent policy in the period between the Robbins and Dearing reports, for despite the economic and social imperatives creating a more significant role for higher education in the past forty years, expansion of the system in the UK has been uneven and has not been systematically planned (Walford, 1991).

Until the Robbins Report of 1963 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963) higher education in the UK was geared towards educating a small elite of the population. The defining features were academic subjects, didactic teaching and independent research agendas. Students were young, on full-time courses, and predominantly male and middle-class. In the 1960s, this elite model faced a number of criticisms. It did not respond to the emerging needs of the economy and the need for applied research and it was seen as socially exclusive (Coffield and Williamson, 1997). The social democratic ideals of the post-war years offered a vision of social mobility and greater social equality through wider access to educational opportunities, including higher education. The Robbins Report reflected these ideals, with a commitment to make a place available for all who were qualified by ability and attainment to pursue higher education and wished to do so.

Following the Robbins Report, the number of students roughly doubled in the UK between 1963 and 1970 (Walford, 1991), though the system remained elite as defined by Trow (1973). The economic crisis in the 1970s, and the policies of the Conservatives in the 1980s which aimed to reduce government spending, led to a levelling off of expansion which lasted until the end of the 1980s. Then in 1989, Kenneth Baker, Conservative Secretary of State for Education, called for an increase in student numbers, leading to a rapid rise between 1988 and 1992. By 1992, participation had reached 30 per cent of school leavers.

Following this period of expansion, the Conservative Government placed a cap on further growth in publicly-funded full-time undergraduate student numbers (NCIHE, 1997), and participation remained at around 33 per cent for the rest of the 1990s. Nevertheless, the

rise in student numbers between 1987 and 1997, from 17 per cent to 33 per cent participation meant that in only a decade, the British higher education system moved from being an elite to a mass system (see figure 1).

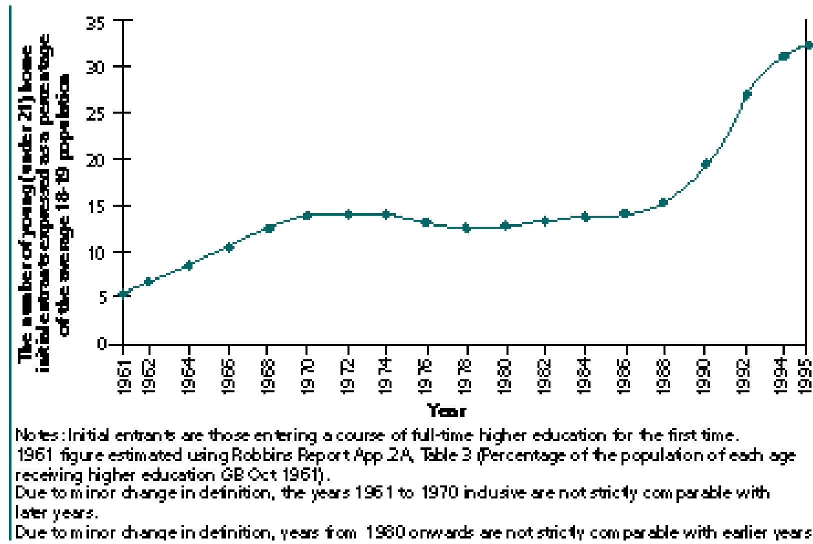

Figure 1: Higher Education Age Participation Index (API) – GB Institutions

(Source: National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997, parag 3.9)

The vision of the Labour Government in 2001 was that participation should rise still further to 50 per cent participation by 2010 (HEFCE, 2001). However, it should be noted that their goal involves a redefinition of participation. They propose that 50 per cent of those aged 18 to 30 should participate in some form of higher education, rather than focusing on participation by young people.

From a binary to a unified system

The expansion of higher education following Robbins was achieved through the creation of what is referred to as a binary system, meaning that it was divided into two sectors. It consisted of universities on the one hand and polytechnics and colleges on the other. Universities were legally independent and able to appoint their own vice-chancellors and staff, construct courses, award their own degrees and select students. Polytechnics and higher education colleges were part of the public sector under the control of local education authorities (and sometimes religious foundations). Degrees were awarded by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) or by a nearby university (Walford, 1991). They were defined as public sector higher education. While universities enjoyed considerable freedom and autonomy as independent institutions, public sector higher education was more closely controlled. The latter was supposed to relate to the needs of local economies, and offer more applied courses.

The two parts of the binary system were funded through grant aid from public funds, but the funding arrangements were different. Polytechnics and colleges received most of their funding through their local education authority. Funding was based on a formula related to student numbers, and was intended to fund the costs of teaching rather than research. Universities received a block grant through the University Grants Committee (UGC). The size of the grant was related to student numbers, though not all of the funding was intended for teaching. It was expected that between 30 and 40 per cent would be spent on research. Thus, although the two halves were defined by government as ‘different, but of equal status’ (Walford, 1991, p.167), the way they were funded clearly differentiated between research-led institutions and teaching-led institutions.

Furthermore, the UGC allowed universities to maintain considerable independence from government, whereas Walford believes that in creating the binary system, it was hoped that the polytechnic and college half would be cheaper to run, more open to public control, and more responsive to the needs of industry.

Expansion post-Robbins was quite generously funded, and although funding was reduced during the 1970s, in the wake of the economic crisis, it was the election of a Conservative Government in 1979 which was to have the next major impact on higher education (Brennan and Shah, 1993; Walford, 1991). The Conservatives were committed to reducing government expenditure on education, increasing efficiency and making the education system more responsive to the perceived needs of industry. There were major cuts to university funding in 1981, resulting in reductions in academic staff and extensive reorganisation. The UGC was reluctant to reduce the unit of resource, and protected as far as possible the amount of money spent on each student. Expansion came to a halt in the university sector in the 1980s, but continued in polytechnics and colleges, despite restrictions made by central government on the amount which local authorities could spend on higher education.

The Education Reform Act (ERA) of 1988 brought further changes to the sector. The Act freed polytechnics and higher education colleges of local authority control, and created a new funding body, the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council (PCFC). ERA also wound up the UGC which funded universities, and created the Universities Funding Council (UFC) in its place. In order to increase efficiency and promote expansion, the Government shifted a proportion of block grant core funding across to the tuition fees paid by local education authorities for each student. Institutions could

increase student numbers, but would receive tuition fees only for their increased numbers. The response of the two parts of the sector was different. While universities tried to protect their unit of resource, and avoided expansion, the polytechnic and college sector was prepared to increase recruitment of students for whom they received only tuition fees (Green, 1994). As a result, the expansion of student numbers between 1988 and 1992 took place largely in polytechnics and colleges of higher education, and was achieved with lower per capita funding.

The differing response to expansion was the impetus for the unification of the system four years later. Universities were not achieving the efficiency goals that the Conservative Government wanted. Abolishing the binary line was seen as a means of facilitating greater competition between institutions, and ensuring expansion at reduced costs. The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act gave polytechnics and large higher education colleges full autonomy with degree-awarding powers, and the right to use the title university. To fund all institutions in the new unified system, Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales were introduced.

Following unification, funding became an increasingly serious concern in the 1990s. There has been a constantly shrinking unit of resource allocated by the government. Institutions have been required to make year on year efficiency gains through a consistent reduction in core funding, so that in the twenty years leading up to the Dearing Inquiry, the unit of funding per student fell by 40 per cent (NCIHE, 1997). Individual students have also faced increasing hardship, with a growing burden placed on them to pay the cost of their study. In 1990, access to the maintenance grant for students was capped. Student loans were introduced, and a Student Loans Company founded to take

responsibility for issuing loans and for the recovery of debt. Between 1990 and 1999, maintenance grants were progressively reduced, and loans increased. From 1999, all new students have only had access to a student loan. Regular reports in the national press highlight the impact of these measures on students; participating in higher education means poverty and debt, reflected in headlines such as ‘Students would be better off on benefit’ (Woodward, 2002).

By the mid-1990s the university system was in financial crisis. Vice-chancellors threatened to take the law into their own hands, and proposed to charge top-up fees to students. Anticipating a general election, the opposition Labour Party and the Conservative Government agreed to set up a national committee of inquiry – the Dearing Committee – to address the problem. Dearing was set the task of ensuring that fees paid by the state would in future be paid by students and their families, but in the run-up to the general election, this remit was kept out of the public eye, and the inquiry was used as a means of parking the problem until the election was over (Parry, 1999).

The Dearing Report was published after the 1997 general election, and the importance of funding is demonstrated in the prominence given to financial issues in the final report, which fill most of the second half (Longden, 2001). Dearing proposed that the block grant to universities should be replaced by a system of funding which follows the student, and put forward proposals for how students should finance their study. Yet although Dearing offered detailed and carefully researched proposals, the Labour Government introduced their own policy solutions, which were not based on the ideas in the Dearing Report. In doing so they have perpetuated rather than resolved the funding problems facing both institutions and students, and this has precipitated a further financial crisis in

2002, with a £1 billion funding gap identified between funding needs and provision. The burden of cost to universities who widen access to non-traditional students has led to proposals to oppose further expansion (NATFHE, 2002).

The expansion of higher education has thus brought with it major questions in relation to funding. Whereas developments following the Robbins Report were well-funded, the New Right Conservative government of the 1980s challenged the belief that the system should be financed by the state, and based expansion on market-led reform (Brown and Lauder, 1995). In what Halsey (1997, p.640) refers to as 'the decade of the market', reflecting the goals of the Thatcher government elected in 1979, consumer choice and competition between institutions were seen as the way to achieve greater efficiency and to bring down costs. Allied to this was the belief that individuals should increasingly bear the cost as they would gain most benefit from higher education. The impact of the market philosophy on both students and institutions since then has been a serious and increasing problem of underfunding. The central dilemma of who pays has been replaced with the question of what is a reasonable balance between state and student (Longden, 2001), and this remains highly contested.

The Pursuit of Quality and Standards

The problems and issues involved in funding the system have been accompanied by increasing concern with quality and standards. The central policy dilemma is the need to expand student numbers with shrinking public funds, without loss to the quality of

teaching and research (Coffield and Williamson, 1997; McNair, 1997; Winter, 1999). Even if not in decline, quality may be different in the current mass, unified system of higher education compared with the past (Brennan and Shah, 1994). As a result, what is meant by quality is the subject of extensive debate, and has resulted in what Watson and Taylor (1998, p.74) refer to as 'quality wars'.

There are tensions between the internal world of the university, concerned with the status quo, quality, status and tradition, and an external world concerned with optimising resources, value for money and extending access to higher education for all those capable of benefiting from the experience (Longden, 2000). Brennan et al (1997) suggest that current changes are seen by some as 'a lack of trust in universities to be responsive to the economic needs of the country' (ibid, p.174), particularly as the burgeoning of quality assessment and audit procedures have coincided with the shift from an elite to a mass system of higher education.

Systems of quality audit and assessment

The various quality systems which have been introduced (see figure 2) cover a range of different aspects of provision in higher education.

Figure 2: Examples of quality audit and assessment in HE (Adapted from Jary, 1999, p.45)

Form of quality procedure	Description	System in UK
Teaching quality assessment	Subject assessment of teaching and learning by academic peers, using a prescribed procedure to measure quality (currently with a numerical score)	Quality Assurance Agency Subject Review Introduced 1997
Research Assessment Exercise	Assessment of research output by subject and elite peers. Numerical outcomes linked to funding	Research Assessment Exercise Introduced 1986
Quality audit	Institutional level audits of quality processes mainly by managerial peers	Individual institutions arrange own procedures
Undergraduate benchmarking	Qualifications framework and subject by subject benchmarks of graduate outcomes. Used for reporting on overall subject quality in institutions by subject specialists	National benchmark standards. Institutional programme specifications related to standards First 22 subject benchmark standards

		published 2000
Accreditation of teaching staff	Accreditation of individual teachers in higher education by a national Institute for Learning and Teaching	Institute for Learning and Teaching Introduced 1999
External examining	Monitoring and moderation of examining procedures for each course carried out by peers from other institutions	External examiners appointed by university departments for a period of 3 years at a time

The assessment of research through the Research Assessment Exercise and of teaching quality through Quality Assurance Agency subject review are perhaps the most widely known. These systems of review are carried out by peers who are considered to be experts. The outcomes are reported with a numerical score, which allows comparisons to be made between departments and institutions and for league tables to be published. Institutional audit examines the systems that an institution has in place for managing its work – its quality assurance procedures - and how these are put into practice. These include procedures related to the provision of courses, the management and development of staff, communication structures, and responsiveness to feedback from students, external examiners and external bodies such as employers.

A further development in addressing quality has been the publication of national

benchmark standards for undergraduate programmes in response to a recommendation put forward in the Dearing Report. They identify key outcomes which are intended to form explicit threshold standards across all provision. By 2000, these were published in 22 subject areas, with a further 24 to be published in 2002. They are intended to provide institutions with a framework for developing and specifying the intended learning outcomes of programmes; and to assist peer reviewers, including external examiners, with a point of reference, amongst others, for making judgements about the appropriateness of standards. They are also intended to ensure public and employer confidence that higher education awards, especially at first degree level, are recognised nationally and understood widely. In this way, Watson and Taylor (1998) believe that benchmarking reflects a shift in attention from examining the quality of the student experience in individual institutions, to the confirmation of standards across provision.

What is meant by quality?

While all these systems claim to evaluate quality, there is no one single agreed definition of what quality means. Green (1994) provides a useful overview of how definitions of quality vary. She explains that the concept of quality has traditionally been associated with providing a product or service that is distinctive or special. It implies exclusivity, and something that is out of reach of the majority of the population. Alternatively, quality can mean conformance to specifications or standards. Standards here mean the characteristics and criteria used to measure a product or service. Achieving quality then depends on the criteria set to define standards. Although this definition allows for a wider application of the notion of quality, it raises a number of problems. If the standards

used do not reflect perceptions of what is significant, there may be disagreement about what counts as a quality product or service. There are concerns that identifying suitable criteria encourages a definition of quality in terms of standards that are easily measurable, and this may not be straightforward in education. It may avoid important purposes which are difficult to measure.

Furthermore, the term standard is often associated with a different meaning in higher education, with standard meaning excellence or a high standard of academic achievement. This definition is inherent in concerns about the dilution of the quality of the intake. Whereas Robbins perpetuated an elite system, based around full-time study often away from home for 18-21 year olds (Watson and Taylor, 1998), the expansion of higher education in the 1990s has brought changes to the nature of the student cohort. Although many students still enter university at the age of 18 or 19, there are increasing numbers of mature students in higher education (McNair, 1997). There has been a steady growth in part-time undergraduate numbers, and a huge expansion of post-graduate study on taught programmes (Watson and Taylor, 1998). Furthermore, while the majority of students have continued to come from middle class backgrounds (Kogan, 1993, Longden, 2000), the focus of expansion in the Dearing Report is on widening participation of underrepresented groups, and the report emphasises the need to promote progression to higher education through projects which address low expectations and achievement. As students enter higher education with a wider range of educational attainment, and with a variety of qualifications rather than simply A-levels, there is a fear that standards of excellence in academic achievement may be reduced (Green, 1994).

A further definition of quality is fitness for purpose, where quality is judged according to

whether a product or service meets its stated intention. This raises questions about who defines the purpose. Whereas academics have traditionally played a major role in defining the meaning of higher education, there is increasing pressure to define fitness for purpose as meeting customer requirements. This raises a further question of who the customer is - the state, employers, students and their families all have an interest in higher education. Moreover, in an increasingly differentiated mass higher education system, purposes may not be the same across provision. One approach to addressing this issue is to measure quality according to how institutions define their goals and purposes. In a differentiated system, this allows institutions to be measured against their own quality goals. Yet this approach tacitly acknowledges that the system is not just differentiated but stratified, despite its overt appearance as a unified system, with a hierarchy of esteem, allowing an elitist model of what constitutes higher education to be retained in certain institutions and departments (Coffield and Williamson, 1997).

The impact of quality procedures on higher education

There is a great deal of concern about the impact of the quality procedures which have been implemented in the British higher education system in the past ten years. The rise to prominence of the quality agenda has coincided with cuts in spending on higher education, and audit and subject review have been attacked for being expensive and intrusive (Watson and Taylor, 1998). For many commentators, the introduction of systems of quality audit and assessment relate to the market philosophy introduced by the Conservative government (Brennan and Shah, 1994; Walford, 1991). For the market to operate effectively, the various ‘customers’ of higher education require assurances that

they are getting a suitable product. The government wants assurance that institutions are producing the graduates the country needs. Employers want to be sure of the consistency of academic and professional competence. Students want to know they are getting a qualification which is recognised and valued by the outside world and in the labour market.

The drive to increase efficiency and to get more value for less money creates a tension between questions of efficiency and quality. There is a fear that quality is being traded for efficiency, so that, for example, changes in approaches to teaching and learning respond to demands for greater efficiency rather than higher quality learning (Green, 1994). Within higher education institutions there are concerns about the impact of overcrowding, and the effect of pressures on staff-student ratios and resources on academic standards. For Halsey (1997) the overall emphasis on efficiency means that it is only realistic to interpret the impact of expansion as a 'levelling down of standards' (ibid, p.645).

Autonomy and accountability in higher education

Surrounding discussions of systems of quality assurance are major debates about autonomy, accountability and responsibility. Even if the principle of institutional autonomy has been maintained within higher education (Watson and Taylor, 1998), the boundaries around such autonomy are much more tightly defined, with the introduction of ever more precise specifications of what higher education should do and how it should do it, albeit in the name of accountability and quality assurance.

The spread of quality systems is believed to have far-reaching consequences for higher education. The discourse of quality audit, the way it defines what people do and the language used to define it, means that audit is not neutral. As Woodhouse (1998, p.264) argues, ‘Audits do as much to construct definitions of quality and performance as to monitor them.’ In this way, audit can structure how those working in higher education behave, and discipline higher education into certain ways of working. The emphasis on efficiency, financial viability and accountability encourages what is called performativity (Jary, 1999), so that those working in higher education become oriented to a management discourse of performance indicators, competition, comparison and responsiveness.

Amidst worries concerning the impact of managerialism and performativity, it is easy to lose sight of legitimate demands for democratic accountability. Democratic forms of accountability would be responsive to a range of stakeholders. However, many of those currently defined as stakeholders in higher education, including the state, industry, students and their families, are currently immersed in a discourse of the market. They are encouraged to see themselves as customers, who should seek compensation if the product they are receiving fails them. Democratic accountability poses challenges to old forms of academic autonomy. But it also challenges understandings of stakeholders in higher education, both in terms of who the stakeholders are, and how their role is defined. As higher education continues to expand, the need to address these questions becomes more pressing.

There is a key role for academics here, as Coffield and Williamson (1997) argue:

> Academics have no right to impose a particular model, but they do have a

> responsibility to ensure that debates about it are informed, critical and open. They have a responsibility to develop different visions of their own future which can be evaluated in public debate so that public choices in this major area of policy are well informed. (Coffield and Williamson, 1997, p.5)

Equally, there is an important contribution to be made by the wider community. Their views should not replace the visions of the academic community, but would work with these visions to contribute to future understandings of higher education.

Conclusion

Around 34 per cent of young people now pursue higher education, and an increasing number of people do so as adults. The widening of participation reflects changes to the social and economic context, changes in government policy, and the changing aspirations of individuals. While the opening up of higher education to a wider audience may be welcomed, it brings with it pressures and challenges. There are competing tensions between the national requirement for a well-educated workforce and the cost of providing such a workforce; between the desire by higher education to retain autonomy of purpose while being driven towards greater accountability and dependence through funding; and between the move towards a mass and possibly universal higher education system set against the desire to retain the qualities and intimacy of an elite system (Longden, 2000).

The changes which have taken place represent important challenges to the former elite system, which are welcomed by many commentators. However, the form these changes have taken has faced wide-ranging critiques. The concern is not just with particular

aspects of reform, but the underlying direction of reform. The emphasis on meeting economic need and achieving greater efficiency is seen as drawing attention away from more fundamental concerns.

Barnett (2000) proposes that 'higher' education should refer to a genuine higher learning, where students are enabled to understand and confront the complexities they face. This means that there needs to be a democratic imperative, not just an economic imperative (Coffield and Williamson, 1997). A democratic imperative 'argues that a learning society worthy of the name ought to deliver social cohesion and social justice as well as economic prosperity to *all* its citizens.' (ibid, p.3) Coffield and Williamson argue further that 'A viable model for higher education is inseparable from one for society as a whole.' (ibid, p.5)

The Dearing report appears to respond to these concerns. The report identifies four main purposes for higher education. These are firstly, to enable individuals to achieve their highest potential, to equip them for work, to enable them to contribute to society and to achieve personal fulfilment. Secondly, to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application for the economy and society. Thirdly, to meet the needs of an 'adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy' at local, regional and national level, and fourthly to play a major role in shaping a 'democratic, civilised, inclusive society.' (NCIHE, 1997, p.5)

Yet the daily business of higher education often appears to remain dominated by agendas concerned with efficiency and meeting the need to educate and train a suitable workforce. It is tempting to see the expansion of higher education as exacerbating these pressures, rather than opening up the potential for wider access to broader understandings of a

genuine higher learning. Yet if universities are to be key agencies in developing a more egalitarian, participatory and socially just society (Watson and Taylor, 1998), then such tensions need to be addressed.

This chapter has aimed to:

contextualise the role of higher education in a modern knowledge economy

provide an overview of the way that the higher education system in the UK has changed and expanded since the Robbins Report of 1963

discuss the problems of funding a mass system which have developed out of elite traditions

explore changing understandings of quality and standards in higher education, and

consider the challenges of maintaining a broad, democratic vision of higher education in the face of economic imperatives.

In an age of risk and uncertainty, there will be no certain solutions, for as Beck (1992) suggests, in modern times, the only certainty is uncertainty.

Activities

The principal goal of higher education is the nurturing of a critical understanding among students in whatever discipline they study (Barnett, 2000). How does this claim match up with your reasons for entering higher education, and your experience of studying in

higher education.

Has the expansion of higher education widened participation to a broader population? Find and discuss data on participation by class, gender, ethnic origin and age in your own institution and compare this with the national picture.

Look up the benchmark standards for your area of study on the QAA website (look under benchmarking at qaa.org.uk). How are they reflected in your course of study?

Further reading

Coffield, F. and Williamson, B. (eds) (1997) *Repositioning Higher Education,* Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

This edited book considers the role of higher education in modern society. There are chapters on quality, the curriculum, qualification frameworks and social justice. All chapters put forward visions for the future which are intended to provoke debate.

Kogan, M. and Hanney, S. (2000) *Reforming Higher Education,* London: Jessica Kingsley.

This book looks at higher education policy over the last thirty years, and examines the

relationship between higher education policy and the state.

Scott, P. (ed) (2000) *Higher Education Re-formed,* London: Falmer.

This edited volume discusses the challenges facing higher education and how it will be re-formed in the new millennium, from a range of perspectives. Different chapters look at the history, management and organisation of universities, and the nature of knowledge in higher education.

The three main journals in the UK which focus on higher education are:

Higher Education Quarterly (Blackwell/Society for Research into Higher Education)

Higher Education Review (Tyrell Burgess)

Studies in Higher Education (Carfax/Society for Research into Higher Education)

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