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Power, politics and prestige: using history to help understand HE policy development (0119)

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HE faces uncertain times, with future policy direction unclear in a context of economic and political upheaval. This paper takes a historical perspective on the state and HE, suggesting that major shifts in HE policy have arisen from contexts of crisis, rather than sectoral dynamics. It will propose that such an analysis can inform the thinking around potential futures for HE.

Clark's 1984 collection of disciplinary perspectives began with the historical; Perkin identifies universities as the 'axial institutions' of post-industrial society, too important to the state 'to be left to their own autonomous devices'. But can we take the historical approach further, following Ash's (1997) insight that 'to gain perspectives for the future, it is appropriate to take the long view that historical research can offer'?

Using case studies from England and overseas, this paper outlines how historically-aware perspective can contribute to our understanding of the drivers behind HE policy.

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1000-word outline

There are three standpoints from which a "backward look" can be taken to reflect our on understanding of HE policy; each brings a distinctive strength, and each a limit to the field of vision. Historians have subjected university-state relations to compelling analysis (Vernon 2004, Ash 1997, Rudolf 1990). These surveys tend to focus on national systems, tracing the emergence of the modern sector and exploring the roles of institutions and individuals in that process. They constitute a valuable historiographical contribution, bringing consciousness of underlying processes, of the unforeseen and unplanned as well as the grand strategy, of the parameters of thought and action. However, the potential for drawing the insights into discussions about the future of those – and indeed other – national systems often remains unrealised. Indeed, there is a reluctance, as Tosh (2009) notes, to enter into discussions that appear to offer prophesy rather than just perspective on contemporary challenges.

When a backward look is taken by those specialising in higher education as a field for academic enquiry, a keen understanding of the sector and of institutional complexity is brought to the endeavour. But stubborn traditions of idealising universities are also encountered. Rottblatt (1997) notes that both those who see universities as stubborn and resistant to change and those who bemoan recent trends towards marketisation and differentiation appeal to the idea of an Idea of a university. Where we are now, and what those taking the backward look make of it, conditions the perspective on the past and also, necessarily, the conception of the future. 'Ideas' (especially those that are given a capital 'I') are by nature ahistorical. While we may be inclined to consider what the 'Idea of a University' means now, what purpose HE serves, on its own this can only be an intellectual exercise.

The standpoint of the policy maker is more pragmatic and politically aware, conscious of the parameters within which decisions can be taken and policies implemented. It is located in very much in the present; 'we are where we are'. In times of adversity there is a tendency to be pre-occupied with the challenges of the present and for the policy maker perhaps more so than any other stakeholder. Emerging findings from my doctoral research suggest that public perception is a main driver of government action and for governments under pressure, dealing – and being seen to deal - with the present is a political imperative. But as the recession plays out, it is clear that actions based on 'where we are' are unlikely to gain traction. As Simon Jenkins, writing last year about the credit crunch, reminded us: 'the dictatorship of the short term is total and blinds all who practise it' (Guardian, 21/11/08). Where we are is conditioned by where we were; any attempt to think seriously about possible futures – and how to create them - requires more than a GPS reference of current location.

A historical perspective allows us to not just know but *understand* where we are. The idea of 'consciousness' captures this well. This paper suggests how we might start to think about issues in HE policy development by taking a historically conscious approach.

One theme – HE policy and nation-building as a response to crisis – is explored through three case studies: the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810; the developments in English HE in response to the First World War; and post-Independence India.

The paper will set the founding of the University of Berlin in the context of the Prussian military defeat at Jena in 1806, outlining how it was conceived to re-build the Prussia's prestige, replacing 'with intellectual forces what we have lost in material ones', as King Friedrich Wilhelm III is noted as saying. It will introduce the concept, echoed in the other case studies, of higher education as being at the heart of projects of national renewal, an instrument for change.

Turning to England and the impact of the First World War, the paper will draw out the role of HE in reconstruction efforts, the seat of civic values and humane ideals. Expertise was to be developed, but in a collegiate context that set knowledge within the framework of a civilised society. Such a context would provide the moral counterbalance to technological power that Germany had so fatally lacked. The collegiate ideal was reaffirmed, but there was a new imperative: reconstruction and renewal.

The final case study - newly independent India – takes HE policy beyond the British rhetoric of knowledge with compassion to a new level of activism. The post-Independence University Education Commission was set an explicit task to engineer social change as the new government faced the challenge of both state-building – establishing the machinery of government - and nation-building – forging a sense of identity and cultural unity.

The paper will finish by suggesting what the implications might be of bringing historical perspectives into our consideration of scenarios for the future of the sector, providing a point of departure for the next paper in the symposium.