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The University as an Agent of the State: The demise of the 'idea' of the university. (0120)

Programme number: L1.6

Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

Higher Education (HE) and the Government have recently developed an intense and often turbulent relationship of mutual dependence. Government places demands on the sector to collude in its policy goals of social justice and to fill gaps in the 'knowledge economy'. Universities are compelled to cooperate through much needed funding incentives. This paper discusses the impact of this relationship, looking in particular at how Government manipulation has muddied the 'idea' of the university. The interventionist policies devised to increase social mobility offer timely examples of the current governments desire to shape the sector to fulfil its own political aims. The UK is not unique in having heavy state influence in HE and comparisons are drawn from other countries on the different levels of influence imposed. This paper debates the level of autonomy Universities should have and how this autonomy will affect the future understanding of the idea of university.

The University as an Agent of the State: The demise of the 'idea' of the university.

The notion that greater investment in higher education is linked to a nation's economic prosperity has led to greater state intervention (Naidoo 2000). Widening Participation (WP) is one of the most prolific of these interventions, either being a product of a left of centre government desire to correct the negative impacts of an increasingly market driven sector, or purely a necessity to facilitate the critical mass of an expanded Higher Education (HE) sector. Regardless, WP is in no way unique to the UK, it is a shared concern of 97% of European Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) (European Universities – Trends V Report, 2007).

These interventionist policies have raised questions about how the concept, and importantly, quality of UK HE is being effected with critics such as Lord Patten (Chancellor of Oxford University and prominent Conservative peer) accusing the government of "infringing on the independence of universities and treating them like 'local social security offices' in the drive to improve the nation's education and social mobility" (Curtis 2008). Sir Roy Anderson, the Rector of Imperial College London also fuelled the debate on state intervention and the knowledge economy "If you take the top five universities, they have enormous potential to earn income for Britain. How best to do that? My own view would be to privatise them. You don't want to be subject to the mores of government funding or changing educational structures." (Ross 2009)

The demand for places at UK HEIs increased by 8% in 2009. This could be seen as evidence of success of the government's social and economic policy. Beyond the arguments that the low participation groups are not being engaged, Fisher identifies the disintegration of identity and 'idea' of HE suggesting "the price is that this success may not actually be what current societal needs require in terms of future expectations" (Fisher 2006).

The financial power that governments wield over HEIs funding dominates their activity (Henkel and Little 1998). This paper will argue that the pressures of massification necessitate a continued drive by HEIs to seek financial and administrative autonomy. It will explore the potential for HEIs to have greater freedom, combined with the possibility that they have failed to drive social change, debating the value of optimistic social justice policy initiatives such as WP.

What is the Idea of University? Is there an accepted interpretation of the purpose and role HEIs play? The paper will explore these questions in the context of state control and who should decide on what Higher Education should be now and in the future.

The 'New Labour' Government indicated its intention of increased state intervention early on, making clear their intentions for an expanded higher education system (Massification) both in their submissions to the Dearing Committee (Dearing 1997) as well as statements in the 1997 manifesto citing the success of such policies abroad.

The paper explores why the intervention culture has arisen, looking at the third way concepts of social justice derived from the work of Anthony Giddens which heavily influenced the Former Prime Minister Tony Blair and the then Chancellor, Gordon Brown. Aiming to end the barriers of social class through social justice and create opportunities through the concept of choice and meeting the needs of globalisation (Giddens 1998)

Despite the 50% target and the well funded initiatives the results have been marginal with participation of the target groups only increasing by 2% (Public Accounts Committee 2009). A dismayed Edward Leigh, Chairman of the Committee, commented "A lot of money, £392m over five years up to 2007-08, was allocated to the universities to increase the proportion of working-class youngsters who go on to university courses. It is dismayed that the government seems to have little idea what the universities have been doing with this money. Certainly, progress has been poor. The rate at which working-class young people participate in higher education has increased by only two percentage points"

The paper draws upon case studies and research exploring how Governments across the world exert their influence. It particularly highlights the patterns arising from differing levels of autonomy; achieved by combining the work carried out by Anderson and Johnson, which investigated the levels of autonomy given to institutions by their Governments in 20 countries, and that of Shavit et al, who investigated whether expansion in HE in 15 different countries provided more opportunities from disadvantage groups or magnifies the inequality systems.

The paper makes the argument that the preoccupation with the concept of universities as instruments of social change has not contributed towards wider goals of enabling people from diverse backgrounds to access HE and has distracted from the 'idea' of University drawing much needed funding away from teaching, and shifted debate away from a diversified system, failing to meet the needs of either party.

The paper is particularly relevant for the sector, with a Fees Review due to take place this year, and a General Election to be held by May 2010, which is also the deadline for achieving the manifesto target of 50% participation (Labour, 2001).

The paper challenges some of the key policy decisions relating to intervention, including whether the massification and social justice agenda were implemented to fulfil the need for a knowledge economy, questioning whether the emphasis should have been refocused from widening access from the young to those already in employment to meet a predicated downturn in the 'traditional student' (Bekhradnia 2006). In concluding this paper will question as we continue to develop a market in our HE sectors, whether the market should determine the future of HE and thus the level of social justice in HE rather than the State?

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