

Policy change in higher education *Intended and unintended outcomes*

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Following developments in the 1980s, the 1990s seem to promise for many governments and societies an increasing concern about the role and relevance of their respective higher education systems. This concern seems to be brought about by several factors such as financial stringency, increased demand, effective articulation between higher and other education sectors, labour market priorities, aging populations, changes in the structure of the 'welfare state', and the interests of minority groups. Increasing participation and the transformation of higher education from 'elite' to 'mass' systems inevitably leads to much larger community involvement and makes higher education more of a 'political issue'. Financial pressures, and the wish of governments to get more value per dollar, appear to be driving higher education systems to change, as does the wish for higher education to be more closely tied to national economies, both in terms of meeting national labour market needs and through research discovering new products or resources.

Many national systems of higher education are experiencing profound change. Nearly everywhere, governments are asking their respective higher education systems to participate more effectively and efficiently in producing a better educated, culturally enriched, and more economically secure society. Over the last few years, substantial system restructuring has occurred in several countries with the expressed intention of creating more flexible, adaptive, accessible, and responsive higher education institutions. Some governments, for example, are changing so-called binary systems of higher education into unitary ones; other governments seem to be doing the opposite; still other governments are attempting to encourage greater educational diversity while maintaining the *organizational status quo*. While the desire seems to be for more diverse and adaptive higher education systems, the process of change and barriers to it are not well understood. Various forces – including government policy itself – appear to divert attempts to create more flexible and diversified higher education systems. A clear example of this is the process of the 'homogenization' of higher education, a process which seems to involve an 'upward drift' of institutional goals, characteristics, and functions towards the top of an institutional status hierarchy.

Some theoretical work on the stratification of higher education systems and empirical investigations of national higher education structures in terms of the governance and distribution of power within higher education have been carried out. However, there appears to be a need for comparative studies to assess how specific policies are achieved or diverted from their intended purpose by the way in which structures and systems of stratification interact with these policies. While

there can be little doubt that nearly everywhere higher education is being asked to fulfil new roles and to serve more diverse community needs, demands and expectations, little is known, particularly from a comparative perspective, about three fundamental issues associated with change in higher education:

- a) the similarities and differences in the way in which governments both initiate and respond to forces of change in higher education;
- b) the similarities and differences in the way in which particular higher education systems both initiate and respond to change; and
- c) the interrelationship between policy outcome and the structure and character of specific higher education systems.

The articles in this issue of *Higher Education* explore the interrelationship between government policy initiatives and the structure and character of higher education systems in Australia, Austria, Canada, Finland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Sweden. The purpose of these articles is not to define what this interrelationship is, but to set a particular research agenda for examining the various and multi-faceted ways in which demands for change are shaped and interpreted by the higher education community in its various national forms.

The papers are the first effort of a major comparative research project on 'Policy Change in Higher Education: Intended and Unintended Outcomes'. Rather than summarizing in this introduction the contents of each article, a brief description of the aims and purposes of the project which generated the articles may be more worthwhile.

The project has its genesis in discussions between researchers from three centres involved with higher education policy studies: Dr V. Lynn Meek, Department of Administrative, Higher and Adult Education Studies, University of New England, Australia; Dr Leo C.J. Goedegebuure, Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, University of Twente, the Netherlands; and Drs Osmo Kivinen and Risto Rinne, Research Unit for the Sociology of Education, University of Turku, Finland. The mutual concern was with investigating and analyzing the varied and complex responses which different systems of higher education are making to what appear to be the new economic, social and political pressures. In so-called 'market driven' systems of higher education (such as in the United States and, for somewhat different reasons, the United Kingdom), governments are assuming a more prominent role in helping to shape the goals and functions of higher education. In contrast, in those systems in which the government traditionally played an important role with respect to higher education policy (such as in Western Europe), a fundamental reappraisal of government's position can be witnessed. Firm beliefs in the virtues of regulation, planning mechanisms and government co-ordination appear to be replaced by a philosophy in which the government's role is confined more to setting the boundary conditions within which the higher education system is to operate, leaving more room to manoeuvre at the institutional level. This shift to what has been called more 'self-regulating systems' or 'remote government control' goes hand in hand with an emphasis on institutional accountability. Value-for-

money or performance-for-money surfaces as a new ideology in many higher education systems, thereby redefining the traditional roles of higher education as well as the existing balances within the systems. Developments that by their very nature set in motion a chain of actions and reactions, both productive and counter-productive to the original aims, leave the outcomes as yet unclear. Interest in these tensions raises the following general problem statement for the project:

In what ways are the key actors who are involved in higher education policy trying to change the internal dynamics and the structure of higher education systems, and how do the characteristics of these systems accommodate or deflect the attempts to generate change?

Specific research questions are:

- a) Who are the key actors who can be identified with respect to the relevant higher education policies in a specific national context, what is their functional location in this system, and how do they act in terms of the policies identified?
- b) What are the reasons behind the emergence of certain policy initiatives, and why do they assume priority on the higher education agenda?
- c) What is the extent of change implied in the specific policies with respect to the internal dynamics and/or the structure of the higher education system?
- d) In what ways do the structure and characteristics of the higher education system accommodate or deflect policy intentions, and what are the reasons behind this?

In designing a project to approach the above questions from a comparative perspective, it was recognized that a good deal of comparative research fails to achieve its aims because little initial effort is devoted to identifying common language, categories, and theoretical frames of reference. So that this project did not end up comparing 'apples with oranges', a two stage process of research was designed. Stage one (the preliminary or framework stage) is devoted to identifying the key issues and generating the theoretical and methodological framework of the study. Stage two is devoted to empirical investigation of the key issues.

Stage one involved: (1) recruiting research collaborators willing to write the initial papers on what appear to be the key issues associated with policy change in their respective national higher education systems; (2) subjecting the initial papers to critical peer review by a group of leading experts in the field of higher education policy research; and (3) assembling all research collaborators and advisory experts in a seminar aimed at constructing a mutually agreed upon research agenda upon which to base in-depth empirical investigation.

This research project would have remained nothing more than a good idea had it not been for the generous support of the Academy of Finland, Finland's Ministry of Education, and the University of Turku Foundation. These bodies sponsored the seminar on 'Policy Change in Higher Education: Intended and Unintended Outcomes' held at the University of Turku, 4-7 June 1990. The papers of the

research collaborators who attended the Turku Seminar are published in this volume of *Higher Education*. The advisory experts who participated in the Seminar were: Dr Marianne Bauer, National Board of Universities and Colleges, Sweden; Professor Burton R. Clark, UCLA, U.S.A.; Dr Elaine El-Khawas, American Council on Education, USA; Professor Grant Harman, University of New England, Australia; Dr Kari Hyppönen, Department of Academic and Student Affairs, University of Turku, Finland; Professor Maurice Kogan, Brunel University, U.K.; Professor Guy Neave, International Association of Universities, Paris; Professor Ulrich Teichler, Gesamthochschule Kassel, Germany; Professor Frans Van Vught, University of Twente, the Netherlands.

Each article is in its own right an important contribution to the analysis of change and stability in the various national higher education systems represented. Here it may be worthwhile to discuss how the articles, taken as a whole and coupled with the debate which occurred during the Turku Seminar, establish a particular approach to comparative research on higher education policy.

During the Seminar, much of the debate focused on the problem of coming to terms with the dynamics of change when confronted with such diverse national cases: where does the commonality lie and how can different systems be appropriately categorized. Past methods of classifying systems as either 'bottom-up' (where change is primarily initiated at the institutional level) or 'top-down' (where change is primarily initiated by government) appeared to detract from, rather than benefit, analysis. As Meek elaborates in his article, both perspectives assume that one group of motivated actors is working its will on another group of, more-or-less, passive actors; the reality of the situation seems to be far more complicated.

Change in higher education is based on power relations and the articulation of interests by various groups whose actions and interests are themselves either constrained or furthered by both the structure of the academic system and their location in it. This implies that empirical research cannot be confined to just one of these central issues – power relations, interest articulation, system structure, or positions – but has to be focused on the *interrelationships* between them. It is the dynamics of the interplay between actors in different positions with a variety of motivations and interests which is at stake. In this respect, the study of 'non-change' may reveal just as important insights as does the examination of significant system transformations. A search for forces and underlying principles of change must, by definition, also be directed at those factors which tend to maintain the *status quo*. The article by Jones, for example, clearly demonstrates how a balance of power amongst key actors and groups in Ontario's system of higher education tends toward the maintenance of the *status quo*. Gruber's analysis of the Austrian predicament hints at how the beginnings of a realignment of interest and powerful groups may set that system on the road to significant transformation. Goedegebuure and Westerheijden analyze the situation in the Netherlands where, on the one hand, an initial shift in relative institutional power and influence sparked a process of radical transformation that went far beyond the expectations of the reformers. On the other hand, they indicate that the maintenance of the *status quo* in certain areas

of academia, such as research, remains an important feature of Dutch higher education because of existing dependencies between key actors. As political actors become more assertive, it seems that the dynamics of the British system of higher education, as Fulton documents, is shifting from a state of high institutional autonomy to one greatly influenced by governmental decree.

The focus on the dynamics and complexities of the interrelationship between policy initiative and institutional response allows for the identification of how the articulation of interests by various groups affects policies and their ability (or inability) to shape the future direction of higher education systems. The Turku Seminar concluded that 'policy' itself should be treated not merely as an officially accepted government directive, but as the resultant of the interplay between the key actors involved on issues relating to the structure, function, and character of higher education systems. Policy in this sense incorporates the dynamics that shape a higher education system through the interactions of the various (groups of) actors who can be identified at the different levels within the system; actors who operate from different perspectives, with different ideologies and objectives, and from different power positions. The article by Kivinen and Rinne provides a specific method for mapping the higher education terrain in terms of the relevant interest groups and their power relations.

While it is assumed that the power of individuals and groups to influence events is highly dependent upon their structural location within a particular higher education system, the Turku Seminar also recognized that the identification of positions or levels in academic systems is necessarily arbitrary. In practice, as Meek notes, higher education incorporates a multiplicity of positions and levels, and for the individual, structural position can be highly fluid.

For the purpose of analysis, the structure of higher education can be disaggregated into three levels: what Becher and Kogan (1980) call the basic unit, the institutional level and the central authority level; or what Clark (1983) terms as the understructure (basic academic or disciplinary units), the middle or enterprise structure (individual organizations in their entirety), and the superstructure (the vast array of government and other system regulatory mechanisms that relate organization to one another). The three primary levels of understructure, middle structure and superstructure can be further disaggregated, such as into (1) the political relationship between and within ministries (and their administrative functions), between ministries and parliament (and its legislative functions), and, in federal systems, between parliaments; (2) the administrative relationship between governments and higher education institutions; (3) inter-institutional relationships; and (4) intra-institutional relationships. This method of disaggregating higher education systems is no more or less arbitrary than any other. Each article in this volume provides a degree of validity for such disaggregations of higher education systems. They also indicate that for the purpose of empirical research and analysis, there is no such thing as one all-embracing structural typology; a specific constellation emerges for each of the cases.

As the articles demonstrate, the project involves the collaboration of researchers from countries each with their own history, culture, and higher education priorities. In practical terms, policy change in higher education involves different empirical

phenomena according to specific national contexts. The purpose is not for each researcher to examine exactly the same phenomena or to generate exactly the same data in each country; this would be an unproductive if not impossible task in the face of substantial cross-national, cultural and historical variations. Rather, the purpose is to examine different facets of change in higher education systems in different places according to a common theoretical perspective. It is the application of the common perspective to divergent phenomena associated with change in higher education which will lead to significant theoretical generalization. As the reader will note, the contributions represent a wide variety in traditions regarding the authority relationship between higher education and the state. The national cases include federal systems and unitary ones; binary systems of higher education and unified national systems; systems exclusively centrally controlled by the state and ones with seemingly more institutional autonomy; and systems which are experiencing a period of rapid change and those which appear to be more stable.

Possibly, a convergence of authority relationships and their outcomes across various national systems of higher education is occurring; several of the articles hint at this possibility. But the notion of policy convergence is treated first of all as an empirical question, not as an assumption. Nonetheless, the application of the common theoretical framework and research questions, coupled with the time factor, will assist in exploring the question of policy convergence. The methodology allows for the comparison of more immediate effects of relatively recent policy initiatives taking place in certain countries, as is the case with New Zealand (see the article by Snook), with the longer term outcomes of older and better established policy reforms in other countries, as is the case with Sweden (see the article by Sköldbberg).

The common perspective and approach to the examination of policy change in higher education in each country involves the following elements. First, a comprehensive 'conceptual map' of the main philosophical, ideological, and social issues facing each higher education system will be formulated. Due to limited time and resources, all issues located on the conceptual map of each respective higher education system cannot be investigated. However, the conceptual map will describe and critically analyze the overall historical development and political, economic, social, and cultural context of each higher education system (including policy traditions), from which will be distilled those issues which can be empirically investigated. The articles presented in this volume can be seen as the first effort at this 'mapping' exercise.

Second, as stated above, the common theoretical assumption is that the extent of change (or again, non-change) is the resultant of power relations and the articulation of interests by various groups whose actions and interests (including ideological ones) are themselves either constrained or furthered by the structure of the specific academic system and the actors' location within it. In that the central purpose is to examine the structure of the interrelationship between policy change and higher education and its outcome, the theory of structuration (Giddens 1977) is a guiding concept; that is, the theory that structure is both the medium and the

product of social interaction. With respect to this interaction, power relations, interest articulation, system structure and actors' location within the system are perceived to be key elements. In dealing with interactions, or more simply 'behaviour', within and between institutions located in the higher education system, it is possible to draw on a large body of literature related to decision-making and administration. Four well-known approaches are the bureaucratic, collegial, political, and organized anarchy models (Baldrige 1971; Cohen and March 1974; Millet 1978; Weber 1947). It is beyond the scope of this introduction to discuss the differences between these models (see Bess 1988; Chaffee 1983; Lane 1990), but we pose the question of whether higher education is so unique that specific 'academic models' are necessary to analyze processes of change and non-change. Of course, higher education institutions have specific characteristics that differentiate them from other forms of organization, but this does not imply that basic concepts from organizational, political, and social theory have no analytical power when applied to higher education systems. 'Instead of viewing organizational structures and decision-making processes in higher education institutions as aberrant and unique adaptations to the special needs of academia, they can be perceived as standard accommodations to normal organizational conditions' (Bess 1988: 12-13). Thus, drawing from a number of disciplinary perspectives, the common theoretical 'lens' to be employed during the course of the project will incorporate the following concepts:

- a) stratification and structuration (e.g., Bourdieu 1988; Giddens 1977);
- b) organizational politics (e.g., Baldrige 1971; Meek 1982);
- c) power (e.g., Bacharach and Lawler 1980; Dahl 1957; Emerson 1962; Pfeffer 1981);
- d) interests (e.g., Culbert and McDonough 1980; Downs 1967; Wildavsky 1979);
- e) dependency (e.g., Aldrich 1979; Emerson 1962; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978); and
- f) strategic behaviour (e.g., Emery and Trist 1965; Miles and Snow 1978).

While the phenomena under examination differ from country to country, several heuristic questions are addressed in common:

- a) The regulatory relationship between government and higher education institutions.
 - I. What recent changes in government policy on higher education have taken place and what have been the effects (if identifiable) with regard to:
 - diversification/homogenization of the higher education system (diversification and homogenization refer to both the structural and functional components of the system);
 - traditional institutional roles and values in the areas of teaching, research and service;
 - institutional autonomy;
 - the steering/co-ordination of higher education, with an emphasis on the type of policy instruments used by government; and

II. What has been the institutional response to the government policy initiatives identified above, and what has been its effect?

b) The classificatory relationship between institutions.

I. In what way are higher education institutions classified?

Both the formal classification of institutions based on legislation, funding formulas, etc., as well as the more 'informal' classification that exists in each system and further differentiates the broad formal classificatory schemata will be addressed.

II. What has been the effect of recent policy initiatives on classification and stratification within the higher education system?

III. In what ways do higher education institutions themselves attempt to change existing formal and informal classifications?

The project assumes not only that the governing relationships within higher education systems can be identified, but also that those relationships affect profoundly the core of academia: curriculum and its control, the emphasis given to one kind of research or the other (strategic and sectoral as against basic), academic governance (collegial, oligarchical or managerial), and so on. The ultimate criterion used to verify change (intended or otherwise) is the degree to which fundamental academic activities and their control – teaching, research, selection, assessment, etc. – are being transformed.

To conclude, we must acknowledge that it is a unique privilege to present this special issue on policy change in higher education to the readers of *Higher Education*. This collection of articles lays a firm foundation upon which to base future research. As the project begins to yield additional results, every effort will be made to bring these to the attention of the international higher education community.

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