ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

FUNDING, ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONTROL

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Introduction

Christian Thomasius, writing at the end of the seventeenth century, described the University of Halle as a place of:

> unfettered freedom, yea, freedom which is the very life of the spirit and without which human reason is as good as dead.

One of the dilemmas facing those involved in higher education three centuries later is how to reconcile institutional autonomy and academic freedom with state funding and the importance attached to control and accountability. In the United Kingdom alone, in 1987-88, there were some 750,000 people involved in higher education with a budget of £4 billion. As one commentator, Graeme Moodie (1986:1) has noted, higher education is costly and is "a conspicuous target for any government anxious to control public expenditure".

With political and economic constraints more and more pressing, the space available to higher education to set its own agenda has narrowed and the:

> criteria for assessing a major set of processes within higher education will be criteria imported from outside, reflecting the dominant interests of work and capital.
> (Ronald Barnett 1990:70)

In this paper we will explore the issues of control and accountability arising from the funding pattern of higher education in the United Kingdom as a means of raising issues about higher education in general.

Efficiency and Standards

In the United Kingdom in the 1980s, growing attention was paid to efficiency and standards in higher education. The Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) commissioned reports on both issues. The Steering Committee for efficiency studies in universities, under the chairmanship of Sir Alex Jarratt reported in 1985. Later the same year, a committee under the chairmanship of Professor Reynolds reported on Universities' Internal Procedures for Maintaining and Monitoring Academic Standards. Also in 1985, a committee of enquiry chaired by Sir Norman Lindop reported on Academic Validation in Public Sector Higher Education.

Graeme Moodie (1986:1) observes that the extent and nature of anxieties about standards and quality came "as something of a surprise to many in higher education and more particularly those in the universities":

> the Robbins Committee had not been alone in feeling that the undoubted quality of British higher education required no supporting argument.

However, he suggests that:

> it is not unnatural to seek to discriminate between institutions and activities on the basis of their relative merit or degrees of excellence.

The specific task of the Jarratt Committee (1985) was to address growing discontent within government circles about the effectiveness of the university sector and its contribution to the national economy. In its enquiry into efficiency and effectiveness, the Committee investigated the general management structure and decision-making processes of institutions. The Committee recommended that the management structure of universities be overhauled and that each university develop its own strategic plan.

In his summary of the Jarratt Report, Michael Allen (1988:125) notes that:

> The Report ... concluded that university aims and objectives were defined only in very broad terms. No evidence was found of a thorough examination of options and the means of achieving objectives; the lack of performance indicators was viewed as a major omission... Many universities, it was argued, needed to make more positive efforts to define what they were trying to achieve in broadly measurable terms.

The Jarratt Committee recommended that reliable and consistent performance indicators needed to be developed for evaluation purposes. These indicators should cover inputs and outputs. They should facilitate use within and comparison between institutions.

In their discussion of the Jarratt recommendations, Jill Johnes and Jim Taylor (1990) summarise the three groups of performance indicators proposed:

1. Internal indicators
2. External indicators
3. Operational indicators

Jill Johnes and Jim Taylor (1990) note the Department of Education and Science's "immediate and warm" response to the recommendations on performance indicators. The government expressed a clear view about how the performance of institutions should be measured. Included in the measurement were to be:

* students' achievements - numbers and class distributions, non-completion rates

* external examiners' reports

* employment patterns of students

* entry standards

The government wanted to see regular publication of performance indicators that could be used by a range of audiences.

Michael Allen (1988) observes that:

> It is in many ways pathetic that in 1985 the universities should have had to be urged to take these steps, and the fact that it was necessary is revealing of the ways in which universities had previously operated. Some opponents of Jarratt have argued that the 'industry' model of 'top-down' management is not appropriate to universities, and that in any case the record of British industry provides no recommendation for the adoption of its management methods. But these arguments are not really a fair summary of what the Report was saying, and in my view the Jarratt Report was long overdue.

In their discussion of performance indicators, Jill Johnes and Jim Taylor (1990:6) ask:

> But how should universities be evaluated? What kind of information is required in order to assess the performance of individual institutions and their constituent parts? What methods are available for assessing an institution's performance? Very little thought has yet been given to exactly how performance indicators can be constructed from this information.

We would like to return to the discussion of the measurement of performance a little later. For the moment we would like to locate performance of the higher education sector in terms of an agenda for the 1990s identified by Peter Scott (1989:12):

> higher education has a threefold task - to tackle the difficult technical problems that arise from attempts to measure academic performance both effectively and accurately; to develop national and institutional policies that reward successful management without abridging academic freedom; and to ensure that efforts to make both teaching and research more appropriate to actual circumstances ... do not inhibit their capacity to transcend the 'givenness' of our present condition.

It is to the balance between higher education as a political and an intellectual system that we now turn. We noted that two reports on academic standards were published in 1985. In the next section we want to consider the significance of validation and appraisal for higher education. To do so we will have to be aware of the kind of terminology that is available.

Graeme Moodie's (1986) collection of articles raises questions about: standards; quality; and excellence. This collection of readings is a helpful introduction to and discussion of these terms. Central to a discussion of these terms is a concern to identify those who are to make judgements about higher education.

Should standards, quality and excellence be the concern of one's colleagues in higher education? This peer review has been a fundamental aspect of higher education. Graeme Moodie (1986:5) has suggested that:

> It is in any event indubitle that no more reliable index exists than such 'peer review' - that harm comes only if its reliability is treated as though it were infallibility or discarded as though it were capricious.

Tony Becher (1989), in his discussion of the social and epistemological foundations of disciplines in higher education, observes that one of the striking features of academic life is that "nearly everything is graded in more or less subtle ways". The pattern of work in academic life is such, he suggests, that " the main currency for the academic is not power ... or wealth... but reputation" (1989:52).

He adds that:

> The responsibility for quality control is a collective one... The right of any member of a particular field to criticize the work of any other member, regardless of their relative status, is strongly defended in principle (1989:61).

The 'right' Becher refers to rests on the procedure termed peer review. Before we consider such peer review in relation to the debate about effectiveness and efficiency, we think it will be helpful to read about the characteristics of an 'academic community' in Ronald Barnett's (1990:100-104) The Idea of Higher Education.

Appraisal

In the preceding section, we discussed how performance indicators have been proposed as a means of evaluating higher education's 'fitness for purpose'. Writing in 1986, Graeme Moodie suggested that:

> we, the professionals in higher education, must be more prepared to accept that our's are not the

> only criteria with which to evaluate the relative cost and benefits of higher education (1986:8).

One of the difficulties academics face is how to deal with models generated in other sectors of society and then transposed into higher education. With regard to appraisal, John Nisbett (1986) notes that staff appraisal in higher education has emerged from the shadows in recent years to become an issue of open debate. He suggests that if the appraisal of staff in higher education is to avoid a damaging effect on relationships and morale, the model on which an appraisal procedure is based must be considered very carefully. He considers that whilst an industrial model of higher education seems to be favoured by some, higher education itself uses a collegial model of peer review. He recommends a change to this collegiate model. He observes that:

> By 1978, some 20 of the 45 universities in Britain had established centres or units to provide courses in university teaching but until recently none had even considered a system of regular staff appraisal other than for promotion. (1986:93)

Let us start our discussion of appraisal by drawing upon the CVCP's paper produced by Professor Alan Reynolds. The discussion of appraisal in the Reynolds' Report and mention of it in the Jarrett Report were followed by government pronouncements about appraisal in the White Paper (1987).

Lewis Elton (1987) draws a distinction between appraisal for judgement (assessment) and appraisal for improvement (evaluation). He believes that appraisal is an essential aspect of accountability (1987:12) and that improvement of performance of the individual is secondary to that of a department. He suggests that the primary purpose of appraisal is to assist in the more complete attainment of institutional aims and he outlines why and how questions of appraisal (1987:14).

But:

> although useful checklists for good teaching can be compiled, it is neither possible nor desirable to establish general criteria against which an individual's performance can be assessed. Instead a process is suggested in which the individual who is being assessed plays a very active role, both in the negotiation of his work plan and in the subsequent assessment of its fulfilment. (1987:27)

Appraisal schemes should be reliable and valid but must beware of the conflict between high validity and high reliability since:

> what is important in complicated human activities can frequently be assessed only qualitatively, while for assessment to be reliable it has generally to be quantitative. (1987:45)

In an earlier work, Lewis Elton (1984) suggests that the aims of appraisal include:

* improving teaching and research
* accountability
* more effective management

He argues that appraisal needs a formal institutional framework and should satisfy the criteria that it is:

* beneficial
* fair
* comprehensive
* valid
* open
* effective
* practicable

He maintains that the department is a more suitable unit of appraisal than the individual (1984:104).

Other contributors to the literature on appraisal include: G Gibbs et al (1988); and M A Richards & P M Bradshaw (1988). In their paper, presented at the Society for Research in Higher Education Conference, Richards and Bradshaw discuss four kinds of evidence about teaching competence:

* classroom performance
* preparation for teaching
* production of teaching materials
* ability and willingness to engage in a discourse about teaching effectiveness

They suggest that discourse about effectiveness is the social process of making and reproducing sense (1988:4). They argue that appraisal through discourse must address: principles (confidentiality; who initiates?; what confidence about evaluation of teaching performance?; authority of evaluator); three aspects of teaching (content; process; outcomes); and evaluation based on descriptions, interpretations and judgements.

For a thematic discussion of some of the literature on appraisal, you might like to have a look at Michael Allen's (1988) account.

Appraisal in higher education raises questions about whether more attention has been given to appraisal in some sectors rather than others because of, for example, the Council for National Academic Awards' validation procedures. A survey in 1979 discovered half a dozen polytechnics with staff development policies but by 1985 it appears that most public sector institutions had a formal policy on staff development (Nisbett, 1986).

John Nisbett (1986) gives examples of work in polytechnics at Trent, Sunderland, Teeside, Oxford, and in Scotland. For a discussion of appraisal in countries other than the United Kingdom please see: Elton (1984:99): for review of literature up to 1984 see: M Goldschmid (1978); C Knapper (1980); and H Murray (1984).

For a discussion of student rating of teachers, see Harry Murray (1990), W J McKeacie et al (1980) and C Flood Page (1974). For an historical background see John Riley and others (1950) and their report of the use of Rating Scales at Oaklahoma in 1922 and at the University of Michigan in 1948. One of the pioneers of the use of student ratings was H H Remmers at Purdue University. Such rating has now been used for over 40 years in North American universities and colleges. What impact have they had on quality? Students think views ignored. Do faculty buy ratings? Do ratings imply a traditional, teacher-centred mode of instruction and in this way impede progress towards non-hierarchical, student-centred alternatives?

Harry Murray (1990) believes that ratings have an overwhelmingly positive impact. He presents evidence of his experiences at the University of Western Ontario. There has been student evaluation at the University since 1970. For a British view of student ratings see, Ian Macdonald's (1990) report of the initiation of a student evaluation system at the University of Birmingham in 1990.

Performance Indicators

As we noted above, performance indicators have received increasing prominence in the political debate about accountability in higher education. This growing concern is reflected in the range of literature which includes work by: Billing (1980); Laurillard (1980); Lindsay (1981); Sizer (1981); THES (1982); Elton (1986); Pollitt (1987); Cave (1988); Johnes (1988); Booth (1989); Gillett (1989); Elliot (1990); and Johnes and Taylor (1990).

Gareth Williams (1986:31) suggests that:

> There are dangers that the definition of performance indicators and their narrow interpretation will distort the activities of higher education institutions.

Martin Cave (1988) has noted that performance indicators are being used to generate judgements about performance and are being transformed into management tools. Tony Becher (1989) notes the threats posed by managerialist values to academia. He suggests that:

> it is unjust and inappropriate to lump together for administrative purposes different institutions, different subject departments and different individuals, taking little or no account of the variety of characteristics which they may between them quite reasonably display. (1989:165)

Measure of performance, he adds, are "typically designed for imposition with equally blind impartiality across the whole range of academic endeavour".

In summary, Tony Becher (1989:166) argues that:

> a horticultural analogy is more appropriate than an industrial one in the advancement of learning. A market garden is successful in so far as it cultivates a variety of produce to meet its clients' disparate needs. To drive a bulldozer through it in the interests of greater efficiency and higher productivity makes sense only if one wishes to transform it into a cornfield. Corn grows easily, but too assiduous a concentration on it will - as we know to our cost - create a massive and useless surplus of one particular commodity, and a corresponding scarcity of those whose cultivation, though beneficial in its own right, happens to be more demanding, more labour-intensive, and generally less easy to govern.

Embedded in the debate about how to measure the performance of higher education are assumptions about 'quality of purpose' and 'fitness for purpose'. Cave (1988), amongst others, points out how complex the use of performance indicators can be. How do you go about measuring the purpose of an institution? How do you distinguish between quality and excellence?

David Billing (1986) discusses indicators with particular reference to the public sector and considers whether there can be any goal consensus about them. He points to the problems of mechanistic approaches to planning and reviews the literature on performance indicators. His article is of particular interest if you wish to read a case study of how an institution underwent a "comprehensive institutional current status self-study" as a way of improving efficiency and effectiveness.

Billing also pointed out that in the search for reliable and consistent performance:

> none of the process or performance criteria are yet sufficiently developed or proven, nor are their limitations properly understood or taken into account in use. (1986:86)

We have tried to give an overview of the literature on performance indicators here. We would like to conclude by drawing attention to one of the most recent accounts of performance indicators prepared by Jill Johnes and Jim Taylor (1990). Their task is to investigate the possibility of constructing an appropriate methodology for assessing the performance of institutions:

> In view of the potential importance of the increasing flow of information describing the inputs, processes and outputs of the university sector, especially the influence which such information may have on the allocation of resources within and between institutions (1990:9).

They consider FOUR specific indicators of teaching and research activities of UK universities:

1. Undergraduate non-completion rates
2. Degree results
3. First destination of newly qualified graduates
4. Research rating of each university.

They conclude that none of these variables is useful as a performance indicator in itself because "it is pointless to compare the output of universities without taking into account differences in the inputs used up in producing these outputs"(1990:182). Johnes and Taylor's(1990:183) main finding with regard to the four measures of university output is that:

> once inter-university differences in inputs available to each institution are taken into account, the remaining 'unexplained' variation between universities is relatively small

They emphasise the kind of careful procedures that need to be undertaken in order to arrive at robust indicators that could be considered for resource allocation purposes. Their experience of working through four output variables as performance indicators leads them to ask:

1. How can teaching quality be accurately reflected?

2. Are indicators 'data driven'?

3. What about the management of resources within institutions?

4. Might estimates of an 'efficiency frontier' be more helpful in measuring performance?

5. Should a much wider range of university activities be considered?

6. How do you deal with the joint production of different types of output?

7. Do we need much more detail about graduate destinations?

They end their book with a most sanguine warning:

> No one has yet devised even a **single** indicator of performance which commands wide support amongst the academic community. ... those using performance indicators would do well to heed the warning that ... 'uncritical use of these indicators may seriously damage the health of your university' (1990:185).

Summary

Higher education is allocated a significant amount of public funding. In the United Kingdom, in the 1980s, higher education was explicitly framed within a political strategy for funding, control and accountability.

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