

Ted Tapper

The Governance of British Higher Education

The Struggle
for
Policy Control

 Springer

THE GOVERNANCE OF BRITISH HIGHER EDUCATION

The Governance of British Higher Education

The Struggle for Policy Control

By

TED TAPPER

*Oxford Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies,
New College, Oxford*

 Springer

A C.I.P. Catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN-10 1-4020-5552-8 (HB)
ISBN-13 978-1-4020-5552-2 (HB)
ISBN-10 1-4020-5553-6 (e-book)
ISBN-13 978-1-4020-5553-9 (e-book)

Published by Springer,
P.O. Box 17,3300 AA Dordrecht, The Netherlands.

www.springer.com

Printed on acid-free paper

All Rights Reserved
© 2007 Springer

No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, microfilming, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the Publisher, with the exception of any material supplied specifically for the purpose of being entered and executed on a computer system, for exclusive use by the purchaser of the work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | vii |
| PART ONE: UNDERSTANDING CHANGE AND INTERPRETING MODES OF GOVERNANCE | |
| 1. Setting the Scene | 3 |
| 2. The State and the Governance of Higher Education: Contextualising the Changing Relationship | 9 |
| 3. From the UGC and NAB to the Funding Council Model of Governance | 27 |
| 4. State Power: Convergence and Fragmentation | 49 |
| 5. Devolution and the Governance of British Higher Education | 69 |
| PART TWO: SHAPING POLICY | |
| 6. The Role of the Political Parties | 93 |
| 7. Parliament as a Marginal Player? | 111 |
| 8. The Policy Community and Policy Networks in British Higher Education | 129 |
| PART THREE: THE POLITICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ACTION | |
| 9. Continuity and Change in the Funding of British Higher Education | 147 |
| 10. The Politics of Quality Assurance | 167 |
| 11. The RAE: The Elusive Search for Selectivity and Consensus | 187 |
| 12. The Politics of Access: Higher Education and Social Engineering | 207 |
| PART FOUR: INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY IN THE AGE OF MASS HIGHER EDUCATION | |
| 13. Who Has the Power? | 225 |
| ACRONYMS | 239 |
| REFERENCES | 241 |
| INDEX | 251 |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would have been impossible for me to have written this book without the support of several people. I am conscious of the fact that as an emeritus professor perhaps I should have left far behind matters such as academic writing. I therefore thank my family for their understanding and forbearance as well as their technical assistance. My command of the English language, like my command of the PC, leaves much to be desired and on both fronts my wife, daughter and son have provided invaluable assistance. Like, I suspect, most emeritus professors my institutional links are precarious and thus my social contacts are doubly important to me. Thus, many thanks are due to my near neighbours, Daphne and Jack Cox, and the members of the Eastleigh Railway Chess Club (3rd team!) for providing social sustenance over the past eighteen months.

I appreciate greatly the input of those who have either pointed me in the direction of relevant source material, provided technical help and/or read draft chapters: Ben Briden (IBM), John Taylor (University of Southampton); Gerry Taggart (HEFCE), Nigel Bowles (St. Anne's College, Oxford), David Palfreyman (New College, Oxford), John Field (University of Stirling) and Ourania Filippakou (Institute of Education, University of London). Undoubtedly the book will have its shortcomings, for which I accept full responsibility, but what merit it has owes much to the input of these supportive individuals.

There are others who may not have made a direct input into this book but whose work I have come to admire and who over time have stimulated my thinking about higher education policy issues: Brian Salter (University of East Anglia), my long-term colleague who is now exploring other areas of public policy; Maurice Kogan (formerly of the University of Brunel), who has done so much to make higher education policy a respectable field of academic study; Alison Wolf and Alan Ryan, for their consistently stimulating contributions to *The Times Higher Education Supplement*; John Brennan (the Open University), for his organising of the CHERI seminar series which provides one of the few forums for the serious analysis of higher education policy issues in Britain; Roger Brown (University of Solent), for his persistently critical view of the status quo in British higher education; Ron Barnett (Institute of Education, University of London), for the intellectual rigour and lateral thinking he brings to the study of higher education; Gareth Parry (University of Sheffield), for the breadth of his understanding and his steady stream of solid advice; and Rupert Wilkinson (University of Sussex), my long-term Sussex colleague and friend with whom over many years I have exchanged ideas on the development of higher education in Britain and the United States.

Ted Tapper

Oxford Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, New College, Oxford

PART ONE

**UNDERSTANDING CHANGE AND INTERPRETING MODES
OF GOVERNANCE**

SETTING THE SCENE

In spite of the considerable expansion of interest in British higher education policy issues, the governance of the system remains a relatively under-researched field. Since the publication in 1994 of *The State and Higher Education* only two books of note have appeared. In 2000 Kogan and Hanney's *Reforming Higher Education* was published which, although examining how the system is governed, had the somewhat broader remit of presenting an overview of recent developments in British higher education. Moreover, its approach to understanding the process of policy change is essentially inductive, with its presentation of 'theoretical perspectives' constituting the book's concluding section. But regardless of how one may react to its essentially pluralist interpretation of the change process, with considerable reliance – as is so common in the higher education policy literature – upon the role of individual agents, it is undoubtedly a scholarly publication.

More recently (2005) Stevens' *From University to Uni: the Politics of Higher Education in England since 1944* has appeared. This interesting publication serves a very different purpose. It is an accessibly written book with a solid empirical base, but essentially polemical in tone with one central theme – increasingly since 1945 English higher education has been constrained by state action, which has not only undermined institutional autonomy but also eroded the overall quality of English higher education. For Stevens the solution to the current malaise is obvious – the financial dependence of higher education upon the public purse needs to be replaced by a more equitable input of private and public resources in order to restore institutional autonomy and system dynamism.

The initial drive to write this book was therefore essentially pragmatic: to add to the sparse body of literature in what, at least to the author, was an important aspect of higher education – how the system is governed. It seemed something of a contradiction that there should be an explosion of interest in policy issues in both academic (see the *Higher Education Quarterly*) and popular (see the educational supplements to the quality press) circles without a parallel expansion in trying to understand how the system is governed. The contention is that without understanding how higher education is governed, it is impossible to reach meaningful conclusions about policy outcomes for the two are inextricably linked. It was not that this obvious link was denied but rather the analysis of policy was invariably trapped in the descriptive case study straitjacket. If there was a political dimension to the research the focus it was upon the politics of the particular issue rather than how this related to the governance of the system.

This wish to write another text on the politics of higher education was, not surprisingly, reinforced by the fact that the 1994 publication, *The State and Higher*

Education, was by now inevitably dated. It had encompassed the demise of the University Grants Committee (UGC), the creation of the National Advisory Body (NAB) and the Universities Funding Council (UFC) along with the amalgamation in 1992 of these two bodies into the funding council model of governance (HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England, SHEFC – Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and HEFCW – Higher Education Funding Council for Wales). But it was published shortly after these national funding councils had been established and long before devolution was a reality. The time of passage alone allows for a deeper and more considered judgement on the functioning of the funding council model. This is without taking into consideration critical developments such as the emergence of mass higher education, the implications of the abolition of the binary divide, and the election of New Labour Governments from 1997 onwards. To what extent has the model been reshaped by different political inputs?

Besides being shaped in part by developments in the policy-making process *The Governance of British Higher Education: The Struggle for Policy Control* will go beyond the theoretical foundations of *The State and Higher Education*. Critical to that book was the importance of new ideas to the process of change. The liberal ideal of the autonomous university governed by its academic faculty was slowly undermined by the economic ideology of higher education – successive governments saw the primary purpose of higher education as serving the needs of the wider society, above all its economic needs. Political control of the higher education system was perceived as essential if this goal was to be secured effectively. With some qualifications this perspective of the relationship between the state and higher education is now widely shared, although there are few who are pleased by its implications. More contentiously *The State and Higher Education* placed the state's central educational apparatus, then the Department of Education and Science (DES), at the centre of this process of change – as both the source of the burgeoning economic ideology of higher education, and as the key institutional force for translating its meaning into concrete policies. This was an anathema to a field of study that had been traditionally more noted for its descriptive depth than its theoretical subtlety, that placed considerable store upon the intervention of 'great men', and was firmly persuaded (and correctly so) of the prior low-status and past policy ineffectiveness of the DES.

The Governance of British Higher Education: The Struggle for Policy Control also sees ideological struggle as integral to policy change, and places the educational state apparatus at the centre of the policy formation process, but it locates both themes contextually. Firstly, it places higher education policy within the broader arena of public policy; seeing it is as a policy issue that needs to be analysed with reference to the wider debates that have surrounded the delivery of British public policy. Secondly, it argues that there was both a political and economic crisis of the British state in the mid-1970s and integral to the resolution of that crisis was the movement towards a new model for the delivery of public policy. Furthermore, although the economic ideology of higher education may have developed within the state bureaucratic apparatus, its full policy impact has been dependent upon

its broad political support. Across the political spectrum, and most importantly in government circles, there is powerful backing for the idea of higher education as an economic resource.

Whereas up until recently it made political sense to see the Department for Education and Skills (DfES – its latest nomenclature) as the major state apparatus with responsibility for the formation of education policy, this is no longer the case. The creation in 1992 of the funding councils transferred administrative responsibility for higher education to Scotland and Wales, to be followed by the devolution of political responsibility in the late 1990s. As significant as this hollowing out of the central state has been the fragmentation of responsibility for policy formation within the central state itself. The administrative responsibility for science policy and the research councils (located in the Office of Science and Technology) has been transferred to the Department of Trade and Industry. Under the guise of ‘securing value for money’ the Treasury has demonstrated its willingness to intervene directly in the affairs of higher education. It sponsored the Lambert Report on business-higher education relations (in which it made strictures about the governance of Oxbridge) and currently it is making a major push to change the basis on which the assessment of research in higher education is determined (advocating a shift from peer review to a metrics-based system). Moreover, there was the personal attack on the University of Oxford by the Chancellor (Gordon Brown) when it failed to award Ms. Laura Spence a place to read medicine. The media furor (not all of it sympathetic to the Chancellor) was intense and, if nothing else, it demonstrated the close political scrutiny higher education now faced. Finally, there is clear evidence to suggest that the Prime Minister and members of his Office were personally involved in formulating the policy on variable fees and helping to steer it through Parliament.

The interpretation of how higher education policy changes has to be sensitive to the range of both political and departmental inputs. It no longer makes sense to insist on the policy primacy of the central educational bureaucratic apparatus. As in *The State and Higher Education*, this text will pay particular attention to the relationship between the quasi-state bodies (above all the funding councils) and the departments of state in the formation of policy. In its latter years the UGC assumed a planning role but the 1988/1992 Acts delegated policy implementation to the funding councils but reserved to the government the right to make policy. But this is too simple a dissection of the policy-making process. Governments may form policy but they do so in a context that stimulates close institutional interaction. What are the lines of influence between governments and the funding councils? How and why do they differ across national boundaries? Is it possible for the funding councils not only to shape the policy formation process but also to use their powers of implementation if not to thwart government policy then to mitigate its potential impact? Moreover, governments are not above intervening in the policy implementation process, which further complicates the question as to where the boundaries in the policy-making process are to be drawn and where authority resides. The funding councils are a manifestation of the new public management mode of governance that came into

vogue in the 1980s and 1990s. This book, through its analysis of higher education policy, demonstrates what that means in practice.

What this book should above all convey is the fragility of institutional relations and the instability in the policy-making process. This is not to evaluate these characteristics negatively but rather to see them as intrinsic to the process of governance in higher education in Britain, or more especially in England. The chapter on the devolution of higher education policy will show that the picture in Scotland and Wales is altogether more stable but that a price has to be paid for that stability. And, moreover, the sheer difference in the respective sizes of the national higher education systems within itself makes it improbable that the Scottish/Welsh model could be replicated in England.

The theoretical interpretation of the development of higher education policy, the analysis of the enhanced complexity of the institutional relationships (involving the political and bureaucratic arms of the state and quasi-state) in the making of that policy, and the enactment and subsequent consequences of policy devolution make up Part One of the book: *Understanding Change and Interpreting Modes of Governance*. Part Two, *Shaping Policy*, examines those forces whose central role is to influence the course of the higher education policy-making process. Although these forces may acquire some responsibilities for drafting and implementing policy their primary purpose is to develop policy ideas, put those ideas into the policy arena, shape the implementation process and to evaluate how policy is working – its effectiveness and unintended consequences.

The major political parties (those that embrace the UK) are given more extensive coverage than is to be found in the existing literature and their endorsement is seen as a vital stage in the overall process of policy-making. Without the backing of one or more of the political parties (at their annual conferences and reaffirmed in manifesto commitments) domestic policy initiatives will rarely come to fruition. Of course Parliament has the formal role of enacting government legislation and in recent years (with respect to both the 1988 Education Reform Act and, even more so, the 2004 Higher Education Act) aggressive parliamentary battles have ensued to ensure the passage of the legislation. In the process Parliament has undoubtedly extracted some concessions, although opinions differ as their significance. Moreover, it would be fair to say that both in 1988 and 2004 the government succeeded in passing the bulk of its legislative proposals, including all the points of principle.

In recent years the work of the parliamentary select committees has expanded dramatically and both the Select Committee on Science and Technology (House of Commons) and the Select Committee on Education and Skills have issued important reports on higher education. The investigative work of the Committees serves the primary function of developing policy ideas as opposed to making an immediate input into the policy-making process. In terms of on-going policy formation the input of the select committees invariably comes at too late a stage in the process to have an immediate impact and governments, in their response to committee reports, invariably seek to build consensus whilst giving nothing away. Another function of the Committees is to bring together a range of institutional interests and individual

expertise. Their reports are certainly built on a solid basis of informed evidence; it is almost as if they are constructing around them a privileged policy network.

The third chapter in this part of the book examines the higher education policy networks. A key component in the theory of change was that new economic and political circumstances generate both different policy ideas and restructure the organised interests within the policy field. Moreover both policy formation and, even more so, policy implementation in higher education have been constructed on the basis of continuous consultation with the affected interests. This chapter notes the deconstruction of the traditional interests, most noticeably the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP – now Universities UK), along with the construction of new interests (the Russell Group, the 94 Group and the Campaign for Mainstream Universities) and examines how the mode of governance operates to encourage the development of policy networks. There has been a shift from the national organisation of the different interests within the higher education sector to the steady emergence of more focussed interest groups and policy networks. The regulatory state, as represented by the funding council model of governance, functions in large part on the basis of co-operation with the policy networks. The point being that is safer for the state to incorporate them rather than risk their opposition.

The third part of the book, *The Politics of Higher Education in Action*, analyses four contemporary policy areas that have stimulated both political and academic conflict. The first of these is the funding of higher education with the focus on the steady, if so far limited, move away from the overwhelming dependence of higher education institutions upon the public purse to a more mixed public/private pattern of funding. The second examines the convoluted struggle to establish a consensual model for monitoring the teaching and learning process in higher education, embracing the shift from quality assessment, through quality assurance to quality enhancement. The third looks at the regulatory state's assessment of research outputs with, on the one hand, the focus upon the tension between standard setting, monitoring and evaluation of research quality and, on the other hand, the state's responsibility for underwriting the results of that process. The fourth focuses upon the current government's widening participation agenda to increase the size of the student population and to diversify it socially – to recruit more students from families that traditionally have not participated in higher education. Although these case studies are both interesting and important in their own right, they have been selected because they demonstrate key points about the politics of higher education in contemporary England.

The book concludes by addressing two questions. Firstly, who has the power now? And, secondly, who will have the power in the future? The first half of the chapter uses the initial question to draw together the major findings of the book. At the same time it will consider whether the theoretical base of the book needs to be reformulated. As the theory was located within a particular historical context – the crisis of the British state that unfolded in the 1970s, then it would not be surprising to discover that some refurbishment was in order. Indeed, the chapter

on devolution claims that transferring political responsibility for higher education policy to the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly represents an attempt by the central government (which appears to have been successful) to ward off another potential crisis of the state. The crisis of the state that emerged in the 1970s has not necessarily been resolved but we have most decidedly moved beyond it.

This book took root within the context of the arrival of mass higher education, the abolition of the UGC, the creation of the funding council model of governance, devolution, the fragmentation of state responsibility for higher education policy and the abolition of the binary divide. We are now entering an era in which market forces (including the power that students can exercise as consumers) will have a more significant part to play, in which British higher education will find itself increasingly in a competitive global environment (for the recruitment of undergraduate and postgraduate students, for attracting the most prestigious faculty and in winning important research contracts), in which a regulatory framework appears to be emerging – the Bologna Process – at the European level, and in which missions will be more sharply differentiated with universities aspiring to be both international players and/or significant local institutions. These are forces that will inevitably act upon the manner in which systems of higher education are governed. Ironically, as the space in which individual higher education institutions becomes more confined – as a consequence of their particular market positions – then they may become more autonomously governed in the sense that their future prosperity is more critically dependent upon the quality of their leadership and management.

As a final observation it should be stressed that, although the empirical focus of this book is directed at the understanding the contemporary governance of British higher education (with the emphasis upon the English experience), it is not intended to be a book about developments in higher education – in the sense that is true of its two closest contemporary rivals (the texts by Kogan/Hanney and by Stevens). It is a book about contemporary British politics; how the state responded to the greatest of its post-war domestic crises. Thus the analysis of developments in higher education is not an end in itself but has been used to illustrate the changing relationship between state and society in present-day Britain. To pursue this end it draws upon the work of Christopher Hood (1994) to place the development of British higher education in the context of a neo-pluralist political struggle that is bounded by a shifting ideological context (a genuflection to Gramsci), the burgeoning of bureaucratic power (a genuflection to Weber) and an acceptance of the relative autonomy of the state (a genuflection to Miliband). The study of the governance of higher education makes sense only when placed in the disciplinary framework of political science.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STATE AND THE GOVERNANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION: CONTEXTUALISING THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

The State and Higher Education placed the state at the very centre of the political process that led to the demise of the UGC and the emergence of the funding council model of governance (Salter and Tapper, 1994: pp. 1–19). The starting point was Halsey and Trow's proposition that the state as both 'manager of economic growth' and 'the dispenser of individual opportunity for participation' had a major interest in higher education, 'which supplies scientific manpower and technological innovation for economic growth and widening opportunities to a rising proportion of the population' (Halsey and Trow, 1971: p. 60). The state's argument was that the universities, under the leadership of the UGC, were not acting with sufficient vigour either to stimulate sustained economic growth or widen opportunities across the social spectrum. In the mid-1960s, almost as an act of desperation, Crosland had agreed to the creation of the public sector of higher education (PSHE) as a counterweight to the universities. The polytechnics would be 'the people's universities', driven forward by responding to societal needs (Robinson, 1968).

Of course the universities, and certainly the UGC, would have seen this critique as a caricature of reality. Moreover, the polytechnics were not immune to the siren call of the universities, allegedly stealthily following the path of 'academic drift', even resisting the pressures of social demand (Pratt, 1997: pp. 11–12). However, regardless of where the truth resides, a clear division of opinion within elite circles was opening up. Could the universities be trusted to respond to the state's needs? Alternatively, was a different mode of governance required that would make the universities more sensitive and reactive to government pressure? The position of the universities was made more precarious by the fact that the critique transcended political boundaries as governments of differing persuasions faced the same problems. Increasingly the political issue was not whether there should be change but what principles should underpin the new structure of governance.

But before new structures could be contemplated the values underpinning the established state-university concordat had to be challenged (Salter and Tapper, 1994: pp. 12–18). New ideas would be the precursor of new structures. Although the UGC had very important technical functions (distributing the annual grant, guiding institutions that sought membership of the university club and, in very broad terms, presiding over the development of the system), its major role was the defence of the liberal ideal of the university. The central functions of the universities were

to determine what was to count as high status knowledge, how this knowledge was to be transmitted and augmented (teaching and research), and to verify on behalf of state and society the quality of higher education. Thus the universities both produced and determined the quality of high status knowledge. University autonomy and the political independence of the UGC were the means that secured the university's monopoly of these functions.

The State and Higher Education argued that a counter-ideology, the economic ideology of higher education, took root in the central educational state apparatus and, as economic and political conditions changed, it steadily gained broad cross-party support. Its proponents challenged the universities on two interrelated fronts: their monopoly control of the definition of high status knowledge, and whether this control should constitute their primary purpose. This challenge has had considerable success on both fronts. It is now part of mainstream academic, let alone political, thinking that one of the central purposes of higher education is to serve the needs of the economy whilst widening social opportunity. Inevitably, as this understanding of the purpose of higher education has seeped into the general consciousness, so the universities' control of what is to count as high status knowledge has weakened. On several occasions the state had demonstrated its willingness to challenge their prior monopoly.¹

As important as the ideological conflict may have been, it is critical not to lose sight of the fact that the main political battles have focused on the mode of governance. The traditional idea of university autonomy could be more easily undermined when the values it perpetuated no longer held political sway, and indeed even within academic circles were increasingly under attack. Why sustain a mode of governance when its *raison d'être* is no longer viable? This is not to suggest that the new values have no significance in their own right. Few would dispute that there is a relationship between economic development and higher education, but the nature and intensity of that relationship is highly disputable. However, to suggest that governments have a misguided faith in the recuperative economic power of higher education, a critique which may indeed be valid, is to miss the more subtle point. The battle is as much about politics as economics (for a good example of such tunnel vision see Wolf, 2002).

But as the 1988 Education Reform Act and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act demonstrate, the steady erosion of the traditional, essentially English, understanding of the university was followed by a new model of governance as the UGC gave way to the funding councils. The detailed functioning of this model will be covered in the next three chapters. At this stage it is sufficient to note the three critical principles on which it is based:

1. Policy control, and thus the ability to direct the development of higher education, is formally the responsibility of the state.
2. The primary purposes of the funding councils are to allocate the universities their share of public funding and to develop the strategies that will best fulfil politically defined policy goals.