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University curriculum reform and global influences - examining the concepts of policy borrowing and academic drift (0110)

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This research study was commissioned by the Higher Education Academy to explore the nature of whole institutional curriculum reform undertaken by universities in the UK and beyond in response to the globalised world and global economy of the 21st Century. Rather than undertaking a general review of international Higher Education provision the research focused on identifying the organisational extent of institutional curriculum reform programmes through in-depth interviews with 9 universities that had undergone significant curriculum change in the last five years. Further in depth case studies took place with 3 of these universities, exploring the process and impact of reform initiatives on staff and students and how these initiatives became embedded in the day to day ongoing workings of the universities involved. This paper explores one aspect of this research and considers the concepts of policy borrowing and academic drift in relation to the way in which these universities engaged with curriculum reform processes.

It has become a rhetorical commonplace to describe the current situation for UK and Global Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as one of rapid change in response to the demands of a global knowledge economy and changes to national funding regimes, however evidence of specific, long term, changes and the impact of these changes for students is harder to find (Vidovich et al. 2012). There may be a resulting change in new university forms, for example, the *transnational* university such as the new University College formed through a partnership between Yale and Singapore and the *federated* form as illustrated by the universities participating in new arrangements for MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) such as the UK Futurelearn initiative). Whilst a new form of delivery does not necessarily indicate a new curriculum the two are often

connected. Vidovich et al. suggest that there are three types of possible curriculum reform.

- ◆ The move to an internationalised, integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum with professional recognition occurring at postgraduate education stage.
- ◆ A move to a 'common core' curriculum of general education alongside the specialist and professional curriculum at undergraduate level.
- ◆ The introduction of 'hub and spoke' type university curriculum, where universities deliver a general/liberal arts curricula from a university abroad or deliver their own curriculum abroad.

However they acknowledge that there is insufficient evidence available to confirm this as many institutions are still in the process of reform.

This paper draws from the preliminary data to examine the concepts of policy borrowing and academic drift in relation to curriculum reform. Phillips and Ochs (2003) identify four stages in 'borrowing', briefly summarized as Attraction, Decision, Implementation and Internalisation. Whilst Phillips and Ochs take a 'big picture' approach to national education it is worth exploring how these concepts work at an institutional level and how the social practice of curriculum design may relate to these stages where reforms are being considered. Closely connected to the concept of policy borrowing there are often policy and political assumptions that one can influence change in university institutions through study of the leading 'global' institutions. These assumptions tend to conflate policy borrowing and that of 'academic drift', "*the tendency of colleges and universities to ape the programmatic offerings of the most prestigious*" (Morphew 2009:246). Morphew's analysis of institutional diversity in US higher education institutions suggests that this is not the case. Morphew suggests that where institutions are well established they are required to balance internal (faculty views, history of the university) and external pressures (student numbers, funding changes, global competition) for change. This requirement for balance means that established universities are '*prone to incremental change, even faced with change in their environments that is not incremental at all*' (Morphew 2009:263). Newer, for-profit, organisations, on the other hand, were less institutionalized, developed new courses

centrally and were therefore more responsive to external pressures for change and more susceptible to academic drift.

This would suggest that newer universities and those with greater financial pressures and financial freedom would be most likely to undertake curriculum reform in response to global or policy pressures. De Jager (2011) suggests that there is an alternative possibility for non research-intensive universities '*a dominant drive to build a unique brand*' rather than to emulate higher status institutions or succumb to academic drift.

The early findings in this research suggest that the nature of curriculum reform may be dependent upon how an individual university places itself both geographically and in relation to other universities in terms of ranking and primary activity. Some interesting geographical influences were reported that challenged the policy assumptions about academic drift as a driver for curriculum change and whilst there were indications of movement by individual universities in each of the areas identified by Vidovich et al. the focus of the effort in the area of curriculum reform was more closely aligned to forming a coherent mission. The individuals involved in curriculum reform at institutional level had where possible, taken the opportunities to revisit their underpinning philosophy for education and made efforts to ensure that this was reflected within the reform process taking place. Further research is needed in this area to add to the 'global' case study proposed by Vidovitch et al. and to add detail to our knowledge about institutional level curriculum design which will impact on students in the future.

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