

Higher Education Policy-making in France and the UK (0037)

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The aim of this paper is to present some of the findings of an investigation of cross-national policy-making in the area of higher education and technology which explored how countries have responded to the perceived policy imperatives of the knowledge economy and international competitiveness. The comparative approach on which this research investigated the development of national 'virtual universities' policy programmes in two European countries, the UK and France, since 2000.

Only a comparative research framework would provide the tools needed to draw out and explore the similarities, convergences and divergences between these policy initiatives. From this perspective this research modestly extended a well established tradition of academic study in the field of comparative education research (for example Broadfoot 2003, Dale 2005, Green 1999 and Vulliamy 2004).

Higher education has always been closely linked to the state and the history of its universities has been played out, for the best part of a millennium, alongside and under the protection of central governmental power. More recently, higher education has been called upon to solve present and future problems, and the political emphasis on human capital has meant that higher education has moved to the forefront of governmental agendas (for example, Ball 2008, Green 2006, Grubb and Lazerson 2006). Increasingly, developed countries appear to widely adopt the discourse of the 'knowledge-based economy' and international competitiveness, and thus, the key question arises as to whether cross-national challenges lead to similar cross-national policy solutions. It is this fundamental anchoring in the time line of a state that makes higher education an ideal 'laboratory' in which to examine such questions. As such, the research connected with and extended existing academic research on the topic of higher education and globalisation (for example Lauder *et al.* 2006, Green 1997, Robertson 2005, Scott 1998).

The originality and specificity of the research however comes from the fact that it proposes an *in-depth comparison* of two state funded virtual universities launched in 2000. Research on the subject of cross-national virtual higher education provision has

tended to focus on providing a snapshot of developments at a given time and, consequently, research projects tend to be based on data gathered via large surveys. In contrast to this, the present research involved a detailed qualitative analysis, which includes textual analysis, of a large number of documentary sources (policies and reports but also transcripts of oral evidence taken before the Select Committee of Education and Skills), and interviews with key people involved at different levels of the two virtual universities and at the different stages of their development.

Brief chronology of each virtual university

The UK policy initiative, which throughout this research is referred to as UKeU¹, was launched in February 2000 by David Blunkett, then Secretary of State at the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The project was allocated £62 million by Government on the basis of a collaborative venture between higher education institutions and the private sector; the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) had the role of setting up the venture and the responsibility for the funding. By the summer of 2003, the HEFCE began to express concern over student intakes (898 students against a 6,500 target) and appointed independent advisers PA Consulting to conduct a business review. In February 2004, having decided to reject the revised plan offered by UKeU, the HEFCE announced its decision to restructure the venture. In March 2004, a new Board at UKeU started the wind-down. In the following weeks, a parliamentary enquiry conducted by the House of Commons Select Committee of Education and Skills was set up.

In France, the initiative – the *Campus numériques français* – was officially launched in June 2000 with the back up of the *Présidents d'Université*, the aim was to “develop new distance learning programmes” (« *développer de nouvelles formations à distance* »). In total, 18 million euros were assigned to the three calls. Higher education institutions had to form consortia with other universities and public or private institutions to propose programmes in certain areas. Over the three years, 90 per cent of all universities were involved in at least one *campus numérique*. 64 gained the *campus numériques* status by 2002. Shortly after the third call, in autumn 2003,

¹ The name of this initiative has actually been source of confusion throughout its short life. Some commentators even think that this lack of agreement on its name may be partially responsible for its failure (Bacsich, 2005). In documents, it is variously referred to as ‘eUniversity’, ‘e-University’, ‘eU’, ‘e-Learning Holding Company Ltd’, ‘e-U Hold-Co Limited’, UK eUniversities Worldwide’, ‘UKeU’ and ‘eUniversities’.

the MEN decided to organise these programmes around five broad academic disciplines (medicine, management, law, engineering and technology, and science and environment) and, essentially, create banks of digital learning and teaching materials which would be accessible by lecturers and students whose higher education institution belonged to one of these five *Universités Numériques Thématiques* (UNT).

In brief, the UK initiative failed and was wound-up in 2005, whilst the French initiative continues, albeit in a modified form, to this day.

The comparison of the two policy-making processes has shown that there were a number of similarities. In both cases, the initiation of the process was backed up by findings from academic research. In both cases, the lead from the state was strongly emphasised. In both cases, a closely linked community of ‘experts’ was identified. There are, however, some differences. The fact that the UK initiative was overseen by the English funding council led to consequences which could only be found in the UK. The difficulty encountered with the fragmented landscape of distance learning providers was equally unique to France. In terms of subsequent cycles of policy-making, shortly after the fall of the UK initiative, the DfES published a policy entitled ‘Harnessing Technology’ (DfES, 2005) but it is not until October 2008, with Prof Sir Ron Cooke’s ‘On-line Innovation in Higher Education’ that the cycle re-started. In June 2009, David Lammy (Higher Education Minister) announced a major project (Open Learning Innovation Fund) in which the British Library and the Open University would be core policy actors. On the French side, a new national information infrastructure (NII) was launched in the autumn 2009, 12 years after the previous one from which the *campus numériques* emerged.

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