

The University: Higher Education or Just Plain Sport? 0046

A Comparative Analysis of the Policy Developments of Two High Performance Environments

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ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades, UK governments have undertaken extensive reviews of their involvement in both sport and higher education (Jarratt Report 1985; Raising the Game 1995; Dearing Report 1997; Climbing Higher 2004; For Our Future 2009). Underpinning these reviews are dominant ideas, such as 'participation', 'excellence', 'competitiveness', 'community/social regeneration' and 'corporate/ social enterprise'. Similar ideas, but underpinning reviews of apparently different performance-driven environments. Ideas that also matter in terms of public policy, helping to frame political judgements and social problems, and shaping future plans and actions (Hoppe 1993).

This paper analyses and compares the dominant ideas and policies that shape, delimit and sustain these two environments; proposes shared paradigms with which to view and understand commonality; and opens a debate, not only as to the appropriateness of comparing two 'seemingly' different sectors but also around the potential for mutual learning as the layers of similarity are exposed.

OUTLINE

This paper examines the common ideas and policies that influence the organisation and delivery of higher education and sport in the UK. In this way, the paper offers new and highly original perspectives relevant for both sectors and, based on this analysis, presents a new framework for the understanding of government policy towards higher education. The paper is based on a detailed text analysis of key policy documents.

This paper uses two primary theoretical premises. First, the analysis is informed by the adoption of an 'argumentative turn' to the study of policy. In particular, Chalip (1995; 1996) advocates the use of critical theory as an essential tool in analysing policy because of its potential to uncover debilitating views and assumptions.

Second, the paper is informed by ideas that utilise paradigms (as analytical concepts) to investigate policy changes for three reasons:-

- They reflect the limitations that are fundamental to the development of policy problems because of how they frame issues and causal descriptions (Howlett & Ramesh 1995).

- They convey the complexity that policy makers face regarding the nature of intervention and the instruments proposed.
- They are a useful middle ground to link ideological theories of state/society with the field specific ideas of policy makers.

Higher education policies stress that universities are vital to the health of the nation, regions and communities, especially in the context of today's knowledge economy (Lambert 2006). The synergy between government, business and higher education draws upon a range of critical elements: strengthening of civil society, effectiveness of public services, creation of adaptable institutions in the voluntary and community sector, and above all, development of the softer skills of co-operation, collegiality and creativity (Watson 2007). The similarity with sport is transparent when we look at 'Game Plan' (DCMS 2002) which emphasised the contribution of sport to health, education, crime reduction, community cohesion, social inclusion, neighbourhood and community regeneration and economic growth. Subsequently, the 'International Sport Strategy' (DCMS 2009) stressed the special nature of sport to work in partnership, build strong relationships and involve citizens through excellence, opportunity, economy, diversity and sustainability. Government is looking for both sectors to contribute to the well being of citizens and to social cohesion; in addition, government is looking to encourage characteristics such as discipline, co-operation and a collective spirit/collegiality, suggesting that a 'community' paradigm is prevalent within both sectors.

Government policy expects the university to be many contradictory things simultaneously; conservative and radical, critical and supportive, competitive and collegial, autonomous and accountable, private and public, excellent and equal, entrepreneurial and caring, certain and provisional, traditional and innovative, ceremonial and iconoclastic, local and international (Watson, 2007). Universities are required to operate in a competitive market but also to promote the interests of a 'public' education; they are both autonomous and self-reliant and yet bound into networks of accountability, largely due to the receipt of public funds.

Again, there is a commonality with sport. The government's Sport Policy also expects the National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) to be many contradictory things, simultaneously. As organisations, they are expected to protect social traditions of, for example, 'fair play' and 'honest athleticism', and to pose potentially radical alternatives, such as 'winning at all costs' and 'protein supplementation for performance enhancement'. NGBs are supposed to operate within a competitive market for participant interest as well as to promote the benefits of physical activity for health and well being. The organisations are both autonomous and self reliant within their own specific sports, yet also bound into networks of accountability.

NGBs are expected to strive to be the best, to have world class performance plans and win medals, yet, at the same time, to have community sport development plans, promoting and achieving 'Sport for All' agendas. Similarly, universities face the tension between elite performance (the culture of league tables) and wider social responsibilities. The paper examines how managers in both sectors respond to these common pressures.

Most universities and sports bodies operate within a number of concentric spheres; the locality; an economic region; a home nation; and an international community. Very different strategies are needed to ensure credibility and success in each of the given spheres. An 'embracing conflict' paradigm is therefore common to both sectors.

The final paradigm examined in this paper is one of 'Meritocracy', a social system in which power is held by the most talented or intelligent people (Sam and Jackson, 2004). Again, this is prevalent in both higher education and sport policies. Dearing (1997) encouraged universities to inspire and

enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels. In 2008, the university was seen as a key to unlocking the talents of people, providing research and scholarship and playing a critical role in maintaining a competitive and innovative economy (Denham, 2008). It is clearly perceived that these institutions of talent, criticality and intellect are essential for the social and economic stability of the country. Similar ideas underpin policy towards sport, especially the pathway to the podium continuum of Foundation, Participation, Performance and Excellence. The 'International Sport Strategy' states that sport can help build, develop and sustain international relationships and is a powerful contributor to the economy, health and well being, and active and engaged communities' (DCMS 2009), yet it equates to less than 1% of the sector as a whole. This paradigm is pursued further and comparisons are made between ideas of 'widening participation' and 'sport for all', whilst the highest performance impact factors for league tables and financial contributions are aligned with RAE/ REF results and Olympic Medals.

Finally, the paper explores further similarities between higher education and sport, extending the frameworks of policy and paradigm. Is "Vice-Chancellor" another term for "Coach"? Are academics, performance athletes? Is it coming top of the league at all costs, or the way you played the game – correction – the student experience, that holds you in the highest esteem? The starting pistol of the appropriateness debate has clearly been fired and the potential for further learning is now open for peer review.