

Whose University? The policy context of the internationalisation of UK Higher education and its implications for the student experience

Background

Few issues in the development of higher education over the last forty years have generated as much idealism and income, challenge and controversy as that of internationalisation. The sector has achieved considerable advantage in its recruitment success, competitive edge in a global market, innovative research collaborations, and ability to sustain partnerships which are often translated into robust transnational programmes. At the same time it is clear that the activities described as “internationalisation” are part of a lengthy continuum that includes, as Peter Scott described it “the good, the bad and the ugly”

As higher education institutions across the world, and the governments under which they exist, strive to develop an internationalisation model which will be fit for purpose, it is timely to consider what that purpose might be and how the universities are positioned to achieve it. This paper attempts to provide a historical perspective by which we can analyse the present position in the UK and possible future developments.

The Political Context of Internationalisation: A Historical Review

The thirst for knowledge described as one of the “primal appetites of man” was slaked in the medieval universities by loose and informal structures which combined freedom of movement, unfettered but frequently world class teaching, a lingua franca, lack of accountability, strife with many of the neighbouring settlements and absence of any infra structure. Apostolic poverty might sustain the status quo but would not be able to develop the studia into universities.

The decision to settle in Oxford and Cambridge, as far as the English universities were concerned, afforded them patronage, protection, resource and growth but required obedience to the Pope or monarch and, at a later stage, to lesser benefactors. While a tiny proportion of the age cohort attended such institutions and were likely to be destined for employment in the church or court, this was of limited long term significance. When the nation had moved to a period of more liberal enlightenment, and a greater need of trained manpower, then patronage became philanthropy. Throughout the nineteenth century that sponsorship of the emerging college sector was provided in the main by industrialists with a stake in a developed society. When entrepreneurs and local dignitaries provided the funding, they had an input into the objects and purposes of those institutions and consequently on the curricula which was offered. For a second time the uncertain and restricted funding for higher education threatened the desired sustainable growth and development.

The nation needed its universities to be sufficient in quality and in numbers and by 1889 that was accepted with the first tranche of state aid to the university and university college sector. There was recognition that ignorance was costing more than education and, after the first World War, the role of the state was admitted as necessary for the improvement of the general good and the general good, in terms of the economy and the life of the citizen, was acknowledged as linked to the existence of universities. This was formalised with the creation of the University Grants Committee in 1919.

State aid was initially perceived, not as a curb to university autonomy, but rather as an underpinning which would allow them to exercise that autonomy for the greater good of the citizens who provided the taxes. As society changed, however, so did the definition of the university and the greater good. Was the university task as Newman saw it “refining the intercourse of private life”, or as Robbins perceived it, as an opportunity for all who had the ability to study and the desire to do so? The proportion of state aid increased considerably between 1919 and 1970 and, in particular, after 1945 and the end of the war. Universities were meeting national needs both for recovery and sustained economic growth.

The access to higher education and the increasing diversity of the student base post Robbins and later after the abolition of the binary line in 1992, required the universities to acknowledge change in both their mission and their relationship to government. Social mobility, employer needs and a system fit for massification were all demanded as part of the state contract, and it would be impossible to deny the rightness of these demands. In the 1980 debate on international fees Rhodes Boyson, speaking on behalf of the government made it clear that the British universities “are funded by the British taxpayer, not from outer space”

The existence of the government funding and its steady growth in size and proportion over a period of nearly one hundred years by 1981, allowed it to drive through a fee regime which many educationalists and all universities opposed. Since that time governments of both political parties have made it clear to universities that absolute freedom of ideas and action takes second place to the national security, the national economy and the national good (defined by whomsoever the electorate returns).

Implications for the Student Experience

This has had considerable, and not always adverse, effect on what the universities can provide in terms of internationalisation and the student experience offered. This leaves a number of questions to be resolved:

- Could/should internationalisation at its best be afforded without differential fees for international students ?

- **Can entry be offered to any qualified non UK student irrespective of subject of study or nationality?**
- **How do we maintain international links without freedom of entry and ability to work after graduation?**
- **Is TNE simply a means to avoid UKBA interventions?**
- **How can we resolve the ethical dilemmas of brain drain or churn and north south mobility?**
- **Can we adopt our pedagogy to acknowledge other methods of learning, other perspectives, and other outcomes?**
- **How closely must institutional policies be aligned with national policies?**
- **What aspects of government policy enhance or constrain internationalisation?**