

The *Neuordnung* in English Higher Education, Consequences and possibilities

Introduction

The situation for higher education providers will be reviewed to ascertain the current distribution of undergraduate admissions in England after the first term of the new fee regime. The managerial responses of HEIs will also be summarized insofar as these can be ascertained to confirm the anticipated pattern of centralization of administrative structures, the expected redundancies from under-recruiting subjects and departments and the mergers of academic units into more 'lean' and 'responsive' re-organisations (recapitulating the experience of FE following incorporation in 1993, see Ainley and Bailey 1997). These adjustments can in turn be seen to anticipate further mergers/closures of institutions along the general lines that, while all HEIs announce their aspirations to rise in the league tables of quality and employability, not all can go up and many – particularly in the middle – will go down; these tendencies exacerbated by competition for high A-level grade applicants at the top and a race to the bottom towards collapse into e-learning centres at the bottom (see Ainley 1994: xx). However, it appears that many – if not all – home students and their parents have little alternative to become grossly indebted for the chance of secure employment, the only route to which appears to be through graduation, even if many of the occupations to which many graduate are para-professional at best (Mudfog 2012).

Response

The response of the academic 'community' to the competitive arena into which they have been thrown by the rapid withdrawal of funding following government's reception of the Browne review is characteristically fissiparous. It ranges from the UCU and other trades unions' reaction of fighting each closure and all redundancies on a case-by-case base to reliance upon student resistance to sustain an escalating *Resistance* (Bailey and Freedman 2011). Others, eg. Holmwood 2011, reason eloquently to establish their case for a public university that is integral to the defence of democracy and civil society; while Collini's influential account of what a university is for (2012) relies upon special pleading for an autonomous academic profession maintaining its privileges to research and teach 'for its own sake'. The NUS has at least dropped its support for Labour's graduate tax as a compromise solution to reduce fees but the disparate responses outlined above indicate the confusions amongst their teachers.

Meanwhile, reforms to the schools system and recommendations for if not implementation of revived apprenticeships (Wolf 2011) indicate Willetts hand-in-Gove with a fantastical desire to return English education and society to the 1950s – as if the reintroduction of O-levels and grammar schools will restart the limited upward social mobility that then existed and ignoring the fact that this period enabled by economic growth ended coincident with but not as a consequence of the introduction of comprehensive schools after 1965 so that nowadays the only social mobility is downward (Allen and Ainley 2012). In this reversion to type, academic cramming is oddly yoked with a tyranny of transparency which, beginning with the teaching of phonics in primary schools, breaks student learning outcomes down into smaller and smaller parts for individually quantified assessment and audit that sets up both students and teachers to fail and to blame themselves for their failure.

This *Capsule Education* (McArdle-Clinton 2008) commodifies student experiences following a behavioural model of learning with Business Studies as the archetype of the new higher

education in which modules are randomly collected with only a vocational coherence at best (see Graff 2003). Students pay more for less, encouraging an alienation from education that is seen only as a performance to be gone through for the sake of qualification (Bourdieu and Passeron 1964). This ‘performativity’ (Ball 2008) infects also their teachers who, if not completely cynical or lost in the ironic postmodern orthodoxy that is now self-fulfillingly ubiquitous in the humanities and social sciences, aim their efforts at a minority of students in hopes of nurturing academic successors, what though the cost of post-graduate study and the lack of any secure career path closes this off from the realistic aspirations of most students. Meanwhile, everyone knows that quality has declined on a reduced unit of resource, exacerbated in many universities by what could be called their speculations in sub-prime student markets during the period of widening participation.

Perhaps it does not matter that undergraduate essays are randomly sprinkled with apostrophes and that, as every marker sees, students rarely spell, punctuate or paragraph properly and often have only a shaky grasp of grammar. These are symptoms resulting from *Capsule Education* from primary school phonics on with ‘bits’ from the internet cut and pasted together leading to inevitable plagiarism. Despite the widely recognized need for a foundation year to sort this out, especially in subjects necessitating understanding of mathematics, leave alone to induct students into an academic culture that has not (yet) completely abandoned its struggle to survive, and to give students – and often staff – time to read, the delusions of Vice-Chancellors, exam boards and recent governments in ever rising standards are sustained. Critics are derided by e-enthusiasts as grumpy, old and soon-to-be-retired under-raters of the ‘experiences’ students/customers consume on-line; or denounced as elitist reverts to minority HE. Meanwhile, many students remove themselves from meaningful involvement in an education from which they are increasingly alienated (Lave & McDermott 2002). ‘Let’s pretend like I give a shit!’ as a student T-shirt proclaims, though whether many can afford to continue their expensive peripheral participation at many HEIs for the sake of *The Pleasures of Being a Student* (Cheeseman 2011) is doubtful. Staff participate in the charade and at worst share the illusions in the simulacrum of quality they maintain, pandering to parents ‘less concerned with what their children learn than with the certificate and what they will earn’ (McArdle-Clinton *ibid*, 48).

Conclusion

With the lack of independent reporting and monitoring of developments in English higher education, SRHE has a role to play in collating, analyzing and disseminating evidence of the effects of the new order in the sector for critical discussion and debate, linking this to wider calls for a commission of enquiry into education as a whole.

References

Ainley, P. (1994) *Degrees of Difference, higher education in the 1990s*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Ainley, P. & Bailey, B. (1997) *The Business of Learning, Staff and Student Experiences of Further Education in the 1990s*, London: Cassell.

Allen, M. & Ainley, P. (2012) *Alan Milburn, social mobility and education* available at <http://radicaled.wordpress.com/>.

- Bailey, M. & Freedman, D. (eds) (2011) *The Assault on Universities, A Manifesto for Resistance*, London: Pluto.
- Ball, S. (2008) 'Performativity, privatisation, professionals and the state' in Cunningham, B. (ed.) *Exploring Professionalism*, Bedford Way Papers London: Institute of Education.
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J-C. (1964) *Les Heretiers, Etudiants et Leurs Etudes*, Paris: Cahiers du centre de Sociologie Europeene.
- Cheeseman, M. (2011) *The pleasures of being a student at the University of Sheffield*, University of Sheffield: unpublished PhD thesis.
- Collini, S. (2012) *What Are Universities For?* Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Graff, G. (2003) *Clueless in Academe, How schooling obscures the life of the mind*, New Haven: Yale UP.
- Holmwood, J. (ed) (2011) *A Manifesto for the Public University*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Lave, J. & McDermott, R. (2002), 'Estranged (Labor) Learning', *Outlines*, 1, pp.19-48.
- McArdle-Clinton, D. (2008) *The Consumer Experience of Higher Education, The Rise of Capsule Education*, London: Continuum.
- Mudfog (2012) *What about the former-polytechnics? (And what about polytechnicism?)* on the Campaign for the Public University website, <http://publicuniversity.org.uk/?s=Mudfog>.
- Wolf, A. (2011) *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*, London: DfE.