

The New Universities of the 1960s: From the Quasi-State's Model to Mission Group Pressures

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Abstract: This presentation embraces two inter-related objectives: to analyse the foundation of the seven new English universities of the 1960s and to assess the impact upon their identities generated by the rise of the so-called mission groups. The foundation of these seven universities was orchestrated by the University Grants Committee, which decided that the increasing demand for higher education was to be met in part by founding new universities. This centralised initiative contrasts vividly with the foundation of the mission groups which was undertaken by the universities and split the new universities into three camps: the 1994 Group, the Russell Group and the non-aligned. The recent demise of the 1994 Group is indicative not only of the increased potency of market forces to determine university self-images, but also of the potentiality for new, more heterogeneous groups to emerge and promote change in UK higher education.

A Dual Purpose

There are two inter-related parts to this paper: an overview of the foundation of the 7 English 'new universities' of the 1960s (East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Lancaster, Sussex, Warwick and York) and the subsequent impact of the emergence of the mission groups upon their identities. The two parts represent different forms of institutional change in English higher education: the foundation of these 'new universities' was almost entirely dependent upon the intervention of the quasi-state apparatus in the form of the University Grants Committee (UGC); while the recent reshaping of institutional identities represents their differing reactions to the emergence (post-1994) of the missions groups in UK higher education.

Planning higher education

Post-1945 the UGC's terms of reference were changed to grant it what, to all intents and purposes, was a planning role in the development of British higher education (cf Shattock 2012). Although acutely sensitive to government policy preferences, it undertook over time a number of policy initiatives which impacted upon the institutional character of the system. Of these the foundation of the 7 new universities marks a high-water point for the UGC. While government approval, mainly reflected in the provision of funding, was critical, the actual implementation of the new universities policy was in the hands of the UGC.

The Committee (UGC 1962) was driven by the following considerations:

1. The need to respond to the increasing demand for higher education stimulated by 'the bulge' (the rise in the birth rate in the two years following the ending of the war) and 'the trend' (the ever increasing number of prospective students)
2. The post-war stress on promoting 'equality of educational opportunity'
3. The reluctance of the current universities to increase rapidly the size of their student intake
4. The desire of the UGC to found new universities in the expectation that they would be more likely than the established institutions to introduce new curricula and organise knowledge

The UGC responded to these pressures by forming a New Universities Sub-committee, which vetted the approaches to the UGC to receive its support. The Sub-Committee specified a number of criteria that applicants had to conform to if their bids were to stand any chance of being endorsed: a site of at least 200 acres, some financial support from the local authorities, the backing of locally organised interests, a willingness to plan for a student population of at least 3,000, and the need to embrace academic innovation. Once a proposal had been approved, an academic sub-committee (composed of nominees of the local sponsors and individuals recommended by the UGC) had the task of bringing it to fruition.

Not surprisingly, judgements as to how innovative these universities were in terms of how they organised knowledge vary (cf. Beloff, 1968; Halsey, 1995; Perkin, 1969; Robinson, 1987; Rich, 2001). Nonetheless, the UGC could take comfort in the fact that within approximately 10 years it had had a central role in founding 7 new universities which have come to form at least a credible segment of the English system of higher education, although one may argue whether the costs justified the outcomes, whether their academic innovations were that radical, and whether the established universities should have been left in peace.

Mission groups and the fragmentation of the new universities

The foundation of the new universities has been interpreted as a move sanctioned by central government but orchestrated by the quasi-state in the form of the UGC (cf. Padure & Jones 2009; Rhoades 1994). The emergence of the missions groups (the Russell Group, the 1994 Group, Million+ and University Alliance - with Universities UK and Guild HE each claiming to be representative bodies) reflects the decision of the universities to form organizations with self-proclaimed identities that want to shape the policy-making process along lines that further their particular interests (Palfreyman and Tapper, 2014). It is change driven at the institutional level rather than from the state or quasi-state.

The impact of the rise of the mission groups upon the changing identities of the seven new universities is especially informative. At one time all but the University of Kent (which brands itself as 'The UK's European University') belonged to the 1994 Group which, prior to its recent demise, saw itself as being composed of the smaller, research-intensive universities with a strong commitment to innovative teaching. But, first the University of Warwick, and then more recently the University of York, deserted its ranks to join the Russell Group, which clearly sees itself as representing Britain's leading research universities, with institutional size not entering the equation. Down to 11 members (with Sussex, UEA, Essex and Lancaster still members) the 1994 Group evidently needed to re-launch itself with a new identity which would assist a growth in its membership. In fact it failed to do this and, rather than struggling on, it decided to disband.

Concluding observation

This demise of 1994 Group is suggestive of an important shift in the process of institutional change in the UK. The demise was driven by changing perceptions amongst the universities of what would best boost their own self-images. In the process it illustrated the relative fragility of the idea of 'the new university' as the potency of 'the research-intensive' label increased. It is also suggestive of a decline in the relative significance of state-directed policy initiatives as, at least in part, the mission groups represent universities with different market positions – mission group membership symbolises relative positions in the status

hierarchy. Finally, although the fall-out from the disbanding of the 1994 Group has yet to be fully realised, there is the suggestion that change is being increasingly generated by the forming of specific liaisons (embracing teaching, research and access to higher education) between particular universities cutting across mission-group membership.

[956 words]

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