

# UC Berkeley

## Working Papers

### Title

An American Perspective on British Higher Education: The Decline of Diversity, Autonomy and Trust in Post-war British Higher Education

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1mq88095>

### Author

Trow, Martin A

### Publication Date

2005-08-05

Revised and edited)

**An American Perspective on British Higher Education: The Decline of Diversity, Autonomy and Trust in Post-war British Higher Education<sup>1</sup>**

**Martin Trow**  
**The Goldman School of Public Policy, and**  
**The Center for Studies in Higher Education**  
**UC Berkeley, CA 94720**  
Trow@socrates.berkeley.edu

This paper takes the form of reflections on the history of the relationship between British higher education and various British governments since WW II, and most particularly since 1980, the beginning of the Thatcher revolution, putting current events into an historical as well as a comparative perspective. And I do this quite consciously as an American observer, with all the handicaps and advantages that accrue to that perspective. While there are great disadvantages for an American attempting to study higher education in Britain (or any foreign country), there are also some advantages.

One advantage is the tendency of a foreign observer to stand outside the institution and its political context, and to raise questions about what natives ordinarily take for granted. So I begin with a series of “surprises” to this observer as I learned about British attitudes and values attached to higher education, surprises at aspects of the system that most English academics would take for granted, but which seemed strange to an American. Ten of these “surprises,” for this foreigner, together constitute a set of assumptions made or values held by most English people who think about their own universities. This set of assumptions or values together characterize the normative framework which has shaped much thinking and governmental policy toward HE in this country since WW II. I do appreciate that there will not be consensus among all English academics on these assumptions, and maybe less agreement among British students of higher education. (Students of higher education are more inclined to question its assumptions than most people.) Moreover, views on some of them seem to be changing. Nevertheless, my hypothesis is that these assumptions or

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper prepared for a conference on the White Paper of 2003, sponsored by The Center for Studies of Higher Education, UC Berkeley, and New College, Oxford, in Oxford, September. 28-30, 2004. A summary version of this paper has been published as “The Decline of Diversity, Autonomy and Trust in Post-War British Higher Education: an American Perspective,” in Perspectives, Vol. 8, No. 4, October 2004.

beliefs together have defined the culture of British higher education, and have heavily shaped the way this country has responded to the problems associated with the transition from elite to mass higher education.

The first great surprise to me, from which all others flowed, was:

That the universities had no friends beyond their borders.<sup>2</sup> That explained to me why successive governments of both parties felt free to cut the unit of resource by more than a half in two decades, without suffering any political penalties.<sup>3</sup> In addition, I was surprised by:

The resistance to, and indeed the reversal of tendencies toward, diversification of the system since 1992.

The withdrawal and then the absence of trust on the part of successive British governments in their institutions of higher education, and in the academics and administrators who give them their life. And closely related, the continuing hostility of government to the universities.

The continued intense hostility, both by government and the academic community, to any form of private higher education, typified by the extended delay and elaborate restrictions placed on the establishment of any genuinely private university.

The resistance by all British governments until recently to allow significant imposition of tuition charges to supplement governmental support of the universities.

The peculiar persistence in the universities and government of the myth of a common degree standard across subjects and institutions, a myth affecting many aspects of higher education policy, among them the resistance to structural diversification.

The political weakness of the universities, and of the academic community as a whole, on the national scene.

The widespread belief, among academics and government officials, that a university could perform only a limited range of functions -- liberal education and scholarly and scientific research -- but not "vocational

---

<sup>2</sup> "Friends" are not necessarily stake-holders, nor are stake-holders always friends. Stake-holders generally ask "what can you do for me?" "Friends" also ask "what can we do for you?" British higher education over the past decades needed friends, and found stake-holders.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, universities and their conditions were hardly ever mentioned in the run-up to general elections in past decades.

training.” The latter was seen as a threat to the integrity of a university, to be done in non-university institutions. In parts of academia this belief survived the transformation of the polytechnics into universities in 1992.

The related assumption that a “university” is by definition a place where people do research as well as teach. If the academic staff does not do research as a central part of their role, it is not a university. This was an article of faith until 1992; it was tested between 1992 and the present, and with the continuing concentration of research support it is no longer held as an article of faith.

And finally, the assumption by British governments that the way to encourage research achievement in universities was to fund them on the basis of the research profiles of their component departments.

These patterns of attitudes, values and assumptions constitute a web of interrelated and mutually supportive forces that shaped the response of British higher education to the problems generated by the transitions from elite to mass to universal access higher education. I believe this was not a benign pattern of response, but one which has broadly injured British universities, with of course differences among the institutions. But on the whole, it would be difficult to argue that the sum effect of the policies guided by these values imposed over the years between 1980 and 2004 have been wise and effective responses to the inevitable problems arising from rapid growth and change. My sense is that this government, like its predecessors, is still struggling with the contradiction between the clear need for greater university flexibility, in setting fees as in other aspects of its life, as over against the government’s determination to retain fundamental control over key elements of academic life, starting with funding. But this ambivalence along with the speed and direction of change, now leads some of these key value assumptions to be modified or discarded. What are the consequences of that for the rest of the web? Instability and uncertainty about the future, is my guess.

In this paper I discuss two of these “surprises” more fully: the political weakness of the academic community in the face of attack, and the issue of diversity, within and between institutions of higher education, as a resource in the transition from elite to mass to universal access.

### **The weakness of political responses by the institutions and the academic community.**

It was clear early on that Mrs. Thatcher was no friend of the university arrangements that she found in place when she came to power in 1979. (She

remained in office till 1990.) Her central concern, as we know and as she insisted at the time, was to halt and reverse what she and others saw as a national decline in economic strength and its accompanying weakness in the world. She divided the world into institutions that contributed to a strong Britain, and those that were collectively responsible for the “British decline”. In her view, and those of her followers, the universities were self-serving, rather reactionary institutions, comfortable places little concerned with serving a society in trouble, starting with an economy failing competitively, from which other troubles flowed. Thatcher and her colleagues were strongly influenced by the idea of the “decline of Britain,” as argued by such economic historians as Correlli Barnett, Michael Sanderson, Andrew Gamble and others.<sup>4</sup> These authors placed a good deal of the responsibility for that decline on British education. And that meant that the universities needed to be radically reformed, to become more efficient, more effective, more accountable. They clearly were not going to do this themselves; they needed the firm smack of government to reform, just as did the unions, nationalized industries, small business, the old professions and other encumbrances from the past.

As the Thatcher government settled into office, we learned that it was home to two different patterns of response to the universities: one of which, symbolized by the Ministership of Keith Joseph, was broadly oriented toward solutions through the market. And responses to markets implied a measure of institutional autonomy to allow them to respond to market signals. The other political philosophy of her government stressed not market mechanisms but central governmental management and control, symbolized by Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, the first Chief Executive of the Universities Funding Council (UFC), and exercised through nominally independent bodies that implemented central government policy. For a while both of these clearly incompatible governmental philosophies were represented in her policies and agencies. But ultimately the managerial policies won out – and what the universities got was the rhetoric of the market with the reality of firm central governmental management, down to a very fine micromanagement of enrollments by subject, the funding of individual departments, the salaries of academic staff, and increasingly detailed criteria regarding approved modes of instruction. Along the way some of the specific policies were discarded or modified in the face of manifest failure and untoward effects, resulting in a pattern of policy that resembled a somewhat unskilled automobile driver who parks by ear.

But this pattern of policies undergoing constant change and reform placed great

---

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Correlli Barnett, *The Audit of War*, (1986), Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline: Economic Policy, Political Strategy and the British State*, Beacon, (1981), and Michael Sanderson, *Education and Economic Decline in Britain, 1870-1990*, Cambridge University Press, (1991). These all place considerable responsibility on Britain’s educational system for not contributing enough to economic development.

strains on the institutions, which had continually to adapt to policies developed elsewhere, inconsistently implemented, and erratically revised. The history of central government policy regarding expansion would be a good illustration of these observations -- alternatively hitting accelerator and brake, without much regard for demand in the society or the varied ambitions and capacities of the institutions. The central policies tended not to make distinction among the universities, treating them on the whole as equal institutions -- or if not yet equal, the policy was aimed at making them more equal. And that ideological commitment in central government to equality among institutions was one source of its continuing problems, since ideological equality was a central source of the pressures for standardization and uniformity -- policies which pressed on and distorted institutions which inherently are diverse, properly diverse, and increasingly diverse as enrollments grow and as the map of knowledge expands. Standardization was thus a consequence and instrument of ideological egalitarianism, but also for quite different reasons, is enormously attractive to central government and the civil service, since it greatly simplifies, and indeed makes possible management from the center. Strong government in modern Britain tends to be egalitarian, at least in principle, both for ideological reasons and for bureaucratic convenience.

I have suggested that the draconian higher education policies of Mrs. Thatcher, and their continuation under the Labour Party, were somewhat surprising to an American observer. But even more surprising was the feeble response of the academic community to these policies, which, whatever their wisdom, were not friendly to an autonomous university or academic community. On the whole the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP) over the whole of this half century has been a peculiarly weak body in its ability to effectively resist policies that their constituents uniformly decried and opposed -- at least in principle. To an American, used to a much more rough-and-tumble political world, this was pitifully wimpy. And equally strange to an American, if not to most Englishmen, the governing boards of universities -- their Councils -- have played almost no role in the evolving policies of government regarding higher education. One would imagine that governing boards would develop a measure of allegiance and affection for their institutions, and would instinctively reflect their interests and sentiments. Moreover, they tend to be independent people, often aristocrats or wealthy businessmen, who carry some weight in their political parties and in Westminster. I also assumed that the members of these governing boards were more likely to be Conservatives, and therefore have more influence with the Conservative Party than the rather more left-wing academic community. But to my surprise I learned that there was no national organization of governing boards, or at least none that anybody mentioned, and those potentially influential bodies were absent from the political process and policies of British government toward higher education.

In addition, to an American it was surprising that the universities could not mobilize their prominent or distinguished alumni in support of the institutions which had been their launching pads for successful careers. But apparently, alumni did not see matters that way, or look on their universities with much affection or gratitude. Or maybe they do, but the universities did and do not know how to tap those sentiments, just as they did not know how to exploit the divisions within the Thatcher government between the “marketeters” (eg. Keith Joseph and Robert Jackson) and the proponents of a command economy managed by central government (Peter Swinnerton-Dyer and others).

How to account for this peculiar absence of the organized university community in the political world? The continuing weakness of the academic community rested in part on the historical informal relationships among the leaders of the British universities and the ministers and senior civil servants who actually made governmental policy – often between academics and their former students at Oxbridge colleges. It was gentlemanly politics, not the real politics of ideology and interest, based on power and money, aiming at influencing legislation and general elections, that motivates the political life of Britain as of the US..

But the long experience of managing the relations between universities and government in a gentlemanly way was a poor preparation for the quite different political world ushered in by Mrs. Thatcher, marked by fierce ideological conflict and new (in the British context) radical policies. The academic community responded to the real politics of the Thatcher government with the habits of the gentlemanly politics it had developed during the decades before – perhaps it had never in the twentieth century played real politics, defined as trying to affect the outcomes of general elections.

An illustration of the inability of British academia to play real politics was the history of Keith Joseph’s suggestion in 1984 that the universities be allowed to charge tuition. There followed an enormous outcry, marked by a march on Westminster by an alliance of Tory parents and their left-wing sons and daughters, all outraged by the suggestion that they pay a fraction of the real costs for a higher education, and a fraction of what many had paid for expensive public schools. I was not surprised that the government and then Joseph folded in the face of that noisy and bipartisan resistance, and withdrew the proposal; what is more significant is that Joseph had no support in his initiative from the universities themselves. It was their future that rode on his initiative. I suspect what hindered them was an enduring suspicion by academics of any initiative by a Tory government, and especially one involving (at least rhetorically) a market involving charges for services to students.

The Tory parents and their undergraduate children were engaged in real politics through the media by demonstrations, and through political pressures of various

kinds on their MPs. But the academic community did not play real politics, in part because they didn't know how, were not organized to do so, and in part thought it beneath them, inappropriate to the dignity of professors and vice-chancellors. Moreover, many academics did not believe that tuition should be a part of the support of British universities, but rather that they should be supported wholly or substantially on public funds, and to allow even modest tuition payments was to allow the camel's nose under the tent. Those concerns are still there two decades later, but now more muted in the face of continuing underfunding of a larger number of universities, and the firm message that none of the three major political parties is willing or able to support the universities adequately out of the public purse.]

Moreover, the academic community seemingly did not know its own interests. Academics yearned, Tory and Socialist alike, for the days when the UGC brokered gentlemanly deals between the university and the Treasury. And most academics disliked Ms. Thatcher so intensely that famously Oxford refused to give her the honorary degree that had been conventionally awarded to their graduates who had achieved that office. A symbolic act, arrogant in the belief that it would have no consequences. More important, the gesture was a substitute for the real political action that might have moved Ms. Thatcher as it does other politicians in democratic societies.

The political weakness of the universities, individually and collectively, is itself a puzzle in a society marked by a very lively political life and sophisticated special interest groups who know very well how to express and press their interests in Westminster and Whitehall. My sense is that British universities, over the centuries, had acquired what Thorsten Veblen called a "trained incapacity" for effective engagement in real politics. It is not what gentlemen did. And so when a government came to be run by people who were manifestly not gentlemen – and whatever Mrs. Thatcher was, she was not a gentleman -- academics responded through symbolic acts, like their refusal to grant her a degree, and through the more effective guerilla warfare that I discovered later during my field studies with Oliver Fulton into the responses of universities to the regulatory machinery of HEFC and the Quality Assurance Agency.<sup>5</sup>

So in the sad and destructive clash between government and universities over the past quarter century, ideology has driven both parties, unrelieved either by genuine consultation or independent and fundamental research, both of which are forms of inquiry, increase knowledge and understanding and undermine the certainties and rigidities of ideology.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



## **The significance of diversity in the transition from elite to mass to universal higher education**

A key to successful higher education policy in the transition to mass and then to universal access is the encouragement of a diversity of educational provision -- a diversity of structures and of functions. Diversity in higher education has two great advantages over uniformity as a principle for planning for growth and transition from elite to universal access. First, diversity of structures is an appropriate response to the growing diversity of students – a diversity of origins, interests, and destinations

The second great advantage of diversity is that, when coupled with institutional autonomy, it creates or allows to emerge a series of educational experiments. As with all experiments, some are more successful than others. That is a crucial source of information for an institution and for society. It greatly reduces the costs of error.

Institutional diversity needs to be coupled with a high measure of autonomy, to allow institutions to be responsive to the continuing diversification of student talents, interests and destinations, as well as to the growth and specialization of knowledge. Autonomy is necessary if institutions are to learn from and respond to their experience and that of other similar institutions.

Central governmental policy in the UK since WW II has not looked kindly either on systemic diversity or on institutional autonomy. But there was a moment when British government policy institutionalized the beginnings of a formally diversified system. This was of course the creation of the binary system, under the Ministerial rule of Tony Crosland and the assiduous work behind the scenes of a senior civil servant in the Department, Toby Weaver.

When Crosland and Weaver were inventing the binary policy, 1965/66, it is true, as then charged, that one of Weaver's motives was to protect the universities, and especially his beloved Oxford, from the press of mass higher education, clearly on the horizon. Mass growth in their view, would be absorbed by the polytechnics, an altogether different kind of institution committed much more clearly to vocational and technical training. What Crosland and Weaver were doing, in a different way and in a different context, reminded me of what Clark Kerr and his colleagues had created in California in the early '50s, that is, a Master Plan for higher education. The Master Plan, as is well known, brought all the public colleges and universities in the State together in a cooperative compact or treaty defining their roles and functions, and their varying relations to state government. They did this "voluntarily" – though the State government had told them that if they could not create such a structure among themselves, the Legislature would do it for them. That threat greatly concentrated the mind of

the representatives of the several segments, and the compact they entered into was written into State law in California, where it still is in effect, still functioning little changed after half a century.

In the binary idea – as filtered through an American and specifically a Californian sensibility – I thought I detected the beginnings of a British Master Plan. It seemed to me crucial to somehow limit the number of research universities; they are enormously expensive, there are a limited number of people with a bent toward scholarly or scientific research, and any society can only support a limited number of them. The polytechnics, some which I had visited, and which on the whole I admired, seemed to me well on their way toward creating for themselves a useful and important niche in the increasingly diverse world of British higher education. At the time it did not strike me as of great significance whether they were called “universities,” or not; eventually the American version were all called “universities,” despite not offering the doctorate degree or housing a major research component. But apart from the titles that characterized the institutions – polytechnics rather than universities, lecturers rather than professors, led by principals rather than vice-chancellors -- the importance of which in my American way I greatly underestimated,<sup>6</sup> the polys that I knew showed a marked resemblance to the varied institutions making up the sector of California public higher education called the California State University, on its twenty-four varied and partly autonomous campuses. The polys in the mid-sixties were already focused on the preparation of students for a varied range of technical and semi-professional occupations, with a smattering of liberal studies alongside. And they were pioneering in the creation of a variety of professional masters degrees, which have come to be the qualification for entry into a lot of semi-professional occupations where some specialized studies beyond the first degree was indicated.

Further, at the time, I could imagine the next step being the incorporation into this compact of the Colleges of Further Education, as the third leg of the stool. (I

---

<sup>6</sup> It did not occur to me that major higher education policy in the UK would rest on the awarding of these titles, and that the polys could not gain those honorifics without being merged into a common system with the existing research universities, where they would be defined as research universities. In the mid-sixties it seemed to me reasonable to take the movement from polytechnic to university by steps, through changes in the sources of authority and support, under the tutelage of the Council on National Academic Awards which over time granted to the polys the right to award degrees and a measure of institutional autonomy. That had largely been accomplished by 1991. My sense was that the polys, or at least many of them, had by then taken on a distinct identity and mission, and were prepared to develop along those lines as self-confident non-research universities. That helps explain my surprise over the merger of the two sectors, reflected in my paper “Thoughts on the White Paper of 1991,” Higher Education Quarterly, vol. 46, (Summer 1992), pp.213-226. I was shocked as much by the casual nature of that important decision, made without study of its consequences or broad discussion, as I was by its substance.

could even imagine the incorporation of the Open University as the fourth, giving it real stability). None of my academic friends ever spoke about FE colleges, a few of which I had visited. But FE colleges struck me then as having a resemblance to our community colleges, open-ended and open access institutions offering a certificate or an associate degree of some kind for the equivalent of two years of study, especially to working students who could only attend part-time. Over the years the FE colleges have become even more diverse in their functions and offerings, as have American community colleges. In California the community colleges currently enroll over a million and a half students of one kind or another. And I never forgot Kerr's remark that the survival of the University of California as a great public research university absolutely depended on the existence of the community colleges, and also of the CSU institutions. If they were not there, the university would have been overwhelmed by numbers, and crushed by costs.

Crosland's views of the binary system, laid out in his Woolwich speech and elsewhere, cut across political lines<sup>7</sup> and class feelings in ways that foreshadowed debates over the next four decades. The debate brought out tensions within government and the academic community that persist 40 years on. Crosland and the binary policy rejected the recommendations of the Robbins Committee, which had foreseen a unitary system with a gradual promotion of the most deserving – ie., most academic, university-like – of the non-university institutions to full university status over time. Robbins was supported by most progressive and forward looking people in both parties, who rejected a dual (and inevitably class linked) higher educational system for one in which institutions (like individuals) could climb the status ladder by effort and demonstrated achievement. Against Robbins' vision, Crosland's binary plan seemed to many, then and now, as backward looking, a way of institutionalizing in higher education the rigid class system which had characterized elementary and secondary education before the abolition of the 11+ exams and the creation of the comprehensives.

In 1966 it seemed impossible to call a non-research university a "university. By 1992 it had become possible by assuming that the polys would become research universities. It took another decade to get over that illusion. And it is something of an irony that in the continuing concentration of research support to the leading research universities in the White Paper of 2003 the British government has finally accepted that it has created the set (if not a system) of non-research universities that was for so long unimaginable. It has done so not through a policy but through the failure of a policy.

---

<sup>7</sup> The binary idea was supported by the Conservative Party at the time, in the person of its Shadow Minister of Education, Sir. Edward Boyle.

### On the costs of dirigisme in British academic life: on funding formulas

Despite the White Paper of 2003, which at least recognizes if it does not adequately redress the deep underfunding of the British higher education,<sup>8</sup> achieved over two decades of steady cuts, the assumption in the UK and in the latest White Paper is still that government makes the central decision about funding for all forms of higher education. There are alternatives. One is to encourage and welcome non-governmental postsecondary institutions, still held in horror in the UK, though not everywhere else in Europe. Another is to fund higher education through students, providing vouchers for students to carry with them to any institution that will admit them; the vouchers of course could be means tested, relieving the Universities of that difficult and unwelcome task. Or government could revert to early patterns of funding by block grant distributed by an independent buffer body like the UGC. But all of these (and other solutions found elsewhere) have the disadvantage from the government's perspective, of reducing control over the universities by central government.

Why was it so important in the first Thatcher government to gain strong control over the universities, in actions culminating in the abolition of the UGC in 1988, replacing it by an arm of central government, the Universities Funding Council and then HEFCE and other regulatory bodies?

Central governmental control is a way of preventing the tendency of universities to go off in their own directions, in what was seen as the anarchy of institutional diversity. But diversity in higher education – that already visible but even more, that threatened in the future by further growth – held the threat of growing variation in the degree and nature of “quality” among universities and their qualifications. As noted earlier, the British government (along with sections of the academic community), until very recently held strongly to the principle (or myth) of a common level of academic quality between universities, and even between subjects. And that principle would be threatened, indeed be made shortly visibly untenable, if different funding sources to increasingly autonomous universities led to a radical devolution of decision making down to the level of institution, and even further to School and department.

Government was not only concerned about the threat to the equality of academic standards posed by autonomous and diverse institutions. It was concerned that growth would lead to a decline in those standards across the board. For a long time it was assumed by political and academic elites that in higher education,

---

<sup>8</sup> In the run-up to the General Election of Spring 2005, two of the three major parties called for the end of all tuition payments by students, promising to roll back the modest £3000 tuition imposed by the Blair Labour Party in response to the White Paper. But no alternative sources of support was suggested by them.

“more means worse.” And while that slogan was heard less often as it became politically incorrect, the anxiety (and some of the conviction behind it) remained. The quality of work in the old elite universities had been guaranteed by the distinguished scholars and scientists who had been elected to fellowships in Oxbridge colleges or to chairs in the departments around the country. As the system grew, the same assumptions about intellectual distinction (however justified for the elite system) could no longer be sustained. Increasingly, the people who were supposed to guarantee quality were people few people had ever heard of. And their names, and the procedures by which they had come to their positions, no longer were sufficient guarantees of the quality of work in the universities.

Of course this varied as between institutions, and subjects – Oxbridge and the sciences retained their old status in the public eye longer than did the new universities and the soft social sciences. All universities of course had some procedures in place for quality control, starting with their procedures for the appointment and promotion of staff. But with the arrival of mass higher education, those traditional forms of quality control were not enough. For that and other reasons, including anxieties about Britain’s “decline,” the Thatcher government withdrew the crucial element of trust from their relationship with the universities. The universities had to be reformed, and could not be trusted to reform themselves. Government had to do it for them, and in that case their autonomy, “guaranteed” by the UGC and defended by the bloc grant granted on a five year basis, had to be replaced by a shorter leash.<sup>9</sup> Moreover for many universities, their autonomy was apparently insured by their charters, and was given substance by their authority over such matters as the internal allocations of funds, and the tenure rights of academics. So university charters, like the UGC and the bloc grant, were all in the way, had to be overruled by central government, and were overruled, though never formally revoked. That was accomplished with astonishingly little complaint from the higher education community. The violation of the charters was, to my knowledge, not challenged in the courts – particularly astonishing to an American observer. And with that, a whole variety of decisions affecting the universities in fundamental ways came over time to be made by central government, either directly or through its agencies.

The decisions made by government for funding colleges and universities were and will continue to be different in fundamental ways from those made by the universities themselves. First, governments or their agencies like HEFCE must make their allocations according to some clear and public formulas. This is

---

<sup>9</sup> In their chapter on “The University Grants Committee,” Salter and Tapper organize their discussion in terms of four phases of its development. Phase Four is entitled: “Management or Martyrdom, 1974-88.” In the event, the UGC got both management and martyrdom. Brian Salter and Ted Tapper, The State and Higher Education, The Woburn Press, 1994, p. 104.

necessary for two reasons: First because of the requirement on government that it be fair among institutions and departments under its authority. Categorical formulas have the appearance of fairness between institutions. A ministry or funding agency cannot easily make a judgment that university A is led by an especially creative and effective vice-chancellor who deserves to have special support for his plans; or that Dept. X has created an especially promising team of young scientists who are worth betting on. Government doesn't do funding based on subjective judgments like that, but on achievements against criteria that are spelled out ahead of time. Government rewards achievement rather than promise. By contrast, a strong vice chancellor can make that kind of discriminatory judgment, less concerned with the powerful norms of politics and the civil service that they act within the clear and measurable criteria that allow funding by formula. Political bodies have somewhat more discretion in their decisions, in their freedom to make policy. But civil servants do not have that freedom, and are constrained by norms of equal treatment of all institutions affected by their decisions. And that means formulas.

In addition, ministries and their agents simply cannot effectively administer a large number of different kinds of institutions and departments. They cannot intelligently take into account the diversity of structure and performance of modern universities and their constituent units. They must deal with a large number of units as if they were comparable, grouped under a few broad rubrics. We can call this administrative convenience, but it really is administrative necessity – and it fits neatly with the requirement of equal treatment.

So both the norms of equity and administrative necessity imposed the use of formulas for defining academic quality, linking funding to excellence. But those formulas could not take into account the deep differences among universities, departments and scholars, the differences that actually make for variations in scholarly and scientific achievement.

One major problem with the funding formulas of the post-UGC funding arrangements is that government decided to fund universities through departments rather than individuals or research groups. But departments do not do research; individuals and research teams do. And modern research teams often cross departmental, institutional, even national lines. So the funding formulas already were at odds with the realities of scholarship and research – reflecting older patterns of individual research within departmental borders.

Linking funding to these outmoded and erroneous conceptions of research brought with it a variety of dysfunctional incentives. For example, the formulas gave no or negative weight to those members of departments who did not contribute much to published research – and this in turn led to the practice of omitting the names of non-publishers from departmental lists in order to reduce

the size of the denominators in the funding formulas determining “departmental research output.” But as most research scientists and scholars will affirm, in departments full of active researchers, the non-researchers often play a crucial role in undergraduate instruction – for the introductory students, and for synthesizing courses and lectures for advanced students. Really effective departments include a variety of types of instructors – loners, those whose links are to scholars in other departments or other institutions, active researchers who do well as mentors to larger groups of research-oriented students, and those who are primarily teachers, either by temperament and preference, or have left the research frontiers in the later parts of their careers. Personal differences and talents among academics, and changes in their interests over their careers, create a diversity of types of teacher/researchers in departments which responds more closely to the diversity of talents and ambitions of students than does any one kind of academic. And yet the funding formulas of governments cannot possibly taken into account this rich (and changing) diversity of academic types.

Those clumsy formulas have great power to introduce inappropriate patterns into academic life. It cannot be good for the morale of individuals or of departments to have to formally identify the “non-researchers” among their colleagues whose names will not be included in the lists to be submitted to the next research assessment. That is a kind of public humiliation to which, under ordinary circumstances, we would never subject our colleagues – valued colleagues who often are the glue, or better, the centripetal force that holds a department together against the powerful centrifugal forces of modern research which pull attention and energy toward work with distant colleagues in distant labs or over the internet. But the funding formulas in British universities have forced that kind of behavior over these past two decades, as academics have had to choose between the chances of another star in their rating from the Funding Council and the clearly undesirable behavior necessary to get it.

There were other behaviors, more widely recognized and discussed, arising out of the funding formulas: the penalties imposed on lengthy scholarly work resulting in books rather than quicker publication in papers; the anxiety to gain publication before the deadline for the next assessment; the pressure on academics to “do research” and to publish it who had no calling for research, no training or preparation for research – and the costs to the academics and the scholarly community of work coming out under such forced pressures. And the invisible loss to the academic community of other more useful work that was not done. This says nothing of the ploys and games engaged in by clever administrators to work the formulas.

The irony is that during the years of these funding formulas, all focused on the sharply bounded departments, the map of knowledge has been transformed by explosions of creative discovery, especially in the sciences and science linked

professions. These transformations have been reflected in some countries and institutions by fundamental changes in the departmental structures which manage academic careers – changes which have tried to reflect and respond to the new maps of knowledge and discovery rather than trammel them within the constraints of the obsolescent names and boundaries of the old departments. Research is increasingly done across disciplinary lines and organizational boundaries, in pairs and groups of researchers who are indifferent to the departmental identities that still are of primary significance to the formulas of funding agencies. But those agencies, and the governments which create them, cannot keep up with the creation of knowledge and what it does to the primary structures of universities. Those primary structures – mostly departments -- retain a certain usefulness within universities as administrative units for organizing instruction and the academic career – though even those functions are threatened by developments that make all disciplinary boundaries more permeable, less stable. Still, institutions and their administrators are or can be close enough to these developments to take measures to prevent the stability of departmental structures from becoming rigidities, rigidities which actively impede scholarship and scientific discovery. But funding formulas notionally linked to “academic excellence” cannot possibly reflect these new and highly diverse patterns of scientific work – even if governmental or civil service people were sensitive to them.

I have been suggesting that the large and continuing decline in central government support has dominated the attention of British academics, so that little attention has been paid to the fundamental error of funding universities largely by funding the research performance of departments. In a way, it seems to me that British academics have domesticated the whole machinery by which support comes from central government, despite its starting from premises at odds with the nature of academic life. British academics seem to me to have accepted the underlying assumptions of governmental support and regulation as unalterable, and have focused on how they can get enough money to allow them to do their job, and maintain nationally or internationally competitive institutions. So the focus rests on how much institutions can charge students by way of tuition, and the terms on which students can borrow money to pay their fees and living expenses. These are not trivial questions, but I have been arguing, not the fundamental ones. Even if problems of finance are met, and funding improved, the dysfunctions associated with the forms of funding and the criteria of assessment and regulation would remain as a drag on the development of British higher education.

## **Conclusion**

The White Paper of 2003 shows central government somewhat gingerly allowing



a degree of institutional autonomy in the setting of student tuition. And it is also encouraging universities to enter into contracts with industry. But government still is firmly opposed to the creation of private institutions of higher education. And indeed, there is little evidence that it makes its policies through discussion and collaboration with the representatives of the institutions of higher education.

So while government seems to be saying that it recognizes the problems of underfunding of the universities, it is still making decisions centrally, still apparently driven by the fear that chronic underfunding will lead to declines in the quality of British higher education – which is what central governmental control is intended to avoid or mitigate. But the new money from central government, however welcomed by a system that seems to have forgotten the nature of its own character, still does not address underlying issues of institutional autonomy, and of the diversity of character, function and quality that is the natural outgrowth of autonomy.

The growth of state regulation of higher education and the diminution of state resources for higher education have gone hand in hand. Thirty years ago I observed that “No society, no matter how rich, can afford a system of higher education for 20 or 30 percent of the age grade at the cost levels of the elite higher education that it formerly provided for 5 percent of the population.”<sup>10</sup> So it was clear even then that the unit of resource (per capita support for students) -- defined as support from the public purse -- would have to decline as enrollments grew.

There were then, as now, a limited number of governmental and institutional responses possible to this inexorable pressure on the unit of resource. In fact, all of these alternative responses to the financial problems of expansion have been tried, with variable success by different institutions – though all together have resulted in what is broadly felt to be an inadequate resource base for British higher education as a whole.

Harold Macmillan, drawing on his experience in WW I, once said that British soldiers make the finest troops on defense in the world. I was reminded of that remark in reviewing the past decades of British higher education from an American perspective. As British higher education has been transformed by successive governments of both major parties, British academics have not raised the large constitutional issues of charter and autonomy, or the more abstract issues of the distance of public policy from the realities of the institutions being reformed and managed. Rather, British academics and administrators have dug in, gotten on with the job, many trying to carry on under conditions of student-staff ratios of 18:1 or 20:1 in 2003 in the ways that they once did when those

---

<sup>10</sup> Trow, *op. cit.*, 1974, p. 17.

ratios were 10:1 in 1983.<sup>11</sup> That is especially true for the academics who came to university teaching before 1980. They have complained, rightly, that they needed more money; the White Paper promises them some modest gains, mostly from student fees. And no one expects the new limits of L3000 on tuition charges will be the last word on that. With other reforms in the conditions on student loans, I expect that Britain will gradually shift more of the costs of higher education to the user or consumer, a.k.a, student. That was predictable thirty years ago, when it was already clear that no country in the world is rich enough to support a system of mass higher education at the cost per student to the public purse of an elite system. A good deal of money can be and has been saved simply by cuts to the unit of resource. In recent British history, these cuts have been oddly and falsely referred to as "efficiency gains," a euphemism straight out of Orwell. That has gone pretty near as far as it can go. Extra money has to come from somewhere, and from the user over his/her lifetime is as good a place as any.<sup>12</sup>

But even as Britain solves this problem of finance, as in one way or another it will, it will be left with an unwieldy and dysfunctional regulatory system, serving as a state substitute for university autonomy. I have tried to sketch some of the unhappy and distorting effects of that substitution. The 2003 White Paper has not undone those effects.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>11</sup> These are average ratios, and include favored (or underenrolled) subjects like the sciences. They are also the ratios after the cuts under early years of the Thatcher government, My estimate was that at the beginning of that government student:ratios in British universities averaged 8:1.

<sup>12</sup> But an important question is whether tuition payments or repayments of loans go to central government for reallocation to the universities, or whether all or part of this money will go directly to the universities for their discretionary use. In the former case, additional funding for the universities strengthens central governmental power, rather than increasing institutional autonomy and flexibility.