

## **Managerialism and the new world order in HE**

I take the essence of managerialism to be the belief that the way to get the best out of an organization is to have a structure which gives managers the role of pilots in a cockpit: they are presented with real time information about the plane and the environment and have controls which determine the direction and behaviour of the plane and thus whether it gets to its destination safely and on time. I am prepared to grant that this is true of most organizations. However, I also take it that this is false of almost all academic activities, where you get the best results by getting some really good people together and leaving them to do what they want, how they want. That autonomy is the essence of academic freedom and its proven ability to produce really great results over several millennia is the reason we prize it.

Now it seems unavoidable that any organization run entirely on academic principles with no hint of managerial intervention will be very expensive and probably quite wasteful in some respects. That wouldn't matter if funds were unlimited or the funders content to see their money spent that way. But funds for universities are tight and the funders – including but not limited to the taxpayer – like value for money. Hence it is necessary that some aspects of universities are run in accordance with managerial principles, specifically those that affect financial performance (aka value for money). And that is no bad thing so long as academic autonomy is preserved for all other aspects.

However, as soon as we make financial performance sensitive to academic decisions, this boundary is blurred and the rationale for introducing managerial practices appears to apply to the previously sacred territory of the academic domain. Financial performance for most universities is sensitive to student recruitment and in the past student recruitment has been largely sensitive to the academic only at the highest level: it is the reputation of the institution or department which affects its recruitment and that reputation is based on academic quality which is best achieved by academic autonomy.

The NSS, and its dissemination through UniStats, changed this dramatically: it made student recruitment sensitive not to academic quality per se but to student opinions and – as many of us have discovered – often good academic practices are not appreciated by students (at least at the point they are asked, namely a few months before finishing their course). But if recruitment and hence financial performance is sensitive to the student opinions which are recorded in the NSS, then it seems that the rationale for managerialism applies to those things students have opinions about. And the opinions being sought seem very sensitive to course design and content, teaching methods, assessment methods and other aspects of the academic side of higher education. Those things have been traditionally the preserve of academic autonomy, on the assumption that the best education will be delivered if those who know most about the subject are left to their own devices. That assumption has been dropped in favour of the principle that we should ask the students what and how they would like us to teach, and managers now see it as their role to ensure we respond to those demand.

The Browne Report, with its explicit attempt to bring market forces to bear on universities' teaching activities, just amplifies this effect. Where there are markets, the

managerialist rationale applies to all activities those markets are sensitive to. Browne makes a much higher proportion of university income sensitive to the student market, especially in non-STEM subjects. And if student recruitment is in turn made even more sensitive to measures such as the NSS and the first destination data – as other parts of the report suggest it should be – then managerialism will encroach on all aspects of teaching in universities.

That this is the core message of the Brown Report was made clear by David Willetts in his speech to HEFCE on 21<sup>st</sup> October (my emphasis):

The central proposition in Browne is this – that the bulk of the teaching grant which is currently distributed to universities via HEFCE should be replaced by spending power placed directly in the hands of students, ... That is the big shift in the funding of higher education put forward by the Browne report ... It both delivers a big saving in public spending – reflected in yesterday's spending review – and reforms the financing system so that it is shaped by the preferences of students.

A colleague recently remarked that we are ‘in danger of not being academically serious’ with our students. I think this is exactly the right interpretation of the consequences of the Browne Report. It requires universities to manage the student experience, including the student experience of teaching, because if we leave it to academic autonomy to determine how students are taught, many will not appreciate it, will not enjoy the ‘experience’, and the market will punish us. Effectively, universities will become businesses selling ‘experiences’ to students and will have to be run like that.

What we really need is a proper evidence-based debate about which method produces better graduates: (1) leaving academics to teach what they want, how they want (academic autonomy), or (2) adjusting teaching methods and course content to meet student demand (managerialism). Only once we have worked out the answer to that question – and a few ‘horror story’ anecdotes do not count as evidence-based debate – can we decide what mechanism is best to fund teaching in universities. (It would seem to be a disaster to do things the other way around, but then politicians are not generally in favour of evidence-based decisions.)

I should add that there is no problem with thinking that ‘employability’ should be one factor which makes someone a better graduate, so long as we understand by that concept not just the ephemera of off-the-peg skills but the longer term data about career success, especially within a complex and changing environment. That is to say, we should think that the better graduate is not the one who has a job six months after graduation, but the one who is in a senior position 15 years later. Too many employers, and politicians who listen to them, concentrate on whether our graduates are ‘ready for work’ and not enough consider their overall career trajectory, which is just as strongly influenced by their education.

But a better graduate is not only one who is more employable, for it may be one who makes more of a contribution to society as a whole, through the arts, the media, politics or even by bringing the next generation of responsible citizens successfully through to adulthood.

Unfortunately but inevitably, no one will do the work to gather the evidence needed for this debate, and instead the line in the sand will be drawn between those in favour of academic autonomy and those in favour of managerialism, based entirely upon politics, prejudice and anecdote. It was ever thus.

Willetts ended his speech by saying:

‘Vince [Cable] and I never lose sight of the sheer inherent value of the intellectual activity that happens within our universities. Any structure and any government department is just there to serve this greater good. Our changes have to fit with and reinforce the core values of higher education, that motivate those who devote their lives to it.’

I do not doubt that he believes that; but by accepting the basic principle of the Browne Report, he will inevitably extend the range of managerialism even further into the design and delivery of the curriculum. Most who have to teach in universities think that will be a bad thing. What Willetts and Cable seem blind to is the need to show that this approach will improve the education students are getting and not just the ‘student experience’. People who devote their lives to universities do so because they want to educate the next generation, not because they want students to have a good experience at university.

Tom Stoneham, 21<sup>st</sup> October 2010