Introduction: universities and 'higher education'

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The university is the second oldest institution with a continuous history in the Western world, the first being the Roman Catholic Church. That much is generally known. Less generally known – except to those who fuss with it – is that the problem of defining 'university' has long preoccupied politicians, planners, reformers, academics, theologians, philosophers, historians, and litterateurs. They have often found the task impossible. So much has this been the case, especially since the eighteenth century, that universities are now subsumed under a broader if less romantic category called 'higher education'. It is less romantic because 'higher education' implies levels of bureaucratic and technocratic organisation and co-ordination that the word 'university' never does.

So this book is also about the tension between universities and 'higher education', between a special sort of cultural inheritance with idealistic, 'spiritual', and 'high-minded' aspirations derived from important philosophical and theological traditions, and a different but no less important set of beliefs which have constantly pushed universities towards a broader and more open set of social or service obligations. Universities have both resisted and accepted, often simultaneously, the broader role. In the process they have redefined their mission and purpose or returned to older conceptions of their 'essence'. The result is a history filled with irony and ambiguity, of a struggle between simplicity and complexity, of outrage and accommodation, of ideals lost and regained; and to understand that history, we are required to narrate how universities have dealt with specific kinds or categories of education – liberal education, the professions, science, technology, research, vocationalism.

The topic of universities and higher education involves every aspect of human activity. It is the study of civilisation itself and requires a multi-disciplinary approach. The contributors represent the academic disciplines of history, the history of science, sociology, and political science. Readers will recognise approaches and conceptions which derive from a wide range of humanistic and social scientific inquiries. They will similarly note a merging of analytical methods from the history of thought, the sociology

of science and knowledge, and the social and political study of institutions as these are pursued in their several variations in Britain, the United States, and Continental countries.

Probably it is misleading to invoke the magical (and trendy) academic phrase 'multi-disciplinary'. The best scholarship and writing have always spanned the boundaries of disciplines. Thucydides was a tragedian as well as an historian. The *summas* of the medieval philosophers and theologians comprehended all known forms of reasoning. Politics and law have often been studied together, or in conjunction with economics, history, and especially philosophy. Biographers travel freely into academic territories with or without visas. Literary criticism today is permeated by conceptions deriving from psychology, philosophy, linguistics, and anthropology. Who can determine where sociology stops and anthropology begins?

The Battle of the Books, whether as satirised by Aristophanes, engaged in by the medieval schools of Paris and Orleans, or reduced to absurdity by the savage wit of Jonathan Swift (or present-day attacks on the 'canon'), always leaves the impression that devotion to one's academic interests and riding one's intellectual hobby-horse invariably lead to exclusion and intolerance. Such is only partly the case. Academic boundaries do indeed exist. They are erected for a purpose, but that purpose is not always the same. If boundaries exist to exclude, they also exist to define, concentrate, and 'discipline' the intelligence. Encyclopedism may be a marvelous aim, but it is unattainable by most minds and increasingly unattainable in our own day. If boundaries represent intellectual intolerance, they also help establish the methods for knowing and understanding, and as such become 'professional' and 'legitimate'. Rolf Torstendahl explains how this happened in the case of European engineers.

Sometimes boundaries exist for reasons that are neither intellectual nor professional. They are convenient structural arrangements or a form of bureaucratic rationalisation, permitting accountability and visibility in large-scale structures. The general subject is of obvious interest to the contributors to this volume. With different examples and categories of explanation, they discuss how academic boundaries are created, how they are sanctioned by tradition, reinforced institutionally, serve specific uses, or become a 'problem' in the sociology of knowledge. But boundaries also bend or dissolve, or, paradoxically, create an urge in the disciplined mind to explore other territories and become acquainted with other tribes. Thus, present-day specialists are cognitively, and through the process of 'complexity' explained by Burton Clark, invited to invade foreign lands.[1]

[1] Tony Becher discusses the tendency for sub-fields and sub-disciplines to transcend single institution barriers and even national boundaries, thus diffusing institutional and collegial

As an academic field of study, 'higher education' encompasses battalions of topics and problems for analysis. Elite formation; the professions both liberal and new; the State; labour markets; science policy and research; the organisation, direction and control of schools, institutes, colleges and universities; the academic profession; culture high and low; definitions of creativity and competence; the machinery of selection and the measurement and reward of merit; and the study of occupations: increasingly, these are an indissoluble part of 'higher education'. As a form of inquiry, higher education naturally includes all theories, hypotheses and conceptions, methods of arranging data and sifting through evidence that provide the researcher with distinctions, conclusions, patternings, and meanings. In sum, the study of higher education is no less than the study of human activity itself, as it is ordered and provides for socialisation, culture, skills, competencies, and creativity at those shifting levels of educational demarcation revealed by history.

Yet if good scholarship has always been distinguished by flexibility and openness, the special circumstances of our own age provide particularly impressive opportunities for the cross-fertilisation of academic specialties, arguably greater than in the days of the scholar gypsies of medieval and humanistic learning or when the Western world was tied together by Latin. (The acidic depiction of a peripatetic professoriate in David Lodge's comic novel of the 1980s, *Small World*, has made the reasons embarrassingly familiar.) The size of the international community of scholars, the close ties in some countries between government and the universities, the conjunction of interests of think-tanks, philanthropic societies, civil servants, knowledge-based industries, institutions like the World Bank in Washington and the higher education community, combined with the revolution in communications and transportation, have greatly enlarged the possibilities for frequent collaboration and interchange. Many traditions of thought are today readily accessible – even if not, given the volume of ideas and human limitations, so readily assimilable!

Just how fruitful international collaboration can be is indicated by the broad and intricate definition of 'higher education' employed in this volume. 'Higher education' (in the English language) is very likely a neologism of the last century. It was, and remains, imprecise. Nations do not define 'higher' in the same way, just as they do not define 'lower' education in the same way. Academic work deemed appropriate for a school in one country is inappropriate in another, and courses of study pursued at college or university in one nation are located in an 'upper

loyalties, in *Academic Tribes and Territories: Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines* (Milton Keynes, 1989).

secondary' or 'post-compulsory sector' in another. These are not merely simple contrasts. They indicate the existence of whole categories of potentially fruitful analysis, ranging from the content of academic subjects and their level, the age of students and conceptions of maturity and suitable conduct, and the relation of advanced to elementary work within specific systems of organisation.

But in fact the dividing line between various levels or types of educational structures was not truly fixed – that is to say, standardised or bureaucratised – in many countries until late in the last century, or early in this one. That is yet another reason why the definition of a 'university' is so vexed. Admissions policies to universities were often informal or irregular. A frequent complaint of Etonians or Wykehamists at Oxford and Cambridge in the early decades of the nineteenth century was that their undergraduate studies resembled those undertaken at boarding school (or were not nearly so demanding). Later in the century the new English civic universities often functioned as feeder schools for Oxford and Cambridge, much as the University of London and the Scottish universities had in earlier decades. 'Liberal education', the broadest definition of education that the western world possesses, embracing both 'general' as well as 'moral' education, took place in schools and academies as well as in colleges and universities. Indeed, it also took place outside those institutions. Michael Burrage, in his discussion of professions, makes the startling point that in the sense of character shaping or moral education, many forms of practitioner-based education have been more 'liberal' historically than school or university-based experiences. Technical education as well as professional education, depending upon time and country, was based on apprenticeship as well as on formal teaching. It could and did take place in a great variety of settings, differing radically in aims, methods, and support. Torstendahl makes these points in a discussion that is wide-ranging in chronology, method, and topic. As the essays indicate, the numerous forms of education have often been rivals for public or market attention, resources, and prestige, presenting societies with 'problems' appearing to require resolution. But as to 'who' exactly resolved (or should resolve) those problems – States, civil services, local authorities, professions, privileged elites, the general public, the invisible hand of the market – that is, directly or implicitly, the subject of nearly every essay in the book.

As used today, 'higher education' implies official or formally recognised partitions, systems, and financial controls, setting certain institutions apart from others. The phrase also suggests bureaucratic direction, partial, limited, or permissive, and conscious national attention to institutional differences. In most of the countries discussed in this volume, 'higher

education' has in recent decades been elevated to the level of a ministerial or Cabinet post, although in quite a few instances ministerial coordination of higher education or policy-making remains quite loose or ambiguous. In Germany, the *länder* take more vigorous responsibility than does the capital. In the United States, 'higher education' as such is virtually unrepresented in Washington's massive civil service, the Department of Education being principally if not exclusively concerned with schooling. Several essays, notably those of Roger Geiger, Burton Clark, and Martin Trow, discuss the consequences for policy and practice of a higher education sector driven from 'below', that is to say, responsive (but not *absolutely* responsive) in a variety of ways to forces representing 'public opinion', market demand, and consumer or price discipline.

As we write, the question of markets in higher education is receiving more global attention than ever before, and the American 'model' or more properly 'models' of higher education are consequently of special international interest. Once the models were English or Scottish, in the last century more conspicuously German, and here and there, as Torstendahl explains, French. The disenchantment with State planning, 'command economies', and large-scale bureaucracy evident from policy discussions of the 1980s and 1990s, the unification of the Germanies, and the balkanising of former Soviet regimes have predictably led to a search for new and different ways of structuring and financing higher education to achieve the three goals of economic development, social mobility, and 'quality'.

The tendency in today's Europe is for observers and commentators to see the State as the pinnacle of institutional organisation, a body beyond which almost no appeal is possible. In the United States this view is also expressed or assumed, but American history reveals yet another and diametrical conception of the State, one that makes government subservient to and responsive to 'society' or public opinion. In this conception the State leads less and follows more.

Once the rhetoric of public argument is set aside, we can see that market behaviour and State or government activity are not always so easily contrasted. The boundaries between the two have not been fixed historically, just as the boundaries between 'private' and 'public' behaviour have not been rigid and firm. These dividing lines have fluctuated. Furthermore, the State is itself a market, operating within a very large and complicated framework of moral and political pressures and arrangements. The same is certainly true of those apparently unregulated 'markets' appearing in classical economics. In general, therefore, it would be an error to view State action as always antithetical to market forces. In 'Liberal Britain' of the nineteenth century, or present-day America, or in

any nation for that matter, governments choose the roles they will play, those roles also affected by national patterns of decision-making. Governments can decide whether to strengthen consumer demand, whether to constrain the market in particular ways, or whether to create partnerships between private and public sectors. All these policies are in fact presently in existence, and, indeed, have long been in existence, although not everywhere at the same time nor used in the same way nor likely to produce the same result. A proper recognition of these facts should lead policy-makers and planners away from simple recommendations and panaceas.

Historically, the formation of a higher education public policy has been the result of the interaction between markets, institutions, professional associations, local and national governments, and what ancient historians recognised as chance, fortune or fate, what we today less metaphysically and more technically call 'contingencies'. It is also the result of institutional rivalries. In any case, the essays show how many different and unique responses a set of higher education institutions can make to either government or the market, and that no simplification of the process of inter-institutional interaction is either possible or useful. No two national States are ever wholly alike, although from time to time they may adopt policies or display features that appear similar. Likewise, no two national markets are ever alike. Indeed, each nation contains many markets, and these operate under many degrees of restriction, constraint, competition, or flexibility.

Comparison is the only satisfactory means of determining the relative weight of State policies or of markets, of the degree of 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' innovation, the action of 'autonomous' professions, or combinations of such initiatives, as is so often the case. Comparison is undoubtedly of prime concern to the authors and editors. Indeed, comparison and the virtues of comparison are everywhere evident in the essays. They are evident, for example, in the pairings which discuss two quite distinct if somewhat overlapping traditions of liberal education, those taking hold in countries influenced by Italian humanist values and in those adapting German models of general education. Similarly, other pairings offer comparisons of the history and support for research in very different countries such as Sweden and the United States, or the development at both institutional and ideological levels of professional education in England, the United States, France, Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland.

The Comparative Method (as it was once called and celebrated in a bygone era, especially by philologists, proto-anthropologists, and legal scholars) is certainly not new, nor could we claim for it the virtues and the advantages of our nineteenth-century academic forebears, who were

certain they had discovered (as 'laws' of Nature are discovered) a *Method*, a unique intellectual tool laying bare the evolution of language and society. Today there are many means of comparison. They are all in evidence in these essays. They are used, as Trow notes in his contribution, to provide a means for determining just what different institutional arrangements – or the absence of features present in other systems – imply in different national contexts. Asking 'why' a particular development did not occur in one country may be 'whiggish' since the question implies it should have (the danger is pointed out in several essays); but merely posing the question does focus attention on comparison, and this in turn leads us toward new questions, new puzzles, new sequences, and perhaps new data.

As is sometimes observed, comparison brings out contrasts as well as similarities, but it brings them out in relation to a problem, an event, a development, a change of direction, a stopping point for reflection. Very likely, at least in relation to higher education, the tendency at present is to emphasise similarities or at least convergence. The formation of the European Community and the startling changes occurring in Central and Eastern Europe provide an incentive and reason to do so, but changes in the world economy also appear to promote emulation or convergence. International interdependence, linked economies, 'global villages', satellite communications, multi-national corporations, and the disappearance of wholly 'national' manufactured products encourage thinking along lines of unity and similarity. Comparative analysis provides us with rather a finer analytical means for discerning whether recent changes are truly convergent, merely superficial, or simply incomplete combustion. Comparison provides an outside referent for assessment, an external way of defining the volume, the functioning, the purpose, and the success of particular narrative elements in the formation and growth of a nation's institutions. While several of the contributors to this volume are not shy, indirectly suggesting some of the policy consequencies implied by their conclusions, our overall task is certainly not to propose but to illuminate and understand the complex processes by which higher education institutions have been created.

Comparative analysis brings out what may be called the second general unifying theme of this volume, already named in passing, that is, 'complexity'. Clark observes that complexity is integral to modern societies and their economies. In our own day, he says, it is leading to the *de facto* breakup of large national higher education structures into a series of 'small worlds' linked by disciplines, the disciplines themselves connected to one another through the process of knowledge expansion and knowledge enhancement.

This is one important view of how specialist inquiry produces a coherent

and interdependent cognitive universe. There are others. But our purpose here is not to dogmatise about specialism and universalism but to stress the value of an analytical approach to the study of universities that sees complexity as a fundamental part of the evolution and differentiation of educational institutions. In other words, we are not using the word 'evolution' to depict the unfolding of an all-encompassing rationality in history, nor by referring to 'differentiation' do we mean a straightforward functionalism, as if universities automatically adapt to changing circumstances. It is of course true that modern historians are not exactly united on the question of whether history's 'lessons' are best conveyed through what John Burrow once called the 'cross-section' approach or through a more overarching, more generalized method featuring purposeful accommodation. For the latter, a history without cycles and repetitions has always appeared to be amoral, relativistic, and useless. The historicist[2] assumption that the past is unique therefore disturbs scholars who fear that relativism must inevitably result in a descent into nihilism and anarchy. But a history that acknowledges the special character of past experience can still be 'philosophy teaching by example' as that scamp, Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke once maintained, attributing the notion to Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Complexity simply forces us to think more clearly about the meaning and uses of our inheritances.

By and large, therefore, the contributors to this volume agree with Trow that the history of higher education is in large measure a record of 'unique traditions', of inverse and unexplained relations and correlations. As such, it is difficult to reduce that history to relatively simple analytic categories.[3] To be sure, a complex world is in some respects semi-anarchic. That needs to be acknowledged in deference to the anti-historicists. It is untidy. It consists of many actors and of competition for control or influence. But it is the way much history works.

No better instance of this can be cited than Aant Elzinga's detailed study of the unexpected changes in the structure and management of Swedish higher education since 1945. Some of these changes, it is true, were part of the on-going statist and centralising tendencies situated in the third 'great transformation' of higher education described by Wittrock. Sweden's experience very nearly encapsulates the alterations of thought and policy evident in post-war Europe. But the intensity of the changes, and their comprehensiveness, are special. From 1945 to the present, no country in Europe has undergone so many sudden changes in the values and structure

[2] Using the word in its relative or non-Popperian definition.
[3] E.g., 'reproduction', the notion that an understanding of the relationship between institutions and society rests primarily on how institutions 'reproduce' the leading features of society. The view here adopted is much broader and wider ranging.

of its higher education system as has Sweden. Perhaps that is why Swedish scholars have been so concerned with thinking about the 'true' or 'proper' mission of a university. The heralded, socially and politically radical Swedish reorganisation of 1968 known far and wide as 'U68' from the acronym of the government commission preparing the reform is itself now undergoing drastic modification. The policy began, says the famous psychologist Torsten Husén, as an effort of simplification in a world that was by contrast proceeding towards complexity.[4] Elzinga's account is an arresting story of compressed history. Developments which in countries such as the United States took the better part of a century to accomplish have been hurried along by both market forces and State interest. The resulting hurly-burly of events, programmes, and ideologies is bewildering precisely because it is rapid, uncertain, and only intermittently pragmatic.

In a world of complexity, boundaries are constructed only to be torn down. Invisible barriers arise and disappear, as do formal barriers. In countries where a definition of a university has been officially and legally 'protected', as in the 'binary' systems separating 'universities' from 'polytechnics' in Australia or Britain, massive changes under way are removing the distinctions. But in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Sweden high quality 'technical universities' have long been in existence, and the question of what constitutes a 'university' or 'higher education' assumes a different form. In the giddy circumstances of the present, historical definitions of a 'university' become meaningless or helpless as the world rushes to meet the extraordinary demand for technological, professional, and research competencies by providing educational alternatives that create highly interdependent educational sectors and partnerships. Systems and institutions emulate one another, or search for their own special niche in highly diversified markets, national but also regional and international. Adult, continuing education divisions, and 'open universities' embark on schemes for mass and universal education. Single-purpose institutions acquire multiple functions and experience the formidable, indeed insoluble difficulties of reconciling opposite missions and values. Research universities form liaisons and alliances with polytechnics and industry according to national conceptions of conflict of interest. They undertake contract work, including contracts for short-cycle courses.

Buried in this dizzying activity, no longer easy to discern or explain, are hallowed or at least hoary cultural ideas like *Bildung*, *Bildning*, *Wissenschaft*, 'humanism', and 'liberal education' – ideas, however, that as our authors explain, were filled with ambiguity from the outset and never possessed the clarity of direction or purpose that their present-day

[4] A remark arising in conversation with the editors.

advocates claim for them. Gone – one is tempted to say forever – is that secure belief in a single, animating, essentialist 'idea' of a University as represented in different ways by the idealist philosophical traditions of Romantic England and Germany, although its enchantments undoubtedly remain,[5] as Wittrock poignantly but forcefully recalls in his highly-conceptualised discussion of the three great transformations in the history of the university.

The pace of recent change, as well as the remarkable expansion of what in Europe has been regarded as NUS or the 'non-university sector'[6] is both exhilarating and worrisome. It is exhilarating in opening up greater opportunities for social and occupational mobility, in questioning received wisdom, and in challenging long-standing systemic rigidities and bottle-necks. Ideological preconceptions encounter the vigour of competition and human ingenuity. Recent changes also appear to be meeting democratic and egalitarian concerns, although complexity warns us that such 'simple' consequences are not likely to emerge.

It is, however, worrisome – depending upon one's point of view – because established and proven values are threatened, policy changes (as in U68) are hurried through in a rush of enthusiasm, or transitions from one policy to another are given short shrift (how, in fact – the topic sometimes arises when American models are discussed – can a 'top-down' system suddenly become 'bottom-up' in the absence of such experience?). Also, words change their meanings. 'Elite', for example, which once had a neutral meaning, has now become synonymous with economic and social privilege. Ideological attacks on 'elitism', therefore, leave in doubt how the high talent essential to the success of modern societies is to be recruited and trained. Universities are restructured or browbeaten so that they will be more 'accountable' or socially 'responsive', and politicians rush to associate themselves with the latest plans and schemes. At the same time, however, they fully expect that traditional norms of scholarly and educational excellence will be unaffected. This is surely unrealistic.

In the following essays we believe that readers will find many examples of the unexpected. It is almost an axiom of some kinds of historical work that the inquirer should be continually surprised, that the exit of a theme may be quite opposite from its entrance, that the expected patterning takes a different form, or that, through comparison, a familiar generalisation acquires an unusual meaning. We hope that our readers will be surprised by the many faces of *Bildung*, as discussed by Torstendahl and Wittrock

[5] See Sheldon Rothblatt, 'The Idea of the Idea of a University and its Antithesis', in *Conversazione* (La Trobe University, Bundoora, Australia, 1989).

[6] See the recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Alternatives to Universities* (Paris, 1991), 20.