

## AFTERWORD

### Managing higher education and the MBA programme

What is it to teach higher education management? Over the years, the course team responsible for the MBA in higher education management at the Institute of Education have returned to this question when ideas for new modules have come forward, when existing material has been reviewed, when student evaluations have been studied or simply when someone has asked, 'What are we really trying to do here?'

The claim of higher education studies as a distinct interdisciplinary field can, I think, be sustained without difficulty: it draws on most of the social science disciplines, plus a few others such as history and cultural theory, and attempts to integrate them in order better to understand both the organisational aspects of higher education and its (apparently, ever-widening) ramifications in matters including, to take a random sample, economic development, social mobility, international relations and regional planning. (The distinction between the study of higher education in this relatively modern and limited sense, and the actual work of universities and colleges, is one that is not always obvious to the wider world.)

The teaching of higher education *management*, though, raises additional difficulties. As a recent colleague on the MBA team, David Watson (2009a), has written,

The argument about whether 'management' is an art or a science – whether it is better incubated in a studio/conservatoire or a lecture room/laboratory – and whether it can be formally taught at all has long been explored, and (to their satisfaction at least) resolved by the business schools.

But, as Watson goes on to note, the higher education enterprise, both in its mode of production and in its organisation, is (literally) unique. I was quoted by Watson as noting that, while some aspects of higher education management had much in common with the management of other large-scale public sector activities (particularly the health service and local government),

Other aspects are pretty much unique [to higher education]: things to do with students, research, finance, third stream and marketing for example....The university also raises management issues around its unique role as a producer of public goods [by teaching and research] – and this applies just as much to private institutions as to publicly funded ones. It is this position, straddling the public/private divide, that creates many of the tensions that [university] management has to deal with.

The study of management, whatever the organisational context that is the focus of interest, involves both a theoretical and an operational dimension. Perhaps 'theoretical' is too grand a term for most of what is found in management texts – 'conceptual' may be safer. In higher education, we have to start with conceptualisations of the university itself: as one of our team members, Ronald Barnett, has pointed out in a series of books (e.g. Barnett 2000),

the purposes of the university are contested and unstable over time. While the typical structure of business corporations may change across the decades, their purposes remain constant and are widely understood (even if not always accepted). But even if agreement could be reached on the purposes of the university overall, its management raises difficulties which, while not absolutely distinctive, are certainly unusual. Some of these difficulties arise from the attachment of individual academics to the 'invisible college' of their discipline which may take priority over loyalty to the actual college which employs them. The professionally disputatious nature of academic life is another factor, allied to the law of academic certainty, which holds that an academic's certainty on any given topic is directly proportional to the topic's distance from the academic's actual area of expertise (Watson 2009b). But additionally, it seems to me, following (Birnbbaum 1988), many of the management challenges in higher education arise from the problem of uncommensurability. By this I mean that there is no sensible basis for claiming that, *as a matter of principle*, the study of physics, say, should take priority over that of history, in the way that most organisations, public or private, are able to assign priority to one set of activities over another, on the grounds that they will make a greater contribution to the organisation's ultimate objectives (Temple 2008).

The aim in teaching higher education management should be, I think, to integrate these and other conceptual aspects of higher education with understandings of operational matters – so that, for example, the study of quality in higher education brings together an examination of how the Quality Assurance Agency carries out its daily work; how the idea of quality when applied to higher education raises a particular set of operational difficulties; and broader philosophical approaches to the idea of quality in general. This integration of what we might think of as micro, meso and macro levels of analysis is what we ask our students to do in their written assignments – to think critically about their own professional experiences and locate these in the literature and the discussions that take place during teaching sessions. It is this integration of the professional and the conceptual that marks out the MBA programme from other kinds of master's (or, indeed, doctoral) programmes in higher education, where participants may not necessarily have managerial experience on which to draw. (There are obvious parallels with the integration of conceptual and practice elements in the training of teachers or doctors, for example; it is one important aspect of most definitions of professionalism.)

The Institute of Education's MBA programme was founded by Michael Shattock and Gareth Williams in 2002, and was at the time, if not unique in Europe, then certainly highly unusual. Now, the MODERN European Platform on Higher Education Modernisation, an EU-funded project, the establishment of which was supported by the Institute, lists 23 management-related master's programmes, taught by institutions in Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Serbia, Spain and the UK (where five programmes are listed). Not all these programmes approach the idea of management in higher education in the way I have set out here, but nevertheless there is a substantial commonality in the curricula as they are outlined. Our own MBA programme, while strongly focused on the case of the UK, has over the years recruited students from many other European countries, as well as from further afield, because, we are told, of an interest in seeing how the UK model works in detail. All this seems to suggest that the need for the study and teaching of higher education management has become accepted across Europe – even in countries with historically state-oriented systems, where the scope for management initiative at institutional level would, until quite recently, have been a questionable proposition. This is perhaps another example of the convergence of national European higher education policies around a set of propositions about how higher education can make a larger contribution to Euro-

pean prosperity and social cohesion, strongly supported by European Commission policies (most recently, European Commission 2011).

In his introduction to this issue, Michael Shattock has outlined the objectives set for the MBA at the outset. These still guide us today. What he also emphasises is the significance of the participants' contributions in keeping the programme fresh and relevant. And, as we say to new entrants, the programme will be a challenge – but we also hope it will be some fun.

## References

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