

EDITORIAL

Burton R. Clark and his contribution to the study of higher education

The death of Burton Clark in late 2009 robbed the higher education studies community of arguably its leading and most influential thinker and certainly its most active researcher and author of distinguished monographs. He was one of a generation of American scholars of higher education – Bob Berdahl, Clark Kerr, David Riesman, Sheldon Rothblatt, Edward Shils, Martin Trow – who both created a new field of study and were active in stimulating and engaging with scholarly work in the field internationally. Of all these, however, Clark, through his masterpiece *The Higher Education System* (1983a) and through the *Encyclopedia of Higher Education* (1992) (jointly edited with Guy Neave) had the most international reach and, through a series of books, the most impact in injecting new research themes into the field. A great deal of academic work in higher education studies is near market and can be, therefore, ephemeral. Just as higher education policy-makers seem to be unaware of lessons from the past so scholars have a tendency to ignore the extent to which their field of study is dependent on contributions from their predecessors. And it was with this in mind that the Centre for Higher Education Studies at the Institute decided to mark Burton Clark's death by a retrospective account of his published contributions to the study of higher education accompanied by some assessment, bearing in mind that his publications extended over 50 years, of their relevance to the study and practice of higher education today. We hope that this collection of essays, each concentrated on a particular work or works, will serve as a reminder of one scholar's contribution to the field, as an inspiration to younger scholars perhaps entering the field for the first time and as a memorial to the scholar himself.

The papers on which these essays are based were originally delivered at a long half day seminar and inevitably the constraints of time prevented due weight being given to some other important works most notably: *The Distinctive College* (1970), *Academic Power in Italy* (1977) and two which can be bracketed together, *The Research Foundations of Graduate Education* (1993) and *Places of Inquiry* (1995) which explore the linkages between research and graduate study. This set of essays cannot, therefore be deemed to be comprehensive in their account of Clark's oeuvre. Neave refers to the social background of *Academic Power in Italy* and Parry to *The Distinctive College* in his discussion of *The Open Door College* but there is no reference to the last two except in this introduction; some other works have not been referred to at all. The essays appear in the order in which the books they are reviewing were published. The exception to the format is the contribution by Guy Neave, Clark's collaborator on the *Encyclopedia* and a long standing friend, who we invited to open the seminar with a strictly personal account of Clark the man and his ideas. Besides giving a biographical flavour of an extraordinary scholar Neave is able to give an account of his intellectual development and the informal ways in which his scholarly influence was diffused outside the United States.

What is particularly remarkable about Clark was the ease with which his research transcended national boundaries and cultures. As a sociologist of organisations he was able to

move seemingly effortlessly from *The Distinctive College*, a study of three US liberal arts colleges (Antioch, Read and Swarthmore) emphasising in each case their highly individual mission (itself a big jump from *The Open Door College*) to a very ambitious study published six years later of a heavily balkanised Italian university system where his analysis of its different organisational levels drew on a deep knowledge of their historical, cultural and bureaucratic origins. We must ignore, he says, easy explanations based on national character, etc.:

A disciplined approach that begins inside the organised setting of a main social activity is particularly needed in Italy, a country so stereotyped from afar and by its own writers... Rather we need to seek the causes of behaviour in the immediate structure that determines whose interests are there expressed and how. Then we can move outward to successively larger structures of causation. Thus the injunction in the explanation of academic power is always to begin with the academic structure itself and then to the next larger framework, the administrative structure of government. (3)

This study of academic oligarchy undoubtedly gave us one corner of the Clark triangle of coordination (see Brennan), and the last chapter of the book laid the foundations of the later *Higher Education System*.

Thus we can see how the study of the two year college described in Parry's essay on *The Open Door* led on to the highly individualistic liberal arts college (*The Distinctive College*), to the organisational ambiguities of the Italian university system (*Academic Power in Italy*), to the global analysis in *The Higher Education System* described in John Brennan's essay. Rather similarly we can see how *The Research Foundations of Graduate Education* (1993) and *Places of Inquiry* (1995) can be said to form the culmination of a corpus of work comprising *Perspectives in Higher Education* (1984), discussed by Gareth Williams, and *The Academic Life* (1987), reviewed by William Locke all of which represent a working through of the internal components of the organisational life of university institutions.

As with *Perspectives in Higher Education* Clark drew on a group of international scholars in *The Research Foundations of Graduate Education* to provide a cross national analysis and employed the same integrative technique of inviting contributors to a week long seminar where first draft papers were discussed to be refined later and then complemented by introductory and concluding chapters by Clark himself. Quite apart from the efficacy of this approach for the study of higher education from a comparative perspective, by bringing together collaborating scholars from various countries these much more intensive encounters than would have been enjoyed at the normal academic conference contributed significantly to the development of higher education as a coherent area of study.

For Clark, graduate education and the way it interrelated with research both defined the ideal university concept and provided the historic research-teaching-study nexus which he believed could no longer be sustained across the board in conditions of mass higher education. In *Places of Inquiry* he saw two primary drivers within institutions for a possible fragmentation of this nexus, research drift and teaching drift. Where it remained integrated, however, was in the graduate school. Foreshadowing policy initiatives in the UK and increasingly elsewhere he argued that the American research university constituted the leading case internationally where differentiation between research led and teaching led (to use UK jargon) institutions had taken place and where the principle of a unity of research and teaching was thus preserved. Such differentiation was intensified by institutional competition, and the 'reputation market' became closely intertwined with the labour market for academics and with the academic consumer market for students. Competition drove the system:

A competitive dynamic in the research university sector of a national system sets in motion an activation effect. Institutions cannot rest on fixed guaranteed allocations; they specifically cannot count on attracting and retaining highly qualified academic staff without close attention to their

desires. Faculty avoid or drift away from institutions that cannot offer favourable conditions. Institutions that nod off for a decade or two fall behind; it pays to pay attention. Institutions are activated by the competitive struggle to build the conditions of best science and best scholarship. (216–7)

Such universities placed the academic department at the heart of their organisation not only as centres of research expertise but as ‘carrying vehicles’ for the transmission of tacit knowledge about disciplines for training doctoral and masters students. In *The Research Foundations of Graduate Education* Clark quoted extensively a statement from a Nobel Laureate from UCLA describing what Clark saw as the ideal of advanced education in a research group of post docs and graduate students working closely together around half of whom ultimately went on to professorships or senior posts in government or industrial research labs. The research–teaching–study nexus therefore ‘becomes the basis for differentiation of higher education among types of institutions and across degree levels. As such it is the prime ingredient in the ranking of institutions and the hierarchy that results’ (239). Put in such blunt terms this message may not have been, nor may be now, attractive to all his readers, particularly those in the UK who resent the Research Assessment Exercise, the moves to concentrate doctoral study and the effects of the various national and international ranking systems but it would be hard to deny that it constitutes now one of the dominant underlying strategies within most advanced higher education systems.

Places of Inquiry builds on *Perspectives in Higher Education* and *The Academic Life* and grows naturally out of the work reflected in *The Research Foundations of Graduate Education*. It could be said that it represented the end point of a line of thinking which was closely related, while remaining comparativist in approach, to the strengths of the US higher education system. It was a bold move therefore to embark on a new set of research ideas, based on European systems, which he was to tackle in *Creating Entrepreneurial Universities* (1998). Since this is discussed in more detail in a later essay it is sufficient here to remark on the intellectual vitality of a scholar in his seventies willing and able to address a new research agenda in a new set of countries, undertaking the arduous fieldwork himself without research assistance.

Back in 1982 I was discussing with Bob Berdahl who to invite to contribute a paper on system-wide governance of higher education to the Leverhulme Study Seminar on The Structure and Governance of Higher Education and he referred to Clark as a ‘deep thinker’. It is, I think, an apt description: he consistently addressed major themes which shaped our thinking about the fundamental characteristics of higher education’s functions and organisation and his ideas grew out of extensive research which he himself always led. Clark wrote a distinguished paper for the Seminar which previewed ideas to be published later in the year in *The Higher Education System* (Clark 1983b). Not satisfied with contributing articles to journals and chapters to books (*On Higher Education: Selected Writings, 1956–2006*, his final published work, is a selection of his essays elegantly brought together and presented by Adele Clark and Patricia Gumpert, and reviewed in this volume by Peter Scott), Clark was a superb presenter of these themes in book form. His scholarship was pursued in the classic tradition of research followed by a substantial monograph. His books, moreover, are accessible, jargon free and peppered with the use of idiomatic phrases which enliven the text; his prose style is such that he is always a pleasure to read. Most scholars in the field of higher education produce at most only a few books and a profusion of articles and book chapters often concentrated on fairly contemporary issues. In this collection of essays we refer to no less than 13 books (and our list is not comprehensive), all of them considerable works of research and deep scholarship. Clark’s memorial is not just, as Neave describes, the ‘invisible college’ he built up but a majestic series of volumes which will shape indelibly the study of higher education for many years to come. Clark was a thinker, a researcher and a writer: taken together the breadth and depth of

his writing provides a unique contribution to the founding of the field of higher education studies. In a very real sense he was and will remain, a master of the field.

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