

BOOK REVIEWS

Making policy in British higher education 1945–2011, by Michael Shattock, Maidenhead, McGraw-Hill/Open University Press, 2012, 280 pp., £37.99 (paperback), ISBN 13: 978-0-335241866, ISBN 10: 0-33-5241867, eISBN: 978-0-335241873

Michael Shattock has seen policy-making from many perspectives – as a senior university administrator, a well-connected national figure, the troubleshooter of choice in high-profile governance problems and professor of higher education management. That rare combination of senior experience with scholarly research has informed his analyses of management and policy, which culminate in this magisterial but personal narrative of British higher education policy over almost 70 years. What really matters in making higher education policy? Shattock says chronological accounts suffer because different phases are not necessarily distinct; instead he chooses five key themes through which to interpret the period: system structure, finance, research, accountability and institutional management.

The book is a history of the substance and the people in the policy-making process rather than a highly theorised account of policy process. The brief opening chapter ‘Higher education and the policy process’ pays its academic dues and prepares us for Shattock’s pragmatic appreciation of how things happen: ‘The development of higher education, therefore, fits Lindblom’s definition of “disjointed incrementalism” ... far more closely than any rationalist planning perspective’ (3).

The story of the changing structure of the system takes up more than a third of the book. The intimacy of personal interconnections and influence in the small elite system emerging from the Second World War had been nurtured by the Treasury through its oversight of the University Grants Committee since 1919. We see how this was unpicked through waves of policy in technical and technological education, teacher training, expansion through new universities in the 1960s, through the polytechnics and the binary policy of the 1970s and 1980s, to the unified structure created by the 1992 Higher Education Act. Higher education became progressively less special as it expanded, and as it became a much more significant drain on the public purse. From being a Treasury-protected favourite it became, after much high-flown huffing and puffing, part of education’s ‘seamless robe’ in the Department of Education and Science. The concern then was that university policy would become subservient to the needs of schools. Now higher education yearns to be reunited with education and science, to turn back the growing economic instrumentalism of policy subordinating higher education to business. The unwinding of the DES, to transfer HE first to the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills and then to the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, showed the ‘fragility of the seamless robe argument’ (102).

Shattock persuasively suggests that the progressive elimination of ‘buffer’ intermediary structures, such as the University Grants Committee and the local authorities which had created and maintained the polytechnics, was not some cunning plan. Rather, Government departments ‘stumbled towards that solution in a series of often faltering steps, each step being the product of spasmodic pressures’ (68). From a post-war hands-off approach which now seems almost unthinkable, these stumbling steps created a higher education system which is now routinely subject to (attempted) central steering and control.

Many of the most significant changes were finance-driven, because, as Shattock argues, the expansion of HE and student numbers always outstripped the expansion of the national economy: '... the underlying policy context has always been the availability of resources to finance the system' (102). The story of Chapter 2 is rerun in Chapter 3, structured around four financial crises: the 1962 rejection of universities' quinquennial estimates; the 1973–74 oil crisis; the 1981 cuts in public spending; and the fall in the 'unit of resource' (funding per full-time equivalent student) which led to the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals' 'top up fees' campaign in 1996–97. 'Each of these acted as a significant spur to policy and in each case it is possible to argue that they generated a turning point when the policy framework was decisively altered' (117). Notably, most of these decisive alterations never reached Cabinet. The binary policy with its creation of the polytechnics was a Ministerial decision (Crosland) strongly driven by an assertive civil servant (Weaver). Even its eventual ending in 1992 with university title for the polytechnics only got as far as a 'rubberstamping' Cabinet Committee.

The inexorable spread of central control, with landmark changes such as the introduction of the Public Expenditure Survey in 1962, is engagingly chronicled, and student tuition fees emerge as the defining issue of the last 20 years. First came the decision to remove completely the subsidy for overseas student fees in 1979–1980, a sweetener for bigger policy decisions which was not in itself expected to have major consequences. But: 'If there was one decision which may be said to have contributed to the marketization of British higher education it was this' (160). And on fee-setting in general: 'In no area of policy has the state more consistently abrogated to itself key decision-making powers' (168).

In Chapter 4, Shattock reminds us that, although the development of research selectivity was prompted by financial pressures, many significant changes, such as the introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise, were generated by people within the HE sector 'independently of Government' (175). Nevertheless, from *A Strategy for the Science Base* in 1987 to the 2003 HE White Paper '... the measurement of research excellence became a critical restructuring agent within higher education and a central element of both the Government's higher education policy and the policy of institutions'.

The accountability story is of the shift from trusted self-regulation by and for an elite to increasingly unsuccessful quality assurance in the mass system. At first university autonomy trumped any suspicions of institutional inefficiency, but the accelerating cost of an expanding system inevitably shifted the policy mindset to treating universities as just another public service. The Chapter 5 narrative races over many issues which perhaps even now deserve rather more discussion, for example to explain just why and how John Randall's law-profession-inspired tenure at the Quality Assurance Agency evoked such visceral opposition. After 1992, there was '... a critical change: the HEFCE (and the other funding councils) became not only the agent for the distribution of Government funds ... but also the regulator of the system' (199).

By the time we get to policy-making at institutional level in Chapter 6 most of the stories have already been told from other perspectives. It is a pity that this diminishes the treatment of shifts in managerial culture, most important of all that punctuated by the Jarratt Report, which '... came to symbolize a central drive towards a new corporate management approach to the running of universities ...' (220). Again, Shattock reminds us how institutional leaders were responsive to Government pressures, even complicit: Jarratt, he says, was not a DES creation nor did it follow a DES agenda. But the story never runs out of steam and reaches a climax in the brief Chapter 7, a final romp through the headlines.

Shattock's great achievement is to command the narrative and tell a compelling story, with its heroes and villains, winners and losers, which vividly remind us of different times

and different customs. For example, Robbins only considered the male participation rate in 1963, not imagining that 50 years later most undergraduates would be women. For many years, the policy debate was dominated by a concept of institutional autonomy which now seems almost quaint, evoked by the revival of words then in common currency like 'dirigiste'. Times have changed so much that even Burton Clark and Martin Trow are cited only once each. But some themes recur almost eerily, as in Kenneth Baker's modern-sounding but 1980s explanation that HE spending would inevitably be affected by the spiralling health costs of supporting growing numbers of over-65s and over 75s.

Anyone who lived through a good part of this period will have ample opportunity to quibble with the emphases and the nuances of Shattock's narrative: for me, the story is told too much from the (research-intensive) university perspective. Shattock lets his own attitudes slip out in places, describing John Pratt as an 'apologist for the binary line' (85), a policy which could have been much more fully recognised as support and affirmation for massification and much wider participation, rather than being mostly blamed for bringing down the unit of resource. Adding the perspective of student demographics would have made for a very different story, in which the expansion from elite to mass could have been much more celebrated than it is here.

The underplayed theorising makes the story a page-turner but leaves some gaps, as in the unconvincing and undefined categories of Chapter 6: 'Freedom to develop policy institutionally can be assessed on the basis of strategic policy, operational policy and academic or intellectual policy' (213). There are some editorial slips, such as misplaced punctuation and misspelling (eg 'modularisation' on p235 twice, Lord Browne described as a 'Blair confidante' (sic!) (166), and a few factual errors: Enfield College became part of Middlesex Polytechnic, not North East London (58). The policy-shaping Enfield management team of George Brosan (a huge influence not even mentioned) and Eric Robinson did however move to NELP from Enfield. At Newcastle Polytechnic, the Director was Laing (not Leonard) Barden (79). It is hard to believe that Toby Weaver used 'criteria' as a singular noun as cited (57), a usage repeated (not by Weaver) on p100. The Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee is misnamed (205) and it is not the case that 'low staff-student ratios offer the potential for smaller class sizes' (209) – it is low student-staff ratios that do that.

However, these are minor irritations. As Simon Marginson's back-cover puff says, Michael Shattock has given us 'a great story, very readable and full of dry humour', from which the participants in policy dramas emerge as people, not characterless functionaries. Shattock draws on much previously-unused or undiscovered archive material, supplemented with his own interviews of some key figures. The anecdotes emerging from these interviews are often the most diverting parts of the narrative; some officials remain nameless, perhaps at their own insistence. The endpoint was well chosen; events since 2011 would demand at least another major chapter, if not another book.

Policy-making is in the eye of the beholder, but always by turns tedium and inspiration, triumph and disaster, comedy and tragedy. In telling it how he sees it Michael Shattock gives us a rattling good read.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2013.841424>