Higher Education Policy and Institutional Change

Intentions and Outcomes in Turbulent Environments

Edited by
Paul R. Trowler

Contents

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Introduction: Higher Education Policy, Institutional Change

Paul R. Trowler

As its title suggests, the subject matter of this edited collection is higher education policy, institutional change and the ways in which they interrelate. It does not, however, see policy and policy-making as distinct from or above processes of implementation and change, located only in formal settings of policy design or strategy formulation. Instead it draws on a model of policy-making and implementation which acknowledges that policy is made in ways other than in formal settings of government or vice chancellors' offices and which sees implementation processes as essentially creative – and therefore also part of the policy-making process. Implementation of formal policy initiatives is also seen as contextually contingent in this model, taking different forms in different institutional and departmental contexts.

This chapter begins by briefly setting out that model as it relates to first higher education policy, and then institutional change. The chapter goes on to discuss the rationale for the structuring of the collection and to review the contents of the chapters that follow. The final section draws attention to the links between chapters by highlighting some of the key theoretical and conceptual issues that they raise, either individually or considered together. Foregrounding them here is also intended to help the reader 'read' each chapter more fully. These issues include: the tensions between agency and structure in the policy process; the often-incoherent nature of policy-making; the situated character of policy reception; and the problems with policy 'problems' and 'solutions'.

Higher education policy

The rational–purposive model of policy

There is a common-sense and usually tacit conception of the educational policy process, often found among students, as progressing along a clearly

defined path starting from the carefully considered intentions of those in formal positions of power, often in response to a problem which has become apparent to them. These intentions – the 'vision' – are encapsulated in careful, formal, policy statements. Explicit decisions are made about policy implementation, including the choice of appropriate levers to use to ensure compliance. These are engaged and changes on the ground in accordance with original intentions are achieved relatively unproblematically. Such changes are usually behavioural and sometimes attitudinal as well. To take some examples from the chapters that follow, they might include changes in recruitment patterns of universities and colleges, changes in the ways PhDs are conceptualized, planned and delivered, or new, marketized patterns of interaction between institutions and their students. We can recognize this in the view of policy articulated by Harman (1984: 13):

> [Policy is] the implicit or explicit specification of courses of purposive action being followed or to be followed in dealing with a recognised [educational] problem or matter of concern, and directed towards the accomplishment of some intended or desired set of goals. Policy also can be thought of as a position or stance developed in response to a problem or issue of conflict, and directed towards a particular [educational] objective.

In this rational–purposive account of policy-making and implementation, policy is defined as the explicit articulation of current actions or preferred actions undertaken in pursuit of a stated objective. It is conceived as formulated only or mainly at the highest level of a country or an institution and is portrayed as generally being coherent and rational. The issues and goals it addresses are capable of being unproblematically identified and articulated from this perspective. Finally, successful realization of policy goals is viewed as being achieved through the use of rewards, sanctions or simply by the fact that the values and goals of implementers are congruent with those of policy-makers (Browbrow and Dryzek 1987).

From an academic perspective this conception almost self-evidently fails to capture adequately the messiness of policy-making and its implementation. It is nonetheless one that frequently informs the thinking of institutional managers and others charged with bringing about change. Moreover the rational–purposive model is an attractive one to governments and managers alike; the notion that there are levers to pull to effect change in desired directions in order to fix clearly identified problems is undeniably appealing. If only things were that simple.

I would like to counterpose this model with an alternative one that sees the policy process as more organic and complex. In this alternative there is only a limited distinction between policy-making and policy implementation; policy is also made as it is put into practice because important social processes necessarily occur as this happens and because unforeseen circumstances on the ground mean that actors need to exercise discretion. Here policy is not just manifested in policy documents: White and Green Papers,

Acts of Parliament, institutional strategies and the rest. Nor does it just reside in the announcements of politicians or the pronouncements of vice chancellors, important though these clearly are. Policy in this sense is understood in a very broad way as 'any course of action (or inaction) related to the selection of goals, the definition of values or the allocation of resources' (Codd 1988: 235). The locale of policy-making and articulation thus becomes diffuse. From this perspective:

> policy is expressed in a number of practices, e.g. the production of texts and rhetoric and the expression of project and national policy management, in school [and university], in classrooms, and in staff-rooms. Policy is also expressed by different participants who exist in a matrix of differential, although not simply, hierarchic power. Finally, participants are both receivers and agents of policy and, as such, their 'production' of policy reflect priorities, pressures and interests characterising their location on an implementation staircase.
>
> (Reynolds and Saunders 1987: 44)

In this view then policy is also 'made' as it is received in different locales (sometimes with loss or fuzziness in parts of the message), interpreted and implemented. It is made too as practitioners go about their daily business, whether they are aware of it or not, as recurrent practices, sets of attitudes and assumptions are realized in specific contexts of practice.

Reynolds and Saunders' (1987) notion of the implementation staircase emphasizes how the location of individuals and groups in the hierarchy of the policy process can shape their interests and perceptions about the nature and relevance of particular policies. The situationally contingent nature of the processes they are engaged in also places boundaries upon how they conceive of their task. The staircase model helps to explain the reasons for the development of an 'implementation gap' (the distance between original purposes and actual outcomes) as policy is refracted during its trajectory down, and up, the staircase (Lingard and Garrick 1997; Gale 1999). The character of policy trajectories in higher education (HE) thus represents an important issue for both researchers and those concerned with the future of higher education.

Institutional change

Loose coupling

It has long been recognized by academic theorists that there is a loosely coupled relationship between policy initiatives at the upper level of the implementation staircase and outcomes on the ground (March and Olsen 1975). As Cohen and March (1974: 206) say:

Figure 1.1   The implementation staircase

| Central government makes formal HE policy and establishes funding regime. | | | National |

| | Vice chancellors and their top teams interpret and respond to policy in different ways. | | Institutional |

| | | Heads of department balance competing pressures, employ, reject or ignore demands for compliance, employ, negotiate or reconstruct the discursive repertoires in which policy is encoded. | Departmental |

Academic staff in different departments and HEIs apply, ignore or adapt policy as they think appropriate, only some of which reaches them and which they receive and interpret in different – sometimes unpredictable – ways.

Classrooms, offices, common rooms

Students respond in unpredicted ways, changing relationships and practices in teaching and learning situations. New situations often develop as unintended consequences of disturbance to the status quo.

Source: Adapted from Reynolds and Saunders 1987

[in universities] anything that requires the co-ordinated effort of the organization in order to start is unlikely to be started. Anything that requires a co-ordinated effort of the organization in order to be stopped is unlikely to be stopped.

Likening universities to 'organized anarchies' Cohen and March say they have the following characteristics:

- problematic goals – 'it [the university] discovers preferences through actions more often than it acts on the basis of preferences' (1974: 3);
- unclear technology – it operates on the basis of a set of trial-and-error procedures, the residue of learning from the accidents of past experiences, imitation, and the inventions born of necessity;
- fluid participation – the boundaries of the organization appear to be uncertain and changing.

Decisions associated with change in a situation of organized anarchy closely approximate a 'garbage can model' in which various problems and solutions are dumped by participants:

> The mix of garbage in a single can depends partly on the labels attached to the alternative cans; but it also depends on what garbage is being produced at the moment, on the mix of cans available and on the speed with which garbage is collected and removed from the scene.
>
> (Cohen and March 1974: 81)

At the institutional level, as at the national, policy-making and policy implementation are more likely to be the result of negotiation, compromise and conflict than of rational decisions and technical solutions, of complex social and political processes than careful planning and the incremental realization of coherent strategy. This was recognized by early institutional theorists such as Selznick (1949); drawing on Merton (1936, 1968) he recognized the importance of the unanticipated consequences of purposive action and the importance of context to those outcomes. He showed too how the explicit, front-of-stage, goals of organizations differ from the 'real', and organically developing, objectives which have a tendency to become increasingly divergent in different locales. Empirical research in a number of educational contexts has confirmed that outcomes are contextually contingent, as the model of loose coupling would predict, even in more managerialist times (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995; Arnot *et al.* 1996; Woods *et al.* 1996).

Brown and Duguid (1996) show how this divergence is inevitable because of the complexity of reality on the ground. They draw attention to the disparities between canonical and non-canonical practices in organizations. Canonical practices refers to statements of prescribed practices as set down in official documents, mission statements and elsewhere. They are the road maps which organizational members are intended to follow. In higher education descriptions of espoused canonical practice are requested by and presented to quality monitoring organizations such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Non-canonical practices are those conditioned by the complex and diverse practice on the ground. These are necessarily different from canonical practice because of, at one level, the complexity and variability of events on the ground, the 'rough terrain' that is missed by the large-scale maps. It is necessarily different too because of the dynamic character of knowledge, knowing and expertise: new ideas, developed understandings, work-arounds, reinterpretations and re-constructions of tasks, projects and roles mean that the relatively static nature of canonical practice can never keep up with the realities faced by 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980). Both canonical and non-canonical practice represent policy, but of different sorts:

> Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete insofar as they relate to or map on to the 'wild profusion' of local practice.
>
> (Ball 1994: 10)

Policy reception in higher education institutions

In discussing the nature of hearing, the neurological specialist Professor Susan Greenfield (1997: 66) points out that our perceptions involve more than simply physical auditory sensations:

> There is much more to hearing, for example, than mere vibrations. We do not hear a symphony as vibrations any more than we see a face as lines and contrasts. Rather, our perceptions are unified wholes, shot through with memories, hopes, prejudices, and other internalized cognitive idiosyncrasies.

This is a useful analogy for our purposes. First let us consider formal policy texts – the acoustic signals. They originate from a source which is not itself simple – certainly not a symphony orchestra following a score, more like a group of untrained musicians competing to be heard and following different scores, often markedly different and some with pages missing. Meanwhile the transmission of the audio signal is both subject to dissipation – some parts never making it to the ear – and interfered with by environmental 'noise'.

Important processes occur when the audio signal enters the ear and is processed by the brain, when the policy is received and interpreted locally by those charged with implementing it. As Tierney's (1989) discussion of changes in leadership and management policy at a small American Catholic liberal arts college indicates, even something so simple as the new director's literal open door, meant to indicate an 'open door policy' was received and interpreted quite differently by staff at that college. Their interpretation was conditioned by both tacit and explicit remembrance of the previous leader's behaviour and their response to it. Also significant to this interpretive work were the new leader's other behaviours, demeanour and actions in both formal and informal contexts. Together such factors generated a series of connotative codes, dispositions in the attribution of meaning and affect, which were attached to the new leader's actions and pronouncements, invisible to the leader herself but immensely significant in conditioning staff responses and so the outcomes of initiatives.

These interpretative responses are founded on 'internalized cognitive idiosyncrasies' which equate to Greenfield's 'memories, hopes, prejudices'. They are not randomly generated, nor (in the case of policy reception) are they the products of individual responses only, such responses are in part socially constituted in activity systems and communities of practice as well as in larger social structural groupings. Stephen Ball (1994: 19) is right to say then that: 'A response to policy must . . . be put together, constructed in context, offset against other expectations. All this involves creative social action, not robotic activity.' This constructive work is, however, tacit as well as explicit, unconscious as well as conscious, sometimes unrecognized even by those involved in doing it.

The book's structure

The rationale

The structure of the book follows that of the implementation staircase: each chapter represents a move down the staircase as the level of analysis shifts from the national contexts right down to the domain of the 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980) in specific institutional locations. Progressively shifting the level of analysis in this way helps address the analytical limitation that Graham Allison (1971: 4) identified some years ago:

> Bundles of . . . assumptions constitute basic frames of reference or conceptual models in terms of which analysts and ordinary laymen ask and answer the questions: What happened? Why did it happen? What will happen? Assumptions [about the character of puzzles, the categories in which problems should be considered, the types of evidence that are relevant, and the determinants of occurrences] are central to the activities of explanation and prediction. In attempting to explain a particular event, the analyst cannot simply describe the full state of the world leading up to that event . . . Conceptual models not only fix the mesh of the nets that the analyst drags through the material in order to explain a particular action; they also direct him [or her] to cast his [or her] nets in select ponds, at certain depths, in order to catch the fish he [or she] is after.

Switching for a moment from the staircase to the fishing metaphor, this book includes chapters in which some authors cast their nets near the surface, others on the seabed and still others to various points in between. They ask different sorts of questions and use evidence drawn from different locations in the policy process. Bleiklie's focus is on the policy environment – the nature of the waters themselves in different geographical areas – while Kogan is interested in the nature of and relations between the fish swimming near the surface. Morgan-Klein and Kirby take us a little deeper, to the institutional level. They explore how leaders in higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) both respond to a particular policy initiative from higher up and effectively remake it in adapting it to local circumstances. Johnson takes us deeper still, focusing on the heads of department (HoDs) within HEIs and exploring their responses to often competing and conflicting demands. We travel to the lower levels in the final three chapters, by Morley, Adams and Trowler and Knight, exploring how policy is received and remade (albeit in unintended and often unconscious ways) in universities in England and Australia.

The chapters' contents

Chapters 2 and 3 by Bleiklie and Kogan respectively focus on the policy process in national higher education policy systems. Their work is based on

the three-country study of higher education policies funded by the Swedish Council for Higher Education Studies (Henkel 2000; Kogan and Hanney 2000; Kogan *et al.* 2000). Bleiklie explores the ways in which the different policy regimes in Norway, Sweden and England are influential in the processes that bring about HE policy in those countries. Kogan picks up the theme raised by Bleiklie of the differences between policy communities and issue networks as distinctive policy regimes. Conducting what Maguire and Ball (1994) would categorize as an 'elite study' of the UK, he examines the groups involved at the upper levels of the higher education policy process. His aim is to explore the forces at work there in creating policy and putting it into effect. His chapter uncovers for us the workings of what has increasingly become an 'issue network regime' as the elite involved in higher education policy-making has fragmented in the UK.

Chapter 4, by Morgan-Klein and Murphy, draws on data from a five-country study of widening participation policy funded by the Scottish Executive. The authors look at the institutional responses elicited in Scotland by the central initiative to widen participation in higher education in that country. They use data from those in key positions in different institutions to demonstrate the differentiated character of institutional responses. They explore the interaction between the marketization of the further and higher education system on the one hand, and the governmental push to widen participation on the other. Particularly significant here is the context of declining demand for post-compulsory education generally. This, then, is an 'implementation study' (Maguire and Ball 1994: 280) focusing as it does on 'interpretation of and engagement in policy texts and the translation of these texts into practice'.

Johnson's Chapter 5 comes out of research conducted for a large ESRC-funded project entitled 'New Managerialism and the Management of UK Universities'. She examines how HoDs respond to policy developments in an increasingly managerialist environment and to what extent their behaviour is in line with that predicted by competing theoretical models. These HoDs had to cope with tensions between mangerialist understandings and discourse from the university and its environment on the one hand, and ground level understandings, practices and pressures on the other. In particular Johnson is interested in the power of what Bleiklie calls 'incentive tools': the giving or withholding of resources to ensure compliance with policy intentions by those on the ground, in this case, HoDs. The incentive tools have become much more significant in a climate of resource constraint and progressive withdrawal of the state from underwriting the cost of HE world-wide. Thus, for example, in the UK universities suffer financial penalties for recruiting too many or too few students, but benefit financially if they recruit students from particular socioeconomic groups, defined by postcode. At the same time, however, other levers – what Bleiklie calls 'learning tools' – are used to amplify and extend feedback to managers and policy-makers through evaluative, reporting and accounting procedures so that proximity to intended policy outcomes can be assessed and corrective

measures taken when appropriate. Their use is linked to new managerialist approaches to establishing compliance, particularly the 'new public management' variety (Clarke *et al.* 2000).

While Chapters 6, 7 and 8 take us to the ground level of institutional life, each makes links back to the upper levels of developments in the national and international policy environments. Chapter 6, from Adams, explores in detail the latent dysfunctionality of the unintended outcomes of progressive 'liberalization' of HE under Labor and then Liberal Australian governments. As Meek and Wood (1997) predicted, these measures have disturbed relationships within and between institutions in quite fundamental and often deleterious ways. Adams draws on evidence from her interviews with academic and general staff within a number of Australian universities, from interviews with research officers and industrial officers of the National Tertiary Education Union, from newspaper reports, government documents, and from participant observation within two universities in that country.

Morley's Chapter 7 examines the ways in which processes associated with quality audit resulted in affective responses on the ground in one UK university and so to consequences which were unanticipated and unintended by national policy-makers in government and the Quality Assurance Agency. While the data used here are specific to one site, the issues are virtually universal. The 'evaluative' or 'regulatory' state (Neave 1997; Sporn 1999) is today found everywhere across the globe as higher education expands and costs rise. Morley's important argument that local responses to this will be affective as well as cognitive is therefore of broad significance, as are the consequences of this fact.

The final chapter, from Trowler and Knight, continues this theme, again using an example from one English university to illustrate processes at different levels on the implementation staircase. Their chapter has the components which distinguish a 'policy trajectory study' (Maguire and Ball 1994) in that it follows a specific policy through the stages of its cycle, though the focus of attention is primarily at the ground level. The case study here involves an initiative to alter the nature of doctoral study in the face of competition in an increasingly global market. Trowler and Knight use the analytical lens of social practice theory (SPT) to view this initiative, showing how the aspirations of innovators can be undermined when they base their ideas on rational–purposive principles. Again, the responses of those on the ground, together with the apparent invisibility of these to national and institutional innovators, constitute an important dimension of this analysis. The chapter also engages, though, with the question of why policy-makers tend to unreflectively adopt rational–purposive understandings of the policy process when they are quite clearly flawed.

A selective theoretical commentary

In this section I want to introduce some theoretical tools and perspectives that are important to have at hand for a fuller appreciation of the chapters

in the book. They tend to surface and resurface across the different authors' work, though none of them individually has the space to explore them. They are also intended to help the reader apprehend the book as whole, rather than as a collection of discrete chapters.

Agency and structure, discourse and text

I want first to highlight the issue of agency and structure, which Bleiklie frames in terms of the actor's perspective and the structural perspective. Agentic understandings of the policy process prioritize actors' perceptions, perspectives, preferences, actions and interactions. By contrast structuralist perspectives emphasize the ways in which these are conditioned by forces beyond the individual and which consequently give rise to a certain degree of regularity and predictability in social behaviour which would not be present if behaviour were wholly agentic.

Ball (1994) highlights the significance of this contrast for policy-making and implementation in his discussion of policy as text and policy as discourse. Viewing policy as discourse draws attention to the ways in which discursive repertoires delimit what can and cannot be thought about as well as what is on, and off, the policy agenda. Discourses do not simply describe reality, they help create it by offering or denying the communicative resources available to frame it. Here the emphasis is on the way behaviour and ideas are constrained by factors external to the individual and the group. The perspective is a structural one; the constraining effect of the discursive context comes to the fore, a context which can affect formal policy-makers as well as those at the ground level (Bacchi 2000). Pring's excellent book provides an illustration in relation to the language of business applied to higher education, including the mechanistic language of educational out-comes much used by the British Quality Assurance Agency in its subject reviews – the focus of Morley's chapter:

> the language of education through which we are asked to 'think in business terms' constitutes a new way of thinking about the relation of teacher and learner. It employs different metaphors, different ways of describing and evaluating educational activities. In so doing it changes those activities into something else. It transforms the moral context in which education takes place and is judged successful or otherwise . . . So mesmerized have we become with the importance of 'cost efficiency' and 'effectiveness' that we have failed to see that the very nature of the enterprise has been redefined . . . Once the teacher 'delivers' someone else's curriculum with its precisely defined 'product', there is little room for that *transaction* in which the teacher, rooted in a particular cultural tradition, responds to the needs of the learner. When the learner be-comes a 'client' or 'customer', there is no room for the traditional apprenticeship into the community of learners. When the 'product' is

the measureable 'target' on which 'performance' is 'audited', then little significance is attached to the 'struggle to make sense' or the deviant and creative response.

<div style="text-align:right">(Pring 2000: 25–6; emphasis in original)</div>

While we can see several examples of the unreflective use of managerialist discourse by further/higher education managers quoted in Morgan-Klein and Murphy's chapter, for example, Pring is overgeneralizing when he claims that we – educationists, researchers, educational managers – have all become mesmerized by the language of outcomes and of business and finance. A more agentic perspective which views policy as *text* stresses the role of actors in the policy process, including their ability to contest, negotiate and reconstruct both policy *and* the discourse in which it is encoded (Trowler 2001). Policy decoding is an active (re)interpretive process from this perspective – one involving creative reinvention by those who 'receive' policy texts.

The ESRC-funded project on managerialism from which Johnson's chapter in this volume derives concludes that the extent of new managerialist discursive capture that occurs is probably limited by managers' ability to be 'bilingual' (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995). The concept of bilingualism refers to the situation in which two or more sets of values and cultures existing side by side are invoked in appropriate contexts (Deem 1998: 50).

Two other studies support this position. Prichard's (2000: 90) interview-based study of managerialism in further and higher education suggests that 'the manager is not a coherent distinct human being, but a multiple of subject positions within various discursive practices, which in this case sit uncomfortably together.' Managers move between the 'managerial station' and other subject positions, particularly localized knowledges which address professional and academic expertise. Prichard, then, suggests that the manager's professional identity, and the discourses on which it draws, is dynamic and protean. He or she will move between the managerial station, using managerialist discourse – constituting students as 'funding units' and colleagues as 'their staff', for example – and more authentic locales situated in specific contexts of professional practice. These are 'localized cultures of practices which produce other relations to the self – that is individualized identities, which variably resist and subvert managerially individuated identities (stationings)' (Prichard 2000: 41).[1] They are the grounds from which agentic resistance to structural stations are mounted.

So, for example, while senior post-holders devote considerable time and attention to developing and implementing performance review processes, staff members engage in counter-moves to resist the intrusion of such reporting and surveillance; they ignore requests and advice, fail to attend meetings or 'lose' important documents. These sorts of struggles between what Prichard calls 'power blocs' and 'the people' occur not only within groups but, most importantly, 'within' people as they struggle with alternative identity positionings and discourses: 'In other words, we all move in

and out of relations which maintain and extend the power bloc into and across our lives and the lives of others' (2000: 41). Bleiklie agrees that both agency and structure operate in real social situations and this is one reason why we should see the pattern of influence in the implementation staircase as being both down *and* up; if structural forces predominated then influence would only be in a downward direction.

These issues of structure and agency, discourse and text, surface in each of the chapters that follow but are particularly evident in Johnson's discussion of heads of departments' responses to the managerialist environment and its associated discursive repertoires. They are applied too in Trowler and Knight's discussion of the reception at ground level of a curricular innovation wrapped up in managerialist discourse and assumptions.

Incoherence in policy-making

Both Bleiklie and Kogan take issue with the rational–purposive policy model, particularly its depiction of the policy-making process as coherent, incremental and cumulative. They note that policy design is often quite different from this picture. Only too frequently policy is far from simply 'the mechanical application of means [by the policy architect or engineer] in order to realise given ends' (Bleiklie 2000: 54–5). Instead the process of 'encoding' policy is a complex one in which policy texts are developed as a process of negotiation, compromise and the exercise of power. As a result these policy texts are usually laden with multiple agendas, attitudes, values and sets of meaning. Policy encoding thus involves complex practices of interpreting, negotiating and refining proposals. The consequence is that 'processes of change at the level of national policy, within academic institutions and disciplinary groups, are only partially co-ordinated' (Kogan *et al.* 2000: 30).

Ball sums up this view of the policy formulation process as follows:

> [Education] policies themselves . . . are not necessarily clear or closed or complete. [They] are the product of compromises at various stages (at points of initial influence, in the micropolitics of legislative formulation, in the parliamentary process and in the politics and micropolitics of interest group articulation). They are typically the cannibalized products of multiple (but circumscribed) influences and agendas. There is ad hocery, negotiation and serendipity within . . . the policy formulation process.
>
> (Ball 1994: 16)

The contested character of policy-making is part of the explanation for the often paradoxical nature of higher education policy. It means that any government will find it extremely difficult to properly 'join up' its policy innovations. Many forces act at different points in the policy process and render coherence extremely difficult if not impossible to realize (Rothblatt 2000: 9). Even discounting outside influence and turbulence, governments

themselves often behave like 'a tribe of hyper-active children' (King 1996). Watson and Bowden (1999) show, for example, how the personalities of education secretaries led to swings in policy even during a period of administration by one party. They trace the paradoxes in British HE policy which resulted from the clash of ideologically driven neo-liberal marketizing preferences of individuals in government at the time and a reluctance to follow these ideas to their logical conclusion:

> the politicians, perhaps unduly inhibited by their officials in this respect, never displayed the nerve really to make this happen. Not only did it conflict with the 'technological steer' [towards 'economically relevant' courses] . . . but it also ran the risk of institutional instability. Instead of a consumer-driven market for public services, the Conservative government invented the 'quango' – of which the HEFCE became, in spending terms, the prime example. Intermediate and formally 'arm-length' bodies would do the government's bidding, sustained by formal 'direction'.
>
> (Watson and Bowden 1999: 249)

At the level of the political party too there are strains that jeopardize coherent policy formulation. Gamble and Wright (1999: 2–3) identify the tensions inherent in the new social democracy as involving the need to assemble a majority electoral coalition and retaining the focus on the kind of society social democrats want to bring about. Party leaders no longer represent a unified and disciplined labour movement. Rather they act as brokers in an extremely diverse, dynamic and pluralist political environment, a coxswain rather than the rower (Coote 1999).

There are strains too between the different departments in government. Ball offers an illustration, describing the policy-making environment during the Thatcher period of the 1980s in this way:

> Old conservative . . . interests are at odds with new, manufacturing capital with finance capital, the Treasury with the DTI [Department of Trade and Industry], the neo-liberals with the neo-conservatives, wets with drys, Elizabeth House with Number 10, the DES with itself, Conservative Central Office with the Shires.
>
> (Ball 1990: 19)

This array of difficulties has led New Labour to restrict its conceptualization of 'joining up' to one that addresses only the superficial avoidance of administrative duplication and costs rather than a more fundamental and holistic effort to establish coherence in its policy drive (McCormick and Leicester 1999).

Examples of mutually contradictory policy initiatives that result from competing pressures on policy-making are legion. In the UK there is a central policy drive to widen participation but, simultaneously, concerns that the higher education system should not grow in an unrestricted way and a push for students themselves to be responsible for part of the cost of their own learning. The resultant incongruities in policy – what Gleeson (1989) has

called 'policy paradoxes' – have been both puzzling and difficult to cope with for those on the ground. Similarly Newby (1999) has highlighted the concurrent yet incompatible policies which, on the one side, encourage the marketization of higher education yet on the other act to preserve a more dirigiste model:

> Despite the rhetoric of fees, competition and market forces, regulation of the UK higher education sector is strong in terms of student numbers distribution, public accountability, quality assurance and selectivity in research funding. It follows that there is unlikely to be a real higher education market on the American model in the UK in the near future.
>
> (Newby 1999: 13; quoted in Benmore 2000: 144)

Again, Maggie Woodrow (1999), reflecting on policy contradictions surrounding the push to lifelong learning, notes that:

> Lifelong learning can only be for all if those who are currently benefiting least are given priority in the allocation of opportunities and resources. The current trend in Europe for an increased proportion of the costs of post-school education to be met by the students themselves means that lifelong learning will certainly not be within everyone's reach.

In considering such paradoxes Bleiklie notes in an earlier volume arising from the study of higher education in Norway, Sweden and England (2000: 55) that policy design 'is not the outcome of any master plan, but reflects the decisions of many different people and organizational units, often acting in different contexts and places. They are not necessarily logical or even coherent.' He argues that variations in policy design can be explained in terms of policy regimes. These are networks of actors and patterns of influence that are dynamic in that actors and relationships change over time. It is its dynamism that distinguishes a policy regime from a policy network as discussed, for example, by Rhodes and Marsh (1992) and Richardson (1997). The regime may be specific to an area of policy (for example higher education policy) or to a whole country. The actors and their actions need not be directly or exclusively engaged in the policy process, but to be relevant to a policy regime what they do must bear on public policy in some way. Moreover, as indicated above, the motivations for and goals of their actions need not be explicitly oriented to public policy goals; they may involve actions and motives which, from the actor's perspective, derive from and are oriented to recurrent practices in institutional contexts.

Knowing about the character of different policy regimes tells us quite a lot about the process of policy-making in any particular context. Thus when Kogan and Hanney (2000) note that civil servants and vice chancellors in the UK not only once shared a common background and university education but frequently also membership of the same London club, the Athenaeum, they are commenting on the higher education policy regime in

the UK and on the policy community there at that time. By the latter term is meant a group with

> limited membership; frequent interaction with shared basic values; all participants having a resource base and the ability to deliver their members' support; and a relatively equal power distribution among the network members.
>
> <div align="right">(Bleiklie 2000: 67)</div>

In some cases the policy regime is such that the rational–purposive depiction of policy design is closer to being the case, though it is rarely if ever fully realized. In such a circumstance we perhaps expect fewer policy paradoxes. Where such a regime exists there is a fairly tight constellation of actors combined with a hegemonic set of norms and values. Contrasted with this situation is the 'issue network' environment, in which there is a wide range of affected interests; fluctuations in contacts, access and congruence of viewpoint; unequal resource distribution; varying abilities to deliver members' support and unequal power levels among the actors involved. This is likely to result in numerous policy paradoxes of considerable significance.

In England there has been a drift since the 1960s from a policy community regime to one characterized as an issue network. As had happened in the compulsory education sector there was a progressive exclusion of some groups from the policy-making process and a simultaneous decline in trust as new managerialist ideology placed greater emphasis on market forces, accountability and performance assessment. Meanwhile an increase in the number of range of 'co-opted elites', such as academics appointed to RAE panels, created an even more mixed picture. Yet at the same time the ideological drive of Thatcherism did retain some consistency and coherence in central policy:

> There are continuities throughout the long period of Conservative stewardship: on the economic imperative (variously interpreted); on the desire for control; on the reluctance to intervene in the fate of individual institutions, or sub-sectoral groups, rather than that of the sector as a whole.
>
> <div align="right">(Watson and Bowden 1999: 253)</div>

In Norway the policy community retained its coherence for longer. There the relatively small size of the country and the HE system meant that there was an intimate and close community: top civil servants and university professors knew each other personally and shared a common background. The state did not become significantly involved in HE until the late 1980s. Meanwhile the picture in Sweden mirrored that in England; a switch from a policy community model to one closer to an issue network occurred, though this happened as late as the 1990s in Sweden. This change led to the breakup there of a tradition of consensus-seeking among the multiple groups involved in the policy process and there was a new tendency to skip the

traditional consultation process. Summarizing the differences between the three countries, Bleiklie (2000: 86) says:

> English reforms were comparatively centralised, radical and relied more on tougher measures in order to discipline non-compliant institutions. Once introduced, the policy was pursued rather consistently. This pattern illustrates the confrontational style . . . what we may call a *heroic style* of policy making . . . The Norwegian reforms, however, were less radical . . . They evolved gradually in a value-structure driven process with considerable local variation as to how the reforms were implemented . . . [We may call this] the *incremental style*. Swedish reforms were characterised by a more confrontational style than those of Norway, but also by less political stability. Government changes led to policy changes and varying central government control in terms of authority tools and use of incentives vis-à-vis educational institutions. The Swedish experience thus illustrates what we may call an *adversarial style* of policy making in the sense of an uneasy tug-of-war between two major political blocs with two very different versions of higher education.
>
> (original emphasis)

The extent to which HE policy represents contested terrain, then, will differ from place to place, and from time to time. Maurice Kogan's chapter explores some of the dynamics of these processes of policy-making.

The situated character of policy reception

I noted above that a situated understanding of policy implementation stresses how the same policy is received and interpreted differently in different contexts according to institutional context, history and environment. Morgan-Klein and Murphy's chapter on the implementation of widening participation policy in Scotland and its mutation into recruitment practices there exemplifies this, substantiating Ball's point, alluded to earlier, that:

> Policy is . . . an 'economy of power', a set of technologies and practices which are realized and struggled over in local settings. Policy is both text and action, words and deeds, it is what is enacted as well as what is intended. Policies are always incomplete in so far as they relate to or map on to the 'wild profusion' of local practice. Policies are crude and simple. Practice is sophisticated, contingent, complex and unstable.
>
> (Ball 1994: 10)

Different locations on the implementation staircase will be influenced by different sets of forces:

> it is thus an open question how and to what extent academic institutions and practices are affected by major policy changes. This depends on the extent to which changes are welcomed by, relevant to, and

moulded and absorbed by academic institutions and practices. Conversely, academic disciplines and their development may, for instance, be formed by processes such as academic drift that may go unheeded by national policy actors.

(Kogan *et al.* 2000: 30)

Multiple factors, then, affect policy outcomes, not just the intentions of policy-makers. Kogan *et al.* (2000: 28–9) point out that national sociopolitical peculiarities affect both the nature and pace of change in higher education systems at the national level too. Changes in student preferences for particular disciplines or for different types of combined degree as against single honours, for example, can have a greater effect on HE systems than any government policy:

Much of the rhetoric about higher education policy is based on the notion that higher education systems are shaped by political decisions and preferences . . . A number of events and processes, such as educational choices made by young people, the dynamics of the academic labour markets and academic prestige hierarchies, have exerted equally important influences on higher education.

(Kogan *et al.* 2000: 29)

Even the seismic shift to mass higher education was itself driven by forces other than just purposive policy. Fulton (1991: 589), borrowing from the poet W. B. Yeats, describes the process in the UK as one of 'slouching towards mass higher education' and Scott (1995: 22) describes it as being the result of a 'fit of absent-mindedness'. As for the formal abolition of the binary divide and policies associated with it, it was, as Pratt (1999: 265) says: 'hard to discern in this history any sense of grand strategy. Much of the policy-making [in the 1980s] would be comfortably, possibly generously, described by Lindblom's (1959) term "muddling through"'.

This multicausality has the unfortunate consequence (from a central policy-maker's perspective) that national (and indeed local) policies will have different outcomes in different locales. Each locale is likely to have a different set of forces and contextually contingent factors driving the reception and response to policy.

Many authors identify the strange fact that policy-makers tend to be blind to the complexity of bringing about change, particularly to the processes that go on when policy is (re-)shaped at the ground level. Lingard and Garrick (1997: 9) say that policy-makers tended to treat teachers as '"empty vessels", waiting to be filled with ideas and approaches emanating from Central Office'. Kogan *et al.* (2000: 29) point out that policies are usually formulated as though 'target groups can be counted on to act as if they are subject to no other influences than the policy itself'. Policy-makers rarely take into account the need to support policy implementation, thinking that once the hard job of policy-making is done they can send out the finished documents and wait for results. As Lingard and Garrick put it (1997: 16):

'more energy is expended in the internal state micropolitics necessary to the production of a policy text than to its institutionalization'. Policy formulators also tend not to appreciate that the constant accumulation of educational policy leads to system overload. Finally, policy-makers usually develop an 'innovation bundle' and think of it as a single policy. In a bundle of loosely defined and loosely-coupled innovations each strand is subject to competing interpretations and alternative viewpoints. 'Implementation' in these circumstances becomes extremely complex and variable according to context. Trowler and Knight attempt to go some way in explaining this strange selective blindness of formal policy-makers.

The chapters in the later part of the book explore the local processes of policy-making and implementation, providing examples of the situated character of policy reception. They show how these processes can result in unintended, unpredicted behaviours and outcomes, what Lingard and Garrick (1997) have called 'policy refraction'. This is evident in Johnson's account of HoDs' responses to managerialist initiatives and in Adams' investigation of the unanticipated consequences of the 'liberalization' and marketization of HE in Australia. Morley's attention to the affective responses to policy initiatives illuminates their significance in the refractive process. She notes, with Adams, that marketization has brought affective responses too, ones associated with loss of confidence, self-esteem and changes to personal and professional identities. So, a system designed to ensure the quality of British higher education not only involves considerable financial costs (£250 million per year according to a HEFCE report: Baty 2000) but personal costs too. More importantly for our purposes, however, these personal costs have important consequences for social practices and hence for the nature of and linkages between higher education policy and institutional change.

Problems with 'problems' and 'solutions'

Morley's chapter also highlights the politically contentious nature of problem-constitution, as does Morgan-Klein and Murphy's. The rational–purposive model of policy-making discussed above assumes that educational 'problems' are unproblematically recognizable (Bacchi 2000). This is a simplistic understanding of the socially-constructed contested character of educational (and other) policy issues. Problems do not exist in isolation from the social and historical context; like the policies that are designed to address them they are created, given shape, in a social and discursive process of problem-constitution. Thus the 'problem' of how to widen participation in higher education is usually formulated as such on the basis of taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of higher education, the forms of propositional knowledge that need to be acquired and notions of 'quality' and 'standards'. These in turn derive from ideological positions and usually latent sets of values and attitudes. Such preconceptions give rise to the idea of the 'under-prepared' student and so constitute the site of the problem in individual

deficiencies. They 'write out' alternative ways of looking at the issues in a fundamentally different way.

Morgan-Klein and Murphy demonstrate the ways in which the 'problem' of increasing access, as constituted by government, becomes entangled with concerns at institutional level, particularly the *institution's* problem of recruitment. This has potentially deleterious consequences for the widening participation agenda. Moreover, through their quotations from senior people in further and higher education they illustrate the ways in which managerialist discourse frames the problem, constituting it in particular ways and excluding other perspectives on it.

Morley too highlights the ways in which the 'quality problem', as constituted by the QAA, is politically driven and framed in a number of senses. Articulated and then addressed in a particular way, resolving the 'problem' leads to a clear shift in the HE agenda and in the locus of power. A power struggle is going on as academic labour is subjected to intensification and scrutiny in a context where knowledge is increasingly commodified so that higher education bears ever-closer resemblance to a production facility. As Barnett (1997, 2000) has noted in his discussion of the shift to performativity, there is more to it than meets the eye. What appears to be 'just' a shift from propositional to operational knowledge (Ryle 1949) in the HE curriculum actually represents a more fundamental displacement of the way we see the world, our way of knowing, and this is associated with a shift in who defines what counts as 'useful' knowledge.

Other chapters, too, raise the issue of the relational character of 'problems'. Trowler and Knight note the way in which the 'problems' connected with education at the doctoral level are constituted from a managerialist perspective, personified in 'Professor Proselytizer'. Likewise Adams notes the ways in which Australia's higher education system was constituted as problematic by successive governments. Their solution was a switch to a marketized model, with the changes in power relations that brought.

These chapters too illustrate some of the complexities involved when a highly rational–purposive approach to solving problems hits the ground in an organization like a university. The rational–purposive approach to change emphasizes efficient, goal or vision directed processes in the management of change. In that model roles and responsibilities in implementation locally are seen as ideally clearly delineated, hierarchical and assigned according to precisely defined and expressed tasks. The stages of accomplishment are regularly monitored. Objectives are assumed to be unproblematic and commonly understood and agreed. Properly-managed change processes are incremental and predictable in this view.

Rational–purposive and top-down models of change have prompted searches for the prerequisites of successful change processes and have led to lists of them such as this:

• creating and sustaining the commitment of those involved;
• having clear and stable policy objectives;

- ensuring that the policy innovation has priority over competing demands;
- ensuring that there is a real expectation of solid outcomes inherent in policy, not just a symbolic one;
- ensuring that the causal theory which underlies the policy reform is correct and adequate;
- allocating sufficient financial resources;
- creating, as far as possible, a stable environment within which policy is being implemented.

(adapted from Cerych and Sabatier 1986)

Morley's chapter demonstrates some of the weaknesses in these approaches by exemplifying the ways in which managerialist versions of this thinking are necessarily some distance from teaching, learning and assessment practices on the ground. Her chapter thus reflects concerns of an earlier period about the rational–purposive approach to policy and the management of change:

> much of the existing literature tends to take a 'managerial' perspective: the problems of implementation are defined in terms of co-ordination, control or obtaining 'compliance' with policy. Such a policy-centred . . . view of the process . . . tends to play down issues such as power relations, conflicting interests and value systems between individuals and agencies responsible for making policy and those responsible for taking action.

(Barrett and Fudge 1981)

Reprised throughout the book, then, is the theme of the complex, paradoxical and essentially 'messy' nature of the policy process, in contrast with the clean and logical model of it portrayed in the rational–purposive approach. From the upper reaches of the policy implementation staircase, discussed in the early chapters, to the level of practices on the ground, addressed in the later ones, it is evident that improving higher education provision through policy initiatives is a complex and socially mediated affair.

Note

1. A station is defined as 'both a physical place where the social order is imposed upon the individual and the social positioning of that individual in the system of social relations' (Fiske 1993: 12).

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IMHE Institutional Management in Higher Education. Fostering Quality Teaching in Higher Education: Policies and Practices. An IMHE Guide for Higher Education Institutions. Fabrice Hénard and Deborah Roseveare. September 2012. 2. Foreword. Quality teaching in higher education matters for student learning outcomes. But fostering quality teaching presents higher education institutions with a range of challenges at a time when the higher education sector is coming under pressure from many different directions. Introduction 1 1 Introduction: Higher Education Policy, Institutional Change Paul R. Trowler As its title suggests, the subject matter of this edited collection is higher education policy, institutional change and the ways in which they interrelate. It does not, however, see policy and policy-making as distinct from or above processes of implementation and change, located only in formal settings of policy design or strategy formulation. Instead it draws on a model of policy-making and implementation which acknowledges that policy is made in ways other than in formal settings of government or v University Challenges: Explaining Institutional Change in Higher Education. World Politics, 60(2), 189–230. Balkizova, K. (2017). Â Policy reform and academic drift: research mission and institutional legitimacy in the development of the Swedish higher education system 1977–2012. European Journal of Higher Education, 5(2), 181–196. Hood, C. (1991).