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Beyond mass higher education? Transforming policies, institutions and the idea of the university for the 21st Century (0051)

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This paper explores the discourse about higher education focusing in particular upon the place of the university in 21st century Britain. In examining the discourse around the university, the paper draws from a current research study funded by The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. It was designed to explore the discourse surrounding higher education and the place of the university in 21st century Britain. Our aim is to explore the assumptions in the debate which point to the set of values inherent in the conversation. The focus is interviews with politicians, heads of university groups and public intellectuals as well as publically available documents including policy, speeches, media statements analysis and commentary.

Although we examine the public commentary on universities from a contemporary perspective, we do so in light of the historical discourse, arguing that to understand the current view requires a gaze that takes in the past constructions of the university. In this sense our research is focused on what we call the contemporary configurations of tradition and transformation as applied to the idea of the university in a mass system.

The paper presents findings from the interviews conducted and seeks to develop an interpretative framework. The presentation will be arranged in three parts. In the first we provide some detail on the study itself, its aims and methodological approach. The second reviews our initial analysis of the interview data. The final part provides an interpretation of the interview data and some of their implications.

Higher education and in particular the university has come under particular and very public scrutiny in recent years. It is a contested site that has become emblematic of broader discussions around the place of the university as both institution and idea within a rapidly changing environment. Conversations about the role of the university are not the sole preserve of academics, vice-chancellors and students but are discussed extensively in parliament and in the media. Discussions range beyond the traditional role of the university as centres of instruction or research or its contemporary adaptation to mass forms of higher education. They encompass debates about core priorities – social economic, political and civic - and extend to the very purpose of a university, who has access, who is in control, what a university represents and who should pay.

Our approach is less concerned with distilling the essence or impact of opinion making and its influence on higher education than with understanding the content and patterns of discourse. In this sense the study is partly linked to Silver's 2003 work on Higher Education and Opinion Making but also departs from it, both in focus and methodological design. Like Silver we are interested in 'Writers who have acted as advocates for higher education' and how and in what ways they 'provide important insights into the nature and purposes of expansion and change in higher education….

(Silver 2003: 8). However, our focus also responds to the challenge, implicit in Silver's approach, of identifying the vocabularies of mass higher education. As he noted, it was the meanings of these vocabularies, 'amidst the rapids of change that were unreliable and 'ran away out of the human soul' (Silver 2003: 11). Mindful of this slipperiness, we seek to pattern and understand the meanings of the contemporary discourse and to analyse the contemporary dimensions of the vocabulary, including its silences and ambiguities, through an appropriate historical lens. In summary, the main elements of our overall study are:

i) Comparative exploration of policy documents and media responses from the four British nations since the landmark Robbins Report
ii) Semi-structured interviews with a selected cross-section of critical informants: politicians, policymakers, heads of university groups, public intellectuals and leading members of representative bodies
iii) Intermeshing of historical and discourse analysis to test the use of language, assumptions made, silences in the text and their significance and the relations between discourse and power within a contemporary-historical dialogue.

Interviews were conducted with the following:

- Ministers of education (or equivalent) from Scotland England, Wales and Northern Ireland
- Academic heads of each of the university groups (Russell Group, Million +, 1994 Group, University Alliance and GuildHE)
- Public intellectuals

Interview data was collected through semi-structured interviews which were audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling in that they are key policymakers, commentators or leading members of representative bodies.

The findings from this study suggest that longer term visions for higher education, if not completely absent, tend to be skewed by particular policy positions about how best to achieve a closer articulation between funding and purpose. There was little discussion of the 'idea of a university' or any willingness to engage with a more theoretical view of what a university meant or should be. Discussions focused on:

a) structural issues such the diversity of the sector, leadership and control;

b) the 'function' of a university seen in terms of its outputs – learning characterised as skills and employability, research and innovation

c) the ideals such as academic freedom, the democratic purpose, universities as sites of learning and knowledge creation.

However, it was this third aspect of the university – where the silence was louder than the voices. Only a few participants talked actively about the university as a set of ideas with a purpose beyond the functional, practical and economic. There was little sense of a vision for the future, indeed with the exception of the public intellectuals interviewed, there was if not silence then a reluctance to discuss the place of universities or ideas of the system of higher education from a conceptual or

theoretical perspective. The study has implications for leadership and policy development in higher education.