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TRUST, MARKETS AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE¹

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ABSTRACT

In recent years problems have emerged around the American system of accrediting colleges and universities – a peculiar system involving voluntary regional associations of colleges and universities, public and private, which appoint committees of academics to make visits to their member institutions and report first on whether they are reasonably decent institutions of higher education, and secondly, on how they might improve themselves. This paper explores these issues comparatively in the American and European contexts.

Introduction

In recent years problems have emerged around the American system of accrediting colleges and universities – a peculiar system involving voluntary regional associations of colleges and universities, public and private, which appoint committees of academics to make visits to their member institutions and report first on whether they are reasonably decent institutions of higher education, and secondly, on how they might improve themselves. In 1994 the immediate issue in the US was the danger that new federal legislation threatened to give federal or state governments a larger role in this process; public discussions were heated but shallow and ill-informed. At that point the Mellon Foundation of New York and Princeton commissioned a three-person committee, of which I was a member, to write a report which

¹ Paper prepared for a seminar organized by the Society for Research into Higher Education, Oxford, June 12, 1996. Published as "Trust, markets and accountability in higher education: a comparative perspective," *Higher Education Policy*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1996, pp. 309-324. My thanks to Oliver Fulton for his critical reading of a draft of this paper.

might put our problems of accountability into a broader and more illuminating perspective.² Over the next six months the three of us talked to college and university presidents, people in government and the higher education associations in Washington, leaders of the regional accrediting bodies, and so forth – at the end of which we produced a report which was widely distributed in the US. and which included detailed recommendations on the reform of accreditation. Incidentally, the immediate problems that gave rise to our study disappeared with the election of a new Congress, but the deeper issues remain.

This paper is an effort to explore the same issues in comparative perspective. Many of these comparative observations arise out of my study and direct experience, both in Washington and in college and university governance in America and Europe. My justification for making this comparison is first that there is already a very large European literature on accountability, which mostly takes the form of discussions of quality assessment. But there are two other reasons for starting from the American experience: first because as European institutions gain greater autonomy (as they are doing outside the UK) they find themselves, like American colleges and universities, more deeply involved with market forces – we begin see that in connection with the commercialization of university research. But more broadly, the sharply contrasting situation in American higher education may allow us to see more clearly the underlying nature of accountability as one of three fundamental ways in which colleges and universities are linked to their surrounding and supporting societies: the others are trust and the market. Every institution is linked to its surrounding society, to its support community, through some combination of these kinds of links – and of course that combination will vary greatly depending on the kind of institution we speak of. Each institution has a kind of social contract with its society, and its support community in that society, defining the relative weight and combination of these three kinds of links, but a. these contracts are as diverse as the institutions themselves, and b. they are almost everywhere currently in the process of change. Let's look briefly at each of these in turn, and then come back to their relationships. And at the end I would like to say something about the relation of teaching to external accountability.

Accountability is the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect. Accountability to others takes many different forms in different societies, with respect to different actions and different kinds of support. The fundamental questions with respect to accountability are: who is to be held accountable, for what, to whom, through what means, and with what consequences.

The link of higher education to society through the market is visible when support is provided to a college or university in return for the immediate provision of goods or services – in the case of higher education these are almost always services – in a situation where buyers of those services face multiple sellers (who really want to sell!) and where the sellers face multiple buyers. The clearest examples are the proprietary schools in the US which depend wholly on student tuition fees, and provide in return technical and vocational skills, and help in getting started in a job or career. But an element of market links can be found in most American institutions, though often concealed or obscured by other kinds of linkages. Markets are still a relatively minor factor in Europe, which on the whole does not provide a market for higher education, and whose governments rather dislike the idea of a market for higher education and its potential effects on quality and status. Government in the UK employs the rhetoric of the

² Patricia Graham, Richard Lyman and Martin Trow, *Accountability of Colleges and Universities: An Essay*, The Accountability Study, Columbia University, October 1995. For a fuller discussion of the American scene, see Martin Trow, "On the Accountability of Higher Education in the United States," in William G. Bowen and Harold K. Shapiro, eds, *Universities and their Leadership*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 15-63.

market in connection with higher education, but since government controls the price universities can place on their services, and the amount and variety of services they can sell, universities currently operate not in a market but in something more like a command economy.³

The third of the fundamental links between higher education and society is trust – that is, the provision of support, by either public or private bodies, without the requirement that the institution either provide specific goods and services in return for that support, or account specifically and in detail for the use of those funds. To a high degree the provision of the block grant to the universities by the British Treasury (and then the DES) through the University Grants Committee before its demise (and really before the Thatcher revolution) was an example of the provision of support on trust; largely trust that the universities would continue to do and be what they had been and done for the previous century or so. Trust is also the central element in the very significant contributions by private organizations and individuals to American colleges and universities both public and private, for which no accountability is demanded. Trust, indeed, is the basis of the very large measure of autonomy of colleges and universities anywhere which are able to raise substantial sums of private money, or which are funded by governments which voluntarily delegate much of their power over the institutions, and thus give to the institutions a large measure of autonomy in the use of the funds they provide.

With respect to its basic functions: first, accountability is a constraint on arbitrary power, and on the corruptions of power, including fraud, manipulation, malfeasance and the like. In serving these functions, accountability strengthens the legitimacy of institutions, including colleges and universities, which meet its obligations to report on their activities to the appropriate groups or authorities. In addition, it is claimed that accountability sustains or raises the quality of performance of institutions by forcing them to examine their own operations critically, and by subjecting them to critical review from outside. And beyond those functions of constraining power and raising standards, accountability can be (and is) used as a regulatory device, through the kinds of reports it requires, and the explicit or implicit criteria it requires the reporting institutions to meet. While in principle accountability operates through reports on past actions, the anticipation of having to be accountable throws its shadow forward over future action. It thus is a force for external influence on institutional behavior, an influence which can vary from a broad steer, leaving to the institution a measure of autonomy over the implementation of policy, to the direct commands of an external regulatory agency which uses accountability to ensure compliance with specific policies and directives, and designs its system of reports to ensure that conformity.⁴

But that note reminds us that accountability is a double-edged sword. While it generally gets a good press in a populist society, we have to keep in mind that accountability is exercised at a price to the institutions under its obligations, and not least to colleges and universities. For one thing, accountability is an alternative to trust; and efforts to strengthen it usually involve parallel efforts to weaken trust. Accountability and cynicism about human behavior go hand in

³ The UK has introduced the rhetoric and vocabulary of the market into higher education – much talk about customers, efficiency gains, marketing and the like – but without allowing the emergence of real markets. Not long ago some universities were responding to a quasi-market situation by buying some active researchers along with their bibliographies (or perhaps the other way around) to improve their standing in the next round of research assessments. This was perfectly rational market - oriented behavior; but on hearing about it the then Director of the Higher Education Funding Council(E) was quite irritated, made clear that is not what he had in mind, and suggested that he would be looking for some way to stop that kind of behavior. It is difficult to explain to Americans that the UK has the ideology of market relations in higher education without markets.

⁴ The nature and detail of required reports can and often do have effects on institutions quite apart from the policies which they are designed to implement. The heavy burden of the many and lengthy reports which marks the current system of central government funding of British universities has effects on them over and above the problems for British universities generated by central government policies and cost cutting.

hand. But trust has much to recommend it in the relation of institutions to their supporting societies, and not least for colleges and universities, even though it is sometimes violated and exploited.⁵

Related to this, and of special interest to educators: accountability to outsiders weakens the autonomy of institutions. Obligations to report are usually disguised obligations to conform to external expectations. And there is, or at least has been, a special case to be made for a high measure of autonomy for institutions of higher education.

Accountability to outsiders, depending on the nature of the obligation, can also be at odds with the confidentiality of sensitive issues within colleges and universities, of which personnel decisions, and preliminary discussions about the treatment of departments and units at times of financial stringency are only the most obvious. It can thus be the enemy of effective governance, and also of plain truth-telling within the institution, as aspects of accountability to outsiders tend toward the character of public relations. External accountability can also be a threat to the freedom of professionals to manage their own time and define their own work. And external accountability, when it applies common standards and criteria to many institutions, can work against diversity among them.

But whatever our ambivalence, the obligations inherent in accountability are central to democratic societies, and have become increasingly so over the long secular trend toward the fundamental democratization of life that Max Weber spoke of. Where traditional authority is weakened and trust in traditional elites undermined, more formal and open accounts and justifications have to be made to the variety of bodies which claim the right to judge the performance of institutions. Accountability, as I have noted, is a major constraint on the exercise of power; the constraint lies in what people and institutions to whom reports are owed might do if they do not like what they hear.

In Europe, higher education's links to society through market mechanisms and trust relations are less commonly debated than are accountability procedures – the market because it has not been a major factor in European higher education, and is only now coming to be a factor in the commercial support for university-based research. And trust is not much discussed because its role in university life is not recognized, or because it is not seen as directly responsible to policy and action, either by the state or by the institution. In the US, where trust is still a central element in the life and autonomy of our institutions, an enormous amount of time, thought and effort goes into creating and sustaining the element of trust in support communities. And nothing frightens American educators so much as the charge that American society is losing its trust and confidence in its institutions of higher education. This charge is frequently made – often by those urging greater measures of formal accountability to take up the slack allegedly left by declining trust. The claim that higher education is losing the trust of the larger society is a convenient one for those who have an interest in increasing the accountability of higher education to the state, and thus of its power over those institutions.

⁵ The two most successful federal programs in higher education in American history – the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1863 and the GI Bill after WW2 – were both marked by relatively light oversight and little accountability for the large sums expended. Both were attended by a measure of corruption in the administration of the programs. But most people would see the gains to American society from both these programs as far outweighing the costs, both the legitimate costs and those of corruption. I believe that this was true in both cases less as a result of considered policy than of the small size of the federal bureaucracy at both times available for oversight. Nevertheless, the examples do raise questions about the bearing of accountability, of its nature and detail, on the effectiveness of public policy, perhaps especially in higher education.

In the UK my sense is that the withdrawal of trust from the universities over the past decade and a half may have been more an aspect of government policy than of changes in attitudes in the broader society. Even if that were so, the British universities never developed political mechanisms that would allow it to convert trust in the society into direct political support when it came under attack by government. That is perhaps the price Britain paid for seventy years or more of elite university politics, involving informal discussions at the Athenaeum between the great and good on one side and civil servants and ministers on the other, many of whom on both sides had gone to school and university together. But however satisfactory that arrangement, the universities did not quite know what to do when they got a Prime Minister who was no gentleman; or put differently, they did not know how to develop and then translate support in the society at large into political support so as to be able to defend themselves through the ordinary devices of real politics in democratic societies. (My British friends will remind me that the universities did not have all that much support in the larger society when they enrolled five percent of the age grade, and did not see public service as a major part of their mission.) Nevertheless, there is everywhere a potential connection between trust and support among groups in the civil society, and political influence through them. The effectiveness of the old elite politics for so long made it seem unnecessary for British universities to convert that potential into a political reality.

We tend to think of trust in connection with the support by private individuals and foundations for higher education and science, but we can also see trust in the relations of states to higher education. While trust in universities is ultimately rooted in the attitudes and sentiments that define the ordinary use of the word, it can also be institutionalized in law and funding arrangements, and thereby gain a measure of independence from underlying attitudes in the broader society.⁶ I have already mentioned the role of the UGC in the UK as a symptom and instrument of a trust relationship, though the UK also reminds us that trust can be deinstitutionalized as well. But trust on the part of governments is much more widespread, showing itself in a variety of ways. Many states have observed various self-denying ordinances, voluntarily surrendering some of their power to universities through the endowments of institutions and chairs, through formula funding which links funding directly to enrollments, through block grants and multi-year grants, through the radical dispersion of public research support (as in the US) where the lack of coordination among government agencies in providing research support to the universities insulates them from central government policy. We see levels of trust by governments rising, for example, in the granting of greater autonomy by the Swedish state to the Swedish universities and the endowment by the state of two as private universities, and a similar very marked tendency toward the decentralization of authority to the institutions where we might least expect it, in France, where the old stereotype of a highly centralized Napoleonic university system is no longer tenable. Indeed, a measure of trust is visible in all those cases where states reduce their discretionary powers over the universities, or even delay substantially their exercise of it. The significance of this leaps out at us in the British case, where the government's leash is very short indeed. Again, the UK is exceptional in that on the Continent governments are easing traditional forms of state management of the universities, whereas in the UK government has greatly strengthened its control over universities which formerly were much freer than their Continental counterparts.

Ironically, the more severe and detailed are accountability obligations, the less can they reveal the underlying realities for which the universities are being held accountable. And here my views have been shaped by ongoing research by Oliver Fulton and myself on the ways British universities, old and new, have been coping with the severe but frequently changing requirements for reports and information placed on them by the HEFC. On the research side, of

⁶ Though these sentiments remain the underpinning for both law and institutionalized forms of funding.

course, we know how cleverly academic departments manage their reports to the HEFC: the care with which they sort out the sheep from the goats on their staffs (with what effect on the morale of the goats?); the intense interest that has arisen around gaining certified publication before closing date – an interest that in some cases has involved the withdrawal of scholarly papers from one journal to place them with another solely on the ground of publication date; the recruitment of stars trailing clouds of publications and glory in their train. And on the teaching side, the anxious rehearsals for a forthcoming site visit, whole days given to walking through the visit, with every moment and conversation choreographed and planned for fullest effect; the even more anxious employment of consultants on how best to present themselves to those review committees – often consultants who themselves mirror the composition of the visiting committees, so that old and distinguished universities can learn how reviewers from new universities are likely to view their teaching methods. And behind the scenes registrars and finance officers and planning officers match wits with the HEFC bureaucracy in arcane manipulations of (for example) the numbers of part-time students who are almost full-time; indeed, looked at from one point of view they are full-timers; of the math students, who in the right light are very like physicists, at least until their degrees are awarded. And so on and on; I am not about to reveal our respondents' most successful scams. Some of the best university administrators in the country devote a very large amount of time and energy to the creation and manipulation of information that goes into their assessment or directly up to the HEFC, information on which their funding and rankings depend. Many little scams aggregate to real money; they are part of the armamentarium of the skillful university administrator; but they take precious time and intelligence from the challenging administrative and financial problems of the universities which employ them to do creative and not just adversarial planning.

Whatever we might call all this, it is accountability in name only. It much more resembles the reports by a civil service in a defeated country to an occupying power, or by state-owned industrial plants and farms to central government in a command economy. In all such cases, the habits of truth-telling erode, and reports flowing up from the field come to have less and less relation to the facts on the ground that they purportedly represent. When information flowing up the line powerfully affects the reputation and resources flowing down from the center, then we know that those reports become less and less exercises in discovery or truth telling, and more and more public relations documents which are, shall we say, parsimonious with the truth, especially of awkward truths that reveal problems or shortcomings in the reporting institution. But accountability depends on truth-telling. So a central problem is how to create a system of accountability that does not punish truth-telling and reward the appearance of achievement.

Varying forms of accountability

The forms of accountability vary with circumstances. In the United States, where the federal government is not the major player in the system, formal accountability to "society" has largely been through "accreditation." Our national report recommended considerable reforms of this system.

In the UK, as we know, by contrast, formal accountability is strong and direct, and discharged in part through quality assessments of research linked directly to funding, but also through external reviews of teaching quality, together with many other instruments of reporting and accountability mandated by a government which has largely withdrawn its trust and precludes an active role for the market.

In many Continental countries, funded largely by the state which maintains control over expenditures, accountability is discharged chiefly through financial and (increasingly) academic

audits, rather than through direct assessments of the work of the institutions linked to funding. As John Brennan has observed, "Quality assessment rarely exists as the sole form of external regulation. The role it plays in achieving accountability is likely to be influenced by the other forms of external control which exist. These are principally state regulation by funding and legislation and the operation of the market. Where either of these is strong (the former traditionally in many parts of continental Europe, the latter in the USA), it might be hypothesized that the role for quality assessment is weaker. Where these are both weak (eg in the UK) then it may be hypothesized that the accountability role for quality assessment will be stronger."⁷

But some forms of support are mixtures of all three kinds of links: for example, student tuition payments in many American colleges and universities are partly based on their (and their parents') trust in the institution, partly as a market transaction. But this kind of support also calls forth intense efforts at accounting through publications to both students and parents for their support by the colleges, which go to great lengths to keep in touch with parents about what the college is doing with their resources. Alumni also contribute very substantially to American institutions, both public and private: that support is largely based on trust in the institution, partly in the expectation of another kind of accountability which the institution discharges through publications of all kinds. What we see in higher education, in Europe as in the US, are complex and variable combinations of formal measures of accountability, trust and market mechanisms. The combinations of these ways of linking colleges and universities to their support communities vary enormously among different kinds of institutions, different departments, different activities, different stakeholders. To understand the problems facing universities and university systems anywhere, it would be helpful to see the nature of the balance among these three links to their support communities. For example, formal accountability in higher education can be seen as a substitute for trust in situations where market forces are weak – a situation that currently characterizes the UK. And it will also be helpful to understand the effects of changes in the balance of these forces – changes in the ways universities are linked to their societies. That might even be useful in informing institutional and government policy.

Aspects of accountability

Before going any further it may be helpful to point to two dimensions or aspects of accountability in higher education: the first comprising the distinction between external and internal accountability; the second the distinction between legal and financial accountability, on one side, and academic (moral and scholarly)⁸ accountability on the other.

On the first distinction: external accountability is the obligation of colleges and universities to their supporters, and ultimately to society at large, to provide assurance that they are pursuing their missions faithfully, that they are using their resources honestly and responsibly, and that they are meeting legitimate expectations. Internal accountability is the accountability of those within a college or university to one another on how its several parts are carrying out their missions, how well they are performing, whether they are trying to learn where improvement is needed, and what they are doing to make those improvements. External accountability is something like an audit, giving grounds for confidence and continued support, while internal accountability is a kind of research: inquiry and analysis by the institution into its

⁷ John Brennan, "Authority, Legitimacy and Change: the rise of quality assessment in higher education," Quality Support Center, The Open University, n.d., 1996, p.7.

⁸ I include "moral" as an aspect of accountability to stress the obligations of higher education to groups and individuals who are part of a support community but who are not in the narrow sense "stake holders." One example might be foreign scholars; another might be secondary school teachers.

own operations, aimed primarily at improvement through investigation and action. And our published report⁹ was particularly concerned with how the forms and practices of external accountability can be made to reinforce rather than undermine good internal accountability.

The second distinction, between legal/financial accountability and academic accountability cuts across the first. Legal and financial accountability is the obligation to report how resources are used: is the institution doing what it is supposed to be doing by law, are its resources being used for the purposes for which they were given? Accountability for the use of resources has its own traditions and norms, and the financial audit by both internal and external independent bodies is a well-developed mechanism for discharging it. Academic accountability is the obligation to tell others, both inside and outside the institution, what has been done with those resources to further teaching, learning and public service, and to what effect. There is usually a good deal more controversy over academic accountability than about legal/financial accountability: the rules governing inputs are generally clearer than our ability to assess and evaluate the outcomes of teaching and research. We can see the contrast also in the forms by which these two kinds of obligations are discharged or enforced: in one case through financial reports, audits and law suits; in the other by the myriad of ways that academics and academic administrators talk to one another and to outsiders about what they are doing.

In America efforts to provide accountability to outsiders for the academic quality of whole institutions through accreditation are currently the most contentious of these various forms of accountability. To a considerable extent, external academic accountability in the United States, mainly in the form of accreditation, has been irrelevant to the improvement of higher education; in some cases it has acted more to shield institutions from effective monitoring of their own educational performance than to provide it; in still other cases it distinctly hampers the efforts of institutions to improve themselves. It encourages institutions to report their strengths rather than their weaknesses, their successes rather than their failures – and even to conceal their weaknesses and failures from view. As long as accreditation is seen as the means by which higher education polices itself, alternative and better means suffer from inattention. Moreover, this is where much dispute has occurred, and where our national report¹⁰ made one of its central recommendations: that we transform accreditation from external reviews of institutional quality into searching audits of each institution's own scheme for critical self-examination, its own internal quality control procedures. This is a familiar recommendation to Europeans: it is a central theme in the writings of the leading European scholars on this subject.¹¹

A stress on trust as a key element in the relation of society to higher education in no way implies turning a blind eye on the shortcomings of academics and their institutions; it does center our attention on the question of who is responsible to whom for what. There are of course in every country many pathologies of academic life. Indeed, some academics and whole departments transform Laurie Taylor from a satiric humorist into a sober and restrained anthropologist. One of the most common of these pathologies – found everywhere – are

⁹ *Accountability of Colleges and Universities, op. cit.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ See, for example, Guy Neave, *The Core Functions of Government: Six European perspectives on a shifting educational landscape*, National Advisory Council (the Netherlands), June 1995; M. Trow, "Reflections on Higher Education Reform in the 1990s: The Case of Sweden," in Thorsten Nybom, ed., *Studies in Higher Education and Research*, The Council for Studies in Higher Education, Stockholm, 1993:94; Guy Neave and Frans Van Vught, eds., *Prometheus Bound: The Changing Relationship Between Government and Higher Education in Western Europe*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1991; Guy Neave, "The Politics of Quality: developments in higher education in Western Europe 1992-1994," *European Journal of Education*, vol. 29, no.2, 1994, pp. 115-134; and Frans Van Vught and Don Westerheuden, "Towards a general model of quality assessment in higher education," *Higher Education*, 28, 1994, pp. 355-371.

academics in research universities who do little or no research. Academics in research universities usually have light teaching loads to allow them to do their research and scholarship; if they don't they turn a privileged tenured post into a sinecure. But this is a problem for a department or a university to deal with, monitored by external audits of its internal reviews; it is not one that can be reached effectively by central government funding formulas. Trying to reach it from outside may cause more problems than it cures. The UK is the only country I know of that assesses whole departments for funding purposes. Research is done by individuals and research teams (increasingly interdisciplinary), not by departments. Britain's funding arrangements, in my view, confuse an administrative unit with a research unit, and introduces new pathologies into the life of the department – for example, by discouraging interdisciplinary research.

I have stressed that these three forces – accountability, trust and markets – are often interrelated in any particular situation. Accountability and trust particularly are in a peculiar relation of tension, sometimes mutually supportive, sometimes at odds. For example, trust by adults in people and their institutions is not ordinarily blind, but assumes the operation of different kinds of informal accountability, kinds that formal accountability procedures do not recognize. One of these is the accountability demanded of their members by the academic guilds – their departments and the disciplines. We hear about that kind of accountability when professional and scholarly norms are violated, as in recurrent scandals about academic plagiarism or the falsification of research findings. The fact that they are scandals attests to the power of the norms that are violated, and the structure of sanctions still in place to enforce the norms.

There is in addition the personal accountability to which one is held by one's conscience, accountability to values that are internalized. Some people in academic life still think in terms of what they conceive to be their duty, who do it without external constraint or coercion, but see it as meeting the dictates of honor, or of loyalty, or of what is required to be a good citizen of the university. All of these forms of inner direction, as David Riesman called them many years ago, stand apart from, and indeed are opposed by, the formal requirements of accountability. That is because formal requirements for accountability are inherently suspicious of claims to professional and personal responsibility, claims which were in fact the basis on which academics in elite colleges and universities in all countries formerly escaped most formal external accountability for their work as teachers and scholars.

In Britain, as I have suggested, we are currently seeing the loss by academics of the persuasive power of their claims to personal and professional responsibility, claims which when honored underlay the extraordinary trust that British and American society have placed in their colleges and universities.¹² Academics in British universities were assumed to be "gentlemen," men and women who governed their own behavior according to the dictates of conscience, or considerations of honor, or professional norms, depending on their social origins.¹³ And that is why, in transforming that elite system of higher education into a system of mass higher education, the British government in the past decade has gone to such lengths to deny the relevance of such claims to trust, and to subject the whole of the system and its members to what can only be seen as a kind of mass degradation ceremony, involving the transformation of academic staff – scholars and scientists, lecturers and professors alike – into employees, mere

¹² On the Continent, academics have had something of the status of civil servants, and with obvious exceptions in dictatorships, were by virtue of their special work accorded a considerable measure of academic freedom in universities which were not as autonomous as in the U.S. and Britain.

¹³ Of course these concerns for personal and group responsibility for behavior were and are not confined to "gentlemen." For a recent discussion of these issues in Victorian England, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Demoralization of Society*, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 143-169.

organizational personnel. And like other employees, they are expected to respond to penalties and incentives devised by the funding agency, required like any other employee of the state to account for themselves and their behavior to a bureaucracy that knows little of honor, conscience or trust. In such a world, claims to personal responsibility in academic life are met with derision or cynicism, as a transparent device to justify the old privileges of university life, and incompatible with state policies for higher education. (Which, of course, they mostly are).¹⁴ References by academics to their personal responsibilities for their work, or to professional standards and obligations are often totally incomprehensible to people to whom the very vocabulary of personal responsibility is foreign. Unfortunately, when these claims to personal responsibility or professional status have to be made explicit, they are already weak. Trust cannot be demanded but must be freely given. In Trollope's novels, a gentleman who demands to be treated as a gentleman is almost certainly no gentleman.

But the decline in trust as one of the three basic forces in the support of higher education, where it has occurred, is not wholly the result of policies aimed at reshaping higher education in the image of private enterprise while increasing the regulatory power of central government, though the British case might lead us to believe so. A case can be made that in European countries a decline in trust is inherent in the growth of mass higher education since WW II, in the tremendous increase in its costs, especially to the public purse, and in the increasing diversity of forms that higher education takes, many of which cannot claim the academic authority of elite forms of higher education.¹⁵ In Europe more than in the United States, the enormous growth of enrollments over the past four decades has not only made higher education into a competitor for support with other elements of the welfare state, but has also raised questions about the quality and standards of those institutions. That anxiety about "quality" has been exacerbated by tendencies in all European countries to cut the budgets for higher education, at least on a per capita basis. And that in turn has generated what can only be called an evaluation industry engaged in writing and consulting about problems in the assessment of teaching and research in postsecondary education, and the possible linkage of assessment to state funding. In all this the UK is exceptional chiefly in its greater anxiety about "economic decline," and the political weakness of its universities in the face of a hostile government which, under both Margaret Thatcher and John Major, has shown mistrust of all the old institutions of the establishment, and most particularly the universities, as agents of decline.

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of the motivations and consequences of central government policy toward higher education in the UK. see my "Managerialism and the Academic Profession: The Case of England," *Higher Education Policy*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1994, pp.11-18. These issues are currently the object of study by Oliver Fulton and myself.

¹⁵ I am skeptical about widespread claims of a deep decline of trust in higher education in America, since that is a convenient, and indeed almost a necessary condition for introducing greater regulation by way of more formal accountability. There is considerable evidence in various measures of tangible confidence and support that trust in American colleges and universities has not declined in recent years as is widely assumed, though there is no doubt that it occupies a different position in the public mind than it did before, say, 1966. Over the decade 1981-1991, total enrollments continued to grow (by 14%) despite the fact that colleges and universities were raising their tuition rates much more rapidly (by 54% in constant dollars) than the Consumer Price Index; during that decade the differential in income between college and high school graduates grew very sharply, by 88%; private giving to colleges and universities increased by 66% in constant dollars; federal support for academic research increased by 53% in real terms between 1981 and 1991; the number of foreign students in American colleges and universities grew by 31%; and measures of "satisfaction" in surveys of students and recent graduates have not declined in recent years. (Source: Ross Gotler, "Indicators of Confidence," memorandum prepared for the Accountability Project, Columbia University, March 2, 1995.) On the other hand, between 1981 and 1995 the proportion of people who expressed "a great deal of confidence" in "major educational institutions such as colleges and universities" fell from 37% to 27% on a national poll, though it has been rising slightly in recent years. (The Harris Poll 1995 #17, March 6, 1995.) In this poll higher education "rank[ed] third on the list of institutions in which the public has the most confidence....the public's loss of faith in higher education lags behind its loss of faith in institutions on the whole." *ibid.* There is certainly room for debate on this issue and its implications. See *Accountability, op. cit.*, pp. 3-5

But while these pressures linking accountability to mass higher education are present everywhere, in many countries on the Continent there are countervailing forces arising out of the same movement toward mass higher education. The growing and increasingly diversified systems of higher education in many countries simply cannot be managed effectively from the center, and in countries as different as Sweden, Austria, France and the Netherlands universities have in recent years been granted greater autonomy. As Brennan notes, "In continental Europe, there is a general movement away from state authority."¹⁶ I do not know of any other country, except perhaps Australia, which has shown the same pattern of management of higher education as in the UK: growth, the reduction of formal institutional diversity, and tighter administrative controls by an agency of central government.

There is a temptation to exaggerate the role of Britain's peculiar and highly intrusive forms of accountability that have been imposed on its colleges and universities over the past decade or more. But they are a symptom or response to other more fundamental forces that have transformed British higher education over the past 15 years: the very great increase in the proportion of the age grade enrolled in higher education, the dramatic decline in the unit of resource,¹⁷ and the casual merger of the two big segments into a single system have been the forces behind the very rapid creation of mass higher education in the UK. The new forms of management and accountability are aspects of that transformation, though with significant consequences of their own independent of the other forces. But a growth of student numbers under circumstances of financial constraint did not require the merger of the segments, and the three together did not require the creation of the HEFC and the elaboration of the instruments of central management and control. There were and are unconsidered alternatives.

If there is less anxiety about the "quality" of higher education in the United States it is both because our system is so variable in that regard, and because we never made (or could make) any commitment as a nation to the maintenance of common standards across our thousands of colleges and universities. We also are less embarrassed by the role of the market in cultural affairs. As Louis Hartz reminded us, in America, by contrast with Europe, the market preceded the society.¹⁸ That has not relieved our colleges and institutions from the problem of defining and defending a distinctive character or mission not wholly defined by market forces. But it has greatly reduced the pressures in America for strong systems of accountability to external bodies.

On the measurement and assessment of teaching

I have suggested that the pressure for greater accountability in the UK, and especially the pressures for the direct assessment of the quality of teaching, arise chiefly out of the emergence of mass higher education and its effects on both teachers and students. On the latter score, the institutions of mass higher education recruit a more diversified body of students with respect to class origins, age, interests and talents. These institutions also recruit different kinds of people to the academic profession, more diverse in their origins, and increasingly from less privileged origins. The increasing diversity of both students and teachers forces a fundamental change in the curriculum and in pedagogy. Even when the new students are

¹⁶ Brennan, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ Lord Dainton, using official figures, calculates that the average unit of resource – that is, "the average amount of recurrent income per student from government directly and also from fees in respect of British and European Union students," declined between 1972/3 and 1995/6 by two-thirds, with worse to come. (Hansard, the House of Lords Official Report, 570, no. 56, 6 March 1996, 310).

¹⁸ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1955

academically able, their interests and motivations will differ. Teachers and lecturers in the mass system can no longer assume that students will learn on their own; it comes to be doctrine that students can only be expected to learn what they are taught. That leads to a greater emphasis on teaching as a distinct skill that itself can be taught (and assessed), and places the student and the process of learning, rather than the subject, at the center of the educational enterprise, a Copernican revolution. The differences between secondary and higher education, in this as in other respects, narrow.

The growth and diversification of higher education, along with associated changes in pedagogy will require that a society and its systems of higher education surrender any idea of broad common standards of academic performance between institutions, and even between subjects within a single university – ministerial assertions to the contrary notwithstanding. But if students gain their degrees or credentials with widely varying levels of proficiency and at different levels of difficulty, then the meaning of the degree itself must change; higher education leaves the gold standard, and degrees are increasingly assessed by the name (and reputation) of the institution where it was earned and the department in which the student took the degree. But for many products of mass higher education who are not going on to the civil service, teaching, the higher professions or post-graduate study, the degree is less important except as a generalized statement that the student has a certain kind of cultural sophistication, has learned how to learn, can probably learn more, and has shown the self-discipline necessary to pass courses and earn a degree.

In the UK, as elsewhere, the growth in the size of departments makes it impossible for a professor to stand as a guarantor of the quality of work of everyone in his department. And appointment procedures to lower ranks become more various. So governments and institutions develop more rationalized assessments and quality assurance procedures, in part because the old quality assurance mechanism are not trusted under the new circumstances, in part because the system is now very expensive and becoming more so, in part because government is anxious about how the universities are performing in the face of the growing globalization of economic competition. So what to American eyes seems to be a manic concern for quality assurance arises in part from the withdrawal of trust in the institutions, now seen as full of less able students and teachers; and in part from anxiety about what these less distinguished students and teachers are doing, especially in the new non-elite sector as per capita support declines drastically.

Nevertheless, even if the pressures in this direction in the United States are still modest by comparison with the UK and some other European nations, public colleges and universities in some American states are the object of demands by their state governments for more evidence, preferably quantitative, bearing on their efficiency or effectiveness. This approach to the assessment of the quality of an education is to try to measure the effects of that education on individual students by testing their performance on various tasks, and then aggregating individual student performance on these tests into “performance indicators.” But such measures of academic “outputs” capture only a fraction, and indeed a small fraction, of the contributions of higher education to the life of students, and the life of the society.

But why, we may ask, need we confine the assessment of the outcomes of higher education to those that can be captured on objective tests of student performance? There are other ways to assess the impact of higher education, not only on students but on institutions and society as a whole. What large effects do we hope our systems of higher education will have on society? How do we weigh the effects of higher education, for example, in reducing levels of racial and ethnic prejudice; or of enabling people to change their jobs, their skills and their professions as the economy changes; or of motivating people to enroll in continuing

education throughout life; or of enabling people to raise children who want and get more schooling than their parents?

Should we use the school achievement rates of children twenty-five years after the graduation of their parents as performance indicators of the colleges and universities of 1970? How do we weigh the value to the society of the organizations created to protect the environment, defend battered wives, reform the criminal justice system, or help new immigrants, or the emotionally disturbed – all the voluntary institutions outside of government that make life more civilized and compassionate, and all of them disproportionately led and staffed by college and university graduates? Are leadership or participation rates in those institutions to be used as performance indicators as well?

Education is a process pretending to have a measurable outcome. That is what makes all measures of educational outcomes spurious. We may need to measure something to justify awarding degrees and certificates; but we need not share the illusion that our examinations measure the effects of education. Our impact on our students can never be fully known; it emerges over their whole lifetimes and takes various forms at different points in their lives. Those effects are mixed up with many other forces and factors over which we in higher education have no control – and among these are the student's character and life circumstances. Moreover, our influence on their lives takes many different forms, the most important of which are unmeasurable. One of the major functions of higher education which evades all measurement is our ability to raise the horizons of our students, to encourage them to set their ambitions higher than if they had not come under our influence. Colleges and universities at their best teach students that they can actually have new ideas, ideas of their own rather than merely the manipulation of ideas produced by others. That is not a conception of self very often gained in secondary school, and yet it lies at the heart of most of what people who gain a post-secondary education achieve in their lives. No formal assessment measures this increased self-confidence and belief in one's capacity to think originally and effectively, yet can we doubt that it is one of the great goods that attaches to a university education? And it is wrong and snobbish of us to think that it is only people like ourselves, professional academics and intellectuals, who possess this capacity. More and more we see the importance of initiative, originality, and the capacity to think in bold and fresh ways as a central element in success in the professions and in business enterprise. We do, at our best, teach people how to think and how to think more effectively, but whether they do so is a function of how well we communicate the novel idea that they can have novel ideas. How successfully they can put that idea into effect is a function not only how they think, but of other qualities of character, mind, habit, and life circumstance. The real and substantial effects of the experience of higher education extend over the whole lifetime of graduates, and are inextricably entwined with other forces and experiences beyond our walls and reach.

We can see the process of education, we can get a sense of the intelligence and energy that goes into it, but we cannot see very clearly what contributions universities are making to the life of the society, any more than we can measure the enduring influences of particular teachers on their students. But our inability to measure the outcomes of teaching does not preclude our learning about what the institution is doing well and what it is doing badly. And that is the work of internal accountability through internal reviews. If internal reviews and assessments are to be more valid and fruitful than those done by outside accreditors, it is necessary that the institution subject itself and its units to serious and recurrent internal review, with real teeth and real consequences. The loss of institutional autonomy is both cause and consequence of the abdication of responsibility by colleges and universities for managing their own affairs. And preeminent among those affairs is the maintenance of the quality of their teaching and research. But the creation and operation of serious, tough internal reviews of quality can be monitored

through external audits, not of teaching quality or outcomes, but of the procedures in place for self-study and self-criticism, and of the effects those internal reviews have on practice. That is the way to link external and internal reviews, and make them mutually supporting.

On the effects of the revolution in communications and information

In all of the above I have been talking about colleges and universities of a kind which have existed in the West in recognizable form for 800 years, in North America for over 350 years, and in wholly familiar form in the United States for about a hundred years. I have left to last any consideration of the implications of the information revolution currently underway for colleges and universities and for their accountability. The authors of the essay on *Accountability* reflected on this question, and commissioned an informative report by a specialist on the impact to date of new forms of instructional technology on higher education.¹⁹ But we declined to address the issue in our report chiefly because that revolution is in its earliest stages, and the nature of its future impact on higher education is still quite unclear. However unclear its lineaments, I believe that impact will be very large. I believe it will make learning at a distance much more common, and raise questions for many institutions of how they might best teach various parts of their curriculum, or revise their curriculum to accord with the new modes of instruction.

One clear effect of the new forms of instruction made possible by new technologies is that in some subjects they reduce the importance of teachers and students being in the same place at the same time, as increasing amounts of teaching are carried electronically. This could either complicate or facilitate the efforts institutions make to monitor and maintain the quality of teaching and learning. It certainly will make more difficult the tasks of accrediting institutions which provide instruction to students thousands of miles away, many of whom are interested in gaining skills and knowledge rather than grades or additional academic credentials. Accountability in higher education assumes a distinguishable institution with recognizable boundaries, employing an academic staff with identifiable qualifications to instruct a defined population of students enrolled for some kind of credential. But the new technologies threaten many of those assumptions, and begin to blur the distinction between "higher education" and "lifelong learning." The latter, however much to be welcomed, will be more difficult to assess and accredit or hold accountable to anyone.

Over twenty years ago I published an analysis of the movement of educational systems and institutions in all advanced societies from elite to mass forms, and pointed to a variety of strains and difficulties that would attend this major transformation.²⁰ That analysis in 1974 also included a discussion of a further movement toward universal access to higher education that I believed would follow naturally and inevitably from the move to mass higher education.

The best examples of universal access at the time were the Open University in Great Britain and the American community colleges, both genuinely open door colleges which also either granted a recognized degree, as did the Open University, or provided credits toward such a degree through transfer, as did the community colleges. But both were limited in their

¹⁹ Pamela H. Atkinson, "Distance Education in Institutions of Higher Learning in the United States: A background paper for the *Study on Accountability of Colleges and Universities*," October 1995, *op. cit.*

²⁰ "Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education." In *Policies for Higher Education*, from the General Report on the Conference on Future Structures of Post-Secondary Education, 55-101. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1974.

outreach, though wider than anything else at the time. I then thought that the move toward universal access, like the move toward mass access, would happen more rapidly in Europe than it did. I underestimated just how difficult these transformations would be, how great would be the social and political constraints on fundamental change in this key area of social life. And it really is only in the past five or ten years, and even more recently in the UK, that we see real transformations in the old system, rather than merely an expansion and dilution of the elite system.

But now, quite suddenly, universal access is not a secondary or marginal or future phenomenon, but threatens (or promises) to transform the relations between teachers and learners, between employers and education, between work and learning, between higher education and the rest of society. The communications revolution is upon us, symbolized by the Internet and the World Wide Web. Many, in this country and elsewhere, are learning to exploit the new capacities that technology gives us. More slowly, because more difficult, is the job of finding out what is going on in the world of higher education as a result of these developments. More energy is being put into the creation of new educational possibilities – for example, highly sophisticated courseware – than in analyzing their long and short term effects. I believe these new forms of teaching and learning will have large effects on the character of our colleges and universities, as well as on the capacity of those institutions to account for what they are doing to their support communities.

I have the impression that there is less discussion of these issues in Europe than in the US, though many of the technical advances have been made in European universities and industries. That may be in part because these developments threaten to develop outside of governmental control; it may be also that European social scientists are a bit shy of dealing with problems that are so heavily based on technological developments. Whatever the reasons, the issues that European and American higher education are currently struggling with, issues of expansion, cost, organization and management, quality, internal and external accountability and the survival or decline of trust, all will be profoundly affected in the immediate future by developments in interactive communications and distance learning currently under way.
