The Long View: change, identity and the developing institution

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Abstract

Change is an historical process but little has been made of the nature of change over long periods of time. This paper takes an historical perspective on the nature of institutional change using a case-study of an English University. The paper examines the main changes that have occurred over the course of the institution’s 110 year history, what are the constants and how the institution has responded to change. Overall, the paper questions our understanding of higher education as a sector. The paper argues that although institutions are not homogeneous entities and are constantly metamorphosing, many of the key issues that confront higher education today are long-term historical processes, what Bloch called the ‘longue durée’ (Bloch, 1953). An historical appreciation of institutional change is essential in understanding the nature of higher education today.
The Long View: change, identity and the developing institution

‘The modern university is like Proteus, many things at once, and the colour or form it assumes depends upon how it is viewed or grasped.’

Sheldon Rothblatt (1968, p.15)

Introduction

A serious historical analysis demonstrates that higher education institutions are in a state of constant metamorphosis: they are constantly re-inventing themselves as a result of both external and internal pressures. Image and reputation are essential elements in this process.

Individual institutions are often difficult to define because of dramatic changes in structure, in constituents and even in the nature of the staff and the students over long periods of time. Clearly, this has significant impact upon our view of the institutions for which we work or at which we study. Institutions, despite all appearances, are not, and probably never have been, homogeneous entities, despite the assertion by Ives et al. (2000) that ‘a university remains an entity’.

The paper examines change as it appears through the history of the University of Central England (UCE) and investigates factors that have influenced the institution’s response to change over a period of hundred years. It discusses the main ways in which the institution has changed and to what extent change has really occurred. What implication does this have for our understanding of higher education institutions? Indeed, the taking a longer-term view of any institution may affect our understanding of the sector as a whole today.

Methodology

This paper is based upon a study of the history of UCE from its earliest origins in late nineteenth century. The research is based upon a wide range of documentary sources and interviews with a number of key personnel and former students. Documentary sources, largely held in the University’s own archives, include the minutes of the City of Birmingham Further Education Sub-committee, which managed the institution until the late 1980s, Senate, governing bodies and academic boards; student databases and registers; prospectuses and student publications. Other documents include local chamber of Commerce publications and local Yearbooks. Interviews have been carried out with staff and former students who were at the institution or its constituent colleges as early as the 1960s.

UCE is representative of many similar institutions. It has been affected by the same pressures of funding, demand, competition, globalisation, by which other higher education institutions worldwide have been affected.

History and the Institution

The history of higher education is, as Ives et al. note (2000, p.xiii), ‘a late comer to the discipline of history’. There are relatively few overall studies of the history of higher education, either within individual countries or over wider geographical areas. American scholars lead the way where recent history is concerned, but there are several notable European works. Lawrence Stone
(1975) has been one of the best known pioneers of higher education history in the UK. The majority of work in this field has largely focused on the individual institution.

Institutional history, however, is problematic for several reasons. It tends to emphasise the positive aspects of the institution. Even where the history has been troubled, the institutional history provides the solutions that were found. University history has tended, therefore, to be more akin to medieval hagiographies rather than serious historical studies. Even where serious scholarship has been involved, the institutional history still has a rather bad press: very few have been published as part of a peer-reviewed process1.

Institutional histories in general have tended to focus on traditional universities. There are several histories, including some serious historical work, of universities which have a medieval heritage, such as Bologna, Pavia, Oxford, Cambridge and Heidelberg, to name but a few. Historical work on these includes collections of central constitutional documents as well as more popular outlines of events, people and buildings. There is, for example, a huge collection of documents from the history of the University of Pavia from 1361 to 1460 (Maiochi, 1915) and a similar collection exists for the University of Bologna and the University of Heidelberg. In contrast, there are very few histories of newer institutions: the historical narrative of the British ‘post-92’ universities (former Polytechnics) is almost silent.

Some histories focus on a particular historical event or period, where it appears that the institution had a specific impact. Lunsingh Sheuleer and Pothumus Meyjes (1975), for example, discuss the development of new learning at Leiden University in the seventeenth century, a period of huge importance to the growth of scientific and humanistic research. Lawrence Stone (1965) was the first historian to view the University in its wider social context. Most histories follow a similar pattern, however. They follow the fortunes of the institution from the early origins and include descriptions of the role of the ‘great and the good’, the development of the campus and its buildings and the development of the modern faculties. One institutional history, that of the University of Liege, contains a whole volume of famous academics who have been employed by the University and lists their publications (Demoulin, 1967). In general, institutions are seldom placed within the wider context of contemporary political, cultural and societal change.

It is arguable that much of this is ‘heritage’ history. Edward and Onyszchuk’s (1997) work on the buildings of McGill University in Montreal helps emphasise the University’s architectural place in the city, although, close investigation shows that the University simply owns a large number of old mansions around the city rather than having constructed them. Change, in this case, is played down and an artificial sense of shared culture is created. It is, of course, possible to argue that university histories help to raise the profile of the institution and provide staff and students with an identity. In this way, universities are indeed like Proteus, taking on the heritage of a city and becoming one with it, even when the connections are, at best, tenuous.

**UCE and the Polytechnic tradition**

UCE is one of about 30 universities that were created by government act in 1992. The so-called

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1 A notable example is G. Walford’s (1987) *Restructuring Universities: politics and power in the management of change*. This is a case study of Aston University and how it changed as a result of the national financial crisis in higher education in the mid 1980s. The book was a critique of contemporary funding policy both at government and University level.
‘Post-92’ universities were almost all institutions that were previously known as ‘Polytechnics’. Polytechnics, founded in the late 1960s by the UK’s Labour government, were part of an attempt to create a system of higher education that focused on technical training. The Polytechnics were supposed to be the equal partner of the universities in a new ‘Binary System’ that characterised UK’s higher education for the next 30 years (Robinson, 1968, p. 193). However, the Polytechnics were always regarded by policy makers as the poor relation and, under the control of the local authorities, always struggled to fund an effective administration and facilities. Towards the end of the 1980s, pressure from the polytechnic directors grew on Thatcher’s government to remove the polytechnics from local authority control. Margaret Thatcher jumped at the opportunity to damage the power of local authorities and made the Polytechnics independent through the 1989 Further Education Act. Some years later, the new Prime Minister, John Major, made it possible in the HE Act, 1992, for the old polytechnics to take University status.

The Polytechnics had been a government initiative. However, they were the culmination of a local movement that developed over the course of the 19th century. By the mid 1960s, local education authorities ran a network of colleges around their districts and the cities all possessed an advanced college for art, for technical education and for ‘commercial’ education (including social studies, English and others). All this had not been the result of philanthropy but of an increasing concern amongst the ruling elite that Britain was falling behind foreign competitors in industrial development. The concern to provide industry with a better qualified workforce has underlain UK government FE and HE policy ever since.

**Constant metamorphosis**

UCE has changed structurally on several occasions throughout its history, which can be followed most usefully from the 1890s. The main changes, which are applicable to many other institutions, are: designation (from college to Polytechnic to University); name (the institution today has undergone many changes of name since the 1890s); new annexes (UCE has expanded rapidly, incorporating many different colleges).

As an institution, therefore, UCE is in no way homogeneous. This is clearly demonstrated by the creation of the City of Birmingham Polytechnic, UCE’s immediate ancestor institution. The Polytechnic consisted of two large central colleges, Art and Commerce and two smaller technical colleges, North and South Birmingham (see below, Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The development of the City of Birmingham Polytechnic**
The initial faculty division of the Polytechnic followed the lines of the old colleges. There were three ‘Centres’: Art, Technology and Commerce. The transition to Polytechnic status was not without problems as a result of this heritage. One argument of particular note was that between the Architecture department and the Polytechnic. Architecture, as a previously independent school, became, perhaps logically, part of the Polytechnic. However, the Polytechnics were all under the academic supervision of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), but Architecture had been subject to the Universities Central Admissions System (UCAS), so, in its own eyes, received an academically superior student. The ensuing row led to the resignation of the School’s well-known Head, Professor Hinton. Although a wide range of faculties has since developed, the earlier college heritage can still be defined and it is this sensitivity that may have led to the relative autonomy of the faculties in relation to the central authority of Directorate and the Director/Vice Chancellor.

Change and continuity: Staff, students and the work of the Institution

The gradual centralisation of colleges that were run by the local authority appears to be one theme of the history of UCE and many other former Polytechnics. Indeed, the Polytechnic ‘experiment’ was an attempt to bring order and parity to a confusing educational system. Each college awarded qualifications from a range of different bodies. The central colleges of Commerce and Technology also offered University of London External degrees. However, many qualifications were not widely recognised or viewed as equal to degrees. For example, the two-year Librarianship diploma course, run by the College of Commerce, was not a degree course and was therefore not held in as much respect as a degree course.

The nature of the teaching staff at UCE has changed gradually since the 1890s. Staff have gradually transformed from being largely part-time to full-time. In the early years of the local education authority colleges, they were from a range of backgrounds and taught during the evenings. Staff increasingly come from an academic rather than a work-based background. Increasingly, staff were more qualified. After the First World War, staff were more likely than before to have university degrees. During the 1920s, the connection with universities was
developed and some lecturers were also staff at the nearby University of Birmingham. More recently, pressures of opportunity in the 1970s, following financial cutbacks, and the 1990s, have led to the employment of highly qualified lecturers.

This in part has been the result of a change in the type of students. Students originally studied part-time and in the evenings at the constituent colleges but by the 1960s, a much bigger proportion of students were full-timers. The origins of UCE were firmly rooted in part-time, evening study. Most of the constituent colleges ran their courses during the evenings. Students studied after work and courses were closely related to their work. During the 1920s, there emerged an increasing, though small, group of full-time students and after the Second World War, the numbers increased as demand grew for higher education courses. During the 1960s, in the era of the Robbins report, that demand grew dramatically and colleges began to focus increasingly on the development of full-time courses. A report by the City of Birmingham’s Chief Education Officer in 1962 argued that an increasing number of parents were sending their children to full-time courses provided in local education controlled colleges and ‘more people may be obliged to follow this course as is expected… An increasing number of young people are unable to obtain places in Universities in the next few years.’ (UCEa, 1962, p. 12). This increasing demand led, during the 1960s, to the arrival of students from further afield than Birmingham and the region. During the early part of the twentieth century, the part-time nature of the courses that were originally devised meant that the constituent colleges were aimed primarily at local people. However, the local connection continues and this is visible in the ethnic make-up of the student body since the 1980s. Many of UCE’s students come from Birmingham and the immediate surrounding districts, which have a large Asian population.

UCE today has a wide range of more typically ‘academic’ disciplines but a large proportion are more directly ‘vocational’ and this reflects the institution’s historical development. The early LEA colleges were established to teach subjects that would be useful to local commerce such as accounting, secretarial skills and so-on. The development of language teaching was primarily as an applied business skill. Spanish, for example, taught during the 1920s, can be seen in the context of increasing British business concerns in South America. The teaching of Esperanto, from as early as 1906, was a result of a contemporary belief that this language was going to be the language of international business. Other, more ‘academic’ subjects, such as history, English literature and social studies, were developed as off-shoots of the original vocational subjects. The tradition continued with the creation of the Polytechnics, founded with the idea of close link between education and local business.

Similarly, the type of work engaged in by the institution has changed over time. Research has become increasingly important to the life of most universities since the 1870s (Shattock, 1995). Local education authority controlled colleges were not, by and large, research institutions and research was more of an amateur interest. The new Polytechnics were primarily intended as teaching institutions, with some allowance for research. Certainly, in the first years of the Polytechnic, individual research project were so rare that they were discussed by the Governing Body as points of interest. For example, in 1971, the Governing Body gave approval to an application by the Commerce Centre to carry out a research project called ‘Filing procedures in the United Kingdom’. The project required a lecturer for 12 months and expenses were paid by

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2 The French Chambers of Commerce in 1931 expressed their enthusiasm for the teaching of Esperanto in all the French national schools.
Office of Scientific and technical information. About a third of the 400 full-time staff were ‘research active’. These spent a half day per week on research. The situation soon became more *dirigiste*. The issue of teaching relief was considered by the Governing Body in 1971 (UCEb, 1970-71, p. 166). In 1972, the Governing Body discussed the formation of a research and development consultancy unit. The Government was pressing for Polytechnics and other colleges that were suitably staffed and equipped to be able to make a valuable contribution to the R and D needs of industry on their own distinctive lines. The Secretary of State expressed the hope that such institutions would be ready to undertake *ad hoc* research projects on behalf of industry. The City of Birmingham Polytechnic agreed with this philosophy but within certain parameters (UCEb, 1971-72, p. 47). Research has, since the 1990s, become much more of a concern to the faculties in UCE.

UCE, like many other similar institutions is constantly developing its research profile, although, unlike many institutions, it still emphasises the importance of teaching as part of its core work. Most of the University’s lecturing staff undertake a professional teaching qualification and this has been largely true since the early years of the Polytechnic.

In common with many post-92 institutions, UCE is increasingly developing more ‘vocational’ subjects. The debate about the balance between academic and vocational courses is not novel. Indeed, it is arguable that it was a debate familiar to Greece in the fourth century. A concern about the state of technical education at higher level has underlain much of government and local government policy on higher education since the 1880s (Sanderson, 1994, 1999). This tradition continues as teacher education was incorporated into the Polytechnic in 1975 and nursing into the University in 1995. Arguably, this is part of a gradual ‘professionalisation’ of different areas of work since the 1870s (Schwarz, 2004).

**Image and identity**

UCE, like many of the ‘post-92’ universities has a problem of identity and this, arguably, is another theme of its history. The College of Commerce, although a rapidly expanding institution, never gained the full recognition that it needed to provide effective education. It migrated from one building to another, had several sites in the city, and had no separate governing body. It finally gained a Governing Body in 1962, nine years before it became part of the Polytechnic and also received a coat of Arms in 1963. This may be seen in the context of the creation of universities in the UK: for a University to be an independent, self accrediting institution, it requires a Royal Charter. The College did not, of course, become self accrediting, but it was important because it brought Royal recognition. It is significant, therefore, that the coat of Arms was used as part of the logo of the new Polytechnic in 1971 and remained in use after the creation of the University.

The University’s logo was redesigned in 2005, in common with a number of other institutions in the West Midlands region (for example, Coventry University and the University of Birmingham). However, concern with the logo is not new. In 1971, the Governing Body was concerned with the creation of a new ‘Polytechnic style’. The Director informed the Governing Body that he was considering employing consultants to make recommendations for a Polytechnic style for writing paper, notice boards and so-on. He proposed to employ three ex-students of the College of Art and Design who would be under the supervision of the Head of the Department of Visual Communication and receive a fee of £400 (CBGB, 1970-71, p. 92). The development of the logo in 1992 was an attempt to combine the new University status and the old Polytechnic. The main colour of the Polytechnic was red, and this was incorporated into the new logo. Change was
effected but older, familiar motifs and colours were used in order to maintain a sense of continuity.

As well as visual imagery, name is also clearly important to British universities. In 1992, there were, for example, objections raised from the nearby University of Birmingham, to the use of any name that included the words ‘University’ and ‘Birmingham’ in close proximity. As the former Vice Chancellor, Peter Knight, has commented, it was felt that the designation ‘University’ was important because the concept of the Polytechnic was unfamiliar internationally and might affect the potential recruitment of international students. Despite the difficulties in deciding upon a suitable name, the University is currently undergoing a further name change and this is to be decided, ultimately, by the Privy Council.

Implications

Harold Perkin (1984) once wrote that for us to see where we are going, we need to see where we have come from. As institutions, we have reached a particular situation because of the actions of previous generations of leadership, both within the institutions and in local or national government. We must think carefully of the dangers of new policies that have in reality been applied in the past. Careful account needs to be taken of why such approaches have succeeded or failed.

Institutions react for different reasons. Sometimes they respond to issues, whether they are novel or not, on the basis of pragmatism but often, they do so on the basis of learnt tradition. Like individuals, they respond as a result of their habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). University culture, argues Mora (2001) is born out of history and this clearly has important implications for how institutions effect change and how they react to it.

All this has serious implications for our understanding of what higher education is. The definition, historically, is always changing. As the borders of higher education through merger, partnership and take-overs expands, the success of attempts to diversify the student body is undermined. The expanded numbers who enter higher education today may not be the result of an expansion of higher education but the result of broadening the definition.

Conclusions

The history of UCE shows us that despite the popular belief that things are constantly changing and that change is good, many of the fundamentals have in fact remained unchanged and that re-organisation, re-designation and re-structuring is only ever a short-term expedient to address long-term issues.

Much of the change has been the result of government and local government interference in order to address long term issues such as the perceived decline in the educational skills of skilled workers in industry. This has been a constant concern of governments since the later nineteenth century but no government has yet provided an effective solution (Sanderson, 1994, 1999).

Much of this change is the result of new ways of organising training and not because the training needs have fundamentally changed. In 2006, we still train nurses, teachers and ‘technologists’ (to use a term that was perhaps more current in the 1950s) but this is largely performed in universities rather than in specialist schools. Higher education has merely taken over much of the
duties that were already being performed by other colleges.

Higher education has clearly expanded and therefore changed out of all recognition from the ‘sector’ that existed in 1900, but the history of the institution questions the nature of the expansion. This study questions whether ‘widening participation’ has in reality occurred to the extent to which modern governments claim it has.
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