

THE ROLE OF IDEAS AND THEIR CHANGE IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY: CASE STUDIES OF ENGLAND AND NEW ZEALAND

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Summary During the last twenty-five years there has been a common trend within the higher education sector in all countries. This trend has sometimes produced profound changes and several proposals of reforms in the sector. In this sense, the proposal of this paper is to start from the debate about the changeable nature of the higher education sector, and to explore in particular the role that ideas have played in the higher education policy-making from the eighties till the present-day in two countries which seem to be very similar, England and New Zealand.

Keywords higher education policy in England, tertiary education in New Zealand, reforms, policy change

In the last twenty-five years there has been a common trend within the higher education sector in all countries; this trend sometimes produced profound changes and several proposals of reforms in the sector. This phenomenon was followed by an increased interest in the policy regarding this sector. The results of this new interest were different in each country. In some of them it led to processes of radical change; in others it produced only marginal changes. It is very interesting to study this phenomenon examining in particular the as-

pect related to policies. In fact the higher education sector, the one I would like to consider, is very interesting to one who would like to conduct an in-depth study of policy change. In this sense we have to keep in mind that the main elements of higher education are: knowledge, authority of the academics, and fragmented structure of the organisation related to knowledge areas conceived as bricks. Clark (1983) explained that these characteristics of the sector help to understand the great adaptability of the institutions of higher education throughout their

existence. According to this point of view, which is the main one according to the literature on higher education, changes in this sector can take place only if they conform to the values that are dominant, especially among the academics. According to this concept, the changes should reflect the main paradigm (dominant or hegemonic) in the policy sector. This means that they should be in line with, or at least not opposite to, the institutionalised values and the interests shared by the academics. This perspective reads the change as completely path-dependant. So, in this context, the policy legacy determines strictly the direction and the content of the change itself. Contrasting with this vision, several changes happened in countries like New Zealand, Australia, England, and The Netherlands, which have taken completely different directions from that of the dominant academic values in the policy sector and in the institutions. Thus, from the path-dependence perspective we would not be able to explain the different directions that the reforms within the higher education sector have taken in the Western countries from the early Eighties. In fact, comparing the shape and content of several policies adopted in this sector and in the different countries, the traditional perspective used to interpret this policy is unable to explain why the higher education system has changed more than others or which direction it has taken (Capano, 1999: 63-64). In this sense, the proposal of this paper, which constitutes the initial step of a more empirical-based research, is to start from the debate about the changeable nature of the higher education sector, and to explore in particular the role that ideas have played in the higher education policy-making from the Eighties up till now in two countries which seem

to be very similar: the United Kingdom and New Zealand. The focus will be particularly on the concept and the practice of change. This is because the twenty years that constitute the focus of this analysis have been a period of great and profound reforms in the higher education sector and of redefinition of values and objectives to be pursued. The two cases that will be analysed have been chosen because they represent an example which inspired other countries. Furthermore, another important goal of this research is to demonstrate that contexts which might seem to be very similar, like the ones of the United Kingdom and New Zealand, could reveal much more differences than initially believed, after a deep analysis of the policy processes.

This paper is divided into six parts: theoretical framework; general hypothesis and the description of the methodology chosen; description of the two case-studies; hypothesis derived from the case-studies analysis; conclusion, in which I will make clear the first impressions I have about the object of research; initial bibliography.

1. The theoretical framework

Certainly the concept of knowledge is the basis of higher education. Its disciplines, academic and professional, constitute the categories that shape the ways of teaching and researching that institutions like universities, polytechnics and colleges are organised to offer. In the context of modern higher education, for sure, knowledge has to be interpreted in as wide a way as possible. It embraces not only the what, the content and methods of particular subjects, but also the why, the wide intellectual and cultural questions that they provoke, and the how, i.e. their practical application to the solution

of personal, social and economic problems. In this sense, therefore, knowledge is not an exclusive property of a deeply intellectual civilization, and of those institutions strongly related to the preservation, transmission and development of a civilization. It is not something about ivory towers. It now permeates our mass society and our post-industrial culture. Knowledge is for sure a crucial resource in the development of political democracy, in the battle for social justice and for individual progress. So it is not something sacred and confined. From this it may be inferred that not only universities are institutions of higher education. We have to keep in mind that many students today do not come from, and are not intended to be part of, a cohesive elite. Many new subjects that are now taught were introduced in order to supply and dilute the old academic and professional standards. But imagining that a consequence of this process could be a detachment from knowledge itself could be an error. Despite the opening experimented in the last decades by the higher education sector, knowledge, even in the restricted sense of sophisticated information and special capacities, remains in the very core of it. The ones who try to substitute a rational, linear and simplistic logic of problem solving to the complexity of the objectives of higher education are not at all convincing. Certainly it is important to reflect about the connection that exists between higher education as an intellectual system and as a political one, between its private and public life. In the past it has been difficult to define this connection, being at the same time intense and transversal. In a general sense, the private life of higher education has become public. The expansion of sciences, outputs of research

and number of students would not have taken place without the scientific revolution that in the Fifties began to transform Biology and Biochemistry. But the nature of this bond could be more complex than it appears at first. The growth experimented by social services and biomedical industry in the post-war period, due without any doubt to the new scientific findings, stimulated also the diffusion of these subjects within the higher education during the Sixties and the Seventies. Therefore the way and the causal sequence of this complicated interrelation between intellectual origins and political outcomes are difficult to describe. So it is difficult to draw the link between the changes experimented in the basis of the human and social sciences (their private life), and their position and prominence in the higher education sector (their public life). Certainly the relation between change of ideas and political change seems to be very strong. Of course, in terms of public policy, this relation has ever been difficult to establish. The great growth of the social sciences in the universities during the post-war period could be perhaps attributed to the rapid growth of the welfare state, as much as to the intellectual vitality of fundamental disciplines like Sociology and Psychology. A similar process of development could be observed in relation to the studies of organization and management. The political success of these disciplines, in fact, has to be attributed only in little part to the ingenious findings within the economic or organisational theories. On the contrary, the decreasing consideration of the social sciences is not the result of a lack of academic creativity. Thus, as we can see, the bonds between the public and the private life of higher education have become really difficult to describe.

One example of the rubbing between the political and the intellectual spheres in this sense is the controversy provoked by attempts to use more indicators of performance in the planning of the system. Teaching and research are at the heart of the enterprise culture, many proposed indicators are related to subjects that once were considered to be private business of experts of the sector. The practice of measuring how the institutions administer their fluxes of money is generally accepted as a legitimate exercise. Also the need to compare the percentages of the components of the staff and the students is generally considered to be a legitimate practice. But attempts to develop quantitative measures of the academic performances are considered an activity to be done between peers rather than measured by managers. Despite this, the performance indicators have become more and more important.

Of course, these indicators create many doubts. In fact, there is a question that is generally formulated whenever different measures have to be combined to produce a general evaluation of the performance of a person, a department, or an institution. Which importance do we ascribe to the different measures? They have to depend on the definition that we give of the measures themselves and on the idea we have of them, which often reflects the dominant idea of the period we live in. This is a demonstration of the importance and power of ideas (Scott, 1989).

Political Science and Sociology traditionally emphasised the role of individual interest in the policy processes of the capitalist societies; less emphasis has been put on how ideas could deeply influence those processes (Campbell,

2002). Only in recent times has this aspect been studied in depth.

2. The case-studies

2.1. England

The English scholastic system, launched in 1944, has been for some years, until the early Eighties, a system characterized by a very decentralized model of management within which the schools – and thus the teachers – had a wide autonomy and freedom to teach. The system progressively showed its limits in several aspects and generated a lot of doubts about its real efficiency and effectiveness. This general trend within the schools, and particularly within the universities, characterised by an inclusive and egalitarian philosophy, ended with Margaret Thatcher, who founded, in 1979, a scholastic system criticized by most of the public opinion, which was characterized by a huge number of abandonments, by dissatisfaction of entrepreneurs with the preparation level of young scholars, and by poor results in international trials (Botani, 2002: 78-79). So, starting from the Eighties, the trend taken by the higher education policies in (not only) England aimed to implement some extremely selective strategies, adopted mainly to satisfy the needs of the economic system. Another demand that became an absolute priority in this period was one of reduction of public expenditure, which by then reached unsustainable levels after the Seventies. Concerning this, in the United Kingdom the Conservative government launched some radical changes in the higher education sector, first of all cutting down many fundings previously given by the central state and then creating a structure that would be responsible for the planning and guid-

ance of the polytechnic (non-university) sector (Capano, 1998: 66). Subsequently, the 1988 Thatcher reform was the most profound ever realised in Europe, especially for its strong attack against progressive pedagogy (Bottani, 2002: 79). With regard to the higher education policy, this law, together with a similar one issued in 1992, fulfilled the conservative principles through a series of measures, such as: abolition of the principle of immobility of university professors; introduction of a series of loans for the poorest students; abolition of the distinction between universities and polytechnics.

The funds came from an organization which no longer included university professors, but people from the world of enterprise and economy. Otherwise there were new criteria for fund-giving: the number of enrolled students and the scientific behaviour of university institutions. The goal of the government was to increase the number of students enrolled without weighing on the students' finances and to improve the quality of research. It is important to remember that at the end of the Seventies the number of students enrolled in English higher education was relatively smaller than in other European countries. This fact led the government to assume that it might damage the national economic development, and it ascribed the causes especially to the excess of autonomy given to each university (Capano, 1998: 66-67).

However, none of the changes made by the central state had direct consequences on the curricula, but several changes in this sense were introduced by the universities themselves, which stimulated a higher number of undergraduate courses, distant learning, and interdisciplinary curricula. On the other

hand, the changes in the modalities of teaching and of learning and in the content of the courses were modest, gradual and non-systematic. The incremental nature of changes in the curricula was largely due to decentralization. As for the postgraduate courses, the PhD programmes have not changed in a remarkable way in recent years. Instead, the Mphil courses showed a rapid growth in the fields of economy, history and physics. They have become more and more market-oriented. Regarding the curricula, a very important and meaningful datum is the fact that of all the subjects, the ones that were more prepared to embrace the recent changes were the humanistic rather than the scientific ones. Indeed, following the research of Becher and Barnett (1999), there have been four major factors determining the curricular change in the United Kingdom:

1. Type of institution (polytechnics more open to change than universities; new universities more than old ones);
2. Scientific or humanistic orientation (the humanistic more than the scientific one);
3. Purity of the subject (spurious more than pure subjects);
4. Market position (courses with less students more than particularly popular ones) (Becher and Barnett, 1999).

Blair's Labour majority did not discard the policies implemented before. In 2003 the Blair government risked to become a minority in the parliament over an important bill. It provided for allowing the universities to raise the enrolment taxes for the students up to 3.000 pounds (previously the maximum was 1.125 pounds). Blair had to face inter-

nal Labour opposition towards a bill that was rejected by 150 Labour deputies, who signed an adverse motion, for it not to be included in the electoral programme, and have the capacity to create a money-based discrimination between students.

In point of fact, the bill provided the poorest students with different ways to get loans at very low interests, to be given back upon entering the working arena. A system borrowed by the Australian law. Blair's measure was justified by the necessity to modernize the British universities, and adapt them to the transformation of formative demands of the people. Actually, with mass access to universities the relation between quantity and quality entered a crisis. The English universities could no longer compete with the American ones in the field of research. This was due to the lack of adequate funds.

So, the purpose of the more profound changes in the trend of British higher education reform in the last twenty years was to bring higher education institutions increasingly close to the world of work, and to concentrate on the prudent and thrifty usage of public resources by them, in order to avoid excess in public expenditure, which had been at the basis of the crisis of the system before the Eighties (Barnett and Bjarnson, 1999). From this point of view, different trends that underline the concept of quality have emerged in the new context. These aim to ensure that some academic standards could be maintained and be as comparable as possible; to ensure a high quality of teaching and learning; to respect academic autonomy, diversity and liberty, while strengthening the mechanisms of control over the expenditure of each university institution; to avoid

the placing of useless barriers between different institutions (Williams, 1997: 116).

2.2. New Zealand

New Zealand has a population of 3.5 million and the sector of *tertiary education* consists of seven universities, twenty-five polytechnics, four *colleges of education*, and three *wananga* (Maori language institutions). We have to add to these structures some small private institutes. In the last two decades, particularly in the last ten years, both Labour and National Party governments carried out policies of privatization and market-oriented competition for the assignation of funds. The emphasis on the concept of quality in higher education and in academic production found confirmation in several legislative bills.

Contrarily to many other countries, New Zealand adopted a very wide definition of *tertiary education*. It includes all levels of education traditionally defined in international literature as *post-secondary education*.

The main characteristic of New Zealand tertiary education policy is its tendency to change (OECD, 2007: 9-10). We can look into the story of reforms relative to the *tertiary education sector* in New Zealand from the mid-Eighties to present-day, dividing this period of great reformism into four sub-periods:

1. Before the Eighties: an elite system characterized by low rates of participation;
2. From the mid-Eighties till the end of the Eighties: trend towards the enlargement of participation united with major competition;
3. The Nineties: a further step towards a competitive market-oriented model;

4. From 2000 to present-day: continuing emphasis on a competitive market-oriented model, accompanied by the emergence of the trend towards major central control to support the economic and social development of the nation (McLaughlin, 2003: 16).

Before the Eighties the central state used to give funds to all the students; this was due particularly to the low rate of enrolled students. Universities were funded quite differently from the polytechnics and the *colleges of education*: in fact, they received funds from the *University Grant Committee*, which negotiated the amounting of funds themselves with the government. On the other hand, the polytechnics and the *colleges of education* received funds directly from the Department of Education.

In the second period (mid-Eighties till the end of the Eighties), the Labour government built a working group on the theme *Post Compulsory Education and Training* (PCET), which had the role of advisor to the government regarding the reform of *tertiary education*. The group was chaired by Professor Gary Hawke of Victoria University, and it included some representatives of governing agencies which treated the subject. Four months later, the group elaborated a series of important purposes for the New Zealand *tertiary education*. The *Hawke Report*, as the document was named, proposed meaningful changes, especially in the funding sector. Its principal goal was to increase participation and to improve the teaching method in the context of *tertiary education*. The purposed changes marked a shift of paradigm that is still at the basis of the approach towards *tertiary education*. The *Hawke Report* recommended:

1. More emphasis on private funds, even maintaining the government as the major financing body of the sector;
2. Increase of taxes for the students and authorization of each institute to set the contribution level;
3. Funds to institutes related to the number of full-time students;
4. Equal treatment of each *tertiary education* structure (universities, polytechnics and colleges of education);
5. Support to a loaning programme for the students;
6. Assistance to the poorest students in paying their taxes rather than using the loans.

The Labour government also wanted to apply a series of measures to increase the flow of students belonging to sub-represented ethnic groups, and to give a lot of subsidies to the poorest students. Most of these policies were never implemented; the subsidy for the poorest students was implemented, but only for a short period of time, i.e. until 1991, when the National Party announced its cancellation.

From 1990 to 1999 the National Party government, elected in October 1990, continued to follow the direction outlined in the *Hawke Report*, moving with greater resolution and radicalism towards competition and market. There was an overemphasizing of the role of the private sector for the funding of the activities of *tertiary education*, and of the idea of giving more autonomy to each structure. The policy decisions taken during this period seemed to be a real radical change of direction in respect to the classical welfare state.

The most important measures were:

1. The abolition of some university taxes decided upon by the Labour government;
2. Policies to stimulate the *tertiary education* institutions to encourage the entry of people under the age of twenty-two;
3. Measures enabling twenty-five year old students maintained by their family to assist the neediest;
4. A new system of loans to be returned with the taxes.

The set-up implemented in the context of these legislative bills concerning education at the beginning of the Nineties has been subject to a series of important revisions in the following years. The revision of *tertiary education* started immediately after the 1996 general elections. The government drafted the *Green Paper* (September 1997), in which the basic principles of the reform were enunciated. The reform was to be discussed by university authorities, and they were to give a feedback. After consultation on the *Green Paper* the government produced the *White Paper* (November 1998), with some ideas and policy solutions that have become principal in the next years. In particular in the *White Paper* the idea is confirmed that tertiary education is increasingly necessary in everyone's life in order to attain the economic and social objectives and to improve the participation of underrepresented groups. There is also confirmation of the policies of closeness to the students' needs and of incentive towards differentiation of programmatic offers. Those factors indicate that the purpose of the government is to fund all the students wherever they study, if the adopted programme respects the quality standards. Otherwise the *White Pa-*

per indicates some areas where it was necessary to make the system more efficient. The purposed measures comprehend: higher and better information for the students, for the suppliers of services and for the government; higher responsibility and *governance* for the institutions; centrality of the concepts of quality and control, and some changes in the way of funding the area of research.

Professor Hawke indicated that the policies implemented during the Eighties and the Nineties overvalued the ability of the managers who worked in the sector of *tertiary education* to think in terms of optimal balance or of economic interest, and to put to use not only zero-sum game dynamics.

The period from 2000 to present-day had as an important preamble the victory of the Labour Party in the elections held in November 1999, which lead to a change in the attitude and in the policy of government towards *tertiary education*. These are some of the initiatives taken by the Labour government:

1. The Commission on Education and Science carried out an analysis of the student taxes, loans and the entire funding system of *tertiary education*;
2. In April 2001 the government set up the TEAC (*Tertiary Education Advisory Committee*). Its task was to give advice to the government on the strategic directions in the sector of *tertiary education*;
3. A review of the adults' and communitarian education was introduced.

The TEAC was a very ambitious institution, which produced four reports in a year and a half. It did not spend much time on defining the problem, and accepted the point of view that the system was too competitive and not in line

with the social and economic needs of New Zealand.

Some very important recommendations made by the TEAC were:

1. To create a document outlining the strategic directions for *tertiary education*;
2. To develop a new method of fund-giving, keeping the teaching and research activities separated;
3. To create research centres of excellence and a fund related to performance.

In fact, the TEAC was interested more in the structure and in the funding of the system than in the access and equity problems of the students.

From 2002 onwards the situation has been as follows: the policies implemented by the Labour government kept many competitive aspects of the previous approach towards *tertiary education*, but they are now placed in a more centralized and regulated framework. The government put in practice several advice received by the TEAC, even if not exactly in the way they were proposed; these included the elaboration of a strategy for the sector, an ad hoc commission for *tertiary education*, some changes in the modalities of funding, and the creation of a fund related to performance, named Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) (Mc Laughlin, 2003: 19-27).

Another important objective is quality: testing out the universities. All is supervised by an authority with the task to do so, the New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA). Any university institution, from this point of view, has to demonstrate that it follows the rules about balance, and carries out the programmes that it had put forward as objectives. As for university-like institu-

tions, such as polytechnics and the like, after a period of management separated from universities, now they are governed by the same authority. The same principle of quality guides the distribution of funds for research. Initially they were given on the basis of the number of students enrolled in an institute, but now they are related also to the qualitative standards of the researches themselves.

The actual action of the New Zealand government aims to continue in this direction; in particular, to make *tertiary education* contribute actively to the welfare of the country, pointing to the formation of professionalism needed by the economic system (Government of New Zealand, 2005).

Of course, there are some doubts and critiques towards the dominant trend in the reforms described. They especially emerged in recent years. In particular, Guy and Hellen Scott (2005) affirmed that the growing disengagement of the state, and consequently of its funding, from the sector of *tertiary education* has had two negative consequences: a diffuse increase of taxes for the students, and the abandonment of the studies by many of them due to the incapacity to subsist (Scott and Scott, 2005: 7). Instead, Dalziel accuses the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF), because in his opinion it rewards only the behaviour and the quality of performance of each professor, and not of a university institution as a public service (Dalziel, 2005: 1). This critique is amplified by David, Craig and Robertson, who point out that some kinds of research, particularly the ones related to the local communities, of certain public interest, will be destined to die with the actual system of incentives. For this reason they

underline that the concept of public accountability has to be related more to responsibility to the citizens and their demands, and not only to the academic world (Davies, Craig, and Robertson, 2005: 2). Finally, Brian Opie stresses that an analysis of the proposed strategies for the next five years gives one the impression that the sector of *tertiary education* in New Zealand is going in the wrong direction. The reason for this is that it is too competitive and similar to the American system, while the country would need a softer approach that could focus more on the diffusion of the benefits (Opie, 2004: 306).

3. The hypotheses derived from the analysis of the case-studies

From a basic analysis of the above-mentioned case-studies it is possible to generate a series of concrete hypotheses. In particular, for England:

1. It can be assumed that Margaret Thatcher performed the role of policy entrepreneur during the period of reforms taken into consideration;
2. It can be assumed that the conservative think-tanks had a very important role in introducing ideas related to efficiency and excellence in the policy agenda;
3. It can be assumed that the trend of the process of reform of the British higher education has remained unchanged both with the conservative governments of Thatcher and Major and with Blair's Labour governments;
4. It can be assumed that humanistic faculties received more innovations of the process of reform of the higher education system than the scientific ones.

For New Zealand:

1. It can be assumed that the principal actors of the reform process from the Eighties up to the present, particularly in the decade from the end of the Eighties to the end of the Nineties, were the authorities in charge of testing the level of quality in the *tertiary education* system (NZQUA, AAA, CUAP), rather than the central government;
2. It can be assumed that the idea of efficiency stood out, setting aside the set-up of politics. Labour and National parties carried out the same policies towards quality, even if from quite different perspectives, but still the process went on;
3. The affirmation of the idea of efficiency made it possible to give more funds to some faculties, particularly the technical ones. The particular period during which I want to test my hypotheses is from 2000 until the present.

4. Conclusion: differences within a common trend

Actually, both situations taken into consideration passed through a very reformist phase starting from the Eighties; in both contexts the weight of ideas that constituted the basis of policies until the Eighties, and of the ones from that period on, has been so prominent that in both cases the policies before the reform were inspired (mainly) by the egalitarianism and the expansion of the student population, while the subsequent ones followed criteria more related to the ideas of efficiency, quality and competitiveness. To this basic tendency, which would seem to be coherent with the general hypotheses here proposed, we must

surely add some differences between the two higher education systems: the New Zealand system proceeded with decisions aimed at an ever higher managerial inspiration, particularly from 1996 up to the present, in keeping with the reforms within the entire public sector. In the United Kingdom there was a confrontation with the tradition of progressive education and with the idea of expansion of the education itself, which had been prominent until the Eighties, just like in the majority of other European countries. From this point of view the action of the Thatcher government created the conditions for a radical change that revolutionized the objectives and values of the entire education, and especially of the higher education sector. The ideas of efficiency, excellence and performance control became decisive. Blair's Labour governments did not deviate from the

course set by the conservative reforms. This seems to be an important point, and we can establish it also in New Zealand, where the same trend in the reform processes was followed both by progressive and conservative governments.

So the impression is that ideas marked deeply the two reform processes, but it has to be verified through research itself. At any rate, there are several factors that have to be valued: in which way the different political elites perceived these ideas, appropriated them and incorporated them in the policies to be implemented; how the different socio-economic contexts influenced the process; what was the weight of the different institutional set-ups; did the individual interests have any impact, and, if so, how relevant it was.

These are the questions which I will try to answer in my research.

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Uloga ideja i njihova promjena u formuliranju javnih politika u visokom školstvu: slučaj Engleske i Novoga Zelanda

SAŽETAK Posljednjih dvadeset i pet godina u sektoru visokog školstva u svim zemljama prisutan je zajednički trend. Taj trend katkad dovodi do temeljitih promjena i različitih prijedloga reforme u tom sektoru. U tom se smislu u ovom radu predlaže pokretanje rasprave o promjenjivoj prirodi sektora visokog školstva te konkretno ispitivanje uloge ideja u formuliranju javnih politika u visokom školstvu od osamdesetih godina do danas u dvjema zemljama koje se čine vrlo sličnima – Engleskoj i Novom Zelandu.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI politika visokog obrazovanja u Engleskoj, tercijarno obrazovanje u Novom Zelandu, reforme, promjena politike