

On Facing an Exciting Future

Cogitations on the Theme Higher Education, Competition and Access

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Introduction

In classical times when the Chinese Empire was Celestial, and when the Imperial civil service was run by true Mandarins, scholar civil servants, one curse was feared above all others. The curse, sometimes visited upon the head of the most irritating and persistent of one's rivals for promotion or for the Imperial favour, was strange indeed: 'May *you* live in interesting times.'

To appreciate and to savour to the full the significance of such an utterance, it is as well to understand the underlying *Weltanschauung* that Confucianism, the basic ethic of the classical Chinese bureaucracy, represented both as a belief and as an expression of the accompanying social order. The Confucian ideal in government, as indeed, in personal relations, was that of being in harmony with the Universe. And harmony, in its ultimate expression and attainment, involved judicious balance between the world-shaping forces – the Ying and the Yang – that governed the Confucian cosmos.

The Horror of Interesting Times

Interesting times were times of unpredictability, of unrest, of imbalance between the forces of darkness and light, between the negative and the positive. To live in times of change – and interest of course is spurred by the unpredictable – was a deeply horrifying experience, not least, because it was the duty of the Mandarinate to maintain that equilibrium which bespoke harmony as much in governance, as in social tranquillity. Interesting times then were clear evidence of disharmony, of unrest and of turmoil. Or, to use an antique, but equally powerful expression from the English 17th century, they held the prospect of 'A world turned upside down'. The enduring mission of the Mandarinate was to preserve the balance, thus harmony. Hence, interesting times were proof of quite massive professional ineptitude and blundering. In short, 'interesting times' in that distant world and of a past age would be the counterpart of what, today, the adepts of the New Public Management and neo Liberals everywhere would call 'government failure'.

Harmony, Harmonisation and some its contenders

Today, we no longer share a cosmology in which harmony has great place. Agreed, there are some of us in higher education, who appear to subscribe to the notion of harmonisation. Though how far we are prepared to push the bounds of this concept to its ultimate remains, for the moment at least, surrounded by creative and perhaps a deliberately judicious – obscurity. There are times when our Mandarins have to draw upon the Yang rather than the Ying, if policy is to be advanced at all. Still, we will be able to test these limits as the Bologna Process

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accelerates, as it affects the *'pays réel'* rather than being debated simply by the *'pays politique'*. (Neave, 2002) As the debate leaves the conference hall and the comfortable carpet-lined corridors of power and begins to have real consequences in the lecture theatre and real impact on the student estate, so the harmony so far taken for granted, will most assuredly take on very interesting dimensions indeed. Brief but intense murmurings that arose amongst students to the South of the Quievrain river in November 2003, serve to remind us of this elemental truth.

Competition, access and higher education

In this short presentation I will examine one particular issue – that of competition and very particularly how competition bears upon the issue of access to higher education. I want to do so in the general context of that very specific European response to 'globalisation' which, in the setting of higher education, is gradually taking the form of a 'common architecture' and thus, the first move in what some see as creating a European higher education system.

Given the scale of the task, and given too that the Bologna Process which has a long way to go, involves, so far, only a minimum definition of what may be considered common European-wide dimensions, in very truth, the Future should be intensely interesting, if not outrightly exciting. Indeed, if some of our higher education gurus are to be believed, change will be the permanent lot of higher education. Supposing their prophecies are accurate, then the least we can say about higher education's future, is that excitement is permanently guaranteed. Harmony however, is a different issue. Yet, one of the most challenging changes lies precisely in the domain of access. Many of the key changes are already taking place. And very especially so in the way in which competition works, is made to work and, more particularly, the points in the higher education system at which it works.

Competition and Access: the historical European model

It is of course, both inaccurate and, at the same time, one of the necessary justificatory fictions involved in reconstructing higher education around 'market forces', to believe that competition has been absent from the university and from the higher education system. Let us remind ourselves, first of all, that the terms of that competition – with certain exceptions of which Islands of the North Atlantic – Britain and Ireland are examples – was set by public authority, sometimes modified from time to time by the same. One modification of particular importance in Belgium was, as you will recall, the *'omnivalence des diplômes'* which, in 1968 opened up access to higher education by adding other curricular tracks to the traditional monopoly exercised by tracks theoretic or academic. And similar developments followed in Italy and France, shortly after.

Let us also remind ourselves that *grosso modo* the mechanisms of selection – and thus of competition for access – have remained remarkably stable in Western Europe for the past half century at least. Whether in the form of the Baccalaureat, the Abitur, the Maturità, these basic components have remained in place and have seen us through what is perhaps the 20th century's greatest achievement in the social history of Western Europe – that is, the transformation of higher learning from an elite to a mass system. Let us also note that certain systems – France is one, Finland another – are from a quantitative standpoint, currently approaching – if they have not already surpassed what the American sociologist, Martin Trow, once defined as the threshold of 'universal access'. Universal access is broadly defined when more than half the age group enters the higher education system. (Trow, 1973) Other systems, notably the British, have set themselves a similar ambition. (Dearing Report, 1998) to be achieved slightly later.

Historically Open Access Systems

In systems where entry to higher education was guaranteed to all those holding the appropriate secondary school leaving certificate, competition was not for entry so much as securing a place in the faculty of one's choice. It also involved a second form of competition, namely to uphold personal performance in such a way that it took

the individual student through that ‘massacre of the innocents’ which regularly took place at the end of the first year in university.

Changes in the Nexus of Access and Competition

From our present day vantage point, tinged as it is by increasing cross frontier mobility of students and by the arrival of what are generically termed ‘alternative providers’ or trans-national ‘learning systems’ – sometimes arranged around Open Universities – as they are in Britain, the Netherlands, Spain and Germany (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999) or various forms of metaphysical construction termed ‘virtual universities’, (Tsang and della Senta, 2000) this historic form of competition for access rested on very peculiar features. It was a competition *by* students *for* a place. What it most certainly was not, was competition by *institutions for* students *to* fill places.

Certainly, here and there, one comes across allusions to competition between institutions, usually by certain newly founded establishments which claimed greater economic relevance for their particular curricular orientation to ‘employer’ needs. Alternatively, such claims made much of the appropriateness of short cycle higher education to the capacities and expectations of ‘new students’ – those who were the first in their family to take up higher learning. Such arguments accompanied the rise of the British polytechnics (Brosan and Robinson, 1972) and, for a time, were part of the rhetoric accompanying the early development of their French counterparts – the *Instituts Universitaires de Technologie*. (Bernard, 1968) They claimed to be a competitive alternative, sensitive to the short term demands of the market, and to remedy the apparent unwillingness of the historic university to meet such demands. At the time, the late Sixties and early Seventies, these arguments were more in the nature of special pleading, extolling one’s own virtues and blowing one’s own trumpet, than a guiding principle for national policy.

How the Change came about

The question we have to ask ourselves is: ‘What changed the terms of competition? And what is the part of globalisation in bringing it about?’ My personal view on this, is that whilst globalisation – that is the press towards economic integration through the application of Information Technologies to economic and social exchange – is less a prime cause than a consequence – an amplification – of a process that began well before the notion of Globalisation became *en vogue*.

The first thing that strikes one in the redefinition of the nexus between access and competition, shifting it from competition *between* students for a place towards competition *between* institutions for students, is the very obvious role of government. Irrespective of the particular ideological trappings that governments bedecked themselves in – irrespective of whether the policy they introduced entailed their acting as ‘pseudo markets’ – that is, as a market substitute, which was the case of the United Kingdom, or as agents of modernisation – which one saw for instance in France and Sweden from the late Eighties onward – injecting the concept of institutional competition stands as a quite massive example of government interventionism. The paradox is, I think, not always appreciated at its full value.

Two Amazing Paradoxes

This paradox has two faces. The first emerges when we consider that to open up higher education to the ‘free play of the market’ entailed quite massive government effort, in legislation, in modifying funding and finance and in some cases, modifying the conditions of academic work. The second paradox lies in the consequences of extending institutional initiative. Though obviously subject to variation from nation to nation, the ostensible reduction in the close oversight of public authority and the creation of greater capacities for self defined initiative at the institutional level, has given rise to a system of public oversight and surveillance if anything more finely attuned to tracking the vagaries and short comings of the individual institution than the system of control which it replaced. State control may be dead. But the drive to state surveillance has resulted in a no less complex system of oversight, often alluded to as the Evaluative State. (Henkel and Little, 1999; Neave, 1988, 1998)

Meritocracy vs Need. The Heart of the Matter

There is second feature, which accompanies the rise of competition as the Ark of Covenant in a post-modern world. Historically, competition has been the prime tool in democratising (awful word) access to higher education on the basis of merit and ability – *la carrière ouverte aux talents*. The past decade and a half has seen competition assume the status of an all encompassing social ethic, the single driving force that a particular political construct holds to lie at the basis of all human behaviour.

Not surprisingly, placing competition as the fundamental and operational tie between economics and society also involves major modification to the role of the student. Calling students ‘consumers’ may to some appear as part of that epistemic drift which accompanies re-conceptualising higher education away from an advanced industrial economy to setting down its place in the Knowledge Economy. This is plausible. But it does not push the analysis far enough. If we give some hard thought to what is involved, this verbal juggling hides shifts of the utmost significance for the place and purpose of higher education in society.

From the narrow perspective of higher education, designating the student as ‘consumer’ reverses the historic relationship between student and institution and very particularly so when we focus on the point of access. From being an applicant who has to fulfil particular conditions prior both to being accepted and to remain in higher learning, the consumer is a resource, vital for institutional survival. Access to higher education thus shifts from achieved merit to ‘individual need’. Once we admit this interpretation, we have a very different perspective on the place of both student and university. Students are no longer apprentices or those ready to undergo the experience of acquiring knowledge, socialisation and education as a process of formal qualification and maturation, defined by knowledge organised and structured by the university over time.

Reconstructing the Student: its consequences for higher education

Re-constructing the student qua consumer carries in its train far-reaching consequences for the type of relationship and the place in the social fabric that the university occupies. Such a mutation places external demand as the primary engine in higher education rather than the interests of academia, driven by internal, disciplinary based concerns, external demand being variously defined as student demand for training rather than education or enlightenment, as commissioned undertakings whether in research or in the service of interests and of constituencies, all of which contribute to upholding the individual establishment’s internal husbandry. Thus the traditional task of disseminating learning is balanced by the ‘providing of services’, a re-defining of purpose, which is reflected in various studies, also engaged in unearthing new types of university. (Clark, 1998; Tjevoll, 1997) These types have less to do with either the content or level of study – though the term ‘research university’ a redundancy in the European vocabulary, enjoys a certain descriptive popularity – so much as differences in institutional self definition in meeting external demand or in the way such demand is purveyed and delivered. As evidence of this, let us simply note the discovery of ‘the Service University’, ‘the Entrepreneurial University’, ‘the Enterprise University’ (the difference is subtle, but significant for all that), ‘the Corporate University’ *e tutti quanti*.

Shifting the Competitive Nexus from student to institution

The shift of the competitive nexus from the student to the institution is visible in other areas too. Competition means choice. Indeed, the basic rationale of the market driving social or educational institutions is, for economists at least, the belief that the market maximises choice. (Van Vught, 1998) So far, so good. Choice however, requires information and the ability to weigh up what is presented in the light of what the individual holds to be his or her abilities set against her or his aspirations. Indeed, employability is nothing less than the successful alignment of the former as against the latter and their subsequent recognition by a particular sector of the labour market.

Re-balancing the competitive element in access from the student to the institution, at least in the European context, assumes two very different strategies. And if both find their justification in strengthening the role of the market,

we have already commented on the paradox inherent in the rise of para-statal bodies, agencies and committees – whether they deal with quality or, as tends increasingly to be the case, with the issue of accreditation.

Quality and Evaluation agencies stand as the central instrument in shifting the competitive element from student to institution. In evaluating institutional performance, they also have the function of informing student choice. Not only do they place the onus for providing that information on the institution – a radical change from previous practice where the onus rested largely with the student, the school or the family. They also involve what for Europe stands as a major departure in the historic projection of institutional image. Historically, such an image was a product forged internally within the university itself. Institutional image was also largely a function of the ties represented by their graduates with public service and with what the American Political Scientist, David Easton, once termed the ‘value allocating bodies in society’ – the law, the civil service, the military, the Church and sometimes the taxation system! This version of the university image reposed largely on tacit knowledge, built up over time. It conveyed an impression – an aura of standing – rather than an evaluation grounded in operational indicators and performance criteria.

Instrumentality of Judgement and the Building of Images

When we take a closer look at the instrumentality involved in shifting the heart of the competitive nexus in access, it is clear that one of the most powerful amongst them is precisely the relocation of repute and image in the public domain. And no less important is the fact that the presentation – and very often the interpretation, which follows the release of official reports and statistics – is no longer wholly controlled by higher education. Or, for that matter, by the agencies responsible for gathering them. League Tables and the ranking of performance have passed very firmly into the public domain and very speedily into the domain of educational journalism.

What is less clear, however, is how far student choice between individual institutions is influenced by the publicly interpreted image, or for that matter, whether the efforts of educational journalism serve merely to confirm decisions students have previously taken. And yet, as a factor which may have its place in directing student flows into higher education, this aspect of competition between institutions for students is one of the unsung arias of change.

We need to pay more attention to the ways in which institutions seek in their turn either to confirm this publicly broadcast image or, on the other hand, to construct an alternative to it. It is very certain that some systems are more advanced along this path than others. The United Kingdom comes especially to mind here. Still, one cannot doubt that that activity often described in marketing terms as ‘niche building’ – that is, securing public standing in particular areas of speciality and strength – is very certainly the shape of things to come.

Niche-Building, Trumpet Blowing and Informational Clarity

Niche building – grotesque though the term is when taken in conjunction with higher education – also deserves our attention, not because of the degree of veracity – or its absence – implicit in the noble art of self extolling, boosterism and institutional trumpet-blowing, so much as its possible consequences for transparency. It is important because what is involved in ‘niche building’ involves two processes, neither of which is necessarily compatible with ‘readability’. The first of these two processes is, in effect, the fragmentation of institutional standing. Niche building *per definitionem* emphasises those activities, which add to the glory of the institution – to boosting its particular strengths. Seen from a slightly different angle, this same activity also involves the fragmentation of institutional image building. Added to reputational fragmentation is a second process. It involves the relative instability in the same undertaking which, depending on the capacity of national Agencies of Judgement, may be repeated or up-dated annually, bi-annually and so forth. This is perhaps necessary, if only to show the responsiveness of individual establishments and their ability to be seen publicly to retain their status or to amend their ways. What one may question however, is whether this torrent of information optimises student choice or for that matter whether it serves to make such a process less complicated and more rational. There is nothing more agonising than hesitating between what appear to be opportunities of equal value, as Buridon’s ass, caught with having to choose between two lumps of hay, found out to his intense frustration.

Issues such as institutional image projection, its fragmentation and instability are present in varying degrees in all national systems. And national systems, as the comparativists amongst us are only too well aware, differ mightily one from another. Thus, the fragmentation that stands in the offing within the confines of the Nation State becomes immensely more complex once we turn our attention to cross frontier student flows. And *a fortiori* once we lift up our gaze to the metaphysical heights of the European Higher Education Area. The situation assumes a greater complexity for the plain and simple reason that the shifts I have described are already present within the Nation State.

A Higher Level of Debate and Excitement

To some, the issues I have raised in relation to the shift in competition for access from the student to the institution, serve merely to raise the level of the debate one notch further. If the European Higher Education Area is to acquire full meaning for students, does this not demand a standardised format for institutional image building? And does this not, in its turn, beg a higher degree of co-ordination between what is judged by Agencies of Judgement? This is, of course a matter of the highest significance – not because it involves the next stage of European construction. But because it also begs the question of how, at the same time, to uphold particular national differences, which is frankly easier said than done. It also raises a no less fundamental issue of what in an earlier decade was once termed the ‘unprepared student’ and how institutions are to take this phenomenon into account.

So long as students in higher education remained within the bounds of their *pays d’origine*, they were pedagogically if not always in terms of family background, ‘prepared’ for higher education. And though it can be argued that some, like the inhabitants of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, are ‘more prepared’ than others, yet it is rare indeed for those versed in the vagaries and practices of one national system always to be equipped to overcome the challenges posed when they move on to another. That the European Higher Education Area will be constructed largely by ‘unprepared students’ poses other issues no less ticklish. Amongst them, how far teaching, content and curriculum should be adjusted to their needs – or not, as the case may be. This, I have dealt with elsewhere (Neave, 2003) and for that reason will spare you the details.

Nevertheless, the moral which I will draw in guise of a conclusion, is obvious. Whether we welcome them or whether we take the horrified stance of the Chinese Mandarin of half a millennium ago, we are, most assuredly, in for very exciting times indeed.

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