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CHANGING PATTERNS IN MODES OF CO-ORDINATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter reviews changing patterns and structures in modes of co-ordination in higher education. It examines modes of co-ordination from three basic perspectives: as a planning and resource allocation mechanism; as an overall regulatory framework or set of rules; and as ideas – that is, more than merely a set of legally defined structures and processes.

The chapter begins with a brief analysis of the concept of modes of co-ordination, followed by an overview of changes in “classical” models of co-ordination (buffer/intermediary bodies, the continental model, etc.). The discussion then turns to a summary of the international reform agenda in higher education, leading to a more in-depth examination of how past models of co-ordination have been replaced by market relationships, concentrating on the international/global dimension.

The market is treated as both a set of concrete exchange relationships that shape the goals and structure of higher education and as normative or idealised presumptions concerning how higher education should be governed. I argue that in some respects the market as a mode of co-ordination does not achieve all that is expected of it. Formalised regulatory frameworks may be necessary for the achievement of certain objectives (though regulation and market are not necessarily antagonistic concepts). With the development of the knowledge based global economy, and higher education institutions themselves transcending national boundaries through forming international consortia of various types, questions concerning effective modes of co-ordination become increasingly complex and difficult. Clearly, the decisions and policies of such global bodies as the World Trade Organisation have the potential to significantly affect the way in which higher education is structured and offered around the world. The penultimate section of the chapter looks at the unintended consequences and weaknesses of market co-ordination of higher education, and the beginning of a renewed interest in state regulation. In conclusion, I suggest a new approach to research on higher education; one that replaces the notion of the natural ascendancy of the market over state control with that of a dialectical relationship between the two.

2. CO-ORDINATION CONCEPTUALISED

The term “modes of co-ordination” with respect to higher education has a number of meanings. In the narrow sense of the words, “modes of co-ordination” refers to specific governmental, quasi-governmental or inter-institutional arrangements for managing specific trans-institutional activities. Martin and Talpaert (1992: 1) define higher education co-ordination as “the formal system of planning, monitoring, allocation of resources, and control whereby governments and bureaucracies regulate higher education”. Van Vught (1989: 21) defines the related term of regulation in much the same way. Regulation is “the efforts of government to steer the decisions and actions of specific societal actors according to the objectives the government has set and by using instruments the government has at its disposal”. However, this chapter adopts a more eclectic approach to co-ordination, examining not only the different machinery used to control higher education institutions and systems, but also the ideological foundations upon which such machinery is based, and the relationship between external authority structures and internal forms of governance and management.

Modes of co-ordination can be thought of as planning and resource allocation mechanisms; as overall regulatory frameworks; or as a set of ideas. Much of the literature on co-ordination in higher education focuses on planning and resource allocation functions and their pursuit through specific governmental, quasi-governmental or inter-institutional arrangements. A separate co-ordinating authority (an intermediary or so-called “buffer” body, such as the former University Grants Committee in the United Kingdom) may be established to perform these tasks, or they may fall to the responsibility of one or more government ministries. If, however, we see co-ordination as an overall regulatory framework or set of rules, this emphasises the basic structural requisites of a higher education system and the degree of formal differentiation which they express, for example in the distinction between unitary and binary systems. Analysing co-ordination as ideas – that is, as more than merely a set of legally defined structures and processes – allows for the examination of the normative and ideological assumptions underlying specific control mechanisms, and hence also the assumptions underlying shifts in the way in which higher education systems and institutions are governed. For example, in many countries, bureaucratic control and the rational-legal ideal on which it is based have given way to the principles of new public management, economic rationalism and the concepts of “the market” and competition as the best way to regulate higher education institutions and systems.

The argument pursued in this chapter is that the ideas underpinning steering and regulatory frameworks of higher education are more important than specific structures and control mechanisms. Over nearly two decades the “idea” of market and competition has progressively come to dominate considerations of the co-ordination of higher education. However, with the start of a new millennium, we are witnessing the beginnings of a renewed interest in state regulation of higher education, as it appears that some governments have reached the limits to which they can abrogate their fiscal and policy responsibilities for this sector. Of course, in practice, specific modes of co-ordination cannot be fully distinguished from the ideological assump-

tions upon which they are based. On occasion, however, there may be a contrariety between the expectation and what is actually achieved by a particular mode of co-ordination – and market steering seems to fall into this category.

3. MODELS OF CO-ORDINATION

The structure and regulation of higher education systems cannot be understood without reference to the history and development of the specific national contexts in which they exist. The organisation of higher education differs widely between societies and over time within societies. There are, for example, formally unified systems recently created in Australia and the United Kingdom where (almost) all higher education institutions are called universities; well entrenched formal binary divisions between university and non-university institutions in Canada, the Netherlands and Germany; and highly centralised systems in France. Also, there is the USA with its great variety of institutional types; and systems under reconstruction such as in Eastern Europe, South Africa and Mozambique.

The mere reference to a “system” of higher education in the absence of a specific national context can therefore be misleading. Nonetheless, higher education has always had an international flavour, and to a remarkable degree, diverse and often divergent national systems of higher education appear to be experiencing common problems and dilemmas.

So long as it is kept in mind that we are referring to “ideal types”, some broad historical models of governance and co-ordination of higher education can be identified. Harman (1992: 2) lists four broad models upon which the governance of higher education is based:

1. The collegial model emphasises non-hierarchical co-operative decision-making, and a significant degree of self-determination by academic staff.
2. The bureaucratic model emphasises legal-rational authority and formal hierarchies.
3. The professional model emphasises the authority of experts and the importance of horizontally differentiated units linked in loose confederations.
4. The political model conceptualises governance in terms of political conflict among interest groups with competing views and values.

These models in turn, according to Harman (1992: 2), relate to three types of national authority systems:

1. The continental mode, in which authority is held by faculty guilds and state bureaucracy, and there is weak autonomous authority at the levels of the university and its constituent faculties.
2. The United Kingdom mode combines the authority of faculty guilds with a modest amount of influence from institutional trustees and administrators.
3. The United States mode has a similar combination to that in the United Kingdom, but with faculty rule being decidedly weaker and the influence of trustees and administrators being stronger.

Added to the above must be the market model of higher education co-ordination, which will receive more attention below.