

STRATEGIES FOR POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Peter Scott

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Strategies for Postsecondary Education

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PREFACE

This book arose out of a study of non-traditional forms of postsecondary education in the United States, principally community colleges and proprietary schools in California. This study led me naturally to a consideration of the place of these institutions within the whole system of education beyond the high school in America and of the growing popularity of the more catholic term, postsecondary education, in preference to the traditional but narrower category, higher education. This in turn led to a discussion of the persistence of inequality even within American higher education, the most developed, the most diverse and the most democratic system in the world. I have tried to illuminate the American experience by including a discussion of recent educational thinking about the structure and purpose of postsecondary education and a description of recent developments in this field in England and France. The book ends with some general observations — conclusions, I am afraid, would be much too firm a word to describe their nature. They turned out to be much more tentative than my own prejudices wanted at the start of the book. So this book is not intended to offer any solutions or answers to the difficult questions raised by the future development of postsecondary education. At the best I hope that it is a small contribution to the formulation of the appropriate questions.

I am very grateful to all the people in community colleges, proprietary schools, and other institutions who gave up their time to talk to me. I am particularly grateful to the following:

The Commonwealth Fund of New York, which by giving me a Harkness Fellowship in 1973-74 provided me with the opportunity to write this book, and in particular to the director, Dr Robert Johnston, and the assistant director, Mrs Martha English.

The University of California at Berkeley, and in particular the Graduate School of Public Policy, which appointed me a visiting scholar at the university during the year of my fellowship and so opened all Berkeley's excellent facilities to me. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to Professor Martin Trow.

The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education, formerly the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. The list of those to whom I owe a special debt of thanks at the Carnegie Council is very long, but it certainly includes Dr Clark Kerr, Mr Verne Stadtman,

Dr Robert Berdahl, Dr Earl Cheit, and perhaps most important of all,
Mrs Nan Sand, the council's excellent librarian.

Peter Scott
February 1975

1 THE RISE OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Postsecondary education is becoming a more and more fashionable term in discussions of future policy for education. Although this quickening interest in a more catholic concept of higher education is an international phenomenon, it is particularly strong in the United States. In a newspaper interview Dr Clark Kerr, president emeritus of the University of California and at that time chairman of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, was asked whether the commission would have done anything different if it had been established in 1973 rather than in 1967. He replied that they might have preferred to be a commission on postsecondary education rather than simply higher education.¹ His retrospective wish probably reflects a similar shift in the majority opinion among American educators and politicians. A whole flood of recent reports confirms this impression. For example, the second Newman Report *National Policy and Higher Education*, published in October 1973, found it almost obligatory to state in its first few pages: 'We believe that the recognised universe of postsecondary education must be broad in an era of egalitarianism, and that the old domain of higher education is not broad enough for the education of the present spectrum of students.'² It is revealing that the first Newman Report published less than three years earlier in March 1971 concentrated its attention on community colleges and did not mention postsecondary education.³ The terms used in the quotation from the second report are also revealing. Postsecondary education is a 'universe': higher education only a 'domain'.

Popularity is one thing; clarity is another. The term, postsecondary education, is widely used today, but its meaning often remains ambiguous and even opaque. At times the use of this term in preference to the narrower 'higher education' is as much a political statement as a genuine redefinition of the categories in education beyond the high school. In the mouths of some people the phrase is a negative statement about the performance of universities and colleges rather than a positive statement about the achievements of those institutions and types of learning that stand outside the college mainstream and are allegedly the centre of new concern. The result is that often the totality of postsecondary education seems to be better understood than its constituent parts. Although not all of the growing interest in less traditional forms of post-high school education can be explained by antipathy to the traditions of higher education, public disillusion with colleges and universities and

the sagging self-confidence of higher education in the late 1960s and the early 1970s have undoubtedly helped to promote this interest.

The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education summed up the change in climate in American higher education between 1964 and 1974 in a single striking phrase: 'From Golden Age to Time of Troubles'.⁴ Until 1964 universities and colleges seemed to embody the inevitability of enlightenment. At the same time they were centres of scientific and technological invention, and so of the creation of wealth, and agents of political democracy and social equality. They enjoyed enthusiastic support among most sections of the community, and this was reflected in generous support from public funds. Postwar America had a faith in the inevitable benefits of educational expansion that matched the faith of Victorian England in the inevitable benefits of material progress. Almost exactly ten years ago the end of this 'golden age' was heralded by the first student troubles at Berkeley.⁵ Higher education was first wracked by internal disorder and then sucked into the vortex of political controversy and social conflict provoked by the crises of poverty, race and Vietnam. Universities and colleges emerged weakened and disoriented. The academic consensus, those common assumptions about the nature and purposes of higher education, which was once such a spacious middle ground, shrank to a thin strip of territory between the trenches of the right and of the left. The right despised what they regarded as the failure of academics to keep order and to uphold traditional values. When they had the power, as they did in California during the administration of Governor Ronald Reagan between 1966 and 1974, they punished higher education by cutting budgets and through more direct political pressure. The left attacked higher education as the agent of a repressive class state. They criticised the links between universities and government and industry, particularly in matters of defence which because of the Vietnam war was a highly charged issue. They argued that universities were eager to satisfy the demands of the state and of those classes with social and economic power, but failed to meet the aspirations of all the people. Instead of fulfilling a progressive and a critical role in society, higher education had become a factory to train professional workers and bourgeois intellectuals.

Today the conflict is less virulent. Physical disruption is the exception rather than the rule. The force of the right-wing backlash seems for the moment to be spent. Yet the memory of the loss of faith that occurred in the 1960s is not dead, and neither right nor left has really modified their criticisms of the college establishment. The new academic consensus is more conditional and more critical than the catholic, but perhaps complacent, consensus that was shattered by the troubles of the past decade. The results of this more critical climate can be seen

everywhere. Along with the loss of public esteem and self-confidence, the momentum of expansion has been lost. Government is less sure that investment in higher education will automatically yield a dividend. Many young people are less sure that a college degree will automatically lead to social and economic advancement, or even that they want such advancement. Even state governments that are more sympathetic to higher education have adopted interventionist policies. For example, they may agree to an increased budget on condition that the institution adopts a more radical affirmative action programme. This new 'interventionism' by liberals is just as fundamental a modification of the traditional concept of academic autonomy as the more obvious, but also cruder, hostility of conservatives. So higher education in America today faces creeping state interference (the Carnegie Commission used the graphic phrase 'the glacial spread of public control'⁶), tighter budgets with more conditions attached, and the disillusion of many young people with the traditional benefits of higher education which is reflected both in student alienation and faltering enrollment.

Another consequence of the shocks of the sixties is the new interest in postsecondary education. Conservatives are attracted to the concept because it gives new status to institutions outside the college mainstream that often have a more down-to-earth approach to education and correspondingly less status to those universities and colleges which in the eyes of many conservatives have been hopelessly 'radicalised'. For example, the Governor of Ohio in a recent book criticised the present American system of education as 'snobbish, impractical, intellectually dishonest, and misguided'. He argued that because of the failure of education to train young people for employment the system was leading the nation to social and economic ruin.⁷ Such a view is extreme, but conservatives would argue that many colleges educated their students for alienation rather than employment, that at its best, much of higher education was impractical and at its worst unpatriotic. The dispute about the future of the criminology school at the University of California at Berkeley in 1973-4 illustrated the gulf between radicals and conservatives in their misunderstanding of the purposes of higher education. When the university authorities decided to close the school and redeploy its work among existing departments, 'Save the Crim School' became a popular radical cause on the campus. One contributor to the student newspaper alleged that the school was being closed because it did not attempt to turn out police officers and FBI agents but instead attempted to educate its students to reorganise the evils of imperialism, sexism and racism. The conservative, of course, would reply that was precisely the point: there are plenty of jobs in law enforcement, but few openings for people skilled in discerning the evils of imperialism, sexism and racism. So to the conservative the idea of post-

secondary education is a useful counterweight to what he sees as the corrosive radicalism of higher education with its emphasis on impractical ideology.

The idea of postsecondary education is attractive to the liberal for parallel reasons. In spite of the massive expansion of educational opportunity through the development of the community colleges, and experiments with 'open access', the very term, higher education, can be seen as an exclusive and elitist category. To return for a moment to the case of the Berkeley criminology school: the authorities argued that the school should be closed because its academic standards were too low. However to many liberals, and especially to radicals, the preservation of academic standards is a lesser priority than the struggle against major social and political evils such as imperialism or racism. A similar contrast is apparent in the debate about affirmative action. The conservative college establishment argues that the academic standards of higher education should not be tampered with in the cause of promoting the interests of women, blacks and other minority groups. Liberals and radicals argue that higher education cannot be neutral in such fundamental conflicts, and that it must actively struggle to correct inequality in society. The question of whether higher education should be an active instrument of social change will be discussed later in this study. My present concern is only to show that the popularity of such views has promoted the popularity of the concept, postsecondary education, among liberals. The left is also attracted to the idea of postsecondary education because of their commitment to relevance in education. Of course, they do not believe that the form of education should be dictated by the needs of employers, but they do believe that education should be relevant to social conditions. They believe education must be actively engaged and committed. So they suspect the traditional commitment of higher education to objectivity as covert conservatism. Postsecondary education is then seen as an alternative model, less exclusive in terms of access, less elitist in its attitude to academic standards, and less neutral in its commitment to social change.

If postsecondary education has gained popularity as a negative concept in opposition to higher education, it has also grown out of the expansion of higher education itself. In a paper delivered at a conference on mass higher education held by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in Paris in June 1973, Professor Martin Trow distinguished three types of higher education, elite (up to 15 per cent of the relevant age group receive higher education), mass (between 15 and 50 per cent), and universal (more than 50 per cent). He added:

'The different phases are also associated with different functions of higher education both for students and for society at large. Elite

higher education is concerned primarily with shaping the mind and character of the ruling class, as it prepares students for broad elite roles in government and the learned professions. In mass higher education, the institutions are still preparing elites, but a much broader range of elites that includes the leading strata of all the technical and economic organisations of the society. And the emphasis shifts from the shaping of character to the transmission of skills for more specific technical elite roles. In institutions marked by universal access there is concern for the first time with the preparation of large numbers for life in an advanced industrial society; they are training not primarily elites, either broad or narrow, but the whole population, and their chief concern is to maximise the adaptability of that population to a society whose chief characteristic is rapid social and technological change.⁸

Later in his paper Professor Trow examined the effects of these changing functions on the institutions and forms of higher education.

‘Another broad trend in higher education that we might reasonably expect to continue is the diversification of the forms and functions of higher education . . . The growth of numbers has meant an increasing diversity of students in respect of their social origins and other characteristics, in their motivations, aspirations, interests, and adult careers. All of this places great pressures on the system to reflect the diversity of students in a similar diversity of educational provision . . . There is also a movement to diversify higher education upward and outward: upward to provide adult education or lifelong learning for a very large part of the adult population; outward, to bring it to people in their own homes or workplaces.’⁹

However the movement from elite to mass to universal higher education is not a simple or smooth progression, but a complex phenomenon made up of many contradictory trends. Professor Trow noted that the development of mass higher education did not necessarily involve the destruction of elite institutions or even their transformation into mass institutions, and that the patterns of growth to mass higher education involved the creation and extension of functions and activities and institutions rather than the disappearance of the old. However he added:

‘But while elite institutions and centers tend to survive and defend their unique characteristics in the face of the growth and transformation of the system around them, they are not always successful. Their special characteristics and integrity are threatened by those egalitarian values that define all differences as inequities; by the

standardizing force of central governmental control; and by the powerful levelling influence of the new forms of rationalized management and administration. The rationalization of academic administration is a reflection and a product of the movement toward mass higher education; but it is not neutral toward other forms of higher education. In this respect it works against the diversity of the system that is also a characteristic — indeed, a central defining characteristic — of mass higher education.’¹⁰

This analysis applies perhaps with greater force to Europe than to the United States. In Europe private higher education hardly exists. British universities, although independent bodies in theory, in practice receive nearly all their income from the state through the medium of the University Grants Committee. In France universities do not even enjoy this legal autonomy. University teachers are civil servants, and the Ministry of National Education not only controls university finances through a rigid system of cost norms but also oversees the system of national diplomas and other academic awards. Other postsecondary institutions like the polytechnics in Britain, although financed by local authorities, are also subject to central government control because in all European countries (with the exception of West Germany) local government only has those powers that the central government has agreed to delegate, and remains dependent on the central government for much of its income. So the possibility of diversity is correspondingly reduced in Europe; the trend towards rationalisation of administration and centralisation of control is correspondingly strengthened. Although the United States is clearly the best example of a mass system of higher education — and in some states of a near universal system — this analysis by Martin Trow of the tension between rationalisation and diversity perhaps fits less well in America. Because of the existence of a large private sector of higher education, and of many thousands of proprietary schools, and the diversity of forms of public control, the demand for a ‘system’ is less urgent, and the possibility of institutional diversity is much greater.

An obvious question arises from the new popularity of the term, postsecondary education, and from Professor Trow’s analysis of the pattern of growth towards mass higher education: are the two phrases, postsecondary education and mass higher education, simply synonyms, or do they describe two distinct concepts? Some would argue that the latter phrase is almost a contradiction in terms: the term, higher education, traditionally has implied a certain degree of exclusiveness, and the implicit contrast is with further education or other less academically advanced forms of postsecondary education. Can such a category of education ever be described as mass? This is perhaps the clue to a

possible answer to the original question which goes beyond semantic squabbling. Although at first sight the two categories may seem virtually synonymous, a great difference of meaning may rest on the choice of phrase. 'Mass higher education' conjures up an image of a core of traditional colleges and universities surrounded by a penumbra of less orthodox institutions that grows fainter towards its outer edge. This category has no innuendo of hostility to the traditions of (elite) higher education: rather the opposite. On the other hand, postsecondary education implies not a concentric solar system, but a galaxy of institutions in which colleges and universities shine brightly but other types of institution have not been caught in by their gravitational field. So perhaps the phrase used in the second Newman Report to describe postsecondary education is not inappropriate, 'a universe'. Both categories attempt to describe and to conceptualise the changes that have occurred, and will continue to occur, in higher education as a result of the massive expansion of student numbers, but they do so from different perspectives; Professor Trow's concept of 'mass higher education' is rooted in the traditions of higher education. It represents a liberal and evolutionary response to new social pressures for higher education; the concept of 'postsecondary education' not only carries an innuendo of antipathy to these traditions, but seems to demand a more fundamental re-examination of the purpose of education beyond the high school and a more radical re-ordering of its structure and institutions.

So the idea of postsecondary education has an ambivalent origin. It has grown out of the expansion of higher education, but it has achieved coherence through the rejection of some of the consequences of that expansion. Indulging for a moment in a mildly dialectical explanation, it could be said that a momentum of expansion is one of the inherent characteristics of modern systems of higher education, as it is of capitalism; and that, as in capitalism again, expansion leads to ever sharpening contradictions. The time comes when these contradictions can no longer be softened by further expansion or ignored. The fundamentals of the existing system must be changed, and a new consensus (socialism after the demise of capitalism, postsecondary education when higher education ceases to be a viable category) must be created.

This study is concerned with postsecondary education. It concentrates not so much on the transformation of traditional institutions of higher education but rather on those non-traditional institutions that stand outside the college mainstream (community colleges are an ambiguous category because they can fairly be included both in traditional higher education and in postsecondary education. In any case their contribution to postsecondary education is discussed in chapter three). Throughout the study postsecondary education — its definition, its