

Now it is the end of the decade, which has crept up, on me at least, quite suddenly, it seems timely to reflect on what the next decade will have in store for higher education – both students and academics, especially women. What will academic life be like by the year 2000? Will the Education Reform Act, 1988 really have ushered in a new era?

Can we glean anything from looking back over the last decade or two which will give us some indication of what the future might hold? I find it quite difficult to recall either my personal feelings or any collective sense of the future in late 1979, but I don't think that any of the thoughts we had then were anything like what has actually happened. The momentous changes in both the form and content of higher education wrought by the end of the 1980s were barely thought of in 1979.

At the end of 1979 we had only had six months of Thatcherism – a term not yet conceived – and any thoughts that higher education would be so drastically pruned and transformed were overlaid with vestiges of concern with the cuts in public expenditure wrought by Labour's quinquennial reviews of higher education. Indeed, I dimly recall some people's hope that the Tories might invest more in higher education, albeit of a selective kind, than Labour had achieved.

Although quite involved in the politics of higher education back in 1979 – being on the local AUT committee – and quite troubled by issues of salary and conditions of service, the key issues still seemed to be those of academic subject matter. I was, however, still part of a campaign for a "proper" university nursery facility, rather than one run at arm's length and on business lines. It seems ironic now to look back on that experience and see how the university nursery had opened in the autumn of 1979 run by a local businessman. He already owned and managed another independent nursery and planned to develop a chain of such nurseries. But within two years we had successfully cam-

From fringe to the fore in 10 years

paign to run the nursery ourselves – as a parents' association – as a charity rather than as a business.

In the summer of 1981, the University Nursery Parents' Association took over the full management and daily running of the nursery, with the only help being a rent-free building from the university. All other costs had to be met from the monies raised by charging for places. Little did we realize then what a precedent was being set and how this form of management would become standard for other levels of education from schools to higher education. In less than six months' time the management of state schools will begin to resemble that of the nursery. Although this kind of activity was incredibly time-consuming, it remained a fringe activity, to be done in the interstices of academic work.

In the same way running schools and colleges through governing bodies will also have to be a sideline to "proper" work. Those who do it will either have to have the appropriate skills of business management, or be appropriately trained, or muddle through as we found ourselves doing, not altogether happily. How we longed for the university bureaucracy to take over the daily "headaches" of cash flow, paying staff, setting fee levels, sickness and even snow policy, leaving us free to think of what we considered the more fundamental questions of policies on child care and education.

Back in 1979, when we considered that the battle over nursery management had been lost to business

acumen, we were really more concerned to try to promote new academic subject areas. It is also surprising to realize that it is also only just over 10 years since the first British introduction to women's studies was published, written by a group of Bristol women academics. Women's studies then was still rather a marginal area of academic life. It was very much an academic development arising from the women's movement. Although there were by this stage a few undergraduate courses, they were usually optional rather than core courses and certainly not usually an acceptable part of mainstream social sciences, arts or humanities courses, despite their evident growing popularity. The first masters (rather than mistress) in women's studies was only just getting off the ground at the University of Kent. Since then and throughout the 1980s women's studies courses have blossomed, especially at postgraduate rather than undergraduate level. I still do not know of one single bachelor (or more properly "spinsters") degree in women's studies. There are some minor components and recently the Polytechnic of North London introduced a half course, combined with other arts, social sciences or humanities. This may presage some future developments.

With the benefit of hindsight it seems odd that a major new area of academic expertise has grown and flourished at a time of tremendous contraction in higher education. Indeed, no new academic posts have been created. All the academic



MIRIAM DAVID

creativity has been spun by women academics adding to or transferring their expertise to these new departments. And sadly given the enormous enthusiasm in the early 1980s this vitality seems to be somewhat on the wane. Perhaps it is that the cuts and transformation to a more businesslike mode have begun to take their toll.

I know of no sustained analysis of the complex changes in the academic labour market in the 1980s, yet it certainly seems as if, despite the cuts, women academics still have a place and, for some of us more fortunate ones a more senior range of positions than a decade ago. What has changed in the academic labour market – for men and women alike – is the lack of new faces. We are all just 10 years older and, of course, there are quite a few absent friends, through early retirement and voluntary redundancies. So women's continuing presence in the academy may appear as a greater proportion of a very reduced totality. Certainly in the first round of cuts in the early 1980s it seemed that male academics quit more frequently than female. Will this be repeated in the early 1990s?

Given the general market and business orientation of higher education especially most recently through the Education Reform Act

of 1988 what future developments are likely to occur? It is hard to conjure up a picture just as it was 10 years ago. Yet E. P. Thompson's 20-year-old study of what he then considered an aberrant form – Warwick University Limited – has turned out to be the likely shape of things to come. In terms of the academic labour market and the student market we already have certain presages of things to come. Surely there will be some new faces in the academic labour market in the next 10 years because of the ageing profile – or are we all going to be over 50 by the year 2000? And will the gender balance alter more in women's favour? Given the already changing nature of the student population in favour of mature and especially women students and the fast declining proportion of 18-year-olds what does this augur? In four to five years the 18-year-old cohort will be at its lowest ebb – perhaps because 15 to 20 years ago women's aspirations were transformed through the education system from a preoccupation with family life to a desire to sustain involvement in an occupation. And these general trends appear to be continuing with some additions such as out-of-wedlock and lone parenthood becoming more common. So the percentage of the student population of the future as well as its age profile will be radically different from the past. And of course we are increasingly turning to parents, especially mothers, to be the students of the future.

Modes of study are also likely to be transformed. There is also considerable evidence to suggest that girls are outstripping boys in their levels of achievement at both GCSE and A level, so that girls may well become a greater proportion of the already dwindling 18-year-old cohort. Of course it is possible that the introduction of the National Curriculum may begin to reverse these trends although ostensibly at least it was in part about widening opportunities. In a myriad of ways it is possible to conjecture that by the year 2000 the academy will be, in terms of both students and academics, a largely female (and ageing) institution.