

A RESEARCH FRONTIER POLICED BY ACCOUNTANTS

Now that my study leave is well and truly over and I'm back in the saddle again I've begun to reflect upon what I have learnt over the past few months. My aim had been not only to recharge my batteries but to read, write and develop some research, including collaborative projects that would require some external funding. Given that I had chosen to focus upon aspects of educational policy and the changes that had occurred since the implementation of the Education Reform Act, 1988, I was already aware of major shifts in the relationships between public and private provision.

Focusing especially on families and schools I became acutely aware of how parents, as consumers, were being given more and more choices and chances to decide for themselves on the education and schooling of their children, whether in private or state provided schools.

I had been only dimly aware of how massive the sea-change was in educational policy at all levels. My first realisation of this was over the search for research funding. One can no longer assume – if ever one could – that funding from a major publicly-sponsored, or even private, research foundation is virtually assured if one has managed to write a “good” research proposal. Funding is now so tight that one is clearly required to develop a very tightly financed proposal and to consider a variety of sponsors.

As I have become more absorbed in this particular educational research community I have been approached about doing small-scale evaluations of innovative or pilot projects around parental participation in education. However, these consist of being a research consultant and also looking for funds to do the studies, since such evaluations have not conventionally been written into the project design. Talking with other researchers in the field, it appears that this kind of approach is becoming increasingly common – a project evaluation to prove the worth and financial value of the project.

And yet funds have to be sought from increasingly scarce resources. And it also raises the ticklish issue of the ethics of such research. Will particular kinds of private sponsorship limit the kinds of findings that can be announced and the audiences to whom they are directed?

Given the current changes being implemented in schools policy around local management of schools and the commensurate financial powers of school gov-



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erning bodies as opposed to local education authorities, the search for additional funding is likely to increase.

Other educational researchers have drawn attention to the ways in which people in educational institutions at all levels are having to become both more entrepreneurial and to look carefully at the markets for their particular kinds of educational work, whether research or

courses. Under LMS schools may well begin to consider targeting particular markets of children.

Similarly at the level of higher education consideration is now being given in earnest to the issue of the appropriateness and effectiveness of courses for markets of students. Returning from study leave I have been struck by just how far down the road we have already moved. Perhaps the process was well under way before my time out and I was too absorbed in it to realise quite what changes were taking place. Or perhaps the process reached maturity last term.

I do not think it is a bad thing for us to have to consider whether our offer is still valid, appropriate and effective for the 1990s and well into the next century. I certainly think that it is essential that we keep uppermost in our minds whether the ways in which we teach – and our students learn from us – remain apposite. We should also keep under constant review our teaching methods as well as the content of our courses and consider both new combinations of courses as well as new markets of students.

However, some of this is easier said than done. Alternative markets of students may well be both more lucrative sources of income than our traditional ones and also possibly more intellectually challenging. But we may have made commitments to particular kinds of students on particular kinds of courses that we do not really want to dissolve.

Most of us became academics in the 1960s when commitment to education as a public service was at its height. Reorientation to being more entrepreneurial and considering the cost-effectiveness of particular educational strategies is often difficult and may even be painful. And because of the shifts in balances of policy there is certainly neither the managerial infrastructure nor the resource support to accomplish these considerations and changes swiftly and smoothly.

In any event, such reconsiderations have their own in-built costs in terms of administrative and managerial infrastructures. There are also even wider issues such as staffing costs and morale as well as questions such as the nature of the buildings and accommodation to add into the equation. It may indeed take longer than one initially supposes for the benefits of such new ventures to be fully realised. And there are also the costs of such change to bring to bear too. So at the end of it all the balance sheet may not look quite so much better than at the beginning of the process.