This article examines the way the mission of higher education in Western Europe has changed and, under the influence of massification, Neo Liberalism, New Public Management has over the past two decades, largely fragmented. It is no longer capable of sustaining coherent overall vision for the institution of Higher Education. Taking a long term historical perspective the article argues that the market perspective together with the rise of Evaluative Agencies whilst increasing institutional latitude has also increased the powers of external regulation.

Keywords: economic crisis, neo liberalism, mission fragmentation, incestuous amplification, new public management, short cycle higher education

Introduction: the reshaping of vision that Europe faces

That current jargon in the world of higher education should allude to the purposes of the University – or for that matter, the polytechnic – in terms of «mission» and «vision» is paradoxical and doubly so. The paradox lies not in the take-over of these basically religious terms to describe what either institution is doing – or ought to do. The University, though not the polytechnic, was after all religious in its origins. Only towards the end of the 18th century in Europe did its basic religiosity move slowly over to a secular task of educating amongst others future members of the Nation’s civil service – a task first ascribed to it in the Austrian Empire of Joseph II (1741-1790) (Grueber,

The second level of paradox lies in the fact that today these terms come to us recently, carrying very different overtones and from a very different source: the world of Business, of plans strategic and from those dessicated milieux which see individuals, qualified or not, as human resources.

Paradoxes aside, our present day vision of higher education has to all intents and purposes been shaped by the crisis – and its aftermath – that bore down on Western Europe during the early Eighties. If we accept this view, it is not unreasonable to suggest we are about to embark on another upheaval as a direct outcome of the present display of greed, incompetence and financial ineptitude which, by all accounts surpasses, because global, even the Krach of 1929. I will argue in this article that the introduction of Neo Liberalism provided the justificatory ethic, which has re-shaped the contemporary vision of higher education in Western Europe¹. Yet, it is clear as the day is long that the spectacular de-railing Neo Liberalism as a justificatory doctrine received over the past two years at the hands of its most ardent practitioners, will very certainly bring about a further torrent of new operational priorities, purposes and definitions. Governments will very certainly seek to inject new priorities into higher education as a result of the efforts they – and we – have made to deprive ourselves of that hilarious spectacle: bankers hurling themselves out of top-floor windows.

Looking back…

New operational priorities, and purposes, procedures and definitions ought when added together, however, eventually coalesce to form a ‘new vision’, just as they entail a ‘new mission’. Indeed, this particular dynamic, beginning with pragmatic measures of budgetary constraint, the setting out of new institutional goals, the creation of a new guiding instrumentality and, as a final step their justification through a largely retrospectively applied shift in values, is clearly demonstrated by the rise of Neo Liberalism itself. Here indeed is the 20th century’s replication of the Balzacian period in the literary history of France, when as has been the case during the quarter

---

¹ This is not to deny the formative influence – if anything more radical – it had in shaping higher education in East and Central Europe. However, the Slavonic languages are beyond my ken and wholly to rely on the accounts of others strikes me as the scholarly counterpart of skating on very thin ice. I will therefore concentrate uniquely on Western Europe.
century past, the cry «Enrichissez-vous» was the slogan of the hour, has come to an end. It remains to be seen whether the post «post-modern» phrase in the history of the Universities of Europe can avoid going to the other extreme of «Appauvrissions-nous».

... Looking forward

One may haggle over which of the many dimensions in higher education Government action affects will be thrown on the scrap heap of history and relegated as the reeking shards of discarded economic theory. Will it be our fate to see the frontiers of the state roll forward again? As banks are nationalized, can a case be made for not re-nationalizing what is, after all, held up an «axial institution» in a post industrial economy, to wit, the university? (Henkel, 2007: 87-99). May we anticipate a more rigorous and less opportunistic assessment of the claims made for the benefits privatization brings the collectivity, to the national community, as opposed to enriching a few thousand self-serving individuals? Will a closer look be taken by authoritative instances at the role played by so-called «occult forces» that legislation in many of our countries, and very especially in the area of higher education, was once explicitly and deliberately enacted to constrain? (Neave, 2001: 13-76). Given that in many of our countries, two decades of Neo Liberalism have seen the gap between rich and poor grow broader and deeper, this is no small matter.² Last but not least, what new balance ought to struck between private advantage and public interest?

Vision, mission and higher education: an historical excursion

The shaping of institutional vision is of course, one of the central tasks in defining priorities at system level and in operationalising them at institutional level. This process in turn sets the policy objectives through which public authorities on the one hand and what is commonly alluded to today as «institutional leadership» on the other, may assess how far institutional performance has met, exceeded or failed to meet such objectives. Institutional vision is no longer simply the occasion for rectoral rhetoric or postprandial adumbrations on past virtue, present turpitude and future intent. Institutional vision has today become an assessable and public statement of institutional purpose.

² Recent studies in the UK for instance, suggest that some 10% (1.3 million) of all children live in conditions of severe poverty. In London, where the world’s second largest Stock Exchange has its being, this detestable statistic rises to 17%. There are, in truth, many faces of Globalization. That the dark side of absolute deprivation exists cheek by jowl with insolent wealth and indeed appears to be spreading in the same city where unbelievable riches fall to the fortunate few, is an eloquent pointer to an unravelling of the social fabric, a process well advanced before the financial world cried «ruin», «poverty» and relative deprivation on its own behalf (Magadi & Middleton, 2007: 24).
This is a far cry indeed from the earlier forms of mission. In the first place, the notion of vision has become separated from the evident religious overtones it once evoked, just as its contemporary successor is largely informed from what is best presented as «business practice» or the entrepreneurial model (Clark, 1998) brought into academia. In the history of the European University, vision and mission were the obverse and reverse of the same coin – learning. In this context, changes to the meaning «vision» carries with it, are part of that long trend that gathered weight over the past century or more, namely the dissolution – sometimes abrupt, at others more incremental – of the purpose of the university from its religious roots, which are still so very evident in the mere usage of the term «mission» to describe a university’s self-set strategy and agenda.

The «sacred» has not been the only aspect to mutate. If we focus for a moment on the linguistic dimension, mission means literally «that which is sent». And whilst obviously a gross anachronism to equate the role of the contemporary university with the ecclesiastical purpose of spreading «The Good Word», its modern day counterpart is nevertheless far from absent. True, the language that set out «the missionary» purpose of the university has changed beyond all recognition, as have the functions the university was entrusted to fulfil. Thus, the basic purpose of the Humboldtian model was to create inside the university the conditions through which the modernization of the nation’s political and administrative elites was to be advanced. It was to be upheld through generating «new», verifiable, replicable and «scientific» knowledge as the permanent basis of their sustained modernity (Nybom, 2003). Thus, in the Humboldtian vision of the university, it was the vehicle of modernization – knowledge – that changed Authoritative Knowledge, which, in the words of the father of English Conservative political theory, Edmund Burke, drew upon «the wisdom of our ancestors» and reposed on their inherited doxology, was marginalized. The institutional base from which knowledge was disseminated, however, did not itself, change.

The long saga of institutional continuity

Nor, I would argue, was the sense of mission greatly changed during that initial phase of massification, during the Sixties and early Seventies. On the contrary, the long-term purpose of the university was on the one hand to expand what was then known as «highly trained manpower», to provide the base for technological and economic growth and, on the other, by opening itself up to the «reserves of talent» thereby increasing equality of educational opportunity and thus, in turn, advancing social justice in society at large. Today, it is fashionable to interpret this broad economic and social vision in terms of «redistributive justice» or in a political perspective, as «the Social Democrat» vision for the university. Nevertheless, substantial continuities emerge from the Social Democrat vision and its Humboldtian predecessor.
The onset of massification and «social demand», which drew strength from a corresponding commitment by universities to «social justice», in no way challenged the legitimacy of the university to bring this «new vision» about. Indeed, such a vision started from very much the same assumptions as had underpinned its Humboldian forerunner: namely, that the university acted from within itself to stimulate and accelerate broad ranging economic and social development without in what the elastic imprecision of today’s educanto calls, «the external environment». Curiously, in 1968 exactly the same concept of the university as the Archimedes lever for radical political change in society fuelled student radicalism from Paris to Stockholm and from Berlin to Rome and beyond (Neave & Rhoades, 1987), as it did in the Portugal of the years 1974 to 1976.

We may disagree with our younger selves over the wisdom or the acceptability to authority of the demands we put forward. But we cannot really disagree that the theory of the «University as a Red (and doubtless beautiful) Base» possessed a curious kinship with the age old vision that von Humboldt revised and which educational planners of the day heartily endorsed and were busily expanding. That the Good Word was to be that of Marx, Marcuse and Chairman Mao in no way contested the central, strategic place of the university as the key institution for the abrupt and radical overhaul of Society.

**Sectoral segmentation or deflection?**

The question this brief sketch poses, of course, is what caused this vision to mutate? And what were the consequences of its mutation? At the risk of infuriating many by the simplicity of the idea, let me suggest that, the first phase in the drive towards mass higher education, amounted to little more than more of the same. To be sure, we see the rise of short cycle higher education as an indissoluble part of massification and with it, sectoral segmentation between universities, polytechnics, *Fachhochschulen*, Higher Vocational Training (*Hoger Beroepsonderwijs*) or District Colleges (Teichler, 2006).

This last development in no way challenged the coherence of the vision that accompanied the university. Rather the contrary. Agreed, by no means all European systems of higher education took up this policy as a way to meet the pressures of mass higher education. Italy, Greece, Austria and Portugal, for instance only moved later towards the binary model of institutional segmentation, during the Eighties and Nineties and as part of a very different vision of higher education. There is, however, considerable evidence to suggest that the purpose behind creating short cycle higher education during the first phase of massification was precisely to preserve the historic vision of the university by deflecting a good part of student demand away from the university, in part to preserve the university as an agent of socialization and preparation for the traditional functions of public service, in part to maintain intact what was termed the «research training system».
(Clark, 1993: 159-220). Not for nothing was the non-university sector identified – and in many instances is still today – by the absence of the obligation to undertake research or to abstain from undertaking ‘pure’ research.

The rise of the non-university sector is, however, important to our understanding the dynamic behind the evolving visions of higher education. It demonstrated the weight and enduring significance of the Humboldtian model, which conceived sensu lato the University as a service to the State and as the sole organizational form where research and higher learning co-existed in symbiosis. In the second place – and here I have to admit this is a somewhat unorthodox interpretation – the advent of the non-university sector may be seen as higher education reverting to an older, pre-Humboldtian concept of higher learning.

This earlier vision had never entirely disappeared even though the children of Humboldt flourished and multiplied. The pre-Humboldtian vision had its place in the various Trade Schools – Handels (boch) schulen, écoles consulaires –, Colleges of Technology (Venables, 1978) often administered by locally-based Chambers of Commerce and specifically linked in with local trade and industry. When placed against this broader historical backdrop, creating a non-university sector assumes a rather different light. For in effect, assimilation into the nation’s provision of higher education not only involved bringing in a type of establishment the identity and purpose of which wholly derived from serving the private sector. It also saw the partial nationalization of an institutional segment largely on the periphery of higher education.

This gives us a different angle of approach to visions of higher education. Put succinctly, the quarter century from the mid Sixties to the early Eighties saw the States of Europe not just extending the public provision of higher education. It also saw them – or rather those that moved the earliest in this field – engaged in creating higher education around two very separate visions, though at the time, these were held to be complementary to one another. The first continued to uphold the university as the hot-house for what the American political scientist, David Easton has termed ‘the value allocating bodies in society’ – that is, law, medicine, the church, the civil service, the taxation system and occasionally, the military (Easton, 1965). The second was seen as providing ‘cadres moyens’, middle management, technician level engineers for a society where the cutting edge of economic development was held to lie in the tertiary or services sector (Bernard, 1966; Pratt & Burgess, 1974; Doumenc & Gilly, 1977; Kerr, 1963; Taylor, Brites & Machado, 2008).

**Dual identity, dual mission in national systems**

Short cycle institutions in effect endowed higher education with a dual mission. On the one hand, a foreshortened, terminal and, to use present-day jargon, ‘market oriented’ mission – a vocationally specific sector – to cater for short-term shifts in market demand. On the other, a long
cycle sector, leading on to advanced research training in which the historic mission of preparation for public service continued as its major identifying feature. Such «mission duality» was not conceived as competitive, though certain British publicists in the Polytechnic cause did make such a claim (Brosan & Robinson, 1972). It was then a complementary dualism between sectors.

A tidy account

So, what were the forces driving in changing the mission of higher education? The usual answer given is, of course, massification itself. Governments, under financial pressure at the end of the Seventies, concluded that the financing of higher education could no longer continue in the same relatively lavish mode as during the elite stage of that institution’s development. Indeed, the detachment of funding from student numbers began as early as 1978 in France (Glenny, 1979; Fréville, 1980). A second explanation attributes changes in mission to the application to higher education of what we have come to call Neo Liberalism, and its various outgrowths viz «new public management» (Pollitt, 1993), the multiplication of agencies of oversight and assessment to reign in public spending; the migration Eastwards of supply-side economic theory from Chicago to the Old Continent. This account is, of course, tidy, even logical. And, often for that reason is used as an explanative vehicle for the very radical changes in the mission of higher education.

Amongst observers of this key point in the development of one of Europe’s oldest and longest surviving institutions (Kerr, 1963) there is a tendency to present these changes as a species of Deus ex Machina as a triumphant entry of Neo Liberalism into the world of higher education policy, largely one suspects as a function of the place of English as a lingua franca and the fact that the UK, along with the Netherlands, figured amongst the first European systems to put their faith in the new doctrine.

Historical scepticism

Historians, however, tend to be sceptical creatures. Tidy accounts are often for that very reason, suspect in their eyes. Added to this, ideologies, regardless of whether they derive from economic theory or whether they are political values operationalized through an economic model, generate their own specific vocabulary. It serves to legitimate the rising ideology. In effect, if we trace the strengthening grip of Neo Liberalism in redefining the mission of higher education, we are faced with that very old and very hoary issue of precisely when it began to bite and how. However important in resetting Higher Education’s mission, Neo Liberalism figures as one consideration amongst many. If we analyse the changing mission of higher education in terms other than
the vocabulary Neo Liberalism has set on the discourse of higher education, and rather retain the
terms it ousted, we obtain a rather different angle on the otherwise orthodox account.

**Maturing late or rotting early?**

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that the public service model of the European university
was already beginning to fray at the edges even amongst those systems where this model had its
most stout defenders and, no less significant, well before the onset of the economic crisis of the
late Seventies, early Eighties. In France, for example, the failure of the «strategy of deflection» to
draw significant student numbers away from the university resulted in 1976 in the «vocationaliza-
tion» of the second (Fragnière, 1978) cycle. Legislation required programmes to show the type of
employment they lead to; in short, there was a clear intention to link second cycle diplomas with
the «non public sector» labour market. Or, put matters slightly differently, the limits to university’s
time-honoured task as a State institution where public service employ formed the outlet for the
majority of its students, were rapidly being reached. This was particularly significant in France, the
first European higher education system to attain mass status, which it had done four years previ-
ously. Similar pointers were also present in West Germany where the then Chancellor, Helmut
Schmidt, hinted at a similar condition (Neave, 1978).

Mass higher education placed the historic mission of the European university via the employ-
ment nexus between university and state service in very real peril even before the economic
down-turn of the late Seventies. Moreover, other straws floated in the wind, this time from Swe-
den, which in 1976 had completed a 40-year overhaul of its education system tout entier. With
hindsight, the Swedish U68 reforms anticipated many of the changes in mission that later took
place elsewhere as measures taken by higher education policy were increasingly presented as,
and justified with reference to, the canons of Neo Liberalism. Amongst them, the vocationalization
of undergraduate study, organized into six broad occupational sectors rather than academic disci-
plines as the basic qualificatory unit; the consolidation of regional interests, by introducing courses
at undergraduate level directly related to the demands of the regions’ occupational structure; the
presence of regional «stakeholders» on university Boards and, finally, the role of regions as sources
of funding, though confined to those courses of regional interest, which they had directly been
involved in negotiating with university authorities (Premfors, 1984: 85-104; Lane, 1982).

---

3 The threshold between elite and mass higher education, following Martin Trow’s classical and pioneering study in
1974, is held to be 15% and above of the relevant age group enrolling in higher education (Trow, 1974).
The shape of things to come

Several points may retain our interest, not least that these were measures put in train by a Social Democrat government in Sweden, though in its latter days, it is true. The first is the explicit assumption that economic change should determine the content of learning, an imperative later to be taken up under the heading of «relevance» in the Neo Liberal redefinition of the university’s mission. The second point, and it was hotly contested at the time (Bennich-Björkman, 1997; Wittrock, 2006) was equally explicit in the Swedish reforms; namely, that the knowledge the university transmitted was no longer wholly to be determined within academia, still less by «disciplinary dynamics» alone. On the contrary, openness to the requirements of «external society» was presented as an integral part of the university’s social responsibility, an argument likewise taken up later by Neo Liberalism as one of its central credos. Amongst senior academics – and very particularly Torgny Segerstedt, the Professor of Sociology at Uppsala University – that the content of transmitted knowledge should be determined by external and occupational instances (market forces were rarely mentioned though arguably this is clearly what the code phrase «occupational sectors» entailed) showed without a doubt that the 1977 reforms were a direct attack on the University’s mission à la Humboldt. The division of the undergraduate curriculum into occupational sectors not only drove a wedge between Bildung and Wissenschaft between Education and Scholarship, the heart of the Humboldtian mission. It drove out and replaced it with training. This too was an argument much to be employed in later and more desperate rear-guard actions in defence of the historic identity and mission of the university.

The Humboldtian mission of the university as a State service – that is, service to the value allocating bodies and a service provided by the State to its citizens – had already begun to erode before the onset of the structural crisis of the late Seventies, early Eighties. In short, redefinition of mission from public service to market-driven higher education was more protracted than is commonly acknowledged. Like Charles II, who reigned from 1660-1683 and perhaps England’s Wittiest monarch, the elite mission of the European University took an unconscionable time a-dying or for its supporters to admit it was dead (Nybom, 2006; Hennigsen, 2006). This puts a rather different gloss on steps taken in the early 80s to deal with a challenge from two directions, on the one hand from the economic crisis itself and on the other, the renewed thrust of student demand, which made finding a satisfactory solution, if possible, even more urgent.

The great hiatus: 1977 to 1986

If we look at the general thrust of the measures taken up to and around 1987, none – neither the cuts made in 1981 in British university funding, their 1986 equivalent in Belgium in the shape
of the St Anne Plan, the spate of reform proposals that flowed from the Dutch government – hint at changes in the university’s mission. Rather they sought to reduce unit costs, lower the staff student ratio, and obtain greater financial and administrative efficiency. Doing more with less does not necessarily entail a direct and immediate change in the university’s mission, though it does have drastic consequences for the Academic Estate – every man a Stakhanovite. Arguably, these measures fell within the usual practice of administrative good husbandry – pragmatic, and dealing with the issues of the hour, rather than designed from the first to redraw the university’s mission (Neave, 2004; Williams, 2004: 241-270). The real challenge to the historic mission of the university lay elsewhere. It lay in the need to maintain, if not improve on the ‘efficiency gains’ thus obtained. To ensure quality and efficiency were sustained, required new procedures within the higher education system for reporting those gains in terms of financial efficiency and maintained efficiency in qualified student output – that is, the upkeep of ‘quality’ – back to central agencies.

The rise of the evaluative state and Amaral’s paradox

It is here one finds the origins of what was to become the outstanding feature of higher education policy in Western Europe from the Nineties onwards namely, the multiplication of agencies of regular oversight, surveillance and verification in areas of funding and institutional performance, quality and accreditation (Schwartz-Hahn & Westerheijden, 2004). In short, the rise of what some see as the Evaluative State, a phenomenon as strong in those systems where Neo Liberalism was active as in those where it was less to the fore. Indeed, the rise of the Evaluative State, I will argue, is an integral and indissoluble element in setting the framework within which the mission of higher education was recast.

The Evaluative State is also the apotheosis of what may be termed Amaral’s paradox – namely, that the drive to ‘de-regulate’ higher education and to raise institutional initiative by moving it from the supposedly dead hand of the central state, creates its own perverse effects. Far from absolving the mortal sin of regulation, the Evaluative State serves merely to transform it into a more deadly version, whilst at the same time changing its locus within the Nation’s administrative apparatus (Neave, 2009b, 551-568) regulation moved from input and from a legal mode to output and an evaluative mode. In so doing, it gave rise to a regulatory layer, formally based not in Ministries but in single purpose agencies, the instrumentality of which was far more invasive and of more immediate consequence for the perceived standing of individual universities than the relatively blunt instrument of Ministry legal oversight which it supplemented (Amaral & Magalhães, 2007: 63-76).
Forces of re-definition

How did the rise of new agencies of public purpose affect the university’s mission? In the first place, the mission of the University as a state-provided service was rarely, if ever expressed in operational terms. Nor was it either time contingent and still less associated with explicit judgement with direct and immediate consequence. Rather, it took the shape of a generic engagement to uphold meritocracy in general and maintain its expression in public service, «La carrière ouverte aux talents». Hitherto, how far that mission had been achieved was rarely subject to question or verification save as an exception or in times of crisis or both. To this generic purpose, particular priorities could be assigned as indeed they were under what we have termed the «Social Democrat consensus» – raising the level of qualifications and acting as an instrument for «redistributive justice». Neither of these priorities challenged the principle of meritocracy – arguably they reinforced it. Nor, as we have argued earlier, did they challenge the public service role of the university. But public service as the heart of the university’s mission was precisely the weak link and very especially so as massification drove forward and as the economic crisis of the late Seventies early Eighties was followed by spectacular numbers of young people driving into the university, in hopes of a secure career at a time when youth unemployment reached unprecedented heights and, incidentally, amplifying the funding crisis as they did so.

Last but not least, as Ulrich Teichler noted a few years back, the classic concept of mission did not apply to individual institutions of higher education. Rather it applied to the sector as a whole. Institutional mission and identity were conceived as collective terms that applied to a particular segment of the Nation’s provision, not in terms of an identity specific to the individual establishment. In fine, both institutional identity and mission derived from being one of a species, as one of a broad type of establishment rather than from the individual activities of the particular establishment (Teichler, 2006).

The erosion of the «public service» ethic, a direct consequence of the declining numbers of students who could find employ in that sector, allied with the Neo Liberal notion of the university’s national purpose as one «wealth generation» rather than redistributing opportunity, is a very major watershed in the historical development of the European University. It uncoupled the university’s abiding purpose from public service, the better to re-couple it with various technocratic constructs such as «the Knowledge Society», «the Knowledge Economy», «the Innovation System» (Sörlin & Vessuri, 2007) – these happy euphemisms for serving the non-state service economy, which in Neo Liberal terminology is otherwise labelled «the private sector».

---

4 In effect, the substitution in the basic ethos of higher learning of *amor pecuniae* for *amor scientiae*. 

---
Marginalizing ideological terminology

Unravelling the university from public service liquidated the central element in its historic mission. This dissolution tends to be identified as the central and most significant application of Neo Liberal theory to higher education. It would be a grievous error to see it as the sole influence, however. Similarly, it would be just as erroneous to see changes brought about as technical remedies as necessarily forming an integral part of that ideology. It is often the case that ideology grafts itself on to the technical solution as part of that process of acquiring credibility for itself by being shown to be appropriate, applicable and demonstrating its empirical workability.

Although the term «privatisation» is often used to describe the central process in shaping the new mission of higher education, it is inappropriate when applied to Western Europe. There are certainly exceptions. Portugal was one, both in the Seventies and, later with the founding of private sector polytechnics in the following decade (Brites-Ferreira, Machado, Santiago & Taylor, 2008: 245-260). Iceland is another (OECD, 2008). But these examples of privatisation do not rule out broader perspectives in which privatisation may figure as one way amongst others of driving higher education by market forces. There are, then, broader categories, which yield a more satisfactory descriptor by far. One would be «de-nationalization». Another would be to view the reshaping of the university’s mission in terms of subsidiarity (Neave, 2007a). This is a very old doctrine indeed, though it suddenly acquired a new lease on life in the wake of the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. It also has the advantage of emphasising that functions and clients can just as well be relocated above the Nation-State as they can at a lower level within it.

Both subsidiarity and de-nationalization correspond more closely to the European context. They are, if the truth were out, an easier fit than privatization and are certainly less ideologically loaded. Privatisation, if a salient feature of higher education in the United States, was historically marginal to the systems of Western Europe (Neave, 2007b, 2009a). Of the two possibilities mentioned, de-nationalization is a more fruitful way to examine the various dimensions instrumental in reshaping the university’s new mission.

De-nationalization

De-nationalization has several dimensions. By no means all draw their justification from that doctrine basic to Neo Liberalism’s creed: namely, the «rolling back of the frontiers of the State» – an imperative that has long characterized the Anglo Saxon construct of the proper relationship between higher education and the polity (Neave, 2001: 13-75). The regionalization of higher education in Spain, its counterparts in Belgium and France stand as one of the earliest moves in the drive to «de-nationalize», a process launched with the Spanish Organic Law on Universities of
1983, with the Federalisation of Belgium in 1988 and the French *Loi d’Orientation* of 1989. The fragmentation of once unitary systems, the creation of an intermediary layer, sometimes presented as a «partner» with the central State, sometimes as the final recognition of right of local linguistic cultures to have mastery over their own universities, certainly had consequences for funding and in the case of the Spanish Autonomous Communities (Miguel Diaz, 1999; Mora & Vidal, 2003) and for the Flemish speaking Community in Belgium (Van Heffen & Lub, 2003) for institutional evaluation as well. De-nationalization in this form, with the possible exception of creating regional funding bodies in the United Kingdom, was rarely justified in the name of privatization. Rather, its rationale lay elsewhere. It stemmed from a very specific interpretation of the demands of participant democracy in Spain, of administrative decentralization in France and Italy and the recognition of cultural and linguistic separateness in Belgium (*ibidem*). The injection of market forces as the driving force came in a second phase as regional authorities began shaping the priorities of the higher education system under their purview.

**Fragmentation of the national community**

From an operational standpoint, de-nationalization qua regionalization foreshortened the chain of command between Universities and local administration. It multiplied the numbers of formal constituencies to which universities were explicitly answerable, as mechanisms of funding and performance accountability were set in place. Regional engagement, however, is generally seen as a first step towards redefining the university’s relationship with the external environment. This engagement has continued as a Leitmotif in higher education policy, though lately – from around the turn of this century – it has taken on a new presentational discourse and tends today to be accompanied by a slightly different terminology – that of the «Third Task» of higher education which has replaced participant democracy as the main rationale with a more bland technocratic justification (see, for instance, OECD, 2007).

**Creative misunderstandings**

Yet, the term itself – the Third Task – gives us some interesting insights into the assumptions beneath de-nationalization. The Third Task – service to the community – seemingly stands as an extra obligation over and above the basic functions of teaching/learning and research. As a parenthesis, it may also be seen as another instance of the spread into Continental Europe of what some are coming to see as an «Anglo Saxon» model of higher education. The Third Task is, in effect, no more and very certainly no less than the American concept of «community service» transposed to the Old Continent.
Now this is interesting because it assumes that «community service» *en tant que tel*, had no part in the public mission of the classic Western European university. This would be a gross misunderstanding. In fact, the classic university very certainly had a specific «community engagement». It was an engagement not to the *local* community so much as to the community conceived as a *national* and *territorial* whole (Neave, 2003: 141-164). This latter configuration obeyed not an economic so much as a political rationale – that of the university upholding national identity through the provision of homogeneous services and by extension similar opportunities across the national territory. It was not, as was the case in the Anglo Saxon model, construed as reflecting local diversity. Seen from this perspective, both regionalization and the redefinition of the community the individual establishment of higher education ought to serve, are no less than the balkanization of a system that previously operated on the principle of national homogeneity. That governments – and inter governmental agencies (OECD, 2007) – increasingly see the community the university *ought* to serve in terms of a fragmented version of the national community, is a powerful influence in shaping both institutional identity and thus reshaping institutional mission.

**Mission reversal**

It is one thing to provide services. The situation is vastly different when the institution is called upon by the external community to provide services and on terms the local community demands. Seen from this angle, the Third Task forms part of that wider process which can be qualified as «mission reversal». The onus is on the university to accommodate external demands. In this sense being driven by «market forces» reverses the direction of mission. Whilst it is not wholly true that mission reversal involves external constituencies – regional authorities, local industry or the student constituency as a permanent channel from the outside world into the university – reaching into the university – nevertheless it considerably alters the university’s mission. Re-balancing the direction of penetration shapes the prime institutional features – adaptability, flexibility and capacity for rapid adjustment – that added together are held to constitute one form of efficiency. These are the shibboleths of the hour, as much for the institution as it is for all three orders within it: the Academic Estate, the Administrative Estate or Student Estate. They are the new qualities that higher training – not higher learning – is required to instill in its students and to demonstrate it has done so.

If these qualities amount to a Vision – that is, the transcendent end towards which higher learning bends its efforts – they are strange indeed. They are unashamedly operational. They are expeditive. They make a virtue out of the short term. What else can one say about adaptability as an organizational principle? But can creating skills and competences – adaptability, flexibility and enterprise – be truly said to be ends? Without Vision, as a noted American historian and student of...
higher education cuttingly wrote: «Without a center, without a central set of beliefs, without a com-
mon vision the university becomes a place of cannibalistic competition and self-consuming
destruction, just like the commodity culture around it» (Rothblatt, 2008a: 8).

One thing higher education most certainly sustains no longer, is a Vision of its place in society,
a vision endowed with the same sweep as those who shaped the earlier purpose of learning and
scholarship, Humboldt, Jaspers, Edgar Morin, Newman, Eric Ashby or Clark Kerr. J’en passe et des
meilleurs. Revenue generation is not a Vision, whatever the euphemistic device one might wish to
use as an Ersatz.

Back to the -Vision Thing.

In the whisperings to which higher education, like most academic undertakings is prone, we
often hear the bleat that the time of the bold narrative is past, that the interpretations are too
many, too detailed and too conflicting to sustain «A Vision Thing» of so vast a sweep. This of
course is nonsense of the most arrant kind. What is Globalization if not a bold narrative that cer-
tain of our colleagues are convinced is the shape of things to come and the way to go? Yet, the
still small voices of scholarly prudence are not wrong. To my way of looking at higher education’s
current lot, they are right about the disappearance of the «bold narrative» – but for the wrong rea-
sons. Certainly, one can have a «Mission». Provided, that is, we are all agreed on the operational
items that go to make it up. If we agree on this, we can perhaps persuade ourselves that respon-
siveness to clients (sic) and the take up of our services may certainly be measured.

Thus, for the first time in the history of the Universities in Europe it is possible – for indeed
there is not a system on our Continent that does not have a thickening rind of evaluatory agencies
dedicated to this task – to measure the fulfillment of Mission. Mission has become a judgmental
statement. And let me add, that Mission defined in these operational, pragmatic and empirical
terms may extend up, down, sideways or even beyond the Nation State. But that changes one
basic truth not one iota. The truth is this: we have separated Mission from Vision. And it is very
precisely the separation of Mission from Vision that means we no longer regard the bold narrative
as either necessary or «relevant».

Mission – pragmatic, piecemeal and measurable – is what we have sought to muster our
higher education systems around these two decades past. But we have no overarching Vision
other than the further elaboration and application of new dimensions of verification – Metrics
being the latest (Rothblatt, 2008b). Obedient to their own rationality, the Metrician will argue that
the more sophisticated and the more extensive the application of his art, the more it will become
accurate, better able to steer (which is a euphemism for regulating) and to verify how, whether
and indeed how successfully Mission has been carried out.
The place of soft law and "incestuous amplification"

It is a devastating process precisely because it serves in greater part to nourish what I alluded to earlier as Amaral’s paradox: namely, the more governments offload responsibilities to the individual establishment, the more regulations or regulatory practices are demanded by judgmental agencies. This promises to be all the more devastating since it does not always follow that the elaboration of new operational criteria requires formal legislation. Indeed, there is good reason for seeing the rise to eminence of the Evaluatory State as a splendid illustration within each national system in Western Europe of a process not greatly distant from that presented in the jargon of Bruxelles as Soft Law, though to the best of my knowledge few of those active in researching this domain have seen the Evaluative State in this light.

It remains to be seen whether Soft Law – that is, agreement between consenting partners for each of them to take on workable and useful practices without having recourse to legislation – is not in fact a "work round" to the principle of democratic accountability (Amaral & Neave, 2009). It also remains to be seen whether the advantages of Soft Law are not offset by that phenomenon well known to the military as "Incestuous Amplification", namely, that small groups tend to reinforce each other’s beliefs, a process that may take them on courses which, when viewed by outsiders, may strike the aghast outsider as counter-productive or even plain, sheer madness (Krugman, 2008: 235). Without long-term Vision against which to check the short-term pragmatic and operational Mission, the risk of "Incestuous Amplification" is not high. It is worse. It risks becoming a "policy style".

Mission fragmentation

This is a serious situation. It is serious because whilst contemporary higher education policy has separated Mission from Vision, it is also witness to the fragmentation of Mission itself. Many dimensions contribute to "Mission Fragmentation". We have already dealt with one in the form of regional decentralization or devolution. Mission fragmentation is the outcome of a number of developments that are the natural consequence of making Higher Education market-driven. Amongst them, one may count the multiplication of external constituencies, the re-designation of students as "consumers" and therefore having "consumer rights", the need to raise funds from non-public sources, and last, but not least, the crying up of one’s wares in the Great Bazaar of higher education.

Mission fragmentation is at one and the same time, the individual institution’s self-generated statement of its identity, its claim to status and its bid for customers. This form of identity lies at the heart of the proliferation in institutional types with universities coupling themselves with such
vague adjectives as service, entrepreneurial, European, teaching, caring or even that most grotesque of all Lapalisades, a learning university\(^5\) (Neave, 2006b, 115-128). One shudders to think what such an establishment might be in the absence of such frivolous, vexatious and futile self-puffery! Precisely because the Mission Statement is central in blowing the institutional trumpet and because each trumpet blower seeks to differentiate himself – advantageously, of course – from fellows and rivals, there are today probably as many Missions as there are universities and institutions of higher education. This does not necessarily make consumer choice any the easier (Dill, 2007: 119-124).

Image-projection, niche-building have become an important part of a university’s administrative activities though, as has been noted, not always with happy results (Boffo, 2004: 371-381). Niche-building in itself is not new. As Sheldon Rothblatt, with his customary verve and sparkle pointed out over a decade ago, Oxford colleges engaged in broadly similar activities at the turn of the 19\(^{th}\) century (Rothblatt, 1997), though on a much reduced scale and without the benefit of the sophisticated techniques today’s publicity industry is always ready to place at the service of the unwary University (\textit{idem}, 2008b). The novelty of our present-day version of niche-building is that it seeks to speed up the acquisition of repute and standing. Previously, both were slow, organic, accumulated over the years and carefully filtered through academia’s equivalent of the Jungle Telegraph.

This interesting, subtle and often libelous mechanism is perhaps as old as academia itself. Through it passed that ‘tacit knowledge’ the Academic Estate has always privately entertained of its members and their feats. Mission fragmentation is a direct result of formalizing and rendering transparent the procedures of Accountability and whilst infinitely clearer it is also a process infinitely less subtle and nuanced. Not all the university ‘produces’ can be measured with a slide-rule, but that is not to say they are any the less valuable.

‘Mission Fragmentation’ is a voluntary form of institutional self-differentiation, a claim to specificity, a statement of what is perceived as an institution’s unique strengths and – from the ‘customer’s’ standpoint – hopefully the benefits it is ready to bestow and he to reap. Thus, mission statements reflect in no small part that new latitude the Prince counts as being amongst the most significant of his recent gifts – institutional initiative. Like most of the Prince’s gifts, it comes with a sting in the tail. Universities may indeed make claims about their ingenuity, creativity and peda-

\(^5\) The process of self-designated institutional identity is reaching grotesque levels of futility. What else can one say when one of Europe’s oldest and most revered universities, founded in 1253 by Robert de Sorbon, describes itself as ‘Sorbonne – université non fumeur!’ Agreed, the weaning of young people – and their elders – from addiction to that product for ever associated with the name of Jean Nicot, is desirable indeed. Perhaps the charitable may see this descriptor as a post-modern form of learning. But are we to conclude that the mission of France’s most ancient university has shrunk to become an outpost of Smokers’ Anonymous or a \textit{clinique anti-tabagiste}
gogical enterprise. But these require verification. Missions may indeed be fragmented, but verifica-
tion most certainly is not. In short, assessment by performance, benchmarking, League Tables and
bibliometric evaluation serve to put some semblance of public order upon the cacophony of self-
proclaimed virtue.

In short, the Prince still retains his instruments of differentiation and wields them vigourously
through the Evaluative State. Institutional self-differentiation, the fragmentation of Mission, is
therefore counter-balanced by the growing weight of Evaluative homogeneity (Neave, 2009b).

The kraken re-wakes

There is, then, self-differentiation for the market and Princely differentiation between universi-
ties, though whether the latter is a novelty in itself depends to a considerable extent on how far
the State in earlier days subscribed to the legal fiction of all universities being on a footing of legal
equality, a feature often to be observed in those systems obeying what I once described as the
«Roman» model of university-state relationship as opposed to the «Anglo Saxon» version of the

Interestingly, there are signs here and there that the Prince is becoming more active in
strengthening Princely differentiation and is bent on forging a new «pecking order» in the world of
erudition and scholarship. Thus, we see the rise of prizes for excellence extended to individual
universities in toto. Whilst all such awards carry official approval, some indeed carry real and sub-
stantial reward. The identification and extra finance given to top performing German universities
is one example; the parallel initiative, recently taken by the French Minister for Higher Education
to set aside a substantial sum to be handed out to France’s top-performing universities, another.
And at a slightly different level, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education’s Award for
Excellent Quality in Teaching, is a third, though whether public funds will follow well-publicized
honour was not addressed.

I have no doubt in other systems other examples of Princely largesse are to hand to spur on
healthy competition and to give official blessing to the excellent by publicly confirming institu-
tional claims to this condition. In short, the Prince is adding a new form of institutional differentia-
tion over and above the usual mechanisms of quality, performance and accreditation. His univer-
sity subjects, regardless of the new-found freedom they have to state how they will go about
achieving excellence – that most desirable condition – are still à la longue subject, if not to his
direct will, then to the subterranean workings of his agencies and servants. In the complex world
of present-day higher education, just as in Ancient Rome, all roads lead to the Evaluative State.
Institutional latitude, self-determination simply allow institutional leadership to advertise loudly
which road they will be taking before they set out. Or, to use a culinary metaphor from my country of adoption, to state and to order beforehand the particular sauce with which they want to be eaten. Or evaluated!

**Envoi et riposte**

In this presentation, I have explored the ramifications that flow from redefining the mission of higher education. I have done so through an approach heavily grounded in the recent history of higher education in Western Europe. There are, naturally, other methods that might have been used. I do not think it would have been possible, however, easily to follow through the sheer dynamic entailed in this field if one chucks history out of the window! I have argued that Mission has mutated into an operational and judgmental statement, firmly set in the here and now. It has become the individual property of the institution issuing it. This could not be more different from the counterpart that attached to what I have – perhaps exaggeratedly – alluded to as the «classic» university, the university of State service as opposed to the university driven by market forces. It is my firm conviction, however, that we would be less able to appreciate the very radical changes and adjustments our universities have made without such a view *de longue durée*. An understanding of our universities’ history is a necessary, continued and powerful corrective to the phenomenon alluded to earlier as «Incestuous Amplification» and very certainly so when efforts are wholly concentrated on the present, a condition that is avoidable only with difficulty in higher education systems urged on by market forces.

This article has examined some of the changes that driving higher education by market forces have wrought upon both its Mission and its Vision.

To round things off, let me by hark back to an obscure incident between George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton more than a decade and a half ago, when both were considering the Nation’s troubles. The answer, for Clinton was short «It’s the economy, stupid». Given how much Higher Education’s mission has evolved – at least in Western Europe – George Senior – had he but known then what we know now – would have been perfectly justified in riposting to Arkansas Bill: «Sure, it’s the economy. But it’s the Vision Thing, too – you jerk».

**Contact:** Centro de Investigação de Políticas do Ensino Superior, Rua 1º de Dezembro, nº 399, 4450 Matosinhos – Portugal.

E-mail: guy.r.neave@gmail.com
References


Ferreira, José Brites, Machado, Maria de Lourdes, Santiago, Rui, & Taylor, James S. (2008). Reframing the non-university sector in Europe: Convergence or diversity. In James S. Taylor, José Brites Ferreira, Maria de Lourdes Machado & Rui Santiago (Eds.), *Non-university higher education in Europe* (pp. 245-260). Dordrecht: Springer Verlag.


Neave, Guy (2003). The Bologna Declaration: Some of the historic dilemmas posed by the reconstruction of the community in Europe's systems of higher education. *Educational Policy, 17*(1), 141-164.


Sörlin, Sverker, & Vessuri, Hebe (2007). Introduction: The democratic deficit of Knowledge Economies. In Sverker Sörlin & Hebe Vessuri (Eds.), Knowledge society vs. knowledge economy: Knowledge, power, and politics (pp. 2-32). New York: Palgrave IAU.


Trow, Martin (1974). The transition from elite to mass higher education (2 vols.). Paris: OECD.


