CHAPTER 3

Higher Education in the United Kingdom under Tony Blair

An American Inspired Economic Issue

Magali Julian

Introduction

Even before his first term of office, Tony Blair chose to put education at the centre of New Labour policy and this was clearly stated in his annual conference leader’s speech, in 1996, when he defined the three priorities of his future Government as being “Education, education, education” (Blair 1996a). The British sociologist Anthony Giddens further developed these objectives in his book The Third Way and its Critics: “Government should create macro-economic stability, promote investment in education and infrastructure, contain inequality and guarantee opportunities for individual self-realization” (Giddens 2000, 164).

What was at stake at the beginning of the first New Labour term of office (which began in 1997) was thus the necessity to create the economic context that would enable each citizen to have access to education and training, in order to become part of the “knowledge economy.”1 Hence followed a period full of reforms concerning both primary, secondary and higher education with the target set by Blair at the 1999 Labour Party Annual Conference (Blair 1999) of having 50% of the population aged between 18 and 30 going into higher education by 2010.

This situation raised an important issue: was media discourse shaped by the widespread vision of education as an essentially economic issue; or was it the other way around, was media discourse shaping the public economic vision of

---

1 This idea of knowledge economy which considers that knowledge and education can be treated as business products was first introduced in a book by Peter Drucker, The Effective Executive (1967). In this book he describes the difference between a manual and a knowledge worker and argues that in this current stage of economic development, information and knowledge are replacing capital and energy as the primary wealth-creating assets. Technological developments in the 20th century have transformed the majority of wealth-creating work from physically based to knowledge-based (Ball 2008, 19).
education? This chapter attempts to answer this question and to outline the new role of higher education, as it is illustrated in the media, by studying the situation and the reforms of higher education between 1997 and 2007,\(^2\) through two British socio-economic and political magazines: the \textit{New Statesman} and \textit{The Economist}.\(^3\)

The objective of this analysis is not therefore to describe Blair's policies on higher education as such. Rather this chapter aims at pointing out the issues related to higher education as they emerged in the press during that period, and the way they were described and commented upon by journalists and sometimes also by readers through their letters to the editors. The systematic analysis of the issues published by \textit{The Economist} and the \textit{New Statesman} from May 1997 to May 2007 reveals that the first magazine published 42 articles and two letters focusing on the question of higher education, while the second devoted 46 articles and no less than 30 letters to the same topic. If we rely on Bernard Berelson's theory on content analysis, these figures are relevant as "content analysis assumes that the quantitative description of communication content is meaningful. This assumption implies that the frequency of occurrence of various characteristics of the content is itself an important factor in the communication process" (Berelson 1962, 265). Therefore, this method of content analysis has been used in this study to try to "reveal the purposes, motives and other characteristics of the communicators as they are (presumably) reflected in the content; or to identify the (presumable) effects of the content upon the attention, attitudes or acts of readers and listeners" (Berelson 1962, 264).

Thus, it appeared that during Blair's terms of office what interested the magazines when they dealt with higher education were two central issues with considerable economic implications: funding and admissions. In light of this observation, the first part of this chapter focuses on the central question of money. The second part then studies the way the journalists focussed on the methods of recruitment used by universities to select good students – the most likely to succeed – amid this constantly growing number of applicants.

\(^2\) This specific period of time corresponds to the 10 years when Tony Blair, as Prime Minister, carried out numerous reforms aimed at expanding higher education.

\(^3\) The choice of these two publications was led by the fact that as \textit{The Economist} and the \textit{New Statesman} are two British weekly magazines with different political orientations. The study of the articles published in their issues thus offers a multi-angle image of the higher education system. \textit{The Economist} was first published in 1843 and is known for defending a liberal economy in an international context, whereas the \textit{New Statesman} has always been a left-leaning magazine, founded in 1913 by the Fabian Society and focussing mainly on national issues.