DEFINING THE ISSUES

Although one of the central themes of this book is that the governance of British higher education, and consequently the shaping of its development, has been increasingly under the control of the state, it is important to present the case with subtlety. Indeed, higher education institutions are not the helpless victims of an increasingly oppressive central government. Moreover, if the higher education policy community is defined broadly as incorporating all those – institutions and individuals – who have an interest in influencing the future development of our universities and colleges then it is an expanding community. In other words it is more hazardous for the state simply to impose its will. Therefore, from the perspective of the state, it is a question of steering the higher education system through an amenable model of governance, one that incorporates the most significant actors into the policy-making process. If it fails to pursue this strategy then at least there needs to be an awareness of the costs of explicitly excluding powerful interests.

The intention in this chapter is to use the political science concept of policy networks to examine the broader context that surrounds the policy-making process. The concept has been subjected to considerable analysis in the political science literature (Marsh 1998; Rhodes 1997) with particular focus upon both its meaning and whether it offers a theoretical basis for understanding policy change. Daugbjerg and Marsh have written: ‘However, the key point here is that policy network analysis can, and must, be integrated with state theory if it is to offer an explanation of policy outcomes’ (1998: p. 60). This book has located the pressure for higher education policy change in the context of the political and economic crisis that enveloped the British state in the mid-1970s, and how this released new (one could say pent-up) ideas about the delivery and funding of public policy. A critical part of this process was the implementation of a new model of governance. Put concisely, the state restructured its institutional input into the policy community whilst reformulating its relationship to the germane policy networks in civil society—the non-governmental segment of the policy community.

This chapter, therefore, will use the concept of policy networks to analyse important changes in the relationship between the governing institutions of higher education and the key organised interests. The concepts need to be defined and their changing character analysed. What forces have instigated those changes and how do the policy networks relate to the new structure of governance (that is post-1988) in higher education? Moreover, what makes for a coherent policy network, one able to operate effectively within the new political context? What kinds of influence can the
policy networks exert upon the policy-making process? And, to conclude, what are the most significant trends in the relationship between higher education institutions, policy networks and the state’s governing structures? None of this analysis within itself will move us closer to measuring the relative significance of those forces that determine policy change, but it takes us a good deal further towards understanding the links in the policy chain than a straightforward listing of the major institutional actors (for example, see Kogan and Hanney, 2000: pp. 211–19).

THE CHANGING HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The intrusion of the concepts of policy networks and policy community into the analysis of the policy-making process reflects an attempt on the part of the political science discipline to construct more persuasive interpretations of how governance functions. In terms of British higher education there were several critical developments that gave empirical reinforcement to the search for greater analytical sophistication. The most obvious change was the creation of a new model of governance: in a comparatively short space of time the funding council model had replaced the old university and public sector structures and established the relationship between higher education and the state on a different basis. Within the structure of the traditional model, Sir Robert Aitken had argued that the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP – now known in more prosaic language as Universities UK) was both a consultant to the UGC and an adviser to the universities (Aitken, 1968–69: p. 171). In broadly parallel vein, Berdahl in his classic The State and the Universities gave the CVCP a consultative policy role but was keen to stress that policy-making itself belonged to the UGC (1959: p. 137). But, policy-maker or consultant, the CVCP evidently had an inside track to the UGC with the institutional ties strongly reinforced by personal links.

The interesting, but unanswered, question is what weight the consultative process had in shaping UGC decisions. In the context within which Aitken and Berdahl were writing this may not have been of much significance (driven essentially by increasing public resources the system was expanding), but as we come to the 1980s and the UGC spearheads departmental rationalisations, creates the Research Assessment Exercises and assumes responsibility for distributing cuts in the annual grant, it becomes a critical question and one that has not been systematically researched.

Although the post-1988 funding council model of governance was one of the forces that stimulated the proliferation of policy networks, it did so in a manner that created a very particular relationship between its own structures and the policy networks. Although Aitken and Berdahl confined the CVCP to a consultative role, both had implied that it was indeed consultation about policy formation. Whilst the earlier analysis of the funding councils has not precluded an input by them into policy formation, their formal role is confined primarily to policy implementation.¹ The funding councils devise the means by which government policy goals are implemented, and thus we have seen the expansion of a relationship between