

# A question of autonomy: Bourdieu's field approach and higher education policy

Karl Maton\*

*University of Wollongong, Australia*

The concept of field forms the centre of Pierre Bourdieu's relational sociology and the notion of 'autonomy' is its keystone. This article explores the usefulness of these underexamined concepts for studying policy in higher education. It begins by showing how Bourdieu's 'field' approach enables higher education to be examined as a distinct and irreducible object of study. It then explores the value and limitations of this conceptualization through analyses of policy during two contrasting moments of transition in the same field. First, the insights offered by a field approach are illustrated by analysing the new student debate over the creation of new universities in early 1960s English higher education. This shows how the field's relatively high autonomy shaped the focus and form of policy debates by refracting economic and political pressures into specifically educational issues. Second, considering contemporary changes in policy highlights how the erosion of the social compact underpinning higher education has increasingly fractured autonomy, necessitating the development of Bourdieu's conceptualization. A distinction between *positional* and *relational* dimensions of autonomy is introduced to capture an increasing disjuncture between the origins of the actors running higher education and of the principles they are adopting, respectively. These concepts are utilized to illuminate the effects of current moves towards marketization and managerialism in higher education on principles, practices and identities within the field.

## Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu remained committed to the analysis of education throughout his career. However, as Bourdieu's work becomes increasingly associated with the sociology of culture, the value of his approach for analysing education is in danger of being eclipsed. Nowhere is this more the case than in the study of higher education. While secondary accounts of Bourdieu's approach proliferate and a growing number of applications research schooling, very few anglophone empirical studies have employed his conceptual framework to address higher education (Naidoo, 2004). Yet

---

\*Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia 2500.  
Email: matonianuk@yahoo.co.uk

few areas of study have greater need of the kind of theoretically sophisticated, empirically applicable approach offered by Bourdieu. The sociology of higher education remains underdeveloped and marginal (Naidoo, 2003; Deem, 2004) and the existing literature on higher education is ‘notable for its theoretical parsimony’ (Tapper & Salter, 2004, p. 14). This article aims to help bridge this gap by critically exploring the usefulness of Bourdieu’s conceptual framework for empirical analysis of policy debates in higher education. Though this framework comprises interlocking and interdefined concepts, I shall focus primarily on the concept of ‘field’ and the key notion of ‘autonomy’. ‘Field’ is the centrepiece of Bourdieu’s entire relational approach and ‘autonomy’ its keystone, but both remain relatively little discussed compared with such concepts as ‘habitus’ and ‘cultural capital’. In this article I shall illustrate the centrality of the autonomy of the field of higher education both to understanding the focus and form of policy and to developing Bourdieu’s approach to better capture contemporary developments.

I begin by outlining how, in contrast to many existing approaches, Bourdieu’s framework enables the irreducible social structure of higher education to be seen as an object of study in its own right. The value and limitations of this conceptualization are then explored through illustrative analyses of higher education policy during two different moments of transition in the same field. First, I discuss debates over rapid expansion in English higher education during the early 1960s. Academics during this period enjoyed extremely high autonomy from political and industrial interests and debates clearly illustrate the effects of the field of higher education on the focus and form of policy. Second, addressing contemporary developments, I discuss how differences with this earlier moment of transition highlight limitations in Bourdieu’s framework for the study of higher education policy today. I argue that autonomy has become increasingly fractured and develop Bourdieu’s framework to distinguish *positional autonomy* from *relational autonomy*. Using these concepts I then illustrate how exploring different changes in these dimensions illuminates the effects of current moves towards marketization and managerialism in higher education.

### Seeing the field of higher education

The chief advantage of Bourdieu’s conceptual framework is that it enables higher education to be seen as an object of study. It is a paradox that higher education is one of the most discussed but least analysed objects of study in higher education. The dedicated literature is voluminous; at least 35,000 anglophone publications from Europe and the Commonwealth alone were listed in *Research into Higher Education Abstracts* during 1966–2002. Yet, from Bourdieu’s perspective, higher education itself rarely features in such accounts. According to Bourdieu’s approach, existing studies often tend towards internalism or externalism. Internalism objectifies higher education as a separate realm by focusing on constituent parts of the field (such as specific institutions, actors, discourses or practices) abstracted from their wider determinations. Externalism objectifies higher education as a reflection of these wider interests, focusing on external relations to the state, economy or social

structure. In terms of policy studies, internalist approaches emphasize the contingency of policy implementation upon micro-contexts and treat macro-social issues as background scenery to the play of agents located in specific sites (universities, departments, classrooms) within higher education. In contrast, externalist approaches emphasize the centrality of the social, political and economic interests of the state for policy formation and treat higher education as a neutral relay for the resulting policies, as if they are unproblematically and uniformly implemented. This false dichotomy is often noted as such by commentators on higher education research. Typically, solutions offered comprise either adding together internalist and externalist foci or analysing interactions between different systemic levels (such as state-institution-department). However, Bourdieu's framework additionally highlights a blind spot shared by both approaches. In short, both approaches lack a conception of higher education as an object of study *sui generis*, a social structure that is irreducible both to its constituent parts and to other social fields of practice and which possesses its own distinctive properties and powers, i.e. both fail to see the field of higher education. Bringing existing approaches together would thus reproduce rather than overcome the blind spot; what is required instead is an understanding of this missing field. I shall begin by briefly setting out how Bourdieu offers such an understanding.

For Bourdieu higher education is one of a series of relatively autonomous worlds or fields whose complex interrelations constitute society. Briefly, a field is defined as a configuration of positions comprising agents (individuals, groups of actors or institutions) struggling to maximize their position. Conversely, agents are defined by their relational position within the field's distribution of capital (resources conferring power or status) and from which they derive properties irreducible to intrinsic characteristics of the agents themselves. The structure of a field is given by relations between these positions, where such relations are not reducible to interactions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 96). This distinction is crucial to overcoming the blind spot: both externalist and internalist approaches share a tendency to conceive social relations in terms of interactions between empirically perceivable elements, such as between interest groups in policy networks, between universities and the state or among actors within an institution. In contrast, the social structure of a field is emergent from but irreducible to such constituent agents and their practices; the relational whole is more than the sum of its parts. The relations comprising a field are, therefore, not limited to interactions between agents—agents may be positionally related (in terms, for example, of higher/lower status) to agents they never meet or know. These relations are revealed through analysis of the field's underlying structuring principles.

The question of autonomy is central to understanding the structuring principles of a field in two principal ways. First, each field as a whole is relatively autonomous from the fields of economic and political power which dominate society; each field both exhibits homologous features to the wider social structure and has its own specific structure and logic. A field's *autonomy* is illustrated by the way it generates its own values and markers of achievement, but the *relative* nature of this autonomy means these values are not alone in shaping the field; economic and political power

also play a role, albeit in a form specific to each field. This results in two principal forms of capital underlying the basic structure of a field, which highlights a second role of autonomy. The two main forms of capital circulating in a field represent competing principles of hierarchization: an autonomous principle looking inwards to the ostensibly disinterested activities of the field (such as 'knowledge for its own sake') and a heteronomous principle looking beyond the field's specific activities and towards economic and political success (such as generating research income or wielding administrative power). For example, Bourdieu (1988) described French higher education as principally structured by an opposition between agents possessing 'scholastic capital' (scientific prestige and intellectual renown) and 'academic capital' (institutional control over appointments, funding, etc.). Higher education is, therefore, hierarchically structured not only into 'haves' and 'have nots' but also by competing ideas of what should count as 'having'. These autonomous and heteronomous principles of hierarchization form the basis of struggles between agents who attempt to conserve or transform the established relations of power in order to maximize their position. Bourdieu thereby conceptualizes practices in higher education in terms of strategic 'position-takings' that depend for their form on the meeting of an agent's 'habitus' or dispositions with their relational position within the field. Taken together these practices and beliefs form a field of position-takings that mirrors the field of positions; for Bourdieu, one's relational position-takings reflect one's relational position (for example, dominant agents tend to adopt conservative stances and dominated agents tend towards more radical stances). Through these position-takings agents attempt to both increase their volume of capital and make the form of capital underpinning their position the dominant measure of achievement within the field. Struggles are thus not only over gaining as much capital as possible but also over which form of capital should be the Gold Standard.

In terms of policy debates in higher education the notion of autonomy thereby plays a double role. First, Bourdieu (1993) argues that the relative autonomy of higher education means the structure of the field as a whole serves as a crucial mediating context which, 'like a prism', refracts external influences 'according to the specific logic of the field' (p. 164). Through this mediating context wider pressures are transformed and take on specific forms within its policy discourses and practices. Second, this process of 'refraction' is shaped by the way the field is structured by autonomous and heteronomous principles of hierarchization, and depends on the play of forces between them. Thus, contrary to internalist approaches, macro-social influences cannot be confined to the status of contextual background but, against externalist accounts, how these wider pressures are played out within higher education depends on its 'refraction coefficient' (p. 182) or degree of autonomy from other fields and internal structure. In short, to understand the form taken by policy one must understand the nature of higher education as a field. I shall now briefly illustrate the significance of the refracting effects of the field by discussing policy debates during a critical moment of transition in a field characterized by very high relative autonomy: English higher education during the early 1960s.

### Policy refraction: the myth of new students

By the 1960s English higher education was the focus of intense policy debate and facing dramatic expansion.<sup>1</sup> An unprecedented governmental enquiry was in progress (Robbins Report, 1963), 16 institutions were being chartered as universities and student numbers were doubling (Layard *et al.*, 1969). Underlying these changes was a convergence of extrinsic pressures. Demographically, increasing demand for places was expected to exceed the rise in supply; lengthening school careers suggested more of an age cohort already swollen by maturation of the post-war population 'bulge' would apply to university. Politically the consensus was that these applicants should be accommodated. With high levels of employment, governments turned their attention to education as a space for social democratic reform promoting a meritocratic vision of society; the poor record of social representativeness in higher education was increasingly noted. Economically, politicians and employers argued expansion was necessary for growth, relating comparatively poor national performance to low participation rates and arguing that rapid technological change and economic restructuring required a better qualified and adaptable workforce capable of being retrained. By the 1960s these demographic, political and economic changes had created pressures from beyond higher education for change from an elite towards a mass system.

The field these pressures affected was characterized by extremely high autonomy. In 1949 Sir Walter Moberley (1949, p. 7), Chairman of the University Grants Committee (UGC), the main governmental body responsible for funding universities, had proclaimed: "No one," wrote Thomas Arnold, "ought to meddle with the universities, who does not know them well and love them well". This principle should be regarded as axiomatic'.

In the early 1960s it was indeed axiomatic. Widely described as a 'buffer' between state and universities, the UGC principally comprised part-time senior academics who enjoyed considerable freedom in decision-making and the support of civil servants who 'defended with all their acumen and experience the autonomy of the universities, and of the Committee, against every attack from whatever quarter' (UGC, 1968, p. 182). In turn, the quinquennial funding system (established 1947), whereby universities received block grants for 5 year periods, minimized the UGC's involvement in university policy to an advisory role. Eschewing manpower planning, the UGC maintained economic progress was best served by university independence; as a contemporary commentator concluded: 'it is inconceivable that the national interest could be defined in terms of a formula equating "a little more efficiency" with "a little less autonomy"' (Berdahl, 1959, p. 4).

Autonomy was also crucial to status within the field. Participants in higher education characterized and ranked institutional and disciplinary practices according to whether they were disinterested ends in themselves or oriented to values and purposes from beyond the field. In a series of oppositions widely echoed across contemporary accounts (such as liberal/vocational, education/training and pure/applied) the autonomous was valorized over the heteronomous. Institutions and disciplines were lauded for their distance from occupational relevance, practical application and

instrumentalism and ‘institutional autonomy’ and ‘academic freedom’ were proclaimed necessary conditions for excellence. In contrast to the autonomy enjoyed by higher status universities, lower status colleges were funded by local authorities which exerted control over finance, buildings, staffing and course approval.

The field of English higher education thereby exhibited relatively high autonomy and was structured *inter alia* by autonomous and heteronomous principles of hierarchization. Though studies of policy during this period typically focus on relations to the state or industry, the autonomy enjoyed by academics meant they were, as a major study of this period later declared, ‘the managers of expansion’ (Halsey & Trow, 1971, p. 26). Policy over higher educational change was publicly debated and shaped by actors within the field, not only in (academically authored) governmental reports but also in conference proceedings, articles, interviews and so forth. Qualitative content analysis of this public discourse shows that among academics charged with formulating and implementing policy (such as senior figures overseeing the creation of ‘new’ universities) it was neither expansion *per se*, which was largely accepted as inevitable, nor wider social, political and economic pressures that formed the focus of debate (Maton, 2005a). Instead, policy was directed to the question of *who* should have access to *what* and *where*; specifically, debate revolved around the problems presented by ‘new students’ and their solution in the form of ‘new’ universities.

### *The new student problem*

In public policy debate a spectre was haunting English higher education: the ‘new student’. Defined as the first of (usually) his family to enter university and typically of working class origin, new students were portrayed as bringing ‘their own problems for which the universities have to find the appropriate answers’ (Fulton, 1966, p. 26).<sup>2</sup> A key aspect of these problems was their perceived embodiment of heteronomy. State-educated and state-sponsored (thanks to mandatory student grants introduced in 1962), new students were the products of state interventions into education. According to senior academics, they also brought heteronomous ways of thinking into the field. Coming from families which ‘have had difficulty over the problems of independence at the rise of adolescence’ (James; cited in Hall, 1961, p. 155), they were said to be vulnerable to influences from beyond higher education: ‘the subculture, the life of the street ... friends, leaving school at fifteen, earning large wages, buying guitars, taking girl-friends out and living the sort of “Baby Cham life”, can, on a working-class boy exercise a really disruptive influence’ (p. 155).

Moreover, they came from ‘homes with no tradition of culture or learning’ (Sloman, 1963, p. 11) where ‘there are not a great many good books read, there is very little good music, there is above all not a great deal of very intelligent conversation’ (James; cited in Hall, 1961, p. 155). They had, therefore, not learnt to value knowledge for its own sake. A common conception was that new students saw higher education ‘not only in and for itself, but for what it can bring and give, the opportunities for social advancement which it endows’ (Hall, 1961, p. 153). In

short, new students were pragmatic, utilitarian and careerist: they 'seek a degree course to earn a living rather than college residence to complete their induction into a style of life' (Halsey, 1961, p. 56). Under such a barbarous and heteronomous gaze extrinsic function would displace intrinsic form as the measure of status, creating, many academics feared, pressure for vocational courses and transforming university education from the civilising of well-rounded amateurs into the training of technical experts (see Hall, 1961). New students were thus portrayed as being at odds with established ideas of university education. Crucially, policy debate focused not on threats to these ideas but rather on how this mismatch would endanger new students' chances of success; though sufficiently qualified to enter universities, they would struggle because they had the 'technical but not normally the cultural background necessary for an easy transition to university style study' (*Times Educational Supplement*, 1964; quoted in Jobling, 1972, p. 326).

### *The new university solution*

A question often asked in policy debate was how this mismatch could be bridged to help new students. The consensual answer was to provide 'in the atmosphere of the institutions in which the students live and work, influences that in some measure compensate for inequalities of home background' (Robbins Report, 1963, p. 7). An oft-repeated argument claimed such innovation required the blank canvass of new institutions (UGC, 1964). To this end huge government investment was ploughed into creating eight new, fully chartered universities during the early 1960s that were publicly legitimated by their planners as meeting the needs of new students. A crucial aspect of this legitimation was an overriding emphasis on autonomy. Planners argued that new students needed to learn 'mastery over self ... what it is to be moving, self-driven, autonomous agents' (Fulton, 1966, p. 30). To do so they needed protection from corrupting influences, necessitating institutions insulated from both external involvement and extrinsic principles of hierarchization. The first priority was to separate new students from their originating social contexts and outside influences. New universities were accordingly located on 'greenfield' sites, outside provincial cathedral cities rather than in industrial conurbations, and were as far as possible residential. Each was designed as a 'university town' (Sloman, 1963, p. 66) that would avoid a 'nine-to-five' mentality by providing an all-embracing world for the whole life of the student so that 'no undergraduates need know any other world outside their University township' (quoted from *The Builder*; cited in Jobling, 1972, p. 133). The economic world was particularly kept at one remove. New universities were typically located in regions unassociated with heavy industry and their planned curricula emphasized the humanities, social sciences and pure science over applied science and technology; as senior staff at one new university stated, 'the primary aim of a university is emphatically not vocational' (Fox & Barker, 1965, p. 9). Within the autonomous space of the new university the aim was, therefore, to orient new students towards autonomous notions of knowledge for its own sake. They needed, planners claimed, 'continuous education ... positive guidance, which is both intellectual and

cultural' (James; cited in in Hall, 1961, pp. 155–156). This need 'to give the student a more liberal education ... broad enough for them to emerge as educated human beings' (Thistlethwaite, 1966, p. 58) was realized in multi-disciplinary Schools of Study, common foundation courses and multi-subject honours degrees. Similarly, small group teaching, collegiate organization and student representation on administrative committees were propagated as engendering a shared belief in and commitment to traditional values of university education.

### *A refracting field*

For leading participants in the field new students were central to higher education policy during the early 1960s. The creation of and form taken by new universities, an unprecedented endeavour that was heralded as revolutionary and captured the public's imagination, was directly related in public debate by policy-makers to the needs of new students. Yet the 'new student' was a myth. Studies show that expansion did not bring a greater proportion of working-class students into higher education, that when they did enter they tended to choose institutions such as technical colleges rather than universities, and that those who did attend university were already well socialized into the appropriate educational habitus and so little resembled their image in the debate (see, for example, Douglas *et al.*, 1968; Layard *et al.*, 1969). The flood of new students for which new universities were ostensibly created never arrived and did not exist. New universities were also in many ways mythical—the portrait painted by their planners was rhetorical and subject to 'academic drift'; within a decade criticisms abounded that innovative practices had either failed to materialize or been undermined, leaving them 'old wine in new bottles'.

What then was this policy debate really about? Drawing on Bourdieu's approach, new students can be understood as representing a refracted form of wider external pressures affecting the field. Though the debate was couched in terms of pastoral concern for the educational success of new students, it can also be understood as struggles over resources and status. As outlined above, the field of English higher education was structured by (higher status) autonomous and (lower status) heteronomous principles of hierarchization, such as liberal humanist and instrumentalist ideas of university education, respectively. New students were constructed in the debate as embodying heteronomy; dependent, instrumental and vocational, their arrival in large numbers would thereby shift the balance of power between these principles of hierarchization in favour of the heteronomous and so reshape the field in ways inimical to higher status agents (including, crucially, policy-makers) within higher education. Their response in the debate was the new universities, institutions embodying autonomy and designed to orient new students towards the (autonomous) liberal humanist idea of university education. New students represented the profane threatening the sacred, new universities represented a means of neutralizing this threat. However, the new student was a myth, occasioning a moral panic; the true source of this threat to the established structure of the field lay beyond higher education. Wider pressures to change (outlined at the start of this section) involved growing

state and industrial interest in higher education as a source of economic competitiveness and social reform—threats to both the high autonomy enjoyed by dominant agents and the higher status of autonomous conceptions of university education within the field. Though never the central focus of policy debate, such pressures were often obliquely expressed in terms of diffuse and ill-defined threats from instrumentalist views to established values; many commentators claimed, for example, that beyond higher education ‘the Idea of a University ... is frequently the subject of ridicule’ (Mackerness, 1960, p. 14). The new student, I suggest, embodied this fear of heteronomy emanating from beyond the boundaries of the field.

In short, the new student debate illustrates the double role of autonomy and the refracting effects of a field. Growing pressure from outside English higher education on the autonomy of agents and the status position of autonomous principles was refracted by the very high autonomy (or refraction coefficient) of the field to become something different. Like a prism refracting light, the field refracted the focus of policy, changing the object it lighted on. What could feasibly have been a debate over social, economic and political changes couched in terms of, for example, social class and economic performance was translated into a specifically educational issue: the educational needs of new students for success at university studies. The heteronomy of political and economic pressure was translated according to the logic of the field into the heteronomy of new students. Policy was not only decided by academics (the new universities were created without a single Parliamentary debate and with almost no ministerial involvement) but on their own terms, as a set of specifically educational problems with specifically educational solutions. Thus the very terms of the debate worked to maintain autonomous principles of hierarchization as the basis of status within English higher education.

### **Developing ‘autonomy’ to address contemporary policy**

At the same time as illustrating some of the insights offered by Bourdieu’s conceptual framework, the example of the new student debate also raises questions of its potential limitations for the study of contemporary policy developments. As Naidoo (2004) highlights, Bourdieu’s own studies of higher education largely focused on a period defined by a ‘social compact’ between higher education and political, economic and social interests that insulated universities from wider pressures. English higher education in the early 1960s exemplifies such a highly autonomous field. More recently, however, the axiom of autonomy has been undermined. Belief that left to its own devices higher education will meet social and economic needs has diminished and instead governments have increasingly viewed higher education as a policy lever for achieving greater competitiveness within a globalizing context of ‘knowledge economies’ and ‘information societies’. To harness higher education to politically desirable outcomes, governments have instituted tighter institutional control over policy decisions and introduced heteronomous ways of working, such as market mechanisms. The terms and conditions of the ‘social compact’ are being fundamentally rewritten. Such developments place the continuing value of Bourdieu’s

framework in question. I shall argue that the overall approach remains robust, but conceptual development is required. On the one hand, such developments not only fit within but also strengthen the case for using his overall framework. Bourdieu's approach highlights that the relative autonomy enjoyed by fields is not universal or immutable but rather differs between national contexts and varies over time. The question of the degree of autonomy enjoyed by a field must, Bourdieu repeatedly insists, be established in each case by empirical research rather than assumed a priori or posited theoretically. [Indeed, in his later work Bourdieu more directly addressed the weakening of the autonomy of cultural fields from economic and political power (see, for example, Bourdieu *et al.*, 1999).] Moreover, for Bourdieu this relative autonomy is a key focus of struggles among agents both within and beyond the field—that autonomy from external interests is the focus of debate and change is integral to the approach. On the other hand, as I shall now discuss, although the overall approach retains considerable analytical power, to fully investigate the implications of contemporary policies in higher education requires developing Bourdieu's framework, specifically the concept of 'autonomy'.

### *Two dimensions of autonomy*

A critique gaining ground in recent years suggests that, when employed in empirical research, Bourdieu's conceptual framework tends towards the elision of the social and symbolic dimensions of fields. Though far subtler than externalist approaches, it suggests that Bourdieu's analysis retains a form of sociological reductionism. This limitation follows from the basic thrust of his argument that the practices of cultural fields obscure the arbitrary nature of their social base and that the transformation of social relations of power into ostensibly disinterested cultural terms within such fields enables this power to be misrecognized. The main aim of analysis is, therefore, to reveal the arbitrary nature of the content of the field and so reveal the workings of social power. Reflecting this aim, Bourdieu's conceptual framework as it currently stands is analytically stronger at analysing the structuring of the social system of a field (relational positions) than the structuring of its symbolic system (relational position-takings). Though Bourdieu was quick in theoretical discussions to emphasize the way practices and ideas or 'position-takings' shape the structure of a field and argued against reductionism, his concepts for analysing practices tend to reduce position-takings to epiphenomena of the play of positions within a field. This means that in empirical studies using this framework a field's symbolic system tends to become a reflection of its social system.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of conceptualizing autonomy this is reflected in a tendency to conflate issues of institutional distancing with questions of the principles underlying practices. For Bourdieu, higher education is delegated autonomy by the dominant class to the extent it reproduces and legitimates existing forms of social stratification. Valorization by agents within higher education of autonomous principles of hierarchization within its symbolic practices (such as a belief in 'knowledge for its own sake') is understood by Bourdieu as representing strategies for achieving

autonomization from wider interests, as reflecting their social position of relative autonomy and as helping to mask their tacit social reproduction function (see, for example, Bourdieu 1996a, b). The degree of autonomy of agents within the field from external involvement and control and the extent to which these agents valorize autonomous markers of achievement thereby tend to be viewed as inextricably intertwined. However, I shall suggest that one effect of recent policy in higher education has been to problematize the relationship between these two aspects of autonomy, necessitating a more refined conceptualization.

To explore this issue I shall analytically distinguish between two aspects of autonomy, which I shall term *positional autonomy* and *relational autonomy*.

1. Positional autonomy refers to the nature of relations between specific positions in the social dimension of a context or field and positions in other contexts. In terms of higher education, if agents occupying positions within the field (such as monitoring bodies or university governance) originate from or are primarily located in other fields (such as industry or politics), the field exhibits relatively weaker positional autonomy. In contrast, where these positions are occupied by agents located solely within higher education, the field exhibits stronger positional autonomy. For example, in 1960s English higher education universities enjoyed higher positional autonomy; they were managed, staffed, funded and administered by agents located firmly within the field.
2. Relational autonomy refers to relations between the principles of relation (or ways of working, practices, aims, measures of achievement, etc.) within a context or field and those emanating from other contexts. In the case of higher education, if the ways of working or markers of achievement within higher education are drawn from other fields (such as economic gain), this indicates weaker relational autonomy. Where the field's principles of hierarchization look inwards to its specific activities (such as academic excellence), it exhibits stronger relational autonomy. In 1960s English higher education, for example, knowledge for its own sake was valorized over any social or economic impact: stronger relational autonomy.

This is to distinguish between, for example, the nature of relations between the positions of actors in higher education and industry (positional autonomy or PA) and relations between the ways of working in higher education and those found in the field of economic production (relational autonomy or RA). In short, the distinction asks 'Who is running higher education?' (PA) and 'According to whose principles?' (RA). (I have focused on higher education here but the concepts are applicable to all social fields.) As I have outlined, each of these analytically distinguishable dimensions of autonomy can be relatively stronger (+) or weaker (-), so that one can identify four principal modalities of autonomy (see Figure 1).

Using Bourdieu's framework as currently formulated foregrounds two modalities of autonomy, which he terms 'autonomous' and 'heteronomous' poles of a field. Using the conceptualization here, these modalities are where the relative strengths of the two dimensions are aligned: PA+, RA+ and PA-, RA- (or top right and bottom left in Figure 1). These modalities characterized the field of higher education during the

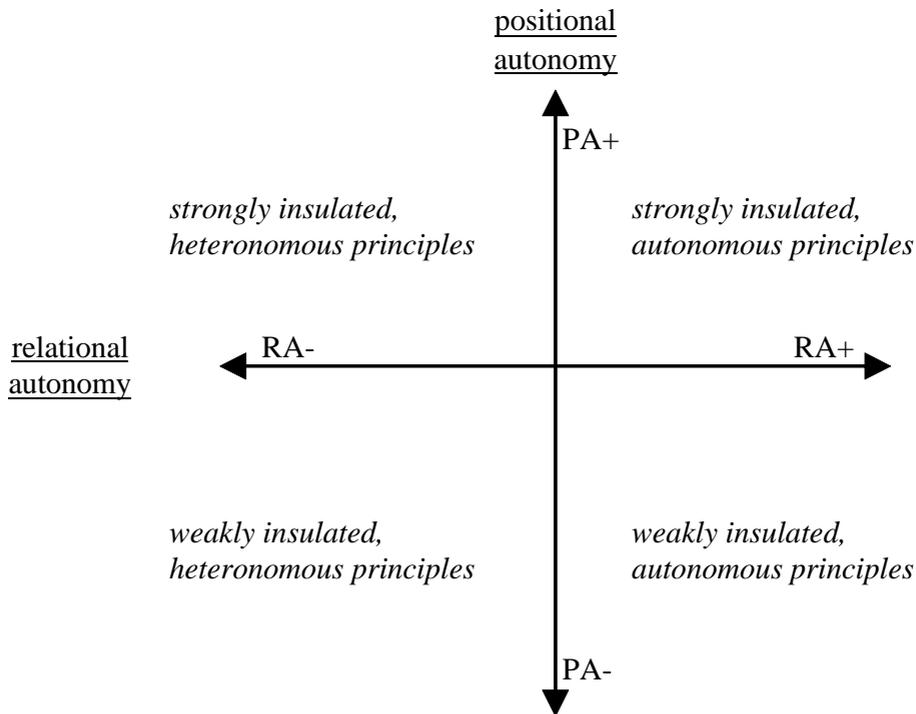


Figure 1. Modalities of autonomy

‘social compact’; for example, in the 1960s English universities were strongly insulated from external involvement and valorized liberal humanist ideas (PA+, RA+), while lower status colleges were weakly insulated from external governance and instrumentally oriented towards vocational needs (PA-, RA-). However, I shall suggest that these modalities no longer exhaust the shape and direction of higher education. By analytically distinguishing positional and relational autonomies one can also conceptualize modalities where their relative strengths differ. Consider, for example, the possibility of universities governed by agents from industry or politics but on purely ‘academic’ lines (PA-, RA+) or the possibility of universities managed by academics but on principles derived from commerce or the political field (PA+, RA-).<sup>4</sup> I shall now briefly illustrate how this conceptual development may help shed light on contemporary policy, returning for comparative purposes to English higher education.

#### *Contemporary pressures on the two autonomies*

Given the historical amnesia often exhibited by policy studies it is worth emphasizing that rapid expansion, chartering of new universities and accelerating technological advancement are among many contemporary echoes of debates from the early 1960s. One significant difference, however, is that current developments occur within a context of weaker autonomy for the field. Over the past two decades governments

have exerted increasing control over higher education policy in England. The demise of the UGC and the movement of polytechnics from local authority to central state control through chartering in the early 1990s helped restructure the external relations of English higher education. Its relative autonomy from political and industrial interests has been progressively weakened as 'the political control of policy direction has become both more all-encompassing and more detailed' (Tapper & Salter, 2004, p. 12) and the sphere of discretion granted funding bodies and, in turn, universities has been more tightly circumscribed. However, the overall weakening of autonomy is not the full story; within this trend one can identify an emerging disjuncture between relational and positional autonomies.

*Relational autonomy.* Of the two, relational autonomy has been most weakened. The notion that social and economic goals are served by enabling universities to create and transmit knowledge as ends in themselves has been replaced within policy discourse by an utilitarian view of higher education as an instrument for achieving politically desirable outcomes (Naidoo, 2003). These outcomes include widening social access and, above all, meeting the perceived recruitment and 'lifelong learning' demands of a fast changing and globalizing 'knowledge economy'. To achieve these goals universities are being encouraged to organize their activities in accordance with principles recontextualized from the commercial field. Central to this policy is economic rationalism, the assumption that competitiveness improves financially defined performance (Ozga, 1998), which has underpinned the introduction of market mechanisms for distributing funding and the creation of audit and inspection regimes, such as the Research Assessment Exercise and Quality Assurance Agency. Such marketization has been accompanied by moves towards 'new managerialism', the adoption in university governance of organizational forms and practices more typically associated with the private 'for profit' business sector (Deem, 1998). Rather than focusing primarily on the needs of potential learners, institutional planning now foregrounds targets for generating income streams, and in decisions over institutional coverage of the disciplinary map cultural value is being supplanted by value for money. Knowledge is thereby becoming detached from knowers and commodified such that it can 'flow like money to wherever it can create advantage and profit' (Bernstein, 1996, p. 87). Such emphases on the efficient, competitive delivery by universities of economic outcomes represent moves towards adopting heteronomous principles from the economic field as the dominant measures of achievement active within higher education: weaker relational autonomy.

*Positional autonomy.* Policy increasingly valorizes heteronomous principles, but the agents responsible for enacting these principles remain overwhelmingly located within higher education. Though the creation of new agencies has weakened positional autonomy in English higher education since its high watermark under the UGC, it is important to note how uniquely strong that autonomy had been. It is easy

for the subsequent creation of more acronym bodies to mask the maintenance of strong positional autonomy for the field as a whole—though weakened it remains relatively strong. Governments have been reluctant to impose extra-field agencies on higher education and there is comparatively little direct occupation of positions within higher education by agents from external fields. Both vice-chancellors and the managers of bodies charged with ensuring universities deliver policy outcomes are typically appointed from within the academy and peer review remains the central basis of inspection and audit regimes ostentatiously based on widespread consultation within higher education (Tapper & Salter, 2002). Indeed, any signs of policies leading to weaker positional autonomy remain strongly countered. For example, the possibility of interference in institutional admissions policies by the newly created Office for Fair Access (managed by a former university vice-chancellor) was strongly criticized by institutional managers and led to a speedy reassurance from the Higher Education Minister that student selection will remain in the hands of individual universities (Palfreyman, 2004). Though shaping the parameters within which universities operate, such acronym bodies remain typically kept at one (albeit often small) remove from both political or industrial agencies and universities. Compared with its relational dimension, this represents stronger positional autonomy.

### *Tensions in autonomy*

Comparing the terms of policy debates in the early 1960s with those of today shows that a discourse of pastoral concern for the education of new students has given way to one of income generation, social participation and economic rationalism. From specifically educational concerns, policy now revolves around economic and social issues. In Bourdieuan terms, the field's degree of refraction, its capacity to transform extrinsic pressures into specifically intrinsic forms, has thus declined and the autonomous is becoming eclipsed by the heteronomous within the field. Though but a brief sketch, the above also illustrates that within this overall weakening of autonomy can be discerned differences between its positional and relational dimensions. Contemporary government policy is based on the notion that agents located within higher education (PA+) remain primarily responsible for achieving politically defined policy goals using means shaped by principles drawn from other fields of practice (RA–): a contradictory modality of autonomy (PA+, RA–). In effect, current policy aims to encourage actors within higher education to internalize heteronomous principles as the basis of new individual and institutional habituses.

This contradictory modality of autonomy may help explain some current tensions within the practices and identities of institutions and actors within higher education. It may be the case that such modalities generate pressures for realignment of their positional and relational values. Relatively stronger positional autonomy may delay weakening of relational autonomy. For example, as Tapper and Salter (2004, p. 8) highlight, a 'key problem for government ... is its reliance upon the very professionals whose behaviour it intends to regulate in the pursuit of its policy goals'. Studies of policy implementation show that academics are often well positioned to adapt,

subvert or resist instrumental measures of achievement (Cave *et al.*, 1997). This provides a (limited) space for the amelioration of the further weakening of relational autonomy. Actors within higher education implementing policies based on principles from other fields also refract those principles through habituses shaped by the field. (It is, furthermore, open to question as to how well academic actors intending to make universities into competitive entities within a marketplace actually understand commercial practices.) Heteronomous principles introduced into the field thereby often take on a specifically 'higher education' form when enacted in practice. For example, rather than being adopted wholesale, management principles found in commercial business are typically being refracted by the field to create hybridized forms of managerialism in university governance (Deem, 1998). Stronger positional autonomy may thereby affect relational autonomy.

Conversely, weaker positional autonomy may generate pressure to further weaken the field's positional autonomy. For example, managerialist governance may accentuate differences between institutional managers and university staff. On the one hand, the latter increasingly perceive their managers as no longer academics (Deem, 2003) and may experience exercises in collegial consultation over institutional policy as merely a veneer for oligarchic diktat. On the other hand, an emphasis on management skills and downplaying of the specificity of higher education legitimates the recruitment to leading institutional positions of specialists in 'management' from industry and commerce, where experience of the concerns of specific businesses can be viewed as less significant than experience of management *per se*. Those agents charged with instituting heteronomous principles may thus increasingly come from beyond the field. Lastly, the contradictory modality may also help generate tensions within individual and collective identities (Ozga, 1998). Though higher education has long been polarized by autonomous and heteronomous principles (such as liberal/vocational), the oft-noted process of 'academic drift' towards liberal humanist ideas of university education captured the way in which the autonomous remained sacred. Marketization, however, increasingly forces academics to pay ritual obeisance to both the two rivals gods of culture and economy, making the divided self that was historically the experience of actors in dominated positions in higher education increasingly the norm for actors across the whole field (Pritchard, 2000). How actors in higher education negotiate this tension will help define the future of autonomy for and within the field.

## **Conclusion**

Autonomy lies at the heart of Bourdieu's intellectual enterprise. The concept of field forms the centre of his relational sociology and autonomy is the key to understanding the structures of fields. From Bourdieu's perspective the degree of relative autonomy of higher education in its external relations with economic, social and political interests and its internal structuring in terms of autonomous and heteronomous principles of hierarchization are crucial to understanding the ways in which policy debates and practices are refracted by and played out within the field. As the example of the

new student debate illustrates, the relative autonomy of the field of higher education helps shape the focus and form of policy. In this case of very high autonomy, economic and political issues were recontextualized within policy debate among the managers of expansion to become specifically educational issues. This effect is not simply benign. Before the new student debate had subsided the British government announced its intention to create ‘polytechnics’, a wholly new stratum of institutions that was intended to be equal but different to universities. This shifting of control over the shape of expansion away from university academics is often associated by commentators with frustration at the failure of universities to respond to extrinsic pressures—the revenge of the refracted. (This policy development was, of course, in turn refracted, leading to ‘academic drift’.) This is not, of course, the full story, even in terms of a Bourdieuan approach: I have focused on illustrating the significance of autonomy at the level of the field as a whole; policy initiatives are also, however, differentially refracted across the field as positions enjoy differing levels of autonomy and thus different capacities for resisting and reshaping policy (see Naidoo, 2004). Nonetheless, it helps illustrate that the way in which the relative autonomy enjoyed by higher education as a social universe works to refract wider changes into its own terms has effects for the field’s development, and thus the importance of thinking in terms of field and autonomy.

If autonomy is central to understanding the value of Bourdieu’s conceptualization of fields, it is also, I argue, central to its development. The weakening of the autonomy of higher education in recent decades has, I suggest, resulted in a disjuncture between what I define as its positional and relational dimensions. Recent higher education policy in (at least English) higher education can thus be understood as creating a contradictory modality of autonomy: actors within the field are charged with the creation and implementation of policies based on principles recontextualized from the field of economic production. Though these developments remain in motion, unfinished and contested, distinguishing between these dimensions of autonomy (thus far underexplored in Bourdieu’s existing framework) may help explain tensions and pressures currently being generated within higher education. The value of Bourdieu’s approach for understanding higher education policy is thus a question of autonomy.

## Notes

1. The Scottish system was sufficiently different to merit its own analysis and no ‘new’ universities were situated in Wales. The following discussion draws on a major, in-depth relational field study of change in higher education (Maton, 2005a).
2. I shall focus on contributions to the debate by founding vice-chancellors of new universities, such as Fulton (Sussex University), James (York University), Sloman (Essex University) and Thistlethwaite (University of East Anglia).
3. My distinction between Bourdieu’s theoretical descriptions of fields and the capacity of the concepts available for their empirical study is crucial to understanding the nature of this critique. Theoretically, Bourdieu emphasized the relative autonomy of practices [although even here he argued that ‘the principle of position-takings lies in the structure and functioning of the field of positions’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 35)]. However, his conceptual framework as it currently

stands when used in empirical research tends to underplay the structuring significance of symbolic practices for fields because it cannot conceptualize their structure in, for example, the manner offered by Bernstein's concepts of 'codes'. For fuller examples of this critique see Bernstein (1996), Maton (2000, 2003, 2005b) and Moore (2004). My aim here is not the displacement of Bourdieu's concepts, but their development to realize in empirical research the potential offered by the theory of fields.

4. It must be emphasized that the strengths for PA and RA are relative, form a continuum and conceptualize underlying structuring principles rather than empirically describing family resemblances; the examples offered do not describe ideal-typical universities but rather simply illustrate different modalities.

### Notes on contributor

Karl Maton is currently Research Fellow in Sociology of Education at the University of Wollongong, Australia. He has published in sociology, cultural studies and education, and recently completed his doctoral thesis (University of Cambridge), *The field of higher education: a sociology of reproduction, transformation, change and the conditions of emergence for cultural studies*, which develops Bourdieu's approach to establish a relational sociology of higher education (<http://www.KarlMaton.com>).

### References

- Berdahl, R. O. (1959) *British universities and the state* (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press).
- Bernstein, B. (1977) *Class, codes and control* (Vol. III) (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Bernstein, B. (1996) *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity* (London, Taylor & Francis).
- Bourdieu, P. (1988) *Homo academicus* (Cambridge, UK, Polity Press).
- Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The field of cultural production* (Cambridge, UK, Polity Press).
- Bourdieu, P. (1996a) *The state nobility* (Cambridge, UK, Polity Press).
- Bourdieu, P. (1996b) *The rules of art* (Cambridge, UK, Polity Press).
- Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology* (Cambridge, UK, Polity Press).
- Bourdieu, P. et al. (1999) *The weight of the world: social suffering in contemporary society* (Cambridge, UK, Polity Press).
- Cave, M., Hanney, S., Henkel, M. & Kogan, M. (1997) *The use of performance indicators in higher education* (London, Jessica Kingsley).
- Deem, R. (1998) 'New managerialism' and higher education: the management of performances and cultures in universities in the United Kingdom, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 8(1), 47–70.
- Deem, R. (2003) Managing to exclude? Manager-academic and staff communities in contemporary UK universities, in: M. Tight (Ed.) *Access and exclusion* (Oxford, UK, Elsevier Science).
- Deem, R. (2004) Sociology and the sociology of higher education: a missed call or a disconnection?, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 14(1), 21–46.
- Douglas, J. W. B., Ross, J. M. & Simpson, H. R. (1968) *All our future* (London, Peter Dawes).
- Fox, E. & Barker, T. (1965) Canterbury campus, *New Education*, 1(January), 6–11.
- Fulton, J. S. (1966) The university of Sussex, in: M. G. Ross (Ed.) *New universities in the modern world* (London, Macmillan).
- Hall, S. (1961) The new student, *Universities Quarterly*, 15(2), 152–163.
- Halsey, A. H. (1961) University expansion and the collegiate ideal, *Universities Quarterly*, 16, 55–58.

- Halsey, A. H. & Trow, M. (1971) *The British academics* (London, Faber & Faber).
- Jobling, R. G. (1972) The new universities, in: H. J. Butcher & E. Rudd (Eds) *Contemporary problems in higher education* (London, McGraw Hill).
- Layard, R., King, J. & Moser, C. (1969) *The impact of Robbins* (Harmondsworth, Penguin).
- Mackerness, E. D. (1960) Ignorant armies, *The Universities Review*, 33(1), 14–17.
- Maton, K. (2000) Languages of legitimation: the structuring significance for intellectual fields of strategic knowledge claims, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(2), 147–167.
- Maton, K. (2003) Reflexivity, relationism and research: Pierre Bourdieu and the epistemic conditions of social scientific knowledge, *Space & Culture*, 6(1), 52–65.
- Maton, K. (2005a) *The field of higher education: a sociology of reproduction, transformation, change and the conditions of emergence for cultural studies*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge.
- Maton, K. (2005b) The sacred and the profane: the arbitrary legacy of Pierre Bourdieu, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8(1), 121–132.
- Moberley, W. (1949) *The crisis in the university* (London, SCM Press).
- Moore, R. (2004) Cultural capital: objective probability and the cultural arbitrary, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 445–456.
- Naidoo, R. (2003) Repositioning higher education as a global commodity: opportunities and challenges for future sociology of education work, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24(2), 249–259.
- Naidoo, R. (2004) Fields and institutional strategy: Bourdieu on the relationship between higher education, inequality and society, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 457–471.
- Ozga, J. (1998) The entrepreneurial researcher: re-formations of identity in the research marketplace, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 8(2), 143–153.
- Palfreyman, D. (2004) *Does OFFA have teeth?*, Occasional Paper 16 (Oxford, OxCHEPS).
- Pritchard, C. (2000) *Making managers in universities and colleges* (Buckingham, UK, Open University Press).
- Robbins Report (1963) *Higher education* (London, HMSO).
- Slooman, A. (1963) *A university in the making* (London, BBC).
- Tapper, T. & Salter, B. (2002) The politics of governance in higher education: the case of the Research Assessment Exercises, Occasional Paper 6 (Oxford, OxCHEPS).
- Tapper, T. & Salter, B. (2004) Understanding governance and policy change in British higher education, Occasional Paper 11 (Oxford, OxCHEPS).
- Thistlethwaite, F. (1966) The University of East Anglia, in: M. G. Ross (Ed.) *New universities in the modern world* (London, Macmillan).
- University Grants Committee (UGC) (1964) *University development 1957–1962* (London, HMSO).
- University Grants Committee (UGC) (1968) *University development 1962–1967* (London, HMSO).