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CO-OPTATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF UNCERTAINTY IN ENGLISH COLLEGES OF EDUCATION

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Informal co-optation is one strategy open to an organisation threatened by increased dependence upon elements in its task-environment The strategy was observed through participant observation in the changing relationship between a university and its constituent colleges of education, after the introduction of the B Ed degree in England Elements within the leadership of the colleges countered their greatly-increased dependence in academic matters upon the university subject departments by informally co opting the latter They were successful in restoring their own sense of control, but the inclusion of university members in policy making bodies encouraged the growth in the colleges of sub-groups whose aim was the pursuit of degree-oriented goals, and thus the dedication of scarce resources to them The likelihood of goal conflict was perceived to have increased as a result, threatening the pervasive good-fellowship of the colleges Thus, co-optation, adopted to preserve the independence of the colleges, undermined two important institutional goals

Much recent theory has focussed upon uncertainty as the central problem facing complex organizations (3, 6, 16) It is argued that uncertainty occurs when one or more elements in the environment of an organization exercises power over it in respect of specific resources—where power is viewed as 'residing implicitly in the other's dependency (4)' Organizations may adopt various strategies to deal with these perceived dependencies Thompson and McEwen (17) suggest that the three most likely ones are contracting, co-opting and coalescing and that the choice between them will be governed by the relative concentration of vital resources in the organization or in its environment Yet co optation had proved its value as a conceptual tool a decade before uncertainty began to receive attention as a crucial variable in the study of organizational decision-making In his classic account in 1949 of the Tennessee Valley Authority, Selznick defined co-opting as 'the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization, as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence (8 p 13)' He argued that the co-opted

groups would be likely to provide future support for the policies of the co-opting organization, and would thus increase its awareness of its own power

But the real extent of this power would depend upon whether formal or informal co optation had taken place (8) The use of formal co optation implies that the leadership does not envisage a transfer of actual influence to elements in the task environment in return for their support, but is content to provide a show of participation in decision-making Informal co optation, by contrast, is employed against those who are interested in the substance of power and not just its forms Selznick (8) has suggested that situations may arise in which the leaders of an organization become dependent upon individuals or groups in or outside the organization, but may not wish or may not find it expedient to parade their new dependencies They therefore make available to those to whom they are indebted places in the decision-making structure, while avoiding open admission of the relationships established In this way they gain support while maintaining the appearance of autonomy, a fact which may be of crucial importance to the whole character of the organization The Tennessee Valley Authority for example, was a public organization, by definition responsive and responsible to public opinion At the same time, it could operate only by coming to terms with local centres of interest, partly because of the power the latter held, and partly because of its own ideological attachment to the grass-roots determination of policy As an instrument of democratic planning forced to resolve a conflict between public and private interests it faced a dilemma If it gave in to the latter, it lost its claim to legitimacy, yet without their support it could not survive Its leaders chose, therefore, to preserve its democratic image, while informally incorporating representatives from local institutions into policy-making positions

The insights provided by Selznick's enquiry into the inescapable dependence of an organization upon powerful elements in its task-environment* and the responses open to it in this situation were used by the writer to illuminate institutional relationships in a very different context Following the recommendations of the Robbins Report on Higher Education (5) in 1963, one English university agreed to award a new degree (Bachelor of Education) to selected candidates following

*The name is taken from Thompson's *Organizations in action* (16)

a four-year course in local colleges of education The colleges in this Area Training Organization found that the introduction of a degree in education meant that the local university became involved to an unprecedented extent in their affairs This development, welcomed by some for the increase in status that it was seen to carry with it, nevertheless created conditions of stress and uncertainty for most members of the college For, in order to meet the conditions imposed by this particular university for awarding the degree they were forced to place themselves in a position of exaggerated dependence, seeking approval by the university departments not only of the standards attained by college students but also of the content and teaching methods of courses, of college facilities and of the qualifications of individual college lecturers At a personal and an institutional level, the power of the university therefore impinged upon the colleges in a way that it never had before, creating for them a sense of dependence in respect of two vital resources—status and legitimacy To deal with this threat to their autonomy they resorted in part to co-optation, without realising that in so doing they were introducing into their decision making structures forces which would in the long run reduce their capacity to act independently This article traces the developments which led the colleges to adopt co-optation as a strategy for the reduction of uncertainty, examines the forms that it took and emphasises its long-term effects upon the autonomy of the host organization

METHODOLOGY PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

The techniques adopted in making this enquiry were those of participant-observation Although I was not a member of the Area Training Organization chosen for my four-month study, I had experience of both universities and colleges of education, and the relative homogeneity of both types of institution made it easy to adjust to the specific language of the ones I selected Questionnaires were not used, and most of the material was gathered from in-depth interviews, supplemented by observation and informal conversations Moreover, since participant-observation involves a good deal of 'hanging-around', it enabled me as an informed observer to consolidate insights into, for example, gossip channels and the social aspects of co-optation With Burton Clark, I felt that 'to ask about the determinants of a particular policy, it is more promising to go to the five persons likely to know than to fifty

that do not know (2, p 181)' Accordingly, the principals of all eight colleges were interviewed, five of them twice, and in each of seven colleges, interviews were conducted with two or three members of the following departments history (an arts subject), mathematics (a non arts subject), art (a practical subject), and education Wherever possible, interviewees had held their present posts since the start of the B Ed negotiations and could thus report upon the full sequence of events as it had affected them University members of the corresponding departments were also interviewed as were all the relevant members of the Institute of Education Supplementary evidence was obtained from a broad range of spectators or participants, ranging from civil servants to secretaries Interviews lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to four hours, and some people were re-interviewed towards the end of the study, the average length was an hour and a half Altogether 61 people yielded 69 interviews Short verbatim notes were taken at the time and written out in full immediately afterwards Perceptions of past events and personal opinions were checked against written materials which included minutes, circulars, newsletters, and journal articles Hearsay was rejected but, like Berger and Luckmann, I assumed throughout that what individuals perceive to be the truth is more important in determining their actions than what is 'really' happening (1)

AUTONOMY AS A PERSONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL GOAL

The colleges of education that co-operated in this study were in a position before the introduction of the B Ed somewhat analogous to that of the Tennessee Valley Authority They had granted autonomy, as an institutional goal the stature of a myth In the first place, each college nourished a concept of itself as a self-governing, independent institution free to select and pursue its own value laden goals Observers felt moved to comment on 'the great jealousy with which they (the colleges) guard their independent status (5, p 1525)' This passionate adherence to the notion of autonomy showed itself in several ways At all levels from Principal to first-year student, the members of the different colleges met, consulted and co-operated with one another as little as was feasible Principals spoke of 'my college', and admitted that they would usually put the good of their own institution before pursuit of a common Institute policy They claimed the right to determine their own criteria for promotion and recruitment Most markedly,

college lecturers denied to any outside body the right to suggest, let alone dictate, the ends they should espouse or the means to which they should in consequence devote their resources In the early 1960s there were many angry exchanges with the Department of Education and Science over issues such as expansion and the balance of training The minutes of college Academic Boards, and the recollections of lecturers make it plain that what was felt to be at stake was the independence of individual institutions

Secondly, *autonomy* was seen as a personal goal, in scope more comprehensive even than the academic freedom which is commonly held to be the birthright of every member of the teaching profession in England As the principal of a college in a different Area Training Organization asserted, 'the integrity, intellectual and professional, of the teacher depends upon the rightful autonomy of the college (19, p 146)' College lecturers treasured their freedom to work as, and how they chose The quantity and quality of work demanded from the students varied from one institution to another, and there was no restriction except by mutual agreement within a department, on teaching methods Typically lecturers stated that 'most of all we should dislike any attempt to dictate what we are to teach' They even claimed, and usually were granted the right to choose their own external examiners They saw themselves as enjoying a freedom which was the more marked when they contrasted it with the syllabuses and external examination pressures of the schools on the one hand and the universities on the other

The introduction of the B Ed created a dilemma for colleges everywhere Wriggling on the twin horns of 'graduate status' and 'autonomy', they found that they could not enjoy the fruits of academic prowess without surrendering some of their freedom to determine institutional ends and means Generally speaking, the higher the status attached to the degree they were offered, the more restrictions it involved Moreover, many of the universities were so opposed to the whole notion of granting degrees to students whom they had not selected, taught in institutions whose staff they did not know, with facilities they had not seen, and in a subject of dubious academic respectability, that they exacted very stringent terms from the colleges Thus for some colleges like the ones described here, access to the B Ed meant accepting a position of greatly increased dependence on their university, while at the same time trying to preserve an illusion of autonomy As part of a

total strategy to reduce the resulting uncertainty of their new environment these colleges chose to co opt the university departments Their hope was that once members of the latter had a voice in determining the policy of an individual college, they would align themselves with it, and support rather than oppose its interests It has proved to be an effective but short-sighted policy

INCREASED DEPENDENCE ON THE UNIVERSITY

Like their colleagues in other universities, many of the lecturers at this one viewed the introduction of the B Ed with emotions that ranged from apathetic indifference to contemptuous hostility After considerable persuasion Senate finally agreed to accept a degree-structure which secured for the colleges a number of advantages (e g , the B Ed was to be a fully-classified honours degree) In return, the university insisted on rigorous safeguards One was the adoption of a policy of individual recognition of staff If the application of an individual member of a college staff was accepted, he was interviewed exactly as if he were applying for a university post If he satisfied the interviewing panel he could describe himself as a 'recognised teacher' of the university As a result of this procedure some who had served in the colleges for many years were rejected, on the grounds that their intellectual lustre had never shone brightly or had grown tarnished Others feared to apply or were advised not to, still others were provisionally accepted on condition that they spend a term as a full-time student at the university (nicknamed 'burnishing' by some members of the university)

Nor could a subject be offered at degree level until its facilities came up to the standards required by individual university departments To ensure this, a procedure known as a 'visitation' was devised A group of university teachers visited each college in turn, met some of the potential degree students, looked at a cross section of their work, and examined the library and other facilities In due course they submitted a report on their findings A typical one was described by the college department which received it as 'grimly suspicious'

Students wishing to take the degree had to satisfy the general entrance requirements of the university although it was later conceded that 'in exceptional cases' this condition need not apply In addition, students had to achieve a satisfactory standard in the second year of the Certificate course before they could be registered as degree candidates They

were not finally selected until the end of their third year According to the first B Ed Regulations to be published, the University Board of the Faculty of Arts had, altogether to give its consent to the following admission to each part of the curriculum and to any examination (subject to the candidate having pursued courses to the satisfaction of the Board), the required standard of work in the first three years, the subjects to be taken satisfactory completion of an examination at the end of the first three years the range of subjects offered in the fourth year and the main subject offered, re-examination of failing candidates On paper, little was left to the discretion of the colleges

Recognised members of staff were, however, invited to join Syllabus Committees with members of the university departments to settle the content of syllabuses and methods of assessment Despite this gesture, a permanent reminder of where the ultimate authority rested was to be found in the membership of the B Ed Board of Studies Two recognised lecturers for each subject were included, *nominated by the heads of the relevant university departments* 'to organize the teaching of their subject in the colleges' (writer's italics) In addition, college lecturers were allowed to serve jointly with the university lecturers as internal examiners For all that, before the first finals were taken, a university member of one Syllabus Committee did not feel it inappropriate to claim that 'there is nothing to stop us (the university) failing them (the candidates) all in July '

His colleagues on other such Committees spoke of 'controlling the teaching', 'sitting in judgment', 'putting my foot down', 'being inquisitorial' For their part, college lecturers complained of 'intellectual domination', 'arrogance', 'interference', 'uninformed criticism', 'humiliating procedures', or at best 'condescension' As one commented, 'they said, in effect it's our degree so we will make the decisions ' To make matters worse the criteria by which recognition was granted or withheld were, to start with, kept hidden by the university departments Thus there was no way in which college lecturers could be certain that their qualifications or experience would secure for them this coveted symbol of parity

INFORMAL CO-OPTATION

For individuals and the institutions to which they belonged a situation of grave uncertainty resulted The former felt that their values were being called in question and their professional futures threatened The

independence of the latter was seen to be in jeopardy Yet colleges could neither afford to abandon the whole scheme, nor bring themselves publicly to admit the extent of their new dependence Further, the power of the university was too real to allow the use of formal co-optation Some graceful way had to be found of actually sharing power with the university departments without appearing to enter into a subservient relationship Informal co optation was the obvious strategy, and one which could take several forms One of these operated when new staff were appointed Whereas in the past colleges had almost always insisted that candidates had good teaching experience or at least had a contribution to make on the professional side of the work, now it sometimes became expedient, if not imperative, to make appointments on the basis of academic records alone Moreover, it rapidly became customary for a member of the appropriate university department to be invited by the college to be present at an interview In some colleges this was taken to extremes, creating the situations where, for example, a university classics lecturer was, he claimed, requested to travel some miles to adjudicate the appointment of a lecturer in home economics In other colleges it happened only when a senior post was to be filled or when someone was to be appointed for degree-teaching Efforts were also made to involve the university in running refresher courses for college staff, and individuals were offered seats on college governing bodies

Three of the colleges also began consciously to cultivate their university colleagues through social contacts, entertaining professors and influential lecturers or at least including them on guest lists This can be seen as an attempt by the colleges to make the new tie between the two institutions appear an association of peers For, especially in the English cultural context, members of different social systems who enjoy one another's hospitality tend also to exchange recognition of a mutual parity of esteem In other words, certain of the colleges were deliberately seeking to co opt the university departments by social as well as administrative means

Generally the colleges were fairly successful with both strategies Before long, governors drawn from the university community were supporting requests to the Department of Education and Science for increased library grants University lecturers on syllabus committees showed themselves sympathetic when someone spoke whom they had helped to promote In numerous small but culturally significant ways

(e g , the exchange of greetings on a stairway, the use of first names, of a telephone call rather than letter) they demonstrated a growing involvement in the affairs of the colleges

GOAL-CONFLICT IN THE COLLEGES

In return, the colleges have been obliged, whether or not they wanted it, to pursue degree-oriented goals Selznick threw the problem of this type of goal deviation into sharp relief in his study of the Tennessee Valley Authority The agricultural groups that were co-opted there brought with them ideological and constituency interests (8) In forwarding these they succeeded in deflecting the initial policy of the Authority (e g , overusing public ownership of land as a conservation measure) They also determined the choice of means by which certain operational goals were met (e g , the land-grant colleges were preferred to Negro institutions in the fertilizer distribution programme) Yet the co optation of the agriculturalists made possible the mobilization of local resources and enhanced the stability of the organization at a time when its existence was threatened by powerful opponents Thus in order to survive at a local level, the Authority was forced to borrow support from its grassroots environment providing as security a voice in its policy-determining structure In other words, those who contributed the resources demanded, and received, some control over both the ends to which they were devoted and the relevant means Thus, the co opted groups brought with them their own 'tools of action', and by their very presence contributed to the logic of future policy For any sub-group incorporated into an organization will press for the adoption of its particular interpretation of the latter's overall function, especially if its members have special characteristics which set them apart or make them resistant to role-diversification Goals and procedures tend to become value-impregnated and impose their own constraints upon future action Policy acquires its own distinctive momentum towards prestige and survival It can, in extreme cases and especially if it is ideologically determined, be dictated by participants whose private aims come to overshadow in importance the achievement of formal goals Even if this does not happen, leaders of sub groups may come to have a vested interest in the preservation of the organizational status quo

In a very short time the 'tools of action' were at work in the colleges of education described here The appointment and promotion of in-

dividuals with good academic qualifications but nominal teaching experience, preferential expenditure of scarce resources (e g , money for books and equipment, time, specialist staff), separate teaching of degree students in the third year—these and other practices followed from the presence of university lecturers in the decision-making structures of the colleges Indeed, by 1969 one principal could assert that she rarely made any decision affecting the college academically without first consulting the university

So conscious of this development were other members of the colleges that they commonly voiced two fears for the future One was that the traditional harmony of the individual institutions would be shattered by the emergence of an élite acrimoniously dedicated to increasing the numbers of degree students and their share of the scarce resources Shipman has described the unity and good-fellowship which were marked features of his college before the introduction of the B Ed (10, 11, 12) Taylor too has emphasized the extent of consensus in the colleges (15) But as the first students began degree courses, educational commentators drew attention to 'the dangerous and divisive effects of the B Ed (7) ' Several witnesses inside the colleges also saw the situation in these terms The new élite would, it was feared, be ignorant of or indifferent to the needs of the less academic, yet by virtue of 'recognition' would be secure in policy-determining positions At worst they might even seek to tamper with the Certificate course

The second and related fear was that the needs of B Ed students would come to dominate the entire curriculum and deflect the colleges from their main aim of 'producing competent teachers' An overall shortage of resources was also aggravated in the first years by the fact that the Department of Education and Science had specifically made no extra staffing allowance for the B Ed and there was therefore a strong temptation to cater for the small classes of degree students by short-changing the Certificate students At the time that this research was undertaken it was too soon to tell how far these fears would be realised, or to what extent the co-optation of the university would have the 'unanticipated consequences' of which Selznick speaks However, the way in which individual lecturers in colleges of education have taken opposing sides in the controversy over the James Report suggests that goal conflict and 'distortion' have matured from the seeds sown by the introduction of degree-teaching A recent study by Taylor bears this out (15)

Despite the similarities, it is worth making one point of contrast with Selznick's study of the Tennessee Valley Authority. There, two groups co-opted from the environment provided resources which were crucial to the success of the Authority's programme. They were thus able to command a large share of its power. From this fact stemmed the political stance adopted by the Authority as a whole over certain controversial issues, and its later change in character as a conservation agent. It would be a mistake to assume that every instance of co-optation has such dire consequences. To claim that co-optation results in the sharing of power is to do no more than assert that a new force is introduced into the leadership. Since the goals of a complex organization are set by bargaining among members of this coalition (3) the distorting effect of the co-opted group will depend upon its power relative to that of others. This in turn will depend upon the share of the total resources that it can command. Presumably, therefore, the influence of the university in individual colleges and its long-term effect upon the development of policies will turn upon the strength of any countervailing groups which develop in the decision-making structures of the colleges, and the resources which they are able to command (9, 13, 18).

In one Area Training Organization the introduction of the B Ed placed the colleges of education, traditionally pledged to institutional autonomy, in a position of greatly increased dependence upon the university granting their degree. Unable for reasons of status to deny the university connection, but reluctant to publicise its nature, they set about co-opting the university subject departments. This policy has succeeded in aligning colleges and university lecturers on various issues affecting the former. At the same time, it has increased the likelihood of growing goal-conflict in the colleges. Whatever their future role or structure, it seems that colleges of education should beware of adopting co-optation as a defensive strategy. As a means of reducing environmental uncertainty, it is clearly a deceptive device which resembles an attempt to prevent bankruptcy by moving in a bailiff. The more influential and active the bailiff, the more likely he is to deflect or even distort the fundamental aims of the organization which he is helping to save, and to have a direct or indirect effect upon its technology. Nor can his occupation be easily terminated, for it will have been sanctioned by structural changes in the host organization. Nevertheless, co-optation remains a popular strategy for organizations under stress. The fact that

it appears to offer a quick means of reducing dependence diverts attention from its long term tendency to promote internal goal-conflict and to undermine institutional autonomy

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