Independent Study.

This is a personal account of the pedagogical innovation which was, to a large extent, the hallmark of the university in its first twenty years as North-East London Polytechnic (NELP). I try to give an account of the place of this innovation in my social and intellectual trajectory, deliberately specifying my referents, in order to show that 'independent study' was not a maverick development in one institution but was an attempt to respond to general issues concerning the nature of higher education in mass democracy. Having received an education in the Humanities in privileged institutions, I came to NELP in the year in which it was instituted and spent the whole of my career there until retirement in 2014. The challenge was to relate my kind of intellectual formation to the supposed educational needs of the whole population. After almost half a century, this same challenge remains. In the early 1970s, 'independent study' spearheaded the institution's attempt to revolutionise higher education. With the abolition of the 'binary divide' in the early 1990s, the institution reneged on its polytechnic vision in order to situate itself as the University of East London (UEL) in the market of universities and, simultaneously, reneged on its commitment to 'independent study'. The demise of a mode of study coincided with the deformation of the institution. My partisan retrospection is an attempt to pose questions which are relevant to our current situation. Was, for instance, the emphasis on the acquisition of 'transferable skills' rather than knowledge accumulation a contributory factor in degrading intellectuality and in generating our contemporary malaise in relation to specialist expertise, or did it accurately anticipate the extent to which information exchange now supersedes knowledge possession? For all its apparent radicalism, was 'independent study' a last throw of modernist 'Bildung' in that it sought to allow the articulation of hitherto excluded cultural dispositions just at the moment when the mass media were beginning to actualise a post-modernist obliteration of the notion of indigenous cultural identity? Could the institution have retained its original social mission if it had sustained its commitment to independent study? Whatever our response to these questions might be, is a recovery of that historical moment desirable or feasible? The questions are inextricably linked to my part in the evolution of 'independent study' and its part in my career, both before and after. Other participants saw the development differently at the time and would now see it differently in retrospect. The excitement of those years was that ideological differences were vigorously expressed but largely suppressed in the interest of encouraging practice. I am not now in the business in

retrospect of seeking unilaterally to impose one interpretation of events which had diverse meanings for those involved.

My acquired cultural capital before employment at NELP/UEL.[1]

My parents both left school at the age of 14 in the mid to late 1920s. They were determined that their two sons would have life chances through educational achievement which had not been open to them. I won a scholarship to my local grammar school at the age of 8 and remained at that school until the age of 18 when I won a state scholarship to study English at Clare College, Cambridge. My familial culture was Nonconformist, entailing detailed biblical knowledge, strict Sunday observance, and total abstinence from alcohol. My school culture was scholastic, particularly involving initiation into the 'humanities' which did not appear to be in conflict with domestic values. My career was promoted by parental aspiration, achieved by 'O', 'A' and 'S'- level and Cambridge Entrance examination performance, and effected through local authority and state funding. I was part of the 'grammar-school boy' phenomenon analysed sociologically shortly before by A.H. Halsey[2].

My school still measured its success in terms of the number of its students who gained entry to Oxbridge. I 'chose' to study English at Cambridge because I was aware of the tradition of the Cambridge English school which emphasized the study of the relations between 'literature' and its social 'background', as most exemplified in the texts of Basil Willey[3] who was still King Edward VII Professor of English Literature in my first years as an undergraduate, as opposed to the Oxford tradition which tended to concentrate on the analysis of literary texts as autonomous aesthetic phenomena. By complete accident, I was admitted to Clare College where some of the English tutors were among the few remaining disciples of F.R. Leavis. His influence was still significant in several ways. Leavis thought that his ideal of the social function of the English school was challenged by the kind of technological 'culture' represented by C.P. Snow. Rather in the tradition of Matthew Arnold, Leavis's assumption in the 'Two Cultures debate' of the 1960s was that Snow's achievements should not be regarded as 'cultural' at all.

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[1] For further detail see Robbins, 2006, 1-47.
[2] A.H. Halsey: *Education and Social Mobility with Special Reference to the Grammar School since 1944*, unpub. PhD thesis, U. of London, 1954, and Chapter 2 in Floud, Halsey, and Martin, eds., 1956.
[3] See, for instance, Willey, 1934, 1940, and 1949.

My undergraduate career at Cambridge was one of initiation into an accepted critical discourse about literature, but this was in a context which constantly raised questions about the nature of literature and of discourse about it. I have discussed elsewhere the implications of the class profile of my fellow students at Clare[4]. There was a sense in which there was a divide between the dominant discourse of public school entrants and the alternative perspective of grammar school entrants. Within the English school the balance of power was shifting with the arrival of Raymond Williams in 1961[5] and I was able to benefit from following courses which he was responsible for introducing into the Tripos. The system of tuition suited me in that specific subject teaching was provided in college in preparation for examinations while it was also possible to pursue personal interests by auditing lectures in any Faculty. I attended lectures in Moral Sciences (philosophy), such as those given by a Nietzschean, Michael Tanner[6], and in the Divinity School, such as those given by Donald MacKinnon[7]. Access to Fellows in college enabled cross-disciplinary discussion with, for instance, the Dean, Maurice Wiles[8], an expert on Gnosticism, and the émigré existentialist, Paul Roubiczek[9]. I graduated in the summer of 1966. My proposal for doctoral research was accepted for commencement in the Autumn. I proposed to study 'Literature and Science, 1770-1800 with particular reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Joseph Priestley'. My main supervisor was Raymond Williams in the English Faculty but I was also assigned to Mary Hesse[10] and Robert Young[11] in the recently established Department for the History and Philosophy of Science.

This intellectual and institutional background to my doctoral research is significant in respect of what subsequently occurred. I had selected for study the relationship between the work of Priestley and Coleridge as a case-study of the relations at a particular period of time between literary and scientific creativity. The object of study was the transition in Coleridge's early thought from allegiance to a philosophical *system* similar to that developed by Priestley, one which sought to reconcile a Unitarian theology with an empirically derived understanding of the material universe, to an interest in a vital physical world, one immanently constituted by an ideal, neo-platonic spiritual presence. I explored the extent to which Coleridge reconciled

[4] Robbins, 2010.
[5] Williams had already published, most significantly, Williams, 1958 and 1961.
[6] See his subsequent Tanner, 2000.
[7] See his subsequent MacKinnon, 1974.
[8] See his subsequent Wiles, 2001.
[9] See Roubiczek, 1966.
[10] See Hesse, 1954.
[11] See his subsequent Young, 1985.

the opposing world-views within a poetic artefact such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, establishing an alternative and autonomous aesthetic discourse. There was an affinity between the problem studied and the process of undertaking the study. In spite of the multidisciplinary supervisory team, I was constrained to produce a thesis which would be acceptable to the English Faculty. The organization of knowledge embodied in the Faculty structure of the institution impinged on my capacity to articulate an analysis of the phenomena. Similarly, the final product of my research was influenced by the interests of my main supervisor. What had started as a philosophical enquiry into the truth claims of competing intellectual discourses at the end of the 18th Century became much more sociological. The historical dimension became more dominant, focussing on the *social* conditions of possibility of different discourses.

I did not complete my thesis within three years and, in 1969, I needed paid employment. I applied for jobs in departments of English in universities. I can give three reasons for my lack of success – obviously, first, the fact that I had not yet gained my doctorate but, also the facts that the boom for employment of new young lecturers had just passed as the 'new' universities had become fully established and that there were few English departments willing to accommodate what was becoming known as the 'sociology of literature'. I was appointed to a temporary post in September, 1969 to teach English on the University of London BA General course offered at the Barking Regional College of Technology. In January, 1970, the Barking college became one of the constituent colleges of the newly instituted North-East London Polytechnic (NELP) and my post was confirmed. I taught English literature 'traditionally' for several years. For the first time I experienced the tension both of teaching a curriculum expressing a dominant culture to students who were relatively uninitiated into that culture and of being an instrument in the transmission of knowledge which was predefined and then adjudicated by an external body over which I had no control and in which I had no representation. I reflected on this experience in the Preface which I wrote to my doctoral thesis, which was examined and accepted in 1972. "There is a need", I wrote, "to 'demythologise' past literature and to rationalize the relation which we accept or impose between the past and the present".

My early years at NELP, 1969-1974.

Working at NELP made me realise very quickly that the structural discrimination I had experienced intellectually at Cambridge was integrally related to the social discrimination

exercised by the institution. It was a relief when it became an almost immediate policy of NELP to discontinue subordination to the University of London external degree system and to develop its own degree courses. I was slower to recognize that challenging the domination of universities would involve a transformation of the philosophy of course design. In 1972-3, I was given the task of developing a proposal for a new degree in Communication which would accommodate elements of existing teaching in Literature and Linguistics. I now realised that the emphasis of 'practical criticism' which I had imbibed as a student was predicated on a shared discourse within a socially privileged minority and that concern with communication within a mass democracy necessitated the articulation of different premises[12]. I tried to develop a degree course based on the pragmatic analysis of communication processes rather than one which merely extended 'literary' values and judgement.

Shortly after the institution of NELP, Eric Robinson had been appointed Deputy Director (Academic). As political advisor to Anthony Crosland, Robinson had been instrumental in proposing the 'binary divide' in English higher education, separating the purposes of universities and polytechnics in the system, but he was not an advocate for the peaceful co-existence of the two types of institution. His *The New Polytechnics* (Robinson, 1968) was a call for a new kind of higher education institution altogether, a kind which would offer education to the whole population rather than sustain the privileged few and would subvert existing universities. He took the view that the liberal universities maintained social distinction and that the curriculum developments in the 'new' universities of the 1960s had provided staff with the opportunity to innovate with 'cross-disciplinary' course content which was, however, an expression of their interests rather than responsive to the interests of a wider constituency of admitted students. The 'innovations' euphemised the perpetuation of prior distinction. Robinson argued, instead, for a 'systems approach' to course design. Course designers should not begin by devising innovative course content but should begin by identifying the characteristics of the likely student 'input' to the proposed course and the 'output' likely to be desired by future employers. The proposed content of the curriculum should function as a means to enable students to travel from 'input' to 'output'. Robinson established a Course Development Unit (CDU) to scrutinise internally all new course proposals at NELP so as to ensure that they would adhere to his principles of course design.

[12] I argued this in an essay which appeared a few years later (Robbins, 1976).

The proposed Communications degree was rejected by the CDU in 1972-3. It was thought to remain too intellectualist without reference to the needs of the rapidly developing communications industry. With a selected group of staff, Robinson had already been working on a course proposal which he hoped would fulfil his intentions for the whole institution and, in turn, for the whole educational system. With political opportunism, Robinson responded to the James Report, published on January 25th, 1972, which contained the findings of the work of a committee which had been appointed at the end of 1970 by the then Secretary of State for Education and Science, Margaret Thatcher, to study the education, training and probation of teachers. The report recommended that teacher training should occur in three cycles, the first of which would either be a degree course or a new two-year course for a Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE). Mrs. Thatcher's higher education White Paper of December, 1972, entitled *A Framework for Expansion*, approved the introduction of two-year courses leading to a DipHE and envisaged that this might have a function in the system much wider than simply within the field of teacher training. Robinson established a working-party during the period between the publications of the James Report and the White Paper to make proposals for a new two-year course which could be introduced at NELP and which might be a blueprint for the national development of the new DipHE award. It produced an Interim Report in October, 1972. An extended working party continued this work in the Spring of 1973 and, in July, the Academic Board agreed to the establishment of a DipHE Development Unit for the following year comprising some staff seconded internally from the institution's faculties. This Unit met for the first time in September, 1973, with the task of adapting the original interim report to constitute a course proposal to be validated by the Council for National Academic Awards in time to enable a first intake in 1974-5.

Following the rejection of the Communications degree proposal, I was seconded to the DipHE Unit. This was a full-time internal secondment but I was also given permission to study part-time at the London School of Economics. In 1972-3, I received my Cambridge PhD, and it was the suggestion of Raymond Williams that I should secure a formal qualification in Sociology in order to advance the study of the sociology of literature. In the first year I satisfied the qualifying requirements to be registered for MSc (Econ) and I pursued this course part-time in 1973-5. In the year of the DipHE Development Unit, therefore, sociological work at the LSE was also consolidating my move away from the study of literature towards a more general interest in the sociology of knowledge.

The DipHE unit operated with a core group of staff of about 6 which met weekly with a wider working-party of staff representing the faculties of the institution. It inherited two main emphases from the interim report and from these it was required to develop a course submission to be approved by the CNAA. The first was that the course should not be restricted to entrants possessing traditional 'A'- level qualifications. It should be a course which would provide for applicants who could demonstrate the 'capacity to benefit' from higher education rather than exclusively for those who had already satisfied standard assessments. The second proscription on planning was the argument that the future employment needs of students would be best served by designing a course which would inculcate 'transferable skills' rather than enable the acquisition of accumulated knowledge. During the year, the Unit developed a course framework which would try to actualise the objectives of the interim report. Tyrrell Burgess was appointed to lead the DipHE Unit. He was an Oxford History graduate who had an established reputation politically as a member of the Greater London Council and intellectually as, previously, a member of Richard Layard's research centre on higher education at the London School of Economics. He was also already well known as an advocate of 'student-centred learning' in primary and secondary education. He was also a known disciple of Karl Popper. His leadership of the Unit introduced two key components into the process of course design. He argued that the way to actualise opportunity for 'non-standard' entrants was to ensure that the proposed curriculum would follow from the objectives articulated by the students. He also argued that skill acquisition and knowledge accumulation could be rendered compatible by accepting that both derive from the practice of problem-solving, particularly from a Popperian recognition that skills and knowledge advance by a process of hypothesis formulation and falsification.

There were three key components of the DipHE proposal which was submitted to the CNAA in the Spring of 1974 and which was formally approved on June 18. Firstly, the introductory six weeks of the course were to be a 'Planning period' when students would be guided in a process of locating themselves as 'input' and identifying their goals as 'output'. In other words, the process of *course* design recommended by Robinson became an integral part of the proposed course, allowing students to propose their own curriculum. The other two key components were structural. Students were required to propose their individual 'programmes' of study within the constraints that half of their time would be devoted to 'central study' and the other half to 'special interest study'. Students were to be encouraged to define their own objectives within the course but they would be required to meet these

objectives by prescribed means. In 'central study', students would be required to realise their personal objectives by working in groups, developing and implementing activities which would enable the acquisition of skills in processes of cooperative social action. In 'special interest study', students would be required to undertake placement with any member of staff in the institution. The aspiration was that students would be encouraged to use attachment to specialist staff as a means to meeting their personal objectives rather than with the purpose of imbibing the totality of the disciplinary knowledge possessed by staff. Specialist knowledge was to be seen as instrumental in the development of skills.

It is clear from this brief outline of the intentions of the DipHE course designers that they represented a challenge to the assumptions underlying the existence of the CNAA. The Council had been established to validate course proposals submitted by polytechnics in order to guarantee their quality equivalence with degree courses in universities. Typically, the CNAA operated with disciplinary panels predominantly comprised of academics from universities. The CNAA set up a new panel to deal with national proposals for the DipHE but the choice of its chair – James Porter, Head of Bulmershe College of Education – significantly situated its brief within the field of education and teacher training. The epistemological challenge posed by NELP's DipHE proposals was barely recognised and, of course, the further challenge was that it appeared that the NELP course proposal was defying the evaluation of its *course* by arguing for procedures which would internally legitimise what *individual* students would propose to study by the end of their 'planning period'. The NELP proposal seemed to be seeking approval for a carte blanche. As a consequence, 'validation' became a crucial issue in seeking approval for the course. In effect, the CNAA agreed to approve the course, initially as an experiment, on condition that the staff administering the course would establish a 'validating body' which would scrutinise all the programme proposals submitted by students at the end of their planning period. The CNAA devolved its authority to the institution while maintaining its right to monitor the institution's exercise of that authority.

The School for Independent Study, 1974-1990.

The DipHE.

The unit within which the new course was to be delivered was called 'The School for Independent Study' (SIS). The first intake to the DipHE was in the autumn of 1974. There were 72 students and these were assigned to groups of 12, each led by a dedicated member of staff. Within these groups, the students wrote small autobiographies and carried out assessments of their levels of skill as exercises designed to enable them to write a detailed statement after 6 weeks of their objectives and of the processes which they would embark upon within the constraints of the course so as to meet these objectives and submit themselves to assessment on their performance. Influenced considerably by Tyrrell Burgess's contacts and reputation, SIS invited powerful people to constitute the Validating Body for the course. These included Lord James of Rusholme, the leader of the earlier report, Sir Toby Weaver, a former Permanent Secretary at the Department of Education, Cedric Price, an avant-garde architect in the East End, and Lady Plowden, author of an earlier (1967) report on primary education. These were 'establishment' figures, most of whom were associated with education and education policy. They were not primarily academics but were prominent for their actions. This orientation implied that they would attempt to scrutinise the totality of what students proposed to undertake in their individual programmes of study in terms of the likely acquisition of their capacity to *act* rather than to possess knowledge.

The process of validation and, subsequently, that of assessment, highlighted some of the ideological tensions within the School. There was a constant difficulty in seeking to reconcile the course's commitment to the transmission of transferable skill and its equally strong commitment to student self-determination. The ambivalence was present in the choice of 'independent study' as a title for the innovation. Independence was seen as both a personal competence and also the essence of cognitive individualism. There was a tension between vocationalism and libertarianism which I tried to resolve by recommending an enactment of Dewey's instrumentalist theory of knowledge.

For my part, my understanding of independent study derived from several key texts of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These were *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger and Luckmann, 1967), *Deschooling Society* (Illich, 1971), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1970 [1962]), *Beyond the Stable State* (Schon, 1973), and *Knowledge and Control: New Directions in the Sociology of Education* (Young, ed., 1971). The process implemented in SIS was 'constructivist' in that it emphasized that students should construct their own curricula rather than be in receipt of prescribed content. The 'Group work' component of the course sought to encourage students to perform 'real-life' tasks collaboratively within the

local community and to evaluate them and, as such, sought to challenge the social detachment of the educational institution. The 'Special interest' component sought to actualise scientific revolutions in that it was an attempt to regard established knowledge ('normal science') as provisional and pragmatic and to allow students to be change agents in developing new paradigms. Critically, these orientations all meant that existing institutional structures should go beyond stability, should not be ossified or reified. Treating education as an ongoing process necessitated both an opposition to already dominant structures and also resistance to any tendency to allow independent programmes of study to generate institutionally normalised new courses. M.F.D. Young's editorial introduction to *Knowledge and Control* specifically drew attention to the controlling function of the CNAA in respect of polytechnic innovation in the UK system of higher education. Staff in SIS were agreed that, within the circumscribed field of 'education' to which their pedagogical innovations were assigned, they were in sympathy with the thinking within the department of sociology at the Institute of Education, London, in clear opposition to the rival position adopted there by R.S. Peters and P.H. Hirst in its department of philosophy[13].

The BA/BSc by independent study.

The course for the DipHE at NELP was one of two courses for the new award approved by the CNAA for commencement in 1974. Other course approvals followed quickly, largely in colleges of education. Staff in SIS were instrumental in establishing an association of colleges implementing the DipHE (ACID) with a view to ensuring that the NELP model for the award would be secured nationally. This was a time when, post-1968, West European governments were experimenting with the introduction of short-course qualifications as levers for transforming their higher education systems. The Diplôme des études universitaires générales (D.E.U.G) was introduced in France at the time when also the 'experimental university' at Vincennes was established. West Germany was attempting to pioneer, at institutions such as Kassel and Bielefeld, a 'Gesamthochschule' concept which would integrate technological and humanities educational traditions. In the UK there were working parties which tried to recommend that the new DipHE would receive recognition across the binary divide, ensuring that diplomates would secure advanced entry to degree courses if they wished to pursue their studies beyond the diploma level. In spite of these discussions, it became clear by the end of 1974-5 that the first intake of students to the NELP

[13] See, for instance, Peters and Hirst, 1971 and Hirst, 1974.

DipHE would receive little recognition at the end of their course. NELP was one of the few institutions arguing for the 'transferability' of its DipHE qualification between institutions and disciplines. The argument that the emphasis of the NELP DipHE was on problem-solving rather than accumulated knowledge and that this was a skill which enabled late entry to any single-subject degree course was almost completely dismissed within the higher education system, even within NELP itself. Nationally, the DipHE became a subordinate exit point from structured three-year degree courses, lacking any independent currency. To ensure that the first intake of students at NELP would not become disadvantaged as a result of their pursuit of an innovative course, SIS moved quickly to seek approval for a one-year post-DipHE course so as to provide the opportunity for its diplomates to progress to degree qualification. Academic Board gave SIS formal responsibility for the establishment of post-diploma opportunities in the polytechnic and it also ensured that a working party of faculty representatives was established to liaise with SIS. The aspiration was to devise a course which would meet the needs of students completing the DipHE and of those who might want to complete their taught course degrees 'by independent study' in their final year. The intention was that this accessibility would not be confined to NELP students. I had begun to think that a key issue for the future development of independent study was the nature and status of university *institutions*. Related to my allegiance to Dewey's epistemology, I submitted an MSc thesis in 1975 at the LSE on 'The Context of Chicago Sociology'[14] in which I explored the social conditions for the emergence of the University of Chicago in 1895 and the consequential *institutional* impact on the contemporary development of sociological research. This was an objective correlative for reflecting on the limits and possibilities for independent study within NELP. The proposal for a BA/BSc by independent study differed from that for the DipHE in important respects. It retained the idea that students should plan personal programmes of study but it proposed that this planning should take place in a 'pre-course' which would precede admission to the course. In developing their individual programmes students would be required to justify their use of the academic institution for the advancement of their projects. Whereas the DipHE instituted a 'validating board' which scrutinised proposals made by students in the first weeks of the course, the BA/BSc instituted a Registration Board which would assess proposals to ensure that they demonstrated that students could argue why and how they would require the specialist tuition

[14] This considered the career of Robert E. Park – the development of his urban sociology and his involvement in producing reports on Chicago race riots – and also the relationship between Jane Addams's Hull House community project and the work of the sociology department in the new institution.

offered by the university to fulfil their intentions. Progression from the NELP DipHE was not automatic but, rather, was dependent on the capacity of students to demonstrate in their proposals the intellectual skills which the course providers had argued would be the generic characteristics of all Diploma holders. It was clear that, in effect, the decisions of the registration board for the degree would be offering a judgement of the claims made for the DipHE. There were some staff within SIS who thought that the degree submission subordinated the values of the DipHE to those of conventional degree course specialists. The establishment of the degree created a rift within SIS between those involved in the delivery of its two courses. The intention had been that the whole institution should own the degree by independent study and the course proposal argued for an internal registration board comprising representatives of each of the faculties. It proposed that there should be one external examiner sitting in an advisory capacity on the registration board so as to establish the necessary link between registration and assessment. After several extensions to approval subject to course revisions, the degree course was fully approved in September, 1979. During this period, NELP resisted the CNAA's contention that the registration board should be external to the polytechnic, established by the Council itself. In concession, NELP agreed that each faculty of the institution would have a sub-registration board attended by one external examiner and that proposals from students would come for decision to a full registration board, attended by faculty representatives and by all external examiners, including one overall chief external examiner. The registration board would be chaired by the course leader of the degree, preserving the position that this was the institution's board.

During the period in which the degree was receiving full approval, SIS also gained approval to run a part-time DipHE course. The full-time DipHE was finally approved in the autumn of 1976 for five years and, with it, the part-time DipHE for the same period. By the beginning of the 1980s, all three courses were firmly established.

The 1980s.

Early in the 1980s SIS proposed a further course development. A MA/MSc by independent study was approved by the CNAA with a first intake in January, 1985. The School for Independent Study was expanding and was a significant element in the course provision of the institution. In the autumn of 1983, the new Head of the School, John Stephenson, projected that by November, 1986, populations of 518 full-time and 390 part-time students, including 280 pre-course students, could be expected. Expansion exacerbated ideological

tensions. The emphasis of the DipHE on skill acquisition became inter-personal and affective, heavily influenced by counselling and co-counselling orientations, and it seemed to follow that there was a disjunction between the products of the DipHE and the entrants to the degree. In November, 1984, an internal polytechnic review of the degree course pointed out that 'the balance of registered proposals in June, 1984 was such that NELP DipHE holders would be slightly in the minority on the course' (NELP Academic Programme Committee, quoted in Robbins, 1988, 95). The first intake to the MA/MSc of 12 students comprised only two graduates from the NELP BA/BSc by independent study. The BA/BSC and MA/MSc courses were served by excellent chief external examiners who elevated the profile of the courses nationally as a result of their sympathetic involvement. The BA/BSc was served, for instance, in sequence by Professors Donald MacRae and Paul Halmos, and the MA/MSc by Professors Tony Becher, Oliver Fulton, and Peter Scott. In June, 1985, the course committees for the BA/BSc and the MA/MSc agreed a paper which argued that the operation of their two courses should be undertaken by an autonomous Independent Studies Unit, separate from the School for Independent Study. As course tutor for the MA/MSc, I wrote, in May, 1985, that 'Whereas the BA/BSc and the MA/MSc have both concentrated upon the issues involved in the engagement of independent study with the rest of the higher education system, the DipHE has tended to concentrate upon the value of its 'independent study' practice in itself' (quoted in Robbins, 1988, 96).

The abolition of the School for Independent Study.

The attempted secession of the post-DipHE courses from the DipHE failed. The consequence was that the assessment of the School made by HM Inspectors at the end of the decade failed to differentiate between courses in its general condemnation. It was not then clear, and is not now clear, what precisely were the machinations which led to the downfall of the School. As Director of NELP from 1982 until 1992, Professor Gerry Fowler, a former Labour junior minister of education at intervals during the 1970s, had always been supportive of the intentions of SIS. At the end of the decade, he was supplanted by a new Director, Frank Gould, who, perhaps, used the shortcomings of independent study practice to undermine the authority of his predecessor. This coincided with changes in the nature of the institution, shortly to be made formal nationally in the designation of the polytechnics as 'new' universities. The intervention of HM Inspectors seemed authoritarian and indicative of a new central government control over local higher education practices. There was now a perceived need for NELP/Polytechnic of East London/University of East London to acquire a new

brand image in the market of higher education institutions and, as a consequence, courses designed to enable individual students to pursue personal objectives were inconveniences.

Reflections.

In 1988, I published *The Rise of Independent Study* (Robbins, 1988). It was an attempt to justify the practices of the School in such a way as to save its reputation. In 1986 I had received an ESRC research grant to assess the contribution of Pierre Bourdieu to the analysis of higher education. In the second half of the 1980s I deployed his conceptual apparatus to try to analyse the extent to which independent study had enabled students to overcome the mismatch between the indigenous cultures of disadvantaged students and the cultures transmitted by privileged staff which Bourdieu and his research colleagues had considered in the 1960s to be the key factor in explaining the way in which French universities perpetuated inequalities in French society[15]. In the final chapter of *The Rise of Independent Study* I tried to draw conclusions from my experience which were inspired by my reading of both Bourdieu and Habermas. I argued that 'The process of registration becomes the model for institutions' (Robbins, 1988, 177), acting as an intermediary between 'system' and 'life' worlds. I thought that maintaining this balance between these competing worlds would enable institutions to be instrumental in 'recreating a 'public sphere' of a whole society. It seems likely, however, that this vision was a function of my own social and intellectual trajectory and, also, similarly of many of my colleagues. In reflecting on the past practice of independent study at NELP, the question is whether a new generation feels the need for this balance and whether higher education institutions feel the need to try to offer it.

[15] See, in particular, Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964.

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