



English Education: More Room at the Top

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A COUPLE of miles outside the Potteries, England's eighteenth-century Klondike of slag heaps, bottle-shaped brick ovens, and streets that begin and end in nothingness, a cluster of new buildings occupies the top of a green and wind-swept ridge. This is the University College of North Staffordshire, commonly known as Keele, ten years after its foundation still the boldest and newest of British universities.

In the English university system, largely devoted to specialization and to turning out potential scholars, Keele is unique. It compels students to spread themselves over several disciplines and in particular to mix arts with science. This may be why it is able to run an undergraduate exchange program with an American college, Swarthmore. When I visited Keele recently, someone in the temporary hut that still houses the students' common room introduced me to this year's Swarthmore visitor. In many English settings an American stands out at once, but this pretty New England girl in a long Keele scarf was indistinguishable from the rest. We talked over the two colleges she had known, their courses, students, teachers. "Well," she concluded with a look of faint surprise, "I guess they're not so different after all."

English universities just now are

going through a half-hidden crisis. As in many other matters, the English give the impression of clinging hard to things as they are: you would think they were doing no more than tinker here and there with some inessential though complex details, and by the standards of willingly expansive countries like America you would be right. At the same time, profound and, for present-day Britain, rapid changes are going on almost unnoticed. They seem bound to transform not just the universities but society itself. The end of it in England may be a move toward a society a lot more like America's.

A Manufactured Aristocracy

England—different in this from Scotland—has long been an aristocracy, in the classical sense of a society run by a carefully chosen group which is differentiated from the rest of the people. For centuries the English governing group has renewed itself by taking in people chosen on merits other than their birth. Until this century it was able to do this without thinking about it much. The last few decades, however, have brought efforts—at least half conscious—to keep in being an elite differentiated scarcely at all by birth and not much by wealth but chiefly by education. For startling inequal-

ities of income you might as well go to Russia. For inequalities deeply felt and kept in being by different ways of pronouncing words, of buttoning one's jacket, or of excusing oneself for stepping on somebody's toes, England is still unique—even though the business becomes year by year more willful and more self-conscious.

The stratified school system has much to do with keeping it going. Until just now the universities acted as a final sieve—a means of turning out enough people to man the civil service, the upper ranks of business, and the professions, but not many more. This manufactured aristocracy roughly tallied with the jobs thought suitable to it; as lately at 1952 the University Grants Committee, the nearest thing to a policymaking body for all the universities, said that universities ought to expand only if there were enough "appropriate" jobs for the extra graduates.

What about a possible cry of privilege? Since the war the English political genius has had an answer. On the one hand society has laid out taxpayers' money, a good deal of it, on tuition and maintenance grants for nearly every student; on the other it has kept down student numbers. It has impartially kept out the idle rich, the unlucky poor, and many of the middling middle class. In the outcome England has still had, for every thousand of its population, only half as many students as Scotland; it has also had proportionally fewer than any other advanced country except Norway and Iceland.

For some years, though, there has been a steady upward pressure of thousands more young men and women. In 1939 the number of university students throughout the country stood at fifty thousand—one-thousandth of the population. After the war the equivalent of the G.I. bill sent this soaring up into the eighty thousands. Soon it looked as if it would settle there or a bit lower, and many academic and political authorities hoped it would. Since the mid-1950's, however, the pressure has been on again. In the last three years the government, the Grants Committee, and the universities have twice had to revise their estimates of future numbers, until now they expect to go from the present figure

of just over 100,000 to about 175,000 in 1970.

An increase of seventy-five per cent in ten years is fairly steep by any standards, even though the totals involved could be swallowed up tomorrow by four or five American state universities. And there is no telling whether the sights may have to be raised yet again. Familiar around many British universities is the brand-new lab, common room, or library that is already obsolete because the expected student population has gone up by a third since the building left the drawing board.

Why this upsurge? There are several explanations; some of them can even be put down to the reasoned decisions of men in authority. A few years ago these men woke up a little late to the need for turning out many more scientists and technologists to keep up with the Russians, and they found that the universities were not supplying them. They were also aware that after the war the English, like the Americans, though not quite so enthusiastically, had started having a lot more children: there will soon be one-third more eighteen-year-olds around than there were ten years ago. What the planners did not foresee was that so many of these eighteen-year-olds were going to want a university education. More and more boys and girls have been staying on in the state schools after the minimum school-leaving age of fifteen, and it looks as though there will be twice as many of them in 1965 as there were in 1958, so that by the late 1960's there will be more potential freshmen than even the expanded universities can take.

Should the System Expand?

Teachers had for years been urging their brighter pupils to stay on like this—often in vain. Why have so many started taking the advice that they or their families used to reject in favor of quickly drawing one more pay envelope? Call it affluence, or a new awareness of the need to acquire skills, or one of those subterranean changes of temper that alter the whole balance of a society. Anyhow, the outcome of all these decisions by adolescents and their parents in brick row houses and suburban mock-Tudor bungalows is that the universities

have been feeling the pressure of thousands more applications than they had places.

All this raises serious problems besides the obvious one of getting enough money, microscopes, and bricks and mortar. British universities are much more alike than American universities. They all keep up reasonably high academic standards, they all give a high place to research, they all get something like three-quarters of their income and most of their new capital from the government, they all feel themselves to be in some way part of the same scholarly community. There is a far smaller difference between Oxford and Hull than between Harvard and Toonerville State. The similarities between English universities are frequently exaggerated—Hull or Southampton or Exeter will find it hard to get the best teachers or the best students—but none of this is allowed to disturb the myth that all universities sit as equals on the top shelf. Hence the worst thing anyone can say of university expansion is that it might mean a “lowering of standards.” As for the idea that the system should expand by frankly letting some universities (as in America) set their academic sights a bit

physics department at Bristol, for instance, gets about a thousand applications a year for its seventy places; it is not likely to waste much time on wishing it were Cambridge or wondering whether it dare risk its standards by expanding.

SCIENCE TEACHERS, by and large, are expansionists. Though they have plenty of worries about money and buildings and staff, they have no worries at all about the demand for their services. Arts teachers, especially in the more disinherited (though theoretically equal) institutions, are far more defensive. The novelist Kingsley Amis, who is a lecturer in English at the Welsh University College at Swansea, has put the extreme case. “More will mean worse,” he says simply. Not only will the extra students be worse students; the university as a place where people pursue academic subjects as “vital to our culture” will suffer: “In order to enable more to participate in something you think valuable, you denature the thing, because those enabled don't see its value.”

The issue, of course, is the whole purpose of a university. Amis and those who think like him reject any



lower than others, hardly anyone ever broached it until just now.

Yet modern English people do change even while they tell each other how painful it would be to change. When you go around the “red-brick” universities you find that the stronger ones, and especially the stronger departments, are sailing ahead without worrying much about their equality with Oxford or Cambridge or anyone else. The excellent

notion that a university's business may be, among other things, to fit students for responsible jobs in future life. For them a university is a place devoted to “the advancement of learning” and to the specialized honors course in a single subject, leading almost automatically (or so one might suppose) to research. It was a Nottingham don who said recently that if some students were to follow a nonspecialized course it

must be sharply segregated from the honors course—and “if people think it inferior they must put up with it.” Not too surprisingly, it is Oxford, with its tradition of teaching and its dislike of the overspecialized, that has given the impulse for some new departures. Keele’s broad science-and-arts course is the brain child of a great Oxford man, A. D. Lindsay; the Oxford influence is also strong at Sussex, a new university whose “organic” courses spanning several subjects will enroll their first students in October.

The Boom Is On

Much of the debate is intramural—an argument among people who accept the existing rules of the game and who agree in particular that every university teacher should be able to spend a good deal of time on research. What is new is that under the pressure of the last few years, people have begun to speak frankly of setting up institutions where teaching would be an end in itself. The notion is still unpopular, but it is beginning to catch on.

Already there are proposals for liberal-arts colleges, or something very like them, to be attached to Nottingham and Glasgow Universities. Both institutions mean to build the new colleges several miles out of town. Lack of space on existing sites is a valid reason for this decision, but I am tempted to believe that some dons would just as soon keep such a low venture as a liberal-arts college (with no research!) decently out of sight. Despite this perhaps shamefaced start, there seems to be a definite drift away from rigid specialization. Compared with what most students now face, the colleges will be more general and experimental in choice of subjects, more varied in standard and in pace.

Above all, higher education will be available to more people. Through the University Grants Committee, the curious mixed body of academics, laymen, and civil servants that stands between the Treasury paymaster and the universities, the government has in effect accepted an expansion of student enrollment to 175,000; it has agreed to double its capital grant for new university buildings to £30 million (\$84 million) a year; it has given its blessing to new universities

at York and Norwich; and several other towns want one too. By English standards the boom is on.

Yet is it enough? Just after ending his term as chairman of the government’s Advisory Council on Education in December, Sir Geoffrey Crowther said that if Britain is to shake off the dead hand of “snobbery and selfishness” and economic inertia, it ought to set about educating not four but twenty per cent of its people in universities—even if this meant that universities had to work two shifts a day. His outburst has widely been put down to “shock tactics.” But it seems likely that even the latest plans for expansion will turn out to be too little and too late.

The immensely tactful system of the Grants Committee, so valuable in preserving the universities’ independence and self-esteem, has one drawback: the hand on the purse

strings usually responds to pressures perhaps already three years old, instead of anticipating pressures three years ahead. The government has set up a special committee under the economist Lord Lionel Robbins to look into the whole matter of higher education—technology and teacher training as well as universities—but this body too must take two or three years to make its report.

As in many other things, Britain seems likely to muddle through—rather late and rather too complacently, perhaps. My own guess is that Britain will make it, at some short-term cost in lost opportunities and underdeveloped young minds; that the undertow has set in toward a higher education more like America’s and, with time, toward the kind of democracy in which all citizens share a common language; and that this will be a liberation.

The Rites of Spring In Albany

MEL ELFIN

IT WAS MID-AFTERNOON in Albany and the New York State assembly had just taken eighteen seconds to approve a minor amendment to the civil-service law. At a desk toward the rear of the Democratic side of the cavernous granite and marble chamber, Assemblyman Louis Wal-lach of Queens turned to a visitor and said: “If you think that was fast, just wait until we get a bill with a short title.”

Within a few minutes the assembly began considering “S3231—An Act to Amend the General Business Law in Relation to Employment Agencies.” From the moment when Ansley B. Borkowski, the assembly’s veteran chief clerk, began droning out the bill’s title until the moment when Speaker Joseph Carlino lifted his right arm, banged his heavy gavel, and announced, “The bill is passed,” only eight seconds elapsed.

Not all the bills that came before the assembly that recent afternoon were cleared so rapidly from the calendar. Nevertheless, the speed with

which they were dispatched indicated the frenzied tempo of the great rites of spring in Albany: the legislature’s annual rush to adjourn. It is a ritual practiced with varying degrees of skill and solemnity by virtually every American legislature from Congress on down. Nowhere, however, does it reach such a thunderous climax as in the grim, gray old capitol of the Empire State.

For as long as anyone in Albany cares to remember, the New York legislature has convened with a great flourish in January, dawdled through February, drifted into March, and then, in a burst of post-equinoctial energy, has disposed of the large majority of its most significant labors in a final week. Almost invariably, the legislators, in their near-stampede to quit Albany before Easter, leave behind unpassed many eminently worthwhile bills and pass others that would have been better left to expire quietly in the seclusion of committee pigeonholes.

While there was no state-wide