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And then to the university

More by accident than design, student numbers in Britain have doubled over the past two decades. And with the change in status of polytechnics, Britain is following the US towards mass higher education. Few want to reverse this trend. But, says Christopher Price, the expansion has led to bitter conflicts over the purpose and quality of university degrees

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Over the past two decades British universities have evolved from elite to mass institutions. It has been one of the great social transformations of our time. Student numbers have more than doubled-rising from 730,000 in 1975 to 1.5m today. Government commissioners and funding agencies have been given unprecedented powers and since 1992 over 40 polytechnics and colleges have been admitted to the university club against the wishes of its ruling caste. In the 1960s there were just 26 universities compared with more than 80 today.

If you are teaching at a middling redbrick, you may well feel you have been transported from Elysium to a madhouse. Your civilised academic environment has degenerated into unproductive stress. You have twice as many students to look after; you are being harried to produce more and more research, often in the form of trivial articles of which you are slightly ashamed; you vaguely blame the government and are irritated with the polytechnics for colluding with this supermarket process of packing students in and piling them high; but you feel impotent to do anything about it.

On the other hand, if you are a student, especially a "first-time buyer," the vanguard of your family in staying on beyond school-leaving age, even an ex-polytechnic can be unadulterated heaven. You may be on the bread line much of the time and aware that jobs will be scarce at the end of your course. But the novelty of the experience can give you a new sense of social confidence.

This revolution has, of course, had its price. Universities have had to adhere to government demands for massive efficiency gains. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has pointed to a 47 per cent fall in costs per student over the past 15 years. Whereas in the 1960s governments followed the Robbins Committee recommendations to keep the staff/student ratios intact, in the

past five years these have gone up from 10.6:1 to 14:1 in the "old" universities. In some former polytechnics, the ratio is twice as high. This has led the OECD to join critics at home in forecasting a decline in the quality of education, with talk of "worthless degrees."

Yet the consumers are not complaining, and very few would deny the good that this revolution has brought about. It has produced a flow of graduates which begins to rival our competitors in both efficiency and output. But under both Margaret Thatcher and John Major the frantic rate of increase in student numbers came about more by accident than design, and the Conservative administration has been oddly reticent about claiming credit for the transformation.

PLANNED GROWTH IN THE 1960s

A shift to mass higher education has happened in most western countries in the past few decades, and is now also taking place at great speed on the Pacific rim. Expansion has taken different forms: Germany has overtly kept a binary system of academic universities and vocational Fachhochschulen, a system which Singapore is successfully copying. The US chose a single stream academic system with a core of elite private institutions supplemented by state-funded universities; Britain has now followed the US model, except that its elite institutions remain subsidised by the tax-payer. France, too, retains a division between its elite Grandes Ecoles and the newer universities where expansion has been carefully planned.

In its early stages, the steps towards mass higher education in Britain were similarly planned. After the Second World War, it became clear that Oxford, Cambridge, London, half a dozen Victorian redbricks and a few rising university colleges would not be enough. Macmillan launched the new "cathedral" or "Baedeker" universities with generously funded residential campuses modelled on Oxbridge: Sussex, Essex, Kent, Warwick, Norwich, Lancaster and York.

In 1961, Macmillan appointed a committee under Lord Robbins to point to future directions. The committee suggested another technological clutch (City, Brunel, Aston, Bath, Salford and Bradford) to counteract the effect of the Oxbridge culture which Macmillan had tried to promote. It forecast that Britain might have half a million students by 1980. In fact it got them by 1968, which led Kingsley Amis to orchestrate a chorus of Black Paper complaints that "more" meant "worse." But both the Robbins committee targets and the more substantial increases that took place were, by any standard, modest. In 1979, Britain was still clinging to elite higher education, with 12 per cent of 18-year-olds going into higher education, against one in three today.

UNPLANNED GROWTH IN THE 1980S

When the Conservatives returned to power in 1979, they had no intention of expanding the numbers of students attending universities and polytechnics. The change from elite to mass higher education happened through a bizarre mixture of accident, opportunism and laissez-faire ideology. Student numbers shot up during the 1980s as a result of reduced employment opportunities and a successful voucher system, which gave everyone who had been offered a place at a university or polytechnic the automatic right to a grant. At first the government was horrified at the prospective cost to the taxpayer; but later, ministers decided to make a virtue of the revolution and devised ways of limiting its cost to the exchequer. Student grants were gradually cut and a loan system was introduced (see box).

Radical change was precipitated by a convergence of interests across the political spectrum in favour of removing the old universities' cultural monopoly of higher learning. The Conservatives were able to disarm a centre of opposition to Mrs Thatcher within British society, while Labour had always favoured expanding educational opportunity. There was also a hunger in industry and commerce for technically trained graduates; a new cohort of graduate parents who had benefited from university expansion in the 1960s and expected similar rights for their own children; and a growing awareness, even among teenagers without aspirant parents, that a college or university education vastly improved employability and earnings potential. The Open University, too, had found a reservoir of high-achieving adults who had performed poorly at school.

What made it all possible was the Treasury's determination to transfer more and more of the costs of higher education from the taxpayer to students and their parents, by ruthlessly reducing unit costs and starting the process of abolishing student maintenance grants. The cartel of the "old" universities had always assumed that they could demand extra resources for any expansion in student numbers; the ploy had always worked in the past. In 1980, they thought they had succeeded in doing so again by refusing, when their grant was cut, to take extra students. But the cartel no longer worked. Those students turned down by universities simply opted to go to polytechnics. Anthony Crosland's polytechnics, based on conglomerations of those municipal colleges excluded by Robbins as not up to university standard, became the foil which forced the old universities to expand.

THE RISE OF POLYTECHNICS

Initially the universities resisted change. Oxford refused Mrs Thatcher an honorary degree, and retribution was swift. The University Grants Committee (UGC), the "buffer" which had preserved their culture intact for 70 years, was summarily abolished; universities were reduced to a subset of "higher education," controlled by agencies preaching privatisation but practising a new form of nationalisation, as the government cut budgets and the agencies deluged universities with detailed "accountability" questions. After the polytechnics became universities, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, which had colluded with the UGC to keep universities out of government control, tried and failed to recruit the new polytechnic director members into its closed Athenaeum culture.

The distinction between universities and polytechnics had always been as much about social class as academic excellence. At first, in 1988, the government appointed two quangoes, one for the old universities and one for the polytechnics. This was justified by one civil servant in a fierce argument with the Treasury on the grounds that the two cultures were as incompatible as Rugby Union and Rugby League. Four years later, when the Treasury won the argument to fuse the two systems, the Higher Education Funding Councils (for England, Wales and Scotland) were established principally to drag the universities out of their amateur culture. The Rugby analogy is probably an apt one, with Rugby Union now going openly professional and the possibility that both codes will, eventually, play by the same rules.

THE LEEDS EXPERIENCE

Having played both codes as a teenager in Leeds, I was quite happy to stick with the Rugby League sobriquet, running a lean, efficient team at Leeds Polytechnic with its strong northern pedigree. But while my fellow polytechnic directors raced for university status, I realised this was a childhood fancy. The most immediate effect of the change of name was to enable the polytechnics to flee their second-class image. It did wonders for student recruitment, especially in engineering. All my efforts to ban the word "university status" from official documents failed. The students loved it; the ex-students loved it even more. Quite elderly polytechnic graduates poured into garden parties to celebrate their academic elevation; a few retrospectively altered their curricula vitae to improve job prospects; members of the Leeds bourgeoisie began addressing me in the elocution-lesson rounded vowels normally reserved for royalty.

Our newly acquired name was a public relations bonus; the change that made a real difference was our release from the municipal embrace of Leeds city council in 1988. At

last we had our own cheque book to wave in the face of a city council which had blocked the appointment of vital staff for two decades. At a stroke we became a partner working with the city council rather than its unruly client. We borrowed money to build new student residences and converted the old ones into libraries and lecture theatres. We had blue chip financial status on top of our new social cachet.

Having improved our corporate image, were we a university? The answer is probably yes, but a university very different from the accepted model.

WHAT IS A UNIVERSITY?

A traditional university might be defined as having well-rated professors; being on the leading edge of one or two research specialities; and being able to demand 24 or 25 A-level points as a condition of entry (A grade=10 points; B grade=8 points). The quality of undergraduate teaching, except at Oxbridge, scarcely entered the equation. Staff career prospects at a university depended on research. To receive financial support for their research, staff had to ensure that a few colleagues in the same speciality in other universities approved of their projects-this usually happened, especially if they gave good marks to their colleagues' own research. This self-referential system of "peer review" had always existed as part of the essence of the old universities; but since the government's recent reforms it has become fundamental to the level of taxpayer support and therefore to their very existence.

Polytechnics, on the other hand, were teaching rather than research institutions. The Council for National Academic Awards had always insisted on the criterion (to which university courses were never subject) that courses should produce employable graduates; thus, single subject degrees, the norm in the old universities, were few and far between; economics, sociology and psychology were integrated into "business studies;" computing and mechanical engineering into "manufacturing systems engineering;" many students did, and still do, sandwich courses, splitting their time between industry and the lecture theatre. More than half the students at Leeds Polytechnic were part-time and more than half on two-year diploma courses rather than three-year degree courses (nearly 450,000 of the 1.5m students in higher education are part-timers).

Polytechnics had to concentrate on teaching because they received hardly any cash for research (Leeds University still gets about 24 times as much research cash as its ex-polytechnic neighbour). When the polytechnics became universities, they tried to make a virtue of these different characteristics.

To the "old" universities, however, the ex-polytechnics still remained a financial threat; the loss of the exclusive right to the "university" title had not been welcome; it would be doubly disastrous if their research cash monopoly also disappeared. So the top dozen or so universities (now named the Russell Group after intrigues in a hotel in Bloomsbury) which were already cornering the bulk of the ?1,500m available, lobbied to keep it. So far they have been remarkably successful both in doing so and in controlling the allocation system for the future. The government, to date, has acquiesced.

As a result, a new "research barrier" is developing between the top 15 universities and the rest; among the losers are not only the polytechnics, but also the smaller and less successful "old" universities. The reaction of some of them is to go "professor poaching," buying up with vastly enhanced salaries the clever people, and their research grants, from complacent old universities. The funding councils are threatening to change the rules to stop it all, but some of the new whiz-kid vice-chancellors will always keep one step ahead of them.

In any case, the concordat between government and top universities on research may be temporary. It is implicit in the shift of the research council's budget to the Department of Trade and Industry and its new economic empire (created by Michael Heseltine) that it remains government policy to transfer control of the university research effort from academic peer review to its own social and industrial objectives.

To the top universities, and especially to Oxford and Cambridge, autonomy has always been more important than income. When, as chairman of the Commons Select Committee on Education ten years ago, I took my colleagues to Oxford, we were met by the Vice-Chancellor along with a few heads of colleges. I had noticed that several colleges had private deals with urban local education authorities to recruit the best of their comprehensive output, in spite of what might be mediocre A-levels. I asked them if guilt was the motivating factor? "Pure self interest" was the universal response. "The brains of Britain are our life blood; we know they are out there, even if the schools do not." Cambridge would have said the same.

AUTONOMY AND QUALITY CONTROL

The main objective of all top universities is to recruit the brightest students they can and keep the best either in their system, or running the country with youthful loyalties to alma mater intact. These universities are determined never to become intellectual creatures of government and have recently won some famous victories for academic freedom, especially in the House of Lords.

But freedom can be abused. The Times Higher Educational Supplement recently published a devastating critique (necessarily anonymous because of the potential for victimisation) of one English department where students are pressured into reading and writing about Derrida, Lacan and Althusser (though never about Plato, Freud and Marx) simply to feed their teachers' narrow political correctness.

This debate is particularly important now that higher education is identified as one of Britain's most significant exports. Fifteen years ago, while the vice-chancellors were regretting the increase in overseas student fees, their finance officers were enjoying making money out of this export trade. Now, with about one in ten students coming from overseas, the quality of our degrees and the extent to which they represent value for money is constantly under the microscope.

The government has not yet come up with a successful quality control system for university teaching. The Department of Education is still trying to improve teaching in the old universities by imposing a central system for assessing the quality of teaching across all higher education and rewarding high quality with more generous grants. But it may be that the university league tables in the newspapers provide enough external accountability.

THE FUTURE

Following the merger of polytechnics and universities, Britain has no significant higher education institutions which provide only industry and business-oriented courses-even though demand from industry for graduates is growing. Britain actually has a reasonably high proportion of science to arts students, but compared with many similar countries it has fewer "applied" and more "pure" courses. One obvious danger for the future is that former polytechnics will seek to become mini-Oxbridges, while old universities become mass teaching colleges. Britain could thus abandon both its world-class research universities and its dedicated business-oriented institutions.

In practice Britain's expanded higher education system appears to be forging stronger relations with business without sacrificing excellence. Many of Britain's universities are on the leading edge of new forms of world-wide learning. The new university at the top of the league table in the 21st century will be expert in linking up with government and EU agencies outside education in order to build partnerships with industry. Indeed, this process is already taking place.

There is still a die-hard nostalgia lobby which believes that any change must be for the

worse. But some of the pedagogic plans of the ex-polytechnics and the old Oxbridge culture are remarkably similar. Ex-polytechnics are increasingly leaving students to do much of their learning at their own computer terminals, with staff acting more as facilitators than lecturers. Oxford and Cambridge have always placed the emphasis more on process than raw output of knowledge. Only 40 years ago at Oxford you theoretically had to ask permission to travel more than ten miles from Carfax during term time. Your contract was to "keep nine terms" and immerse yourself in the atmosphere; the degree was a bonus. This tradition goes back to the ideal of the Platonic academy, a quiet space for students and teachers to reflect.

Some elite universities will continue to provide such an environment partly because they are locked in a definable space; the ex-polytechnics will have to rely more on cyberspace. Here, as academia goes increasingly global, they may have the edge.