OPENING TERTIARY EDUCATION — SOME IMPLICATIONS OF DIFFERENT APPROACHES

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During a recent study leave I had opportunity to talk, and listen, to a great many people, sometimes singly and sometimes in organised conferences, about what they variously describe according to their backgrounds and prejudices as Open University, University for the Workers, or a continuing-education approach to university. Whilst there are undoubtedly differences between them, both in aims and in preferred methods, all of them were at least agreed that university education should be more widely available to people who are older and/or less traditionally qualified than the matriculated, predominantly middle-class, eighteen-to-twenty year olds who make up the bulk of the student intakes of most universities at the present time. Discussion nearly always tended to revolve around one of three major questions. Should selection procedures be made more varied, appropriate and generally accessible or should they be abandoned altogether? Should we 'open' existing institutions or establish new equivalent institutions geared to the needs, advantages and limitations of more heterogeneous student bodies? And, more fundamentally, is the prime purpose to provide opportunities to individuals for their personal advancement or to create a more equitable and more efficient society? I suggest that there is a greater interdependence between these questions than is generally acknowledged. I also believe that, especially in determining what the prime objective is, we must differentiate between ideas which are conceptually distinct on the one hand and strategic aims which are in practice separable on the other.

Theoretical Designs and Their Practical Limitations

Whatever our aims may be, our activities can only take the form of enabling and encouraging individuals to embark upon tertiary education courses. Since the success of these activities must depend on the co-operation and the personal motivations of those individuals it will tend to follow that, irrespective of the intentions of the planners, the students themselves will think quite definitely in terms of meeting their own aspirations within the existing frameworks of society. At the same time, irrespective of *their* motivations, the introduction of large numbers of people who already have firm roots in all sections of the community into the 'graduate segment of society', with all that this implies, must bring about some changes to the nature of society as a whole and the role that education plays in it. I suggest, therefore, that if we are realistic about our ultimate aims we will recognise that the most we can do is select approaches to open tertiary education which will tend on the one hand to favour equality of opportunity with all its implications for meritocracy, or, on the other hand, a breaking down of the nexus between being educated and being clever and the achievement thereby of a more egalitarian and more rational society.

I do not, therefore, find it surprising that those who see social change, including radical readjustments of the education process, as their major aim tend to favour totally open admission policies, whilst those who think mainly in terms of greater and more equitable opportunity for individual advancement look mainly to modifications of selection methods to achieve this. There are considerable differences between the implications of letting everybody enter a race and, like Alice, declaring everybody the winner and handing out prizes all round. It makes sense to talk of increasing social mobility via educational opportunity only on the assumption that society will retain a definite social structure and that the educational currency will not be debased. Granted these assumptions, then the widening of the catchment net cannot but have the effect of increasing competition,* pushing standards up and putting an ever-greater premium on native ability.

Whereas I can well understand that many educators would view this prospect with dismay and would seek, therefore, something much more akin to Alice's caucus race, something which assumes that all men, if not actually equal, are at least equally entitled to extend their own education to the limits of their own energy and ability and gain public recognition for so doing, I feel that such people must recognise that they are, in effect, committing themselves to establishing tertiary institutions which, whatever they might call themselves, are importantly different from universities as we now know them.

They are so committed, I maintain, because from the viewpoints both of political expediency and of decency and responsibility to the students it is essential that those who are admitted can reasonably be expected to cope with the programmes of study offered and achieve a fairly high level

of success, as measured by whatever accreditation the institutions give. And it is just a brute fact that cannot be denied that, whatever the shortcomings of conventional selection procedures may be, they do nevertheless provide student bodies about which certain expectations can be held. And the methods, assumptions and standards of universities are geared to these expectations. Any university which moved wholly to a first-come-first-served admission policy would inevitably suffer a marked fall in its success-rate unless it either lowered its standards or made radical changes to its teaching methods and its evaluation criteria. It cannot be assumed, of course, that such changes would necessarily be changes for the worse.

The Options for 'Totally Open' University Education

I want, therefore, to consider what methods and approaches might be adopted, together with a policy of totally open access, to ensure that the prospects of student success remain acceptably high and, at the same time, what we might regard as reasonable university standards of proficiency are maintained, and to do so by looking at the styles and experience of two major institutions — the British Open University and the University of Paris (VIII) at Vincennes — both of which have had totally open admission policies since their almost contemporary inceptions about nine years ago.[1]

Since the British Open University has taken great care to ensure equivalence of standard by consulting outside examiners from other British universities[2] and Vincennes is subject to the normal conditions of the University of Paris, there can be no suggestion in either case of a deliberate lowering of standards. The high level of success that they have achieved must, therefore, be attributable to the approaches and methods they have adopted. What I find particularly interesting is that, in diverging from traditional university methods to meet their responsibilities to student bodies which are plainly more heterogeneous and have a lower background education level and, very probably, a lower average intellectual capacity, these two institutions have moved in diametrically opposed directions.

If I might be permitted an analogy, it is as if two department stores wished to ensure that all customers, including the halt and the lame, could move from the ground floor to the top floor, purchasing their vital needs in the process; one achieves this by providing an escalator system with a limited but essential range of goods in close proximity to each staging point, the other by a profusion of short stairways, ramps and lifts such that the really determined customer can always find some manageable way to reach the goods he needs. The second store's way will tend to make harder work of it and the chances are that more customers will leave the store with their shopping incomplete — but they have had a far wider range of options presented to them and a much better chance to purchase precisely what they want.

The 'Primrose Path' Approach

Taken too far, the likening of the British Open University to an escalator could certainly be misleading. It is definitely not the case that O.U. students need merely stand still and be carried forward; they are required to work hard, diligently and productively. But they are not required, I suspect not even desired, to show great initiative. The options before them are extremely limited, the approaches to study meticulously prescribed, the steps and stages neatly paced out with appropriate feedback mechanisms like a well designed teaching machine. The admirable counselling-support provided is wholly geared to reconciling students to the prescribed content of courses and ensuring that they develop the prescribed learning techniques. It is a system in which less native ability can be compensated for quite effectively by more work. It ensures that every student has the texts he needs, with the appropriate passages underlined, and completes all the essential exercises in the approved manner. He is largely relieved of the need for decision-making, and is not expected to make any great contribution to his own education, other than by dedicated receptivity, or to the education of his fellows. However, tremendous care and sensitivity have gone into the preparation of course material, both in its communication-effectiveness and in the selection of content. In a situation in which it would be unrealistic to expect students to extend their enquiries beyond specifically prescribed material, the material provided does, I believe, ensure that people leave the O.U. very much better informed and generally better equipped than they enter it — which is, after all, the purpose of education.

It would be foolish to question that the British Open University does what it does extremely well and that what it does is well worth doing. It would, however, be equally foolish to deny that it provides a somewhat 'blinkered' education process geared to upgrading mediocrity rather than to developing excellence.

This is totally justifiable, almost inevitable, I believe, for an institution with vast student numbers which must operate by distance teaching methods and which has a moral obligation to self-selected students to set a course that they can run. However, there is no reason why the approaches and methods employed by the O.U. of necessity could not be adopted by other institutions from choice. University of Paris (VIII) at Vincennes, for

instance, which is a metropolitan, non-residential, face-to-face institution with something like 30,000 enrolled students, could have elected to use the same 'closed circuit' methods to ensure an acceptable level of student success. Indeed I suspect that many Australian teachers' colleges in the days of the bonded student did precisely this to avoid the embarrassment of failures.

The 'Multitude of Possibilities' Approach

Such a decision at Vincennes, however, would have run totally counter to the spirit in which that institution was established following the 1968 student riots. My feeling is that its fundamentally liberal approaches to education are a reaction more against the rigidity and narrowness than against the exclusiveness of traditional French university education so that, although a radically different admission policy was, as it were, part of the deal, the aim was to set up an ultra-flexible university in which students would be thrown heavily on to their own initiatives, would have a definite participatory role in designing programmes and establishing criteria for accreditation to ensure that relevance, that somewhat mystical quality so dear to undergraduate hearts, would pervade the institution and its works. The Vincennes approach is to provide so wide a range of possibilities and combination-options that every student can do the things he is best at doing; he can always maximise his own existing skills rather than forcing them into a new and unfamiliar mould. Like other autonomous sections of the University of Paris, Vincennes specialises in certain broad fields of enquiry rather than attempting to cover the whole spectrum. Its courses are almost entirely within those areas of the humanities and social sciences in which the student's experience of life plays a vital part in his grasp of the subject and earlier formal study is of little relevance. It is not surprising, therefore, that this university, which has adhered steadfastly to its original policies over its nine years of operation to date, has proved well-suited to the needs of a great number of self-selected students.

Apart from the incredibly dilapidated state of the buildings, the thing that I first found most striking about it is its pervasive attitude of permissiveness and supportiveness. I felt that every member of staff, administrative as well as academic, was totally convinced of the rightness of what they are doing and how they are doing it and was willing to go to great lengths to assist individual students to work out and profit from the courses most suited to their particular interests and talents. This unusual staff-student relationship is not the kind of thing that can be quantified or even described exactly, but it is an absolutely essential ingredient of a system which departs quite radically from the customary in its regulations and methods.

It offers an extremely wide range of semester-units; for the ordinary degree a student must successfully complete 30 of these, usually 20 from within (broadly speaking) a given subject area, the other 10 from any areas at all. But there are no prerequisites; all semester-units are parallel and can be taken in any order at all. There are no time-limits whatsoever. The design and control of each semester-unit is the sole prerogative of the lecturer-in-charge, as is the assessment of students. Formal examinations are extremely rare and, I understand, it is most unusual for any student to be denied accreditation in a unit if the lecturer-in-charge is satisfied that he has applied himself to it to the best of his ability.

Students enrol in the university and then, in effect, make their arrangements direct with the various staff members to take their semester-units. A student may be credited with up to six units taken concurrently (it is, therefore, possible to complete a degree in 2½ years) but no central record is kept of which students are taking which units. The university is able to say how many students are enrolled and how many units any student has been credited with to date but has no means of knowing, except approximately by consulting all staff members individually, how many units have been commenced and withdrawn from.

When I raised the obvious misgivings with the Director of Studies his answers were disarmingly logical: Why should they concern themselves about what students have attempted and failed; what matters is what they have succeeded in. Although there are no fixed quotas it is comparatively easy within the system for a lecturer to guide the right people, and the right number of people, into his class. Since what is covered in any semester-unit can be decided in consultation between lecturer and student group, pursuit of an enquiry in greater depth is quite possible without formal prerequisites. Standards can look after themselves; no intellectual concessions are made by staff-members, however sympathetic and patient they may be, and what student is going to persevere dully and uncomprehendingly through thirty semester-units? Either he will develop to a point where he is worthy of accreditation or he will quietly fade away. And if a few dull-witted but doggedly determined people secure a first degree, does this really matter? Nobody is permitted to move on to post-graduate work without the strong recommendation of his undergraduate teachers. The system may be somewhat confusing for new students, especially those coming from a non-education background, but staff members are all willing and accessible to help and advise; if people cannot or will not seek and secure the necessary advice perhaps it is better that they do not proceed with a course which will certainly demand initiative from them at every stage.

The same gentleman, however, was far from complacent. He was aware that since such institutions could operate only in centres of great population such as Paris they could never be a general, across-the-board answer to the problem of providing university education for 'the workers' in a way that they could reasonably be expected to take advantage of. He also admitted that Vincennes inevitably attracted, and had to live with, a proportion of students whose motivation was political rather than educational and who could be a damned nuisance; to reject such people, he believed, would be to compromise those principles which were quite vital to the university's philosophy and its success as an open institution. He felt an obligation to take all comers but was aware that this led to staff-student ratios which put unreasonable burdens on staff members and possibly made unfair demands on students; the amount of face-to-face tuition that could be provided was far less than desirable and, because of this, drop-out was higher, he felt, than it need be. In a situation where only one institution amongst many accepts responsibility for educating all those who present themselves, without setting quotas as the British Open University does, it is almost inescapable that its human and physical resources will be dangerously overstretched. And he did acknowledge, albeit reluctantly, that the more conservative sections of the French establishment are still somewhat dubious about Vincennes graduates.

Does Totally Open Admission Attract 'Ordinary People'?

Interestingly, however, the main source of dissatisfaction at Vincennes, as at the British Open University, is that, despite all their efforts to provide curricula, methods and approaches calculated to make success possible for well-motivated people of fair-average-quality intellect irrespective of their educational background, the 'ordinary people' at which open education schemes are aimed form a comparatively small proportion of the student body. Even though the British Open University indulges quite openly in *ad hoc* adjustment of its quotas, its student body stubbornly remains predominantly 'middle-class'.[3] This would not be true of the student body at Vincennes but neither would it be true that they are 'ordinary people' as that term is generally understood. Rather they tend to be activists, 'alternative-life-style'' people, acentrics from a wide spectrum of backgrounds. The Parisian 'typical working man' is no more attracted to Vincennes that his British counterpart is to the Open University. Certainly I gained the impression that a very high proportion of the students are from under-privileged sections of the community (it is particularly noticeable how many of them are non-white in what is a predominantly white society) but they are not, I think, fairly representative of those underprivileged sections; rather they typify those minorities found in all sections of society who tend to take any opportunity which is presented for the advancement of themselves or their beliefs.

That Vincennes does present such an opportunity is, in itself, excellent. It is also excellent that the success achieved both in attracting good students and in providing sound education by radical means is causing other, more conventional, universities to re-examine many of their basic assumptions, as is the quite different yet no less remarkable success of the British Open University. By their innovations to meet new and more difficult tasks both are contributing to a steady, evolutionary change in received educational wisdom. And by facilitation of increased social mobility they are obviously producing some modification, however slight, of the general social structure.

But I doubt whether either of these institutions has the radical effects upon general attitudes to education and its role in society as a criterion for social and economic preferment that the fully-fledged social engineers would wish. I have seen nothing to make me doubt that their successful students are overwhelmingly motivated by the (quite respectable) desire for personal advancement and are the kind of people who would come forward quite happily for traditional university education if it were offered to them under practicable conditions.

If I am right in my belief that an institution does not, simply by declaring itself totally open, attract students who are differently motivated or students who would not otherwise present themselves as teritary education candidates, then it is hard to see what case there can be, apart from a somewhat barren ideological commitment to total equality, for the abandonment of all preselection. Indeed, it could be argued that, if we are in any case stuck with a system in which educational qualification is seen and sought as a means to individual social and economic advantage, then it is more equitable that such qualification should be limited to those who prove themselves better equipped within a competitive system. Here, of course, we must take care not to think in hard 'either-or' terms — either totally open entry or the exclusion of all but the very bright. A sufficiently flexible competitive system can still provide opportunity for the hardworking and highly motivated fair-average-quality student.

The Modified Selection Method Alternative

My own view is that a policy of totally open admission would need to have more advantages than are manifest in the two very different examples I have here considered to compensate for its drawbacks. Since it is simply a brute fact that some people make better students than others, it inevitably

entails departures from university education processes and demands which have evolved over years of dealing with preselected students and established the widespread confidence which university education enjoys. There are at least grounds for supposing that if these departures take the British O.U. direction then the institution's graduates, however well-trained they may be, will tend to lack some of those qualities we look for in university graduates whereas, if they take the Vincennes direction, only the hardy will survive anyway and these will tend to be somewhat suspect by the graduates of more traditional institutions and also by employing authorities.

And I believe that there is a reasonable alternative. We have all tended to think and talk as though, if we are to have selection procedures at all, then there is one **proper** means of selection of university students, the assessment by established formula of a person's capacity to absorb six years of high school teaching, and any variation from this is some kind of 'special arrangement', a concession to some minority group who 'should be given a chance'. What is to prevent any university from designing a range of selection procedures, all with appropriate tuition provision available, to meet the needs and situations of different categories of people, so that only those who lack the necessary ability or motivation to achieve success are debarred from higher education within the existing traditional framework.

In Australia all the indications are that 'special entry' students perform quite as well in the traditional university as other students,[4] and as well as they would be likely to in such specially designed institutions as the British Open University and Paris (VIII) at Vincennes. Why, then, do we continue to regard them as 'special' and to assume that they must forever be a tiny minority of the student population? The rate of admission of such 'non-standard' people into even the most liberal traditional universities has to date very rarely been more than about 200 students a year. And the methods employed for their selection have frequently developed in an *ad hoc* way, generally as some concessional modification of standard matriculation examinations; rarely are they specifically designed as effective predictive mechanisms for the group or groups of people in question.

Surely there is no reason why this must be so. Nothing in the constitutions or methodologies or even the traditions of most universities puts any ceiling on the proportion of mature undergraduates that can be accommodated or prescribes that all students be selected in any given way. It should not be beyond the capacity of professional educators to identify within their own communities different categories of background-and-education level and devise for each a pattern of preparatory education and assessment which would provide an effective prediction of university success — and and attractive proposition to the people in those categories.

This last point, that the selection process should be attractive as well as effective, I regard as very important indeed. It is widely acknowledged that totally open entry policies have failed to attract 'ordinary people' — 'the workers' if you prefer that loaded term — into higher education in any appreciable numbers. I am fairly convinced that the main reason for this is that most of the people who are totally out of contact with universities and university people are generally unwilling or unable to believe that without considerable preparation they have the ability to tackle a university degree; they feel that they would simply make themselves ridiculous and face certain failure and humiliation. This does not mean that such people have no interest in higher education; it does mean that some means must be devised to introduce them into the higher education stream by stages which are not felt by them to be threatening, which enable them to develop confidence by discovering for themselves that they are as competent as most people. It also means that they need to be subjected to objective assessment procedures which vest in people whose views they respect the responsibility for deciding whether they should or should not aspire to ongoing higher education. They are happy to enter university only when someone who they feel has the appropriate authority can say to them: "I've seen your work and the way you are developing and I feel that this is now the correct step for you to take; you have been weighed in the balance and not found wanting." This is possible, of course, only if the universities, or other organisations working in close association with them, are willing to be involved in the design and conduct of the kind of preparatory courses that people need and will accept.

To return, then, to my starting point: I am suggesting that, whatever our ideological motivation may be, our methods must provide, and be seen to provide, opportunities for individuals to advance via education within the existing social structure. I believe that this can be achieved most effectively by providing wider access to the kind of education generally recognised and accepted as the prerogative of universities and that abandonment of all preselection of students leads inevitably to departures from that recognised and accepted kind of university education. Furthermore, there are reasons to suppose that it fails to attract large numbers of potentially capable people into higher education. My firm belief, therefore, based upon discussion, observation and my quite extensive experience with 'non-standard' mature-age university aspirants over the past twelve years, is that we should devote our energy and ingenuity to the design, not of specially tailored 'different-but-equal' universities-for-the-workers, but of a full range of different-but-equivalent education and assessment procedures through which the right people from every segment of society could be channelled with confidence into our existing university system.

References

1. A very comprehensive account of the aims, methods and history to date of Vincennes is given by its Director of Studies, Michel Debeauvais in *L'Université Ouverte: Les Dossiers de Vincennes* (Presses Universitaires de Grenoble 1976). Unfortunately this publication does not appear to be available in English.
   Although much has been published about the British Open University, I believe that the clearest picture of its aims and methods can be gained from the *Prospectus*, the *B.A. Degree Handbook* and the *Guide for Applicants to Undergraduate Courses* issued each year by the University.
2. The assessment and examination procedures of the Open University are discussed in detail by **Walter Perry** in Chapter 8 of *Open University* (Open University Press 1976).
3. In *Open University* (p. 149) **Walter Perry** writes (of enrolment by students identified as working-class) 'This is a slow increase but the fact that it has been a continuous one has been of great interest to us. We hope that these people will come forward in increasing numbers as the institution becomes more widely known . . .' The increase he speaks of is from 10% of the applicants in 1970 to 15% of the applicants in 1975.
4. The Tertiary Education Research Centre at the University of New South Wales has been making a detailed study of Mature and Unmatriculated Students for several years and produces regular progress reports. These indicate much better-than-average results by these students. Similar positive results have been found at all other Australian Universities which have conducted such studies.