

# I. The Scottish Universities

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In Britain few would argue that even the majority of the population should attend a University. But there lingers on even among left-wingers, the idea that the University also provides a certain social grace, a critical appreciation of cultural forms, which cannot be obtained elsewhere, or, if obtained elsewhere, is not worth having. For Conservatives, this is the simple fact that going up to Oxbridge is the passport to the social elite, based on the Oxford-Cambridge triangle, with its connection in government, law, politics and the society of the Home Counties. This social pattern often produces a type of academic left-wing who thinks there is an intellectual case for Socialism, that it is less wasteful of resources, and would produce a more civilised society — always, of course, organized by the elite to which he himself belongs.

And yet, surely one of the basic principles of Socialism (unless it is simply *about* efficiency, about the relative merits of physical or monetary controls over the economy) is that no section of the community is inherently more valuable than any other. The more skilled jobs should be rewarded by higher wages, but not by any privileged social status. It will be small improvement if the class structure of society is to be replaced by a system which rewards a certain type of mental agility by giving it power, prestige and overtones of caste.

If the central function of a University, then, is conceived, not as the creation of a special rank, to whom non-graduates are inferior, but as a provider of professional training, then the Scottish Universities have some strikingly good features. Since the mid-Eighteenth Century, the Scottish aristocracy has tended to drift down to London and to send their sons — younger as well as older — to the English Public Schools, and thence to Oxford and Cambridge. Scottish Universities have, as a consequence, become, and have remained, a preserve of the middle class. Low fees made it possible for most middle class children to

attend and they went for strictly vocational purposes — to learn the law, to become teachers, to graduate into the local manse — all worthwhile occupations. Other sons who went into trade or banking or the army were not in any ways less fortunate: they merely acquired their professional training in other ways, and they were expected to have a fair amount of general education.

Much of this atmosphere still exists. "Going up to the University" is much more common in Scottish families than in English, and there is no gulf between those taking this sort of training and the large numbers who become chartered-accountant students and attend some classes at the University. Until quite recently it was possible to learn medicine either at a Scottish University, or at the College of Physicians and Surgeons. Scottish Students usually have a clearer vocational aim in view than their English counterparts. The English provincial boy, winning an Oxford scholarship, will place all his hopes on the few positions in art, letters, politics, or in the Senior Common Rooms, which will put him, or keep him, in the charmed circle. But if he is driven into teaching or industry, he regards his career as, from the start a relative failure. In Scotland, the student aims much lower at the professions he has learned to respect, in the persons of the local schoolmaster, doctor or lawyer. He sees the University as the happy means to this good end — not as a few years of "real life" against which he must measure all that comes after, and after which, having missed his chance, he was sent into perpetual and undeserved exile.

If this tradition makes for a fairly healthy atmosphere in the Scottish Universities, it also creates its special problems. Precisely because entrance into University was relatively easy for the middle classes, the local authorities have always been reluctant to provide reasonable grants. There is no state scholarship system in Scotland, and local authority awards are markedly lower than those in England.

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% English and Welsh students on Grants	% Scottish students on Grants
1952-3: 80. 7%	57%
Average amount of LEA Grants in England and Wales	Average amount of LEA Grants in Scotland
1952-3: £190	£123

(See *Sub-Committee of the Association of University Teachers of Scotland*).

Despite the lower fees payable in Scotland, the Scottish student is at a real disadvantage, and the University application forms serve to destroy the myth of working-class boys pushing themselves through the University on the basis of hard-won vacation earnings — in fact they form only a very small percentage of those coming to the University.

The traditional Scottish emphasis upon Schools and Universities as places to pass exams and obtain qualifications has had unfortunate effects on the methods of teaching. Fifty years ago Scottish education was admired because, where England before 1902 did not even have a proper system of secondary schools, Scottish schools and Universities hammered a fairly high degree of competence into the children and the young men and women. This is still true today, but the reliance upon pressure, the persistence of the idea that education is "cramming", has retarded any growth of self-confidence among the school-pupils. The result has been noted by all teachers of first-year classes at the Scottish Universities. The first year men are inarticulate. They often have no notion that they are entitled to an opinion of their own, and if they do have views, they lack the confidence to maintain them, standing in constant awe of the teacher. Professor Pares used to say that, asked a question, a Scottish student will either give the right answer at once, or maintain a total silence.

### Problem of recruitment

More serious than the hangover effects of the defects in Scottish schools, is that these defects are not all remedied during the three or four years of undergraduate life. No doubt this is in part due to the transference of attitudes formed at school to the University. But there is a general tendency for Scottish students to regard University work as simply attendance at courses, copious note-taking and then cramming to pass exams. Though the gap between undergraduates from English and Scottish schools is steadily reduced, the final product of Edinburgh or Glasgow Universities still seems to be lacking in maturity and flexibility — at least when compared to graduates of Oxford and Cambridge.

This opinion is supported by the evidence of the selection boards for the Civil Service and the leading industrial enterprises. Candidates have to have a first or a good second but the appointments are based on interviews where selectors look for the qualities which I have mentioned. Results which I have compared regionally over the post-War years indicate serious deficiencies in the standard of Scottish graduates.

	<i>No. from England and Wales</i>	<i>No. from Scotland</i>	<i>% of Scots</i>	
<i>Recruitment</i>				
Foreign Service 1946-55	434	18	3.	9
Home C. S. 1948-55	428	47	9.	8
N. C. B. 1950-55	59	2	3.	2
LCI. 1947-55	139	9		6
A leading Motor Company 1947-56	62	6	8.	8

It is true that there are relatively fewer applicants from Scotland for these posts — but this is a symptom of the relative weakness of the Scottish Universities, which can be seen contrasting the relative number of students in Scotland with the figures given above:

Average 1948-54		
England and Wales	...	67,800
Scotland	...	15,532
% of Scots . . .	...	18.6%

When these manifest deficiencies were discussed in a recent newspaper controversy, the more Conservative reaction was simply to say that these students came from lower-middle class families, many of them ought not to have been at the University anyway, and that if they had gained entrance, it was to be expected that few would achieve that tranquil consciousness of effortless superiority" which is the prerogative of the London-Oxford-Cambridge triangle. The normal Scottish reaction is to say that the selectors are Englishmen, with a bias in favour of the glib, superficial English public schools. But a reluctance to venture opinions without careful prior study is an old Scottish virtue which must not lightly be cast aside. The solution is not to alter the Scottish graduates, but the selection methods.

In answering these arguments, a Socialist must use some caution. It is true that there is a type of upper-class self-assurance, which may well conceal deficiencies in English candidates. The whole class structure of English society militates in favour of a certain kind of candidate — especially one feels, in the entrance to the Foreign Office. On the other hand, Scots graduates are usually well received by their boards, and many allowances are made for relative reticence. On the whole selectors are looking for inherently valuable qualities which most Scottish University teachers would agree are lacking, to a greater or lesser degree, in many of their graduates. A more cynical left-wing reaction is to point out that a country gets the education it deserves. The tone of Scottish society is set by a middle class which distrusts originality, ideas or criticism, and looks at home and in the schools to conformity in outlook. But this argument is unnecessarily defeatist. The Scottish middle classes are open to appeals (suitably tinged with patriotism) to keep their educational system among the best and of course could be roused to passion by a relative lack of success.

### What can be done?

Even within the existing University and social structure there is much that can be done. I have not attempted in the suggestions that follow to work out an

order of priorities, but dearly finance and the present lack of it informs most of the points.

In the first place, the principle of the 1944 Education Act should be applied to Scotland. This would end the large number of part fee-paying state-aided schools in our major cities—schools that do so much to stamp middle class conformity on successive generations of students. A proper system of state scholarships and grants would make it possible for working class boys to enter Universities in far greater numbers.

Besides deterring entrance, low grants have a pervasive and retarding effect on all aspects of student life. The Scottish Education Department calculates "maintenance" at 75/- a week, and the resultant poverty of the average Scottish student — aggravated by the extreme housing shortage, especially in Glasgow — makes work conditions very difficult (through inferior and shared "digs") and any background of general cultural activities (e. g. theatre) almost impossible. Buying books and even taking newspapers and periodicals is unusual among Scottish students, and as a teacher I am acutely embarrassed at having to ask my students to buy prescribed volumes of documents at 42/- each.

In my time as an Edinburgh graduate — the days of the POST-WAR ex-service grants — the great social hour at Edinburgh was over lunch. There, in the dining hall, one could sit in comfort and talk to medicos, lawyers and people of all kinds and faculties. I learned as much over lunches as at any of my courses. On my return in 1955 I found that the students could no longer afford to eat in Hall, but take only a snack-bar meal in the clatter of a station waiting-room.

Being, many of them, members of the "new poor" families, Scottish students are reluctant to ask for higher contributions from their parents. As a consequence paid work in the vacation has increased enormously, so that in many cases it absorbs the entire vacation. And this is happening at a time when the academic syllabus is becoming so overloaded that the authorities are considering extending the minimum time for various degrees — a peculiar state of affairs

when the students are being forced to spend three or more months of the year at a paid occupation that has nothing to do with their studies and whose value as experience is very limited.

Proper financial provision could have other beneficial effects. Tutorial work in small classes of two to six is undoubtedly the best method of breaking down the old Scottish habits of learning by rote. **At present** such tutorial work is only possible for the Honours School (though the Arts faculty of Glasgow is far behind the rest). Far too many students take ordinary degrees, because of the prevailing **impression that it** is only exceptional students who go on to Honours. It would be easy, even within the present limitations on the tutorial system, to reverse this, and to expect all but students with poor performances to read for an Honours degree, provided that an extra year did not, as it does now, involve financial hardship.

The housing difficulties of students in non-residential Universities is well known. In Scotland it is aggravated by the especially grave housing shortage. Hence, it is especially important to implement the excellent suggestion of the Edinburgh Students' Representative Council that sufficient hostels be built to permit **all** undergraduates, whether or not their homes were in the area of the University, to spend their first year in residence. This is urgently needed for Glasgow and Aberdeen, as for Edinburgh — but it would need considerable increases in the expenditure of the Scottish Education Department.

If it is the function of the University to educate administrators, lawyers, doctors and engineers, not merely to technical competence, but also to realise that they are valuable only in so far as they perform their tasks as equal critical members of the community, then the Scottish Universities have the advantage that they are biased in the right direction, in the traditional emphasis on vocational training. But there are many deficiencies to be made up — not the least of which is complacency and a local patriotism which looks rather to the past than to the future.