

# Excellence or Equality: A Dilemma for Higher Education?

A Report on the Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Higher Education, University of Lancaster, 1st-5th September, 1975

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As one of the more encouraging examples of the new universities which were established in Britain during the enrolment expansion of the 1960's, the University of Lancaster has acquired a favourable reputation for the functional elegance of its architecture, the innovative nature of its programmes of studies and, not least, for its sponsorship and planning of an International Conference on Higher Education which is held on a triennial basis. This September witnessed the holding of the third of the International Conferences, the theme of which – “Excellence or Equality: a Dilemma for Higher Education” – struck an international chord which was responsive enough to attract some 230 scholars and academic administrators (including the author) drawn mainly from the countries of Western Europe, North America and Australasia. In return for a fairly hefty conference and accommodation fee, the participants were given the opportunity to hear the views of a battery of distinguished speakers, amongst them being Martin Trow, Edward Shils, C. Arnold Anderson, Torsten Husén of the University of Stockholm and Ladislav Cerych of the European Foundation in Brussels. In addition, where it was possible to fit them in between the plethora of plenary speeches and keynote addresses, the participants were able to take part in the discussions of one or more of a series of working parties devoted to such topics as the aims and purposes of higher education, credentialism and the labour market, access and structure, and teaching and learning with the use of the new media.<sup>1</sup> Probably the main organizational flaw of the conference was, in fact, a timetable which overlapped plenary and keynote speeches with the meetings of the working parties to the point where attendance at the former became incompatible with full participation in one of the latter, and vice-versa. Hence this report of the conference proceedings does not pretend to be exhaustive, but rather concentrates on the task of interlinking the contents of the main speeches to the general theme of the conference.

## **The definition of academic excellence**

In devoting the conference to the theme of “Excellence or Equality,” the organisers were clearly concerned to explore the possibility that the continued pursuit of the goal of equality in higher education might prove to be incompatible with the maintenance of high standards of academic excellence. Such a possibility would, one feels, probably have been most fruitfully debated at the conference if there had been some generally

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understood and accepted definition of the meaning of "academic excellence" as it relates to the functioning of institutions of higher learning. However, given the obvious difficulties of arriving at any explicit definition of this kind (for example, does "academic excellence" in higher learning mean the same thing for scholars in all countries and in all types of post-secondary institution?) it is perhaps understandable that academic excellence should usually have been treated in the conference deliberations as something which is more easily recognised than described; that is, the application of the principle of "we all know what it is when we see it" proved to be a useful way of avoiding any major disagreements on the matter of definition. The main exception to this rule lay in the emphasis which both Professors Trow and Shils placed in their plenary addresses on the high academic quality of teaching and research at so-called "elite institutions" such as M.I.T., Harvard and the French *grandes écoles*. For these scholars, it was evident that the high quality of scholarship, the research on the borders of knowledge, and the intense intellectual relationships between teachers and students which tend to characterise such institutions, were all recognisable features of academic excellence. Such features, they stressed, could also be found in varying measures and degrees in non-elite universities and in colleges of the non-university sector. Indeed, both Trow and Shils expressed confidence that academic excellence would find ways of surviving, if not necessarily thriving, even in the midst of mass higher education and the avid pursuit of academic credentials by the bulk of the student body.

### **Equality and intellectual capacity**

If academic excellence was not easy to define, what then of the concept of equality? Here, there was less difficulty. Professor Henri Janne, the distinguished Belgian academic, in a plenary address on "Quality and Equality in European Higher Education" suggested that the social and political pressures towards greater equality in European (and incidentally, in North American) higher education incorporated four sets of major goals: first, equality of access including demands for the abolition of selective entrance examinations, abolition of tuition fees and allotment of student places on the basis of socio-economic background; secondly, equality of accomplishment including demands by students for collective or group evaluation and for self-evaluation; third, equality of decision-making in universities and colleges including student participation in university government; and fourth, equality of status and finance between the university and non-university sectors of higher education. In practice, the conference proceedings tended to concentrate heavily on the scholastic and structural implications of the first of these goals, although the problems of the sharp split in status and support between so-called *noble* higher education (i.e. traditional full-time university education) and *less-noble* higher education (generally, technically and vocationally-oriented education) in many countries was certainly also a major focus for discussion. By way of contrast, the relative lack of interest which the conference showed on the once hot issue of student participation in decision-making in higher education can only be accounted for by a certain disillusionment and cynicism with the outcome of reforms in this area. As Janne remarked in his speech, "what is really amazing . . . is the lack of interest shown by the majority of students in participating, at the present moment, in the democratized management of their University."

In order to understand fully why the conference proceedings concentrated heavily on

the implications of equality of access, it is useful to refer to the taxonomy of phases of development in higher education which Martin Trow outlined in a paper published in 1974, and which was referred to on a number of occasions by other speakers at the conference.<sup>2</sup> Trow notes in his paper that the systems of higher education in various countries can generally be classified into one of three major categories or phases, with there being some tendency for the systems to evolve through one phase to the next. The first phase is the *elitist* one in which less than about 15 per cent of the relevant age-groups continue their formal education after completing secondary school. The second phase of *mass higher education* is where up to 50 per cent of the relevant age-groups go on to higher education. The third phase of *universal higher education* is where the majority of adults participate in advanced studies at some level, and where those persons without completed secondary school have the possibility of embarking on some form of post-secondary study. According to this taxonomy, whilst some countries such as Canada would be considered to be mainly at the mass higher education phase and other jurisdictions, such as California, have long been at the universal phase, most countries of Europe are currently in the critical process of the transition from elitist to mass higher education, often carrying with them a baggage of traditional cultural ideas and structural arrangements which makes the transition very difficult indeed.<sup>3</sup> Not unnaturally then, problems of academic selectivity and of the maintenance of academic standards in the face of seemingly inexorable pressures towards the participation in higher education of substantially larger proportions of their nation's citizens, were of major concern to many of the participants in the conference.

In the light of this concern with the intellectual implications of increased enrolments in higher education, it is appropriate that Professor Thorsten Husén should have devoted much of his plenary address on "Problems of Securing Equal Access to Higher Education" to the task of combatting the arguments of academic elitists that the admission of increased proportions of the relevant age-groups to post-secondary studies inevitably lowers that average intellectual level of the intake, and ultimately undermines the standards of academic excellence in the university or college. Thorsten was able to bring forward ample evidence to show that improved educational opportunities, especially for hitherto educationally disadvantaged groups, has made something of a mockery of the early conservative estimates of the size of the pool of talent capable of undertaking post-secondary studies. He was also able to cite a major international study<sup>4</sup> which had found that although the average level of academic performance of high school seniors in countries with almost universal secondary education, such as the United States, was considerably below that of their age-mates in the highly selective secondary systems of France, Germany and England, yet, nonetheless, the average level of performance of the *elite* group (say, the top 5-10 per cent) was similar in both the *universal secondary* and the *highly selective* systems. This finding effectively refutes the arguments of the academic elitists that universal senior secondary schooling, which is normally associated with mass higher education, can also be associated with a general deterioration in academic standards at all levels of ability.

Husén's arguments were fascinating and convincing. However, one suspects that he was preaching to the converted insofar as there was little evidence at the conference of any strong sentiment running in favour of the limitation of higher education to a so-

called “aristocracy of intellect.” On the contrary (and rather surprising in view of the powerful rearguard actions which continue to be fought against mass higher education in many European countries by the upholders of academic elitism), most of the participants seemed to have reached the same conclusion as George Z.F. Bereday at the end of his recent study of changing patterns of higher education in industrialised countries: to wit, that mass education “cannot be licked, it must be joined. Those who cooperate have a chance to influence the trend with the wisdom of their experience.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, to all intents and purposes, a greater degree of equality of access in the form of mass or universal higher education was viewed by the conference participants as inevitable. They were, therefore, more concerned to explore various means of maintaining, or even enhancing, the quality of higher education amidst the process of institutional change.

### Perceived threats to academic excellence

Professor Husén was justified in his argument that the goals of mass higher education and of academic excellence are not intrinsically incompatible, at least not in the sense of “more must mean worse.” On the other hand, the trend towards mass higher education *per se* is but one aspect of the pursuit of equality of access, and it would be naive in the extreme to ignore the evidence that there are related aspects of the drive for equality which may indeed pose a threat to the maintenance of high academic standards and the quality of the learning experience. In order to appreciate fully the nature of this threat, it is necessary to recognise that since the early 1960’s, the role of higher education in advanced countries has become increasingly similar to its social functions to the role of secondary education during the 1940’s and 1950’s – that is, it is viewed by growing proportions of the national populations as providing the academic credentials for secure and relatively well-paid employment. Granted that the rate of increase in enrolments has dropped off in recent years in many countries due to an apparent measure of dissatisfaction amongst students with the level of economic returns accruing to these credentials. Even so, the long-term prospects are high that “the propaganda of the degree” (as Shils terms the burgeoning ambition for the possession of credentials)<sup>6</sup> will ultimately intensify the demand for access to universities and colleges and, more significantly, that the demand will be particularly high amongst those members of socially disadvantaged groups – notably, women, lower-status students and the members of some racial minorities – who have good reason to view a degree or diploma as being a basis for individual or group ascent in the social hierarchy. The utilisation of higher education as a means of social ascent is certainly not a new phenomenon. However, as Shils points out in his *Minerva* paper, the transition to mass education in western countries has been accompanied by an ideology of anti-elitism, and this ideology has, in turn, led to a demand that institutions of higher learning should promote “substantive social equality” – that is, that they should offer opportunities for substantial social ascent, notably through changes in the substance of what is taught and in the intellectual qualifications for admission.

Both of these interlinked themes of “substantive social equality” and the ideology of anti-elitism received some airing in the deliberations of the Lancaster conference. The former was the topic of a number of working group papers, written mainly by American scholars, which described and usually advocated the use of such devices as “benign

quotas” and university-run compensatory education programmes as means of increasing the representation in universities of lower-status and, more particularly, racial minority youth. It was also touched upon in the speech of Professor Janne who noted that the Dutch government intended to extend a lottery system (which is already being used in Holland to solve the problem of allocating a limited number of places to less-qualified candidates for admission to some university faculties) to cover all candidates for all faculties irrespective of their level of performance in the final school-leaving examinations. The Dutch government, according to Janne, justified its intention to extend the lottery system “by its general policy of equality of educational opportunity, as students from the upper and middle classes usually fare better throughout their school careers.” Such an admissions policy is, of course, in accordance with the growing demand for the democratisation of higher learning which lies at the centre of the anti-elitist ideology. However, this writer would have liked to see more debate at the conference on the significance of the warning hidden away in Husén’s speech that “the educational system cannot serve as a substitute for social and economic reforms. You cannot have more equality in education than in society at large.” More specifically one feels that insufficient concern was expressed at the conference over the likelihood that the universities and colleges will be required increasingly to compensate for the manifest failures of the primary and secondary schools of most western countries to combat group inequalities in educational achievement; a task for which they may be ill-fitted both in terms of their traditions and the shrinking size of their real incomes. However, such a concern would clearly have been at variance with the ideological trends of the times.

But what are the trends of the times, at least as they are shown in the growing significance of the anti-elitist ideology? To be strictly accurate, neither Professor Trow nor Professor Shils provided a precise definition of the components of anti-elitism in their addresses to the conference, but both of them were concerned to defend the need for institutions of elite higher learning (for which also read “centres of academic excellence”) against certain forces which sought to undermine such institutions. Thus, Professor Trow noted that research and scholarship of the highest quality needed a stable environment of insulation from the turmoil of university politics and academic reform. He thought that such an environment was best found in academically elite institutions and, as we have seen, considered the survival of such institutions to be both likely and desirable despite the persistence of attacks from politicians without and academics within. Likewise, Professor Shils argued that higher education must foster new discoveries and intellectual eminence and, in his view, the best way of achieving this was through the existence of “central institutions which embodied the academic ideal.”<sup>7</sup> He, like Trow, was optimistic for the survival of such institutions, and saw as doomed the apparently deliberate attempts of some governments to prevent some teachers and universities from being superior in their intellectual achievements. So far as one can judge, these references of both speakers to internal and external attacks on institutions of elite higher education were aimed at two of the less laudable aspects of the ideology of anti-elitism. First of all, the fact that some academically elite institutions tend to confer particular privileges of status and rank upon their students (the more prestigious private universities in the United States would be a case in point) has been seized upon by some egalitarian reformers as sufficient reason for demanding the submergence of such institutions in the

mass higher education stream. Secondly, insofar as many academically elite institutions are largely publically financed, supporting governments are showing a growing reluctance to believe that the core function of such institutions, which is to provide a high quality education to a relatively small number of students at a relatively high cost, is compatible with the current search for cost-economies in higher education.

The danger of undermining academic quality in the name of equality and economy is evident in the trends outlined above. However, it should again be stressed that whilst such trends are clearly incompatible with the flowering of academically elite institutions, neither Trow nor Shils saw the reverse as being true – that is, neither saw the existence and persistence of such institutions as being themselves in any way antagonistic to the pursuit of mass higher education. On the contrary, Trow argued that patterns of elite education could exist even within impersonal mass institutions – for example, where a dedicated teacher within a large state college attracted a small group of motivated students. This latter observation has incidentally some relevance to Canada where, in the absence of elite private universities and, with rare exceptions, specialised institutes for advanced studies, the academic ideal will clearly have to be maintained within the framework of the existing publicly supported universities and colleges.<sup>8</sup>

### **Other matters**

I have attempted in these few pages to outline some of the main themes which emerged at the Lancaster conference. Much of worth has inevitably been excluded from the report in the interests of brevity.<sup>9</sup> However, a brief mention must perforce still be made of the excellent speech by the eminent professor of Japanese studies, R.D. Dore, to the working party looking into education issues in developing countries; and also of the address delivered by Professor Ian Lister of the University of York (U.K.) to the “Radical Alternatives” working party. Professor Dore provided a powerful analysis of the single-minded pursuit of credentials by students in developing countries which he called “the chief enemy of excellence” and “the chief enemy of public-spirited concern with social welfare.” Professor Lister, for his part, swam against the prevailing tide by attacking the current plans for recurrent education and permanent education which are now emerging in many countries. In particular, he castigated the Swedish U68 Plan which recommends various schemes of periodic return to formal education for job-retraining, as being economy-centred rather than formal education for job-retraining, as being economy-centred rather than man-centred, as creating a new bureaucracy with a vested interest in job obsolescence, and ultimately as preventing the creation of a true learning society. On the other hand, Canadians will be pleased to know that Lister considered the report of the Ontario Commission for Post-Secondary Education as offering the most practical plan for the realisation of that society; he describes the Commission’s report as a document “favouring learner choice and concerned to open up educational services to all citizens throughout their lives.” Canadian readers may remember the Ontario report – it is the one which has had an excellent press amongst European educationalists and yet seems to have made little practical impact in Ontario. Yet another painful reminder of the fate which befalls Canadian prophets in their own country!

### **Conclusions**

In general, the Lancaster conference was a well-planned and intellectually stimulating

affair. It was admittedly a little marred by the timetable overlap between speeches and working parties which was referred to at the beginning of this report. It was also more remarkable for the efficient planning of intra-mural events than for the smooth running of extra-curricula activities; in particular, some mention must be made of a poorly planned bus tour of Britain's Lake District which resulted in most members of the non-British contingent at the conference spending two hours wandering along the side of a lake with the uncomfortable feeling that they should be enjoying themselves. Since most of the contingent were dressed quite formally and adorned with nametags, the contrast which they made to the British holiday crowd can well be imagined. At least, the dismal affair left this writer with the indelible memory of the two elderly English ladies who were eyeing with fascination a strikingly modish young male German scholar. "Oooh, Doris," I heard one whisper to the other, "Ain't he just lovely?." Such a memory will remain long after the details of academic debate has faded into oblivion.

### Footnotes

1. The other main working parties were "Special issues in Developing Countries" and "Radical Alternatives."
2. Trow, Martin, "Problems in the Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education" in *Policies for Higher Education*. Paris: O.E.C.D., 1974, pp. 51-101. It should be noted that Trow's taxonomy is considerably more sophisticated than may appear to be the case from the description given here. He notes, for example, that the phases are "Ideal Types" in Max Weber's sense, and that accordingly the description of any phase cannot be taken as a full or adequate description of any single national system.
3. This observation holds true even though, as Ladislav Cerych pointed out in his speech to the conference, there has been a certain telescoping of phases insofar as some countries have not passed fully through the mass phase exhibit some characteristics of the universal phase – for example, in the admission of mature students who do not possess the requisite school leaving qualifications.
4. For some of the results from this study see: Husén, T. Ed., *International Study of Achievement in Mathematics. A comparison of twelve countries*, Vols I and II, Stockholm and New York: Almqvist and Wiksell, and Wiley and Sons, 1967.
5. Bereday, G.Z.F., *Universities for all*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973, p. 144.
6. Shils, E., "The Academic Ethos under Strain," *Minerva*, Vol. XIII, no 1, Spring 1975, pp. 1-37.
7. More explicitly, Shils described such institutions as those "which combine research with teaching as they manifestly must if scientific knowledge is to continue to grow, and if a succession of young scientists and scholars to produce that growth is to be trained, and if teaching is to be more than the interpretation of the inherited texts of once original discovery and commentary."
8. It would follow on from this conclusion, however, that the general level of academic excellence in Canadian higher education is vulnerable to the cost-economies imposed by the provincial governments. In other words Canada has no significant private post-secondary sector which might be relatively immune from the impact of government economies.
9. Probably the single most important aspect of the conference proceedings not dealt with in any detail in this report pertains to the use of new instructional devices for purposes of teaching and learning. For example, Professor Marcel Goldschmid of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology devoted the greater part of his address to the working party on Teaching, Learning and the New Media to the subject of recent developments in the field, including such items as the use of the media for individualised instruction, the establishment of learning resource centres, trends towards peer teaching and exploration into means of improving faculty teaching performance.