Commentary

Higher education in Great Britain is at the cross-roads. Radical changes in our university system have reached a point where it becomes necessary to ask a radical question: what precisely is a university for? The rapid increase in the number of students attending British universities (from 50,000 in 1939 to 100,000 now, with a probable redoubling by the 1980s), the founding and projecting of new universities, the end of the Oxford and Cambridge class preserve and of the numerical preponderance of—together with London—these two universities, the increasing financial dependence of the universities on the State; these factors, and especially the last one, have brought about a state of affairs that has no parallel in the past. Yet there is nothing to be surprised at, except the novelty. Just as Oxford and Cambridge would be inconceivable outside England, so in no other country, probably, could the changes that are now transforming our universities have been held up so long. Essentially, they are a product of post-war government policy. It was only in 1946 that, as Professor Dent points out in his very timely survey of the matter, 'the increase in the number of students at British universities began in earnest.' The situation is the effect, and in turn the cause, of the State's response and the universities' response (but the latter in effective dependence on the former) to the needs of a democratic and industrialised society.

Professor Dent's little book[1]—lucid, well-documented, impartial—is just what the moment calls for, and it should be widely read. It provides the materials for judgment on a matter that concerns us all. For university policy is no longer the concern only of academic teachers and administrators; it has become a national question, now that, with the great majority of British university students being maintained by the State, a university education of some kind is virtually open to the youth of the whole nation. And of course this active intervention of the State in providing and maintaining students is only one aspect of a trend (a better word than 'policy' here, since the government seems to have no clear general plan for the universities) which is affecting, and no doubt will increasingly affect, not merely the externals of life at the universities but also the nature and scope of the education they provide.

And this is where it becomes urgent to take stock of the situation

[1] *Universities in Transition* By H. C. Dent; Cohen and West; 15s.

critically, to think out afresh, in the light of the deepest and clearest ideas we can formulate about human nature, what we hold to be the specific purpose of 'higher' education—indeed of education generally, since the 'higher' sort is presumably only different in degree, not in essence, from the lower, just as a young man only differs in maturity, not in essential nature, from a boy. The question as to the purpose of university education is not of course new. What is new, in Great Britain at least, is a situation in which the kind of higher education that is in fact available for young men and women is likely to be increasingly determined by purely practical and ultimately political considerations. To put the question as plainly as possible: do we want our universities to become mainly schools of science and technology whose principal *raison d'être* would be to maintain and increase the nation's material wealth and power? If that is what we want, very well; it is what we shall anyhow get, if the present trend continues unchecked. As Professor Dent points out, 'The plain fact is that the Government's—every Government's—financial policy is dictating the shape of the universities and the place which the various disciplines will occupy in them.' To judge from the approved building programmes, the Government strongly favours science and technology.

But what is just as important as building programmes themselves is the fact that these are being projected and paid for without any clearly stated idea, or at least none officially put out, of what they are all ultimately for in terms of human education. There is a powerful concentration upon means without any clear vision of the final end; hence, inevitably, the more obviously practical means draw most attention. But the question, after all, is not whether one prefers humanities to science or science to humanities. History or languages, taught in a certain way, can be just as narrowing, educationally, as science taught in a certain way. The point is that the present concentration on science is only a particularly clear symptom of a state of mind which compensates for its haziness about ends by an intense concern with material means. The remedy can only be a real effort on the part of scholars and teachers themselves to clear their minds as to the true purpose of all learning and teaching. The universities need to recover or discover a true scale of values; they need to recover or discover an ideal of spiritual wisdom, both intellectual and moral. In the meantime, and as a partial means to this, it might be an excellent thing if, as Professor Dent suggests, the government (or the universities themselves) were to set on foot an official enquiry 'covering the entire range of university learning and teaching.'

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1961.tb06881.x Published online by Cambridge University Press