

## HOW DISTINCTIVE IS SCOTTISH HIGHER EDUCATION?

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Robert Bell and Malcolm Tight, **Open Universities: a British Tradition?**  
Milton Keynes: Open University Press, hardback £42.50, 180 pages,  
1993. ISBN 0335191266

I.G.C.Hutchison, **The University and the State: the Case of Aberdeen,  
1860-1963.** Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, paperback £8.95 186  
pages, 1993. ISBN 1857522052

Everyone seems to agree these days that Scottish higher education is going through one of the biggest upheavals in its history. Student numbers are expanding, the structure of funding is being revolutionised, and the hallowed link between teaching and research is being eroded and will probably soon be severed altogether. Presiding over these changes, moreover, is what appears to be a wholly new governing structure: the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, it is claimed, brings control of the Scottish universities back to Scotland for the first time this century.

These two books induce some sceptical caution about such apparently revolutionary changes. Are we really seeing an unprecedented degree of openness arising from the expansion in student numbers? Is the relationship between the universities and the state really changing as fundamentally as both the government and its critics allege?

### ACCESS

Bell and Tight would certainly question the social openness of the system of universities in the UK that was inspired by the Robbins Report of 1963, and that lasted until the early 1990s. Even the Open University is less radical in its practice than were many nineteenth-century institutions.

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The authors show that the nineteenth-century openness existed throughout the UK (including what is now the territory of the Republic of Ireland). The most well-known example is the Scottish universities, which were then among the most socially open in Europe, in the sense that they contained students from social groups that were certainly not privileged. Indeed, the proportion of working-class students in Scottish higher education was probably only slightly lower in the late-nineteenth century than it is now - about one quarter then, and about one third now (Anderson 1983, p.311; and unpublished analysis of the Scottish Young People's Survey: see also Paterson (1991)). And because the working class was then a much larger segment of the whole population than it is now, that means that there has been a widening in social-class differentials in access over the century (even though, because of overall expansion, the opportunity to enter university has grown for both working-class and middle-class people).

Less well-known than this dominant Scottish tradition is the work of St Andrews University in providing courses for women between 1877 and 1931. Administered by one man - W.Knight - and a clerk, the St Andrews Licentiate (or LLA) was an astonishing success. Over 4,000 candidates per decade took part, rising to a peak of 10,000 in the first decade of the twentieth century. This is much the same level of participation by women as the four ancient universities managed to attract in these years (about 1000 in attendance at any one time). What is more, the LLA, by drawing on the dominant Scottish tradition, encouraged a diverse clientele. As Bell and Tight say, 'one of the major attractions of the LLA...was the fact that the candidate could gradually collect credits over a number of years, in the style of the Scottish undergraduate course, and could add further credits even after graduation' (p.80). The LLA was also thoroughly international. At one point or another, there were 329 examination centres throughout the world; only 37 of these were in Scotland itself, and only 111 in the UK as a whole. Indeed, the country with the second-largest number of centres after England (which had 57) was Germany (with 41). It is no wonder that Knight and his clerk found themselves dealing with 5000 postal items each year.

The Scottish traditions of relatively open access then had an influence on the University of London, on the new civic universities of northern England, and - at the end of the nineteenth century - on the general university extension movement. London University, in fact, was in principle nothing but an examining body, and students could prepare themselves for these examinations in whatever way they wanted - private tutor, secondary school, or university college. In 1891, for example, nearly one half of the 242

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students who gained the BA degree from London did so by private study. The northern English universities imbibed the same atmosphere of civic pride as suffused Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen. And the extension movement - influenced by Scottish radical thinkers such as Patrick Geddes and S.S.Laurie - became part of the project of adult education that grew in the early twentieth century along with the Labour movement and the increasingly popular ideals of the welfare state.

The Irish universities, too, were intended to be socially open. The Royal University of Ireland lasted from 1879 until it disintegrated in the first decade of the twentieth century. It was an attempt by the British state to bypass the Protestantism of Trinity College and the Catholicism of University College, both in Dublin. The model was London University: teaching was not offered by the university itself, which remained an examining body. Anyone - principally, that is to say, Catholics as well as Protestants - could sit the examinations, having prepared themselves in whatever way they wanted. Like London, much of the preparation for degree examinations in fact took place in secondary schools. Indeed, by 1894, 31% of people who gained the Irish BA degree studied in schools, seminaries and religious houses, and a further 41% studied on their own; this left only 28% studying at the university colleges of Belfast, Galway, Cork, and Dublin, and Magee College in Derry. This experiment in open education came to an end under something of the same pressure for face-to-face teaching as were causing the analogous changes in Britain, but with the added continuing campaign of the Catholic hierarchy for their own university.

So the openness we have seen in the Open University in the UK - and that we are beginning to see more generally in the current expansion - is not new. So why is it believed to be unprecedented? An obvious point is that it is indeed unprecedented. Bell and Tight do not adequately acknowledge the sheer scale of higher education now. Middle-class school leavers may be still more than six times as likely to enter higher education as their working-class counterparts (a ratio that has not changed since the 1930s); but the overall expansion has vastly increased the proportion of each class that does enter. One simple indicator: in the 1860s, Scotland was ahead of most of Europe in the ratio of number of university students to the total population (about 1 in 1000), and that is the basis for the Scottish nineteenth-century openness (Anderson 1983, p.300). But by the late 1980s, that ratio had grown to 19 per 1000 (SOED 1992).

Nevertheless, the main point which Bell and Tight make is cogent. Entrance to university in the UK became highly selective in the early years of the

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twentieth century because it became ever-more tightly tied to entrance examinations (and later to Highers or A-levels). The price of expansion, in fact, was an insistence that 'quality' could be maintained only if a rigorous academic test was imposed on entrants. That was not a view shared by any of the nineteenth-century institutions - even Oxford and Cambridge, whose social exclusivity owed more to their requirement that students reside in expensive colleges than to any explicit programme of selection. Entrance requirements were imposed in the name of meritocracy - the belief that a university education should be offered only to those who demonstrably could benefit (in the words of the Robbins Report). But, in an unequal society, that discriminated against people who could not readily overcome the prior hurdles of gaining these qualifications - the working class, the adults, the women returning after bringing up a family. The ideals of a comprehensive university disappeared at much the same time as comprehensive schools were coming to dominate the secondary sector.

As part of the same process of creating an academic elite, argue Bell and Tight, academic staff placed an increasing emphasis on research: it was no longer believed to be sufficient to define an academic career in terms of teaching and scholarship. Introductory teaching was increasingly transferred to the senior years of the secondary schools (although less so in Scotland than in England), leaving the academics free to concentrate on the advanced work that seemed to sit more appropriately with their research.

Bell and Tight do not despair, however: they see the current expansion as an opportunity to reduce the exclusivity of the universities, and to return to the open structures of the nineteenth century:

it should be possible to allow a wider range of agencies to undertake the preparation of students, and for those agencies to be widespread throughout the country, offering students a real choice to suit their own taste, pocket, and previous experience. (p.158).

### **STATE CONTROL**

The question is, however, whether the universities will be allowed to develop this flexibility. Hutchison makes the point that the Scottish universities have always welcomed state control - even in the laissez faire nineteenth century - but that this has also subjected them to state regulation. The new funding council brings the state closer to the Scottish universities than ever before, and therefore could be a regulatory threat as much as a national opportunity.

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Hutchison's book is the latest in the Aberdeen University series that is commemorating the 500th anniversary of the founding of King's College (in 1495). He argues that the Scottish universities welcomed state control for three main reasons. They were poorer than their English counterparts (either because of having fewer endowments than Oxford or Cambridge, or because they did not have the same degree of civic support which places such as Leeds could enjoy). Their students were poorer too, reflecting the social openness that Bell and Tight trace (and that Anderson (1988) and Moore (1991) show in detail for Aberdeen in earlier volumes in this series). And there was a consensual Scottish belief that the universities were national institutions, not private corporations.

The Scottish universities eventually won their long nineteenth-century battle for increased state funding, as part of the general twentieth-century expansion of all UK universities: in this sense, the nationalist version of their history as a defeat by the anglocentric British state is quite misplaced (the version popularised by Davie (1961)). The Scottish universities were not denied the right to develop. But, in another sense, Davie is partly correct, because the Scottish universities stopped seeing themselves as Scottish national institutions. They participated in the movement towards the single homogeneous UK system that Bell and Tight outline - the imposition of entrance examinations, the greatly increased role for research, and the greater mobility of careers.

Even that story, however, is not fully accurate. Take that last point. Academic staff were supposed to see the world (or at least the British world) as their intellectual oyster. In fact, they did not: even in the late 1960s - the high-point of academic mobility - about 60% of academic staff in the UK had only ever worked in one university (Williams et al 1974); that figure is probably substantially higher now that mobility has been choked off by cuts in funding. The Scottish universities continued to define part of their identity in Scottish terms. Enough of the nineteenth-century practices lived on to give them a distinctive flavour: longer degree-courses than in England, higher rates of participation, and perhaps slightly less sharp social-class differences in participation (McPherson 1973). The universities had to remain attached to their Scottish context because the bulk of their students still came from Scotland, or even more locally (so that Aberdeen could start to define its role as the regional university of the north and north-east). The entrance examinations which were passed by these students were Scottish. And even much of the research which the universities undertake was rooted in the local economy, or was contracted to the Scottish Office. That Office, in fact,

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offered wider opportunities too, as a bargaining tool against the Treasury in London, a process on which Hutchison is especially interesting.

So by the 1970s, when nationalism was starting its late-twentieth century rise to become the taken-for-granted background of all Scottish politics, the Scottish universities were stuck in a thoroughly ambivalent position. They were the focus of national expectations, as universities everywhere have tended to be in times of nationalist ferment. That, after all, is why Davie's books have had such resonance. But they were also suspicious. They distrusted the Scottish Education Department, which (contrary to some myths about it) had fought a continuing battle against the academic elitism of the professors. In Hutchison's words:

Departmental secretaries [in the twentieth century]...all seem to have found the arrogance and pretentiousness of the professoriate insufferable, and preferred to argue the case for those pupils below the high-fliers who aspired to university places. (p.154).

And they distrusted that mythical beast, the Glasgow Labour Politician. In the words of Principal Fyfe of Aberdeen (in 1937): a Scottish governing body would threaten 'the looming danger of a committee composed of Labour politicians, eyeing the votes of the uninstructed, and Departmental officials armed to the teeth with axes' (quoted by Hutchison, p.155). The sentiments - though not perhaps the language - dominated the universities' contributions to the devolution debates of the 1970s, and are not wholly absent even today.

### **WHAT KIND OF SYSTEM?**

So these universities with that hybrid history are now faced with a Scottish funding body, but with no strategy to exploit their position because they were not the source of the pressure to establish such a body (see Peter Scott's article elsewhere in this issue of **Scottish Affairs**). Behind the funding council is the Scottish Office, paranoid about nationalism, but also tightly controlled by the Treasury. Already the universities have conformed to the behaviour that other bodies funded by the Scottish Office have adopted for many years: if you unite in an alliance with that Office, you will be safe in the perennial battle with London.

The question for the future of the system is then merely a specific version of the question that has faced all Scottish social policy at least since 1979, and

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possibly for longer: can this alliance between department, intermediate body, and civil-society institutions extract from Westminster the freedom to pursue the agenda which Scottish popular preferences seem to want? Specifically, although this has not been articulated explicitly yet, can the apparent national belief in openness - in the democratic intellect - be translated by this alliance into a more radical programme for higher education than is likely to be established in England? The precedent is the way that a similar alliance at the secondary level achieved a more satisfactory system of comprehensive education than in England in the 1970s. An early indication is a recent circular from the funding council, which announces that 'the Council has decided to place particular emphasis in academic year 1994-95 on improving access opportunities for students of all ages from ethnic minorities and from social classes III, IV and V' - the social groups that are broadly describable as 'working class' (SHEFC 1994). Under a government for whom concepts of class are usually thought to be anathema, this is strong stuff.

The interesting point from the book by Bell and Tight is that this apparent revolution is nothing of the sort, and nor is it separatism: the tradition of open access is long-standing and was as strong in England as in Scotland. But times have changed, and invocations of tradition might no longer be persuasive to the Treasury. In which case, we are back to an earlier advocate of university reform, the Aberdeen MP W.A.Hunter, who had this to say in parliament in 1889:

Parliament has been a cruel stepmother to the Scotch Universities. If we had a Home Rule Parliament, we should not have starved our higher education and stunted its growth. (Anderson, 1983, p.266).

Will the new Scottish funding council have the freedom to prove him wrong?

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