

THE CRISIS OF THE UNIVERSITY

Peter Scott

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PETER SCOTT

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The Crisis of the University

Peter Scott



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INTRODUCTION

This book is divided into two parts. In Chapters 1 to 4 an attempt is made to describe in general terms the evolution of the modern university, and in particular to examine the development of the university as an institution within the broader context of the changing construction of intellectual life. Perhaps it is naïvely done, but the attempt can be justified nevertheless because so few attempts have been made in the past to relate the administrative and intellectual aspects of higher education in a common framework. Yet the connection is clearly crucial. For too long studies of higher education have been studies of institutions with little attention being paid to the ideas and values which these institutions represented.

The second part, Chapters 5 to 7, is a more detailed study of British higher education, but in the context established in the first part. The achievement of the Robbins expansion of the universities is assessed, and the successes and shortcomings of the binary policy which established the polytechnics and other non-university colleges are examined. Finally, there is an attempt to bring the two parts of the book together in Chapters 8 to 9 in a speculation about the future of higher education, and more broadly of modern secular society.

The ideas developed in this book were first expressed in a speech for a conference organised by the Edinburgh University Students' Association on a very snowy day in 1979. They were revised and refined in a paper for a Rockefeller Foundation conference held at Bellagio in the summer of 1980. An earlier version of Chapter 6 on the binary policy was written for the seminar on the structure and governance of higher education in the Leverhulme programme of study into the future of higher education, which was held at Warwick University in 1982.

However, my main acknowledgement must be to *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, and especially to my colleagues. Most of the ideas developed in this book grew out of the weekly task of reporting and reflecting on higher education. The last four years

have been a period of exceptional turmoil in British higher education. But this has made it more rather than less important to stand back, not in a spirit of resignation or disinterest, but to make sense of what is happening to universities, polytechnics, and colleges. This is deliberately not a book about cuts in higher education, although the cuts are a part of the story. It is a book about the condition of higher education towards the end of the twentieth century.

Peter Scott

Chapter One

GOODBYE TO ROBBINS

Britain's traditionally benign public culture, even the British character itself, seems to be passing through a period of strain and crisis on a scale not experienced since the years surrounding the First World War — or even, some would argue, since the successful consolidation of industrial society in the mid-nineteenth century. So it is hardly surprising that British universities, polytechnics, and other colleges of higher education seem to be passing through a period of similar strain. Some of the symptoms of this strain are simply functional, like the cuts in public expenditure on higher education imposed since the general election of May 1979, but foreshadowed in the low growth rates of the middle 1970s; the University Grants Committee's (UGC) selectivity strategy of July 1981 when the cuts passed on to individual universities by the Committee were highly discriminatory, ranging from almost nothing to 40 per cent; the clumsy and crude capping of the advanced further education pool (the element in the annually negotiated rate support grant earmarked for polytechnics and other colleges); the arrival of the new National Advisory Body with a brief to put the non-university sector's house in order; 'full cost' tuition fees for overseas students again imposed since 1979, but foreshadowed by the introduction of differential fees for home and overseas students as long ago as 1965, and so on.

Other symptoms take the form of increasingly disturbing questions. Doubts about the future of higher education cluster like crows. How can higher education in the austere 1980s sustain the more liberal role it acquired during the Robbins expansion of the 1960s and 70s in a fit half of absentmindedness, half of acquisitive imperialism? 'Should it even try?' whisper the more conservatively inclined. Liberals wonder whether that momentum can be maintained if doubting conservatives can no longer be bribed by ever increasing resources. Will higher education face a stark choice between students (= jobs and money?) and standards (= academic

2 Goodbye to Robbins

integrity?) when and if demographic decline bites in the late 1980s? What is the future of the polytechnic alternative in a steady-state or even shrinking system? And so the questions go on.

But even these questions, important as they are, are out-ranked by questions of greater significance. After all, the functional difficulties faced by higher education, however much they may dominate immediate policy-making, are concerned essentially with the political dimensions of the system, the turbulent and quickly changing surface layer of the whole enterprise. Even this second set of disturbing questions penetrates only one layer deeper, to a sub-surface where the relationship is shaped between higher education and our society and economy through the market, politics, and culture. Beneath both is a third layer moved by a quite different rhythm, the *longue durée* of the university. It is in this academic layer where truth is searched for, and if never found at any rate approached, that the heart of higher education is to be found. Is it here that the remarkable intellectual creativity of British higher education since at least the 1930s, in pure science initially and more recently in the social sciences and humanities, is at work. It is a creativity that does not appear to be diminishing. In physics, biology, history these are years of exceptional excitement. So the most important question of all is whether this creativity will continue with the same vigour into the future or whether it will be slowly eroded by the storms above, by the troubles with which higher education will have to live during the next few years. Only if the latter is true will it be fair to talk of a crisis in British higher education that matches in intensity the crisis in British society.

This is the broad issue with which this book will be concerned. Does higher education face a really fundamental crisis, one that affects its academic values, or does it simply have to come to terms with a period of difficulty and uncertainty brought on by external accidents and threats? Or to put it another way, how deep into higher education's *longue durée* will the present and obvious crisis of resources cut? Nor can the issue be contained there. For if higher education's crisis is one of purposes as much, or more than, of resources then it is difficult to segregate the future prospects for universities and colleges from those for the wider intellectual system, of which they are the most prominent instruments, and by extension those for modern secular society as a whole, which has become critically dependent on intellectual advance for both its material growth and its social organisation.

These close and even incestuous links between higher education, the intellectual system and modern society are comparatively recent. The university in an institutional form that would be approximately recognisable today is not especially ancient (despite Bologna, Paris, Oxford and the rest). Three centuries of neglect, decay and even obscurantism separate the medieval universities from the reformed institutions of the nineteenth century which are the true ancestors of today's universities. The renaissance, the scientific revolution, the enlightenment largely bypassed the universities. Indeed, the liberal university — an ideal and arbitrary type that could be said to have flourished from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries particularly in non-science disciplines and in institutions in non-industrial towns — never really overcame its marginality in the intellectual market. Certainly it never achieved or even aspired to the 'market leader' or occasionally monopoly position captured by the modern, post-1945, institution. It saw its job as to teach students rather than to discover new knowledge. Cardinal Newman, the household god of the traditional university it should be remembered, believed that formal research was best undertaken in institutions other than universities. Half a century later the PhD was a new-fangled idea reluctantly introduced to wean wealthy Americans off the universities of Germany.

At this stage in its development the university had three main roles: First was the custodianship of an intellectual tradition derived more from the culture of a social elite than the codification of scientific principles by a *corps* of academic experts. This emphasis on 'cultural knowledge' rather than 'scientific knowledge' had mixed results; it encouraged philistinism by undervaluing scientific rigour and enthusiasm for new discoveries, but it displayed liberalism, even humanism, by placing people rather than ideas at the centre of higher education. Secondly, was the reproduction of traditional professions which were defined more perhaps by customary than technological requirements — with malignant results, among which were alienation from the new industrial spirit, reciprocal philistinism in industry, and the exclusion from higher education's first division of those emergent professions with insufficient social clout. Thirdly, was the transmission of cultural capital in its broadest and possibly most allegorical sense by the formation and, more important, the legitimisation of political and administrative elites. These qualities of the traditional, or better liberal, university will be explored in Chapter 2.

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Of course, these twin attempts first to define an ideal type and then to describe its essential characteristics are open immediately to detailed refutation. But both can perhaps be defended by emphasising the charismatic power of myths — the continued primacy of Oxford and Cambridge shows this power at work — and by arguing that even hidden layers of values, unacknowledged and perhaps forgotten, may retain an active and powerful presence. At least this characterisation of the traditional university helps to explain strange features of Britain's intellectual and university culture such as:

- *Anti-intellectualism even among intellectuals and the suspicion/absence of an intelligentsia

- *An enthusiasm for pragmatism and suspicion of over-abstraction

- *A continued commitment to the close and careful teaching of students

- *An obscure but evocative distinction between scholarship and research

- *An apparently almost unbridgeable cultural gap between science and non-science

- *An unnatural separation between 'human' and 'social' sciences

- *A high degree of independence from the state combined anomalously with an equally high degree of solidarity with established political society

All of these, of course, have come under increasing challenge in recent years. The growth of an intelligentsia, most prominently located within higher education, has been pronounced. Pragmatism as an intellectual style is very much on the defensive. The traditional commitment to the careful teaching of students has been modified partly in response to the larger scale of the operation which has been a direct result of the expansion of higher education, and partly because of shifting priorities within the academic profession. Scholarship as opposed to research is stigmatised by more than a whiff of amateurism. The growth of the social sciences and the 'scientification' of the humanities have bridged the gap between science and non-science, or at any rate made it much narrower. The independence of the universities has been very much compromised by both recent cuts in public expenditure, and less obviously but perhaps more influentially by the more active role and engaged style which higher education has adopted in its relationship with lay society. Yet there is enough left of all these features of British intellectual and

university culture for them still to be recognised, and on many crucial occasions to continue to be influential.

Yet for 30 years following the end of the Second World War the story seemed to be of the rise and rise of the modern university (again a somewhat arbitrary and simplified category). Although it had its origins in the nineteenth century and especially in the rise of the natural sciences, the modern university achieved its apotheosis between 1955 and 1975 with the Robbins expansion in Britain, the even more impressive expansions and diversifications of university systems in Europe, and, of course, the growth of the 'multiversity' in the United States. If Newman was the household god of the liberal university, Clark Kerr occupied the same icon-like position for the modern university. Yet it is wrong to imagine that there was as sharp a break in the quality, the values, of higher education, as that which occurred in its quantity. The modern university is the result of a process of accretion as much as of evolution or reform. But it can be argued that there was a significant change in the university's conception, even ideology, of knowledge. This started in the nineteenth century with the rise of the natural sciences, which became as central to the modern university as classics, philosophy and history had been to the liberal university. But so rapid and so destabilising have been advances in the theoretical foundations of the natural sciences that they can never be restrained within an essentially cultural definition of the intellectual tradition. Their links with technology and so with industrial society also threaten the subtle links between the traditional university's ideology of knowledge and a privileged social order. Finally, they have as their priority the discovery and codification of theoretical knowledge rather than the satisfaction of the culturally defined intellectual needs of students.

The revolutionary impact of the natural sciences spread in time to all disciplines, with the humanities last to be captured. Disciplines came to be organised on the basis of the degree of association between theoretical preoccupations rather than of the coherence of undergraduate teaching. Disciplines divided and subdivided. The growing prominence of new disciplines derived from the expanding 'service' role eagerly taken up by the modern university accelerated this process. Scholars also became more professional in their work as teachers and above all as researchers, which again increased the distance between disciplines. The modern university valued academicism more highly as an approach to intellectual questions than did the liberal university which had clung to a form of humanism,

however tainted by social privilege. Two important results flowed from this change. First, the intellectual culture was splintered into many not easily reassemblable fragments. Secondly, the university became less and less a community of academics with similar values which they could share, and more simply a shared bureaucratic environment. This essentially internal process was accelerated by external events. The utilitarian values of industrial society which had been slowly seeping into the university for more than a century rushed in after 1945, partly because of the expansion of student numbers (which meant it was no longer realistic to base the character of the university on the assumption that most graduates would occupy elite positions in administration and the professions) partly because of the incorporation of technological higher education (the colleges of advanced technology (CATs) and the polytechnics) within the broad university tradition. In the 1960s the university's traditions also had to be stretched to give more prominence to the 'service' values of the post-war Welfare State and their intellectual and vocational preoccupations.

But it is wrong to place too much emphasis on these external pressures and the ways in which the post-war university has accommodated them. It is a mistake to assume that they are the whole story and so explain the great differences between the liberal and the modern modes of the university. At least as revolutionary in its impact on the university has been the internal momentum, even dynamism, of disciplines. If the modern university has become a confusing, and possibly disintegrating, institution, it is not solely or even mainly because it has tried to do too many jobs for people outside. The confusion is as much the result of changes in the construction of intellectual life. It is probably wrong to imagine that academicism, in the sense of the discovery and codification of (mainly theoretical) knowledge, has the strongest claim to be regarded as the core preoccupation of the university. If it has, it is a recently established claim. But even if the first claim is allowed it is not much help in sorting out the core purposes of the university from those which are more peripheral. The fracturing and re-fracturing of disciplines have been accompanied by the cultivation of mini-cultures within disciplines which those outside find difficult to penetrate and by the professionalisation and so bureaucratisation of scholarship. These characteristics, and dilemmas, of the modern university are discussed in Chapter 3.

The dilemma for higher education in the 1980s is clear. At no time

since 1945 has there been a more urgent need to establish priorities, within the system, within sectors, within institutions, within departments, and within disciplines; but at no time since 1945, because of the developments within the modern university which have been described, has it been more difficult to find the basis for a consensus about how to establish priorities. It goes much much deeper than an immediate shortage of resources. Indeed, this dilemma would exist and even intensify whatever the level of the university grant or of the advanced further education pool. This ambiguity and confusion are endemic qualities of the modern university. But there is also a further dimension. In certain important respects the development of the modern university has offended the submerged values inherited from the liberal university. First, we have acquired, absentmindedly perhaps, an intelligentsia especially and most intensely in some social science disciplines. Secondly, there is a growing tension between teaching and research, especially in the natural sciences, which has not only created a host of practical and expensive difficulties, but offended some strongly held assumptions about university education. Thirdly, the establishment of academicism at the heart of the modern university and the displacement of elitist humanism have begun to undermine the British fashion for pragmatism. Ideology and theorising have reared their ugly heads, even in the once pure humanities. Historians look longingly at the *Annales* school across the Channel. English dons dabble in structuralism and even semiology. There is a growing interest in Marxism. All very un-English. All very disturbing.

Of course, some will claim that this amounts to a caricature of modern university life and the exaggeration is admitted. Yet it is interesting to reflect that the Robbins expansion of the universities which was seen at the start and still by Lord Robbins himself as an experiment in enlightened pedagogy (broader and more general first degrees) was actually a period of creeping academicism and of a burgeoning intelligentsia. A similar point could be made about the contrast between the intentions and results of Anthony Crosland's binary policy for the polytechnics and colleges although here there is more room for optimistic dissent. None of this, of course, is conclusive evidence of a deep crisis in British intellectual and university life to match the crisis of resources. But it is perhaps slight evidence of a *prima facie* case for believing that the drift of higher education's *longue durée* over the past 25 years may be at least as interesting (and exciting or alarming, depending on one's viewpoint) as

marginal shifts in funding patterns and policies. The extent of this crisis is explored in Chapter 4.

Of course, it is important to keep such speculation under tight rein. Old values and traditional commitments are still strong in Britain's 45 universities. Indeed, what is perhaps most remarkable is how resilient these values and commitments have proved to be in the face of the great and potentially destabilising expansion of the number of students that has taken place over the past generation. Unlike universities in the United States and most of Europe, British universities still place a surprisingly high value on the teaching of undergraduates, usually one of the first things to go to the wall in the movement to a mass system. Research in British universities, even in the more sensitive areas of inquiry, is not politicised on the foreign pattern, either in the sense that disciplinary networks have been irreparably torn apart by academic sectarianism or in the equally important sense that our universities have not yet become the foci of an oppositional intelligentsia at silent war with political society (although Mrs Thatcher is doing her best to bring this about). So in considering the universities' *longue durée* what will probably be remembered about the Robbins period is not how much was lost and squandered but how much of the peculiar quality of British universities was preserved. The achievements of the Robbins expansion are discussed in Chapter 5.

Another temptation is to seize on a slogan metaphor — the menopausal university, perhaps? After all, a case can be made for the advancing middle age of the British university. The Robbins expansion is now well in the past. The 1960s were the decade of university expansion: in the 1970s the main thrust of expanding student numbers was in the polytechnics and colleges. No new universities have been created either by foundation or promotion for 18 years. The latest cuts are simply the culmination of reductions in public expenditure on universities that have been made with depressing regularity since the first crisis of 1973. Any empires that were built in British universities in the 1950s and 60s have seen their foundations crumbling for half a decade or more. Projected forwards, the metaphor of middle age looks equally accurate. After all, with only a trickle of new appointments (if that) the academic community will quite literally age. The prospects for the revival of large-scale public investment in the expansion of the universities on the Robbins pattern appear almost hopelessly remote over the next decade (any revival is much more likely to boost the polytechnics

and colleges). So it can be argued that the most likely pattern is one of increasing intellectual conservatism and detachment from wider social and educational goals as the arteries of the academic profession harden, to be followed by a new outburst of radicalism towards the end of the century as the retirement of the Robbins generation opens the way to substantial numbers of new recruits.

But just as the thesis of creeping academicism and a burgeoning intelligentsia has to be severely qualified by attention to the contrary evidence that the peculiar quality of the British university has been surprisingly well preserved, so this second thesis of a cycle of radicalism/growth followed by conservatism/steady state has to be equally critically examined. There *is* firm evidence of an ageing academic profession, of slackening public investment in universities (to put it as civilly as possible), and that morale among university teachers is lower than it has been for a generation or more, probably two. But there is no real evidence that academic creativity will be blunted by these factors, or that academic standards are about to slip into some kind of somnolence. To suggest that these malignant results might flow from such political factors is to enter the territory of speculation. For it can equally be argued that the public, political life of higher education may be troubled, while its private, academic life remains serene. In fact, even the most superficial attempt to penetrate the mentality of the modern British university throws up a whole series of paradoxes and inconsistencies which make it difficult to believe that any single thesis can hope to be an adequate description. The first paradox is that while many might have expected there to be a revulsion against the more 'social' ambitions of Robbins, a growing conviction that the universities had been the victims in the 1970s and 80s of their own over-ambition in the 1960s, there seems to be remarkably little evidence that any such revulsion has in fact taken place. Professor R.V. Jones up in Aberdeen is as much a prophet crying in the wilderness in 1981 as he was 20 years before, when he was one of the most distinguished critics of the Robbins blueprint for expansion.

At the most there is a feeling that the universities would benefit from a period of calm (although not, of course, of cuts) after two decades of expansion. But even among the more conservatively inclined the emphasis is on consolidation of what are almost universally accepted as gains and successes in the 1950s and 60s, not on some reactionary return to some pre-Robbins golden age. Much more common, indeed, is a sense of regret that the Robbins

experiment was not carried through with sufficient vigour. The reasons for this unbroken faith in Robbins are probably many. Of course, some are practical and selfish. The Robbins wave created new institutions, departments, careers. But perhaps more interesting is the light this faith sheds on the stubborn streak of altruism that runs through British universities despite frequent (and often accurate) assertions about their commitment to traditionalism and elitism. Perhaps at times it shades into a form of paternalism. But whatever it is called, this commitment to the expansion of university education founded on a firm belief in the high quality of such education seems to have survived both the disdain of the anti-Robbins *ultras* and the depredations of recent government policy. The social conscience of the universities is not as vestigial as its naïve critics and real enemies imagine.

The reason for this is probably that the hopes for a better and broader future embodied by Robbins seem natural and right to majority opinion within the universities. They seem to fit so exactly the humanist (although elitist) preoccupations of the liberal university which have already been mentioned. Perhaps it is because the expansion of opportunity encouraged by Robbins had such traditional roots that the commitment to such an expansion has remained so strong. Robbins was not offering mass higher education on the American pattern, let alone that of Nanterre, but something much more in tune with British ideas of what a university is for. Another, barely noticed, factor is the way in which the greater democracy in universities today allows younger (and more liberal?) academics a stronger voice in their affairs. Perhaps this helps to explain the second interesting aspect of the mentality of the modern British university, that is, the rather surprising way in which the commitment to the student and to good undergraduate teaching has held up in a time first of rapid expansion and then of growing strain. Indeed, contrary to what might have been expected there seems to be a widespread conviction that both teachers and students are better than they were ten years ago. The teachers themselves perhaps because the shock of student revolt in the late 1960s and 70s underlined the fact that the needs of students could never safely be relegated to second place in the priorities of the university (in this sense the popular parodies of this period represented by Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* probably get it wrong. Student revolt encouraged a return to more traditional pedagogy as much as it opened the flood gates to politicised mediocrity.) The students have to be more

serious today than they had to be in the 1960s. One fairly obvious reason is jobs. Another is that meeting the tough entry standards for British universities is perhaps more difficult for the new ranks of students who benefited from the Robbins expansion and may have come from a less differentiated secondary school system, than it was for the gilded (and brilliant?) youth of the 1950s and early 60s before the expansion of opportunity got under way. The fact that today there are many more women students may also have contributed to a more serious and more mature mood among students generally.

The third paradox is perhaps the most interesting of all. It is that while depression among university teachers seems to be widespread, it also seems to be only skin-deep. A lecturer at a London college may try to avoid telling people her profession because she feels the social esteem of university teachers has fallen so low. A northern professor may say that at a recent departmental evaluation meeting they sat round the table gloomily contemplating how much further they would slide down before falling off the end. But put against this the belief of the physics lecturer that there has not yet been a time when there has been a shortage of money for truly good research, and the bubbly enthusiasm of the new (and therefore very rare) chemistry lecturer who simply says: 'Really, it's my hobby. I had a lab at home at a very early age and now my hobby's my job.' Of course, the severity of present problems is admitted even by such enthusiasts. Everywhere there is concern about the malignant effect of the freeze on recruitment into the profession. The scientists in particular fret about the way in which a whole generation of scientific talent has almost been sacrificed, although even here some are sanguine and point out that this infusion of redirected talent will do industry good. There are already many departments that have not made a new appointment since the mid-1970s. Fears increase about how it will feel in 1990 when the faces along the corridor have been the same ones for 15 or 20 years.

But everywhere also there seems a strong determination not to allow this problem (and related less serious problems arising from the cuts) to become the occasion for academic ossification. Indeed, in certain circumstances the very absence of new blood has underlined the need for serving academics to maintain their creativity and energy in ways which were not perhaps demanded so intensely in the past, because the burden of scholarly progress could more easily be taken up by the next generation. Indeed, there is a reluctance to accept that the cuts and the virtual end of expansion will inevitably

damage academic standards. Even when such damage is admitted, it is talked of in almost deliberately low-key terms, the shortage of laboratory technicians, the difficulty of keeping up with administration, and other marginal distractions from academic work. This is perhaps to underestimate the problem of academic creativity that the universities will have to face over the next ten years. Too easy advancement in the academic profession may not have been an incentive to good scholarship; but neither is no advancement at all. After all, what practical incentive is there to publish when the career rewards are likely to be so meagre. It would not therefore be altogether surprising if there were to be a fall-off in the productivity of the profession in its scholarly work (especially as the demand from good, hard-working, but perhaps passive students is bound to increase as teaching loads get heavier and demographic decline allows competition for students to rear its ugly head). This in turn might, to adopt the categories used earlier in this chapter, erode the academicism of the modern university and restimulate the humanism intrinsic in a more liberal model for the university. Fewer scholars, more teachers, or at any rate a readjustment of the balance between scholarship and teaching — it is an intriguing prospect for the universities, disturbing in its academic aspect but exhilarating even in its implications for a liberal higher education.

To move from the universities to the polytechnics and other colleges, to cross the binary chasm, is to move from a world of (comparative) orthodoxy to one of absolute heterodoxy. Although there are substantial differences of emphasis between the natural sciences with their austere theoretical, and so perhaps neutral, preoccupations and the social and human sciences, which are inevitably more culture-bound in their definition of knowledge, there is general agreement that universities are about the life of the mind. Of course, attempts to tease out that rather clunkish phrase immediately run into trouble — what room is there for active and engaged intellectual activity alongside the more traditional reflective academic variety? There are many similarly difficult questions of definition which in turn provoke even more searching questions about the relationship between any intellectual activity and the society and individuals which are its context. From these latter questions, of course, eventually flow all the practical policy issues that face higher education, science policy, the UGC's selectivity strategy, manpower planning, and so on. But at least for the purpose of this preliminary discussion these questions can be ducked by saying

simply that the overwhelming majority of university teachers feel, believe, and behave as if they are engaged in a shared and harmonious activity with deeply common values and self-evident goals. From this conviction of the value of disengaged, or at any rate autonomous, intellectual activity grow practical assumptions about the autonomy of the universities, within them a non-corporatist academic community, and the academic freedom of the individual — in short the whole environment of the university.

With the polytechnics and colleges the same easy assumption about common purposes cannot be made. Of course, a substantial number of those who teach in these institutions see their intellectual responsibilities in terms that are analogous to those of their colleagues in universities (although in a more modern and down-to-earth context, they would tend to argue). But there are many others who are engaged in tasks with no academic or even intellectual pretensions. They make no claim, and express no desire, to be involved in a process of critical inquiry, not one at any rate which requires the 'distance' between themselves and society provided by traditional barriers of academic freedom. They have an entrepreneurial, not a fiduciary relationship with the world beyond the campus. There are various intermediate groups which are perhaps in a process of shifting from the latter to the former style of higher education, a shift that is often shallowly described as 'academic drift'. There are even people in polytechnics, pre-eminently perhaps in some fine-art departments, who see their role not just in intellectual terms but also and more intensely in aesthetic and so moral terms, as the core of conscience in a mechanistic world. Not many people in universities today go as far as that. The rise of academicism has encouraged an often amoral approach to intellectual responsibility.

There have, of course, been attempts to produce some overarching philosophy of polytechnic education which tries to capture all this heterodoxy in a common gravity and to apply to it a common principle, attempts that go back far beyond Crosland through Lunacharsky to Owen. These attempts have tended to emphasise the aspect of 'doing', of application, of capability. To suggest that they have largely failed is not to say that they have not been, and do not remain, a valuable element in the necessary discourse about the future purposes of higher education. But it has always been difficult to make a sensible distinction between the creation and the application of knowledge, or between the capacity for creative reflection

and the practical capability of the individual. Too often at both a conceptual and concrete level the processes of creation and application are so closely entwined that they cannot be safely separated. Perhaps in the end the only adequate 'polytechnic' philosophy for higher education is no philosophy at all, to come to terms with the inevitable and perhaps enriching heterodoxy of intellectual activity once it has escaped from the gravity of the university.

Instead, the preoccupations of the polytechnics are necessarily more diverse, reflecting their more fissiparous quality. Many people within them, and more still in the colleges with their often more liberal traditions, are prey to the same gloomy preoccupations as their colleagues in the more harassed disciplines in universities. But as many see themselves as engaged, not in an organic academic enterprise in which they are joined by all their colleagues, but in a functional and mutual relationship with their clients beyond the campus. So the quality of such relationships is the key stone of their well-being — and so their morale. It would be going too far to suggest that while universities have a single overarching mission, the polytechnics do a multitude of marginally connected jobs. But it is not altogether wrong to say that the polytechnics have a greater diversity of purposes and practices, with important and surprising implications for their resilience. Of course, the problem of maintaining intellectual creativity is as acute, or perhaps more acute, in the polytechnics as in the universities. In many ways the margin for creativity — the tradition of the freedom and the time to do research, for example — is much tighter. The problem also takes different forms. In the universities the overwhelming difficulty is how to introduce new blood; in the polytechnics, where comparatively there is much more new blood, the problem is how to stop it becoming sluggish. In the context of the more active and more externally directed intellectual patterns of work that prevail in the polytechnics this means above all opportunity for promotion, to course leaderships, headships of departments and so on. The poor passive scholar is not a model that works well in a polytechnic environment.

The polytechnics have to put up with a lot of disdain from the universities, little of it deserved. The colleges of higher education as is the way of the world have to put up with double disdain. Both will have to put up with hostility and cuts from government which bear even less relation to any assessment of their value or achievement than the parallel hostility which the universities are having to

endure. But to write off the influence of the polytechnic experiment on the future shape of all higher education would be mistaken. At a deeper level the process of up-rating forms of intellectual and educational activity once dismissed as quite outside the scope of higher education has broadened and diluted not only our view of what higher education is and is for, but also perhaps our very definition of academic knowledge. The pluralism of the polytechnic may even in time undermine the catholicism of the university. The successes, and short comings, of the binary policy are discussed in Chapter 6.

The 1980s are unknown territory for higher education — and unknown territory is too easily peopled by the imagination with fearful prospects. Robbins looked forward only 20 years and those 20 years are now up. No map equally magisterial (and reliable) is available to guide universities, colleges, and polytechnics through the next 20. As a result higher education has lost a horizon many times more important to its well-being and healthy development than the planning horizon which the universities lost when the quinquennial system of university funding collapsed in the mid-1970s. Perhaps it could be called the horizon of aspiration. Anyway it is for the moment lost. Instead, higher education against its will concentrates myopically on the next few years of senseless austerity and is overwhelmed by the immediate prospect of the cuts. But beyond that brief period — nothing. All perspective in which the deeper development of higher education can be continued has been lost. All this is undenied and probably undeniable. But the appropriate interpretation to place on these events, and the context in which higher education should be placed in 1981 and which flows from this interpretation, are open to question. Many, perhaps a majority, argue that the impetus provided by Robbins and accelerated by Crosland is now exhausted, that Britain's enthusiasm and willingness to pay for great liberal reforms is also exhausted, and that the only sensible course is to accept these iron realities and plan for a narrower and austerer future. 'Snibborism' (Robbins in reverse) sums up this baleful approach.

There is another possible approach, although in such difficult times it is inevitably one that has fewer supporters. It can be argued that far from being over, Robbins is just about to begin. For although the quantitative message of Robbins, that there should be three-fold expansion of the number of students in higher education, was received and obeyed during the 1960s and 70s, it is only now that

the qualitative message, that a more liberal as well as a larger higher education system should be built in Britain, is starting to be received. After all, great changes in the character of any social institutions, let alone of educational systems so pregnant with human and intellectual values, do not take place quickly. It can be argued that it took at least a generation, from the Butler Education Act of 1944 to the comprehensive reforms of the 1960s, to establish both the principle and practice of secondary education for all (rather than elementary education with a bit added on for most). Why should we expect changes in higher education at least as great to take place in less time? So two contrasting interpretations of the present state of Britain's universities and polytechnics are possible. On the one hand, a 'steady-state' or shrinking system accompanied by growing disengagement from the more generous ambitions characteristic of the recent past and by an intellectual thrombosis as the academic arteries harden. On the other, a state of incomplete liberalisation with higher education on the brink of new expansion (more qualitative perhaps than quantitative) accompanied by an intensification of intellectual creativity and invention.

In such confusion how can we hope to recreate the horizon of aspiration? Believers in 'snibborism' may feel that such an attempt is hardly worth while: it would only get in the way of their reality. The rest of us have to be a little more hopeful and even a little more courageous. A good starting point, of course, is the Robbins Report itself. There is a strong case for saying that Robbins's prescription for a more liberal system of higher education — more general first degrees, greater diversity of postgraduate study, more emphasis on the higher education of adults and so on — still holds good and that Robbin's description of the aims and principles of higher education in paragraphs 13–40 has still not lost its power and its freshness. There was really almost nothing in Model E, the radical, continuing education, option, of the 1978 discussion document, *Higher Education into the 1990s*, that was not better said by Robbins, which is remarkable considering Robbins's brief was confined to *full-time* higher education. The experience of the polytechnics, their practical expansion of the scope of higher education and their up-rating of academic standards across a wide range of new subjects and para-professions, has also demonstrated the potential for progressive reform, although perhaps as too strictly controlled an experiment mainly within the vocational tradition of British higher education. What we have not seen, or seen very little of, is a similarly liberal

movement within the more academic university tradition. That is what we should look forward to and encourage during the 1980s and 90s. There are five reasons why moderate optimism is not entirely out of place despite contradictory indications on the troubled surface layer of higher education. These will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 8.

The first is that there may be a reaction against the academicism of the modern post-war university and a return to the humanism of the liberal university (or, to adopt the scheme of Robbins, a restoration of the balance between the committee's third aim: the advancement of knowledge, and its second: the promotion of the general powers of the mind, and possibly its fourth: the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship). If this does happen the prospects for the Robbins prescription for broader first degree courses actually being fulfilled would be much improved. Of course, it can be argued that the momentum of academicism is unstoppable, that the organisation of knowledge round principles other than the association of theoretical preoccupations has become impossible given its contemporary sophistication, and that there are strong and interesting parallels between the fracturing of the university's knowledge base and the formation through credentialisation of a new intellectual/professional division of labour. But it is just as possible things will turn out differently. The conservatively-inclined who committed themselves to the academicism of the modern university as a defence against the inroads of mass society and culture, may come to regard the professionalisation, even bureaucratisation, of scholarship and the fracturing and refracturing of knowledge as deadly enemies of the liberal university tradition. At the other end of the spectrum radicals who committed themselves confusingly to the 'service' and/or autonomist values of the modern university because these challenged what they saw as a reactionary academic tradition and/or repressive 'relevance', may also have growing doubts now that society is no longer represented by the benign social democratic state of the 1960s but by the neo-conservative state or some vast 'technostructure', a modern tower of Babel piled up with microchips.

The second reason is that the accelerating pace of scientific and technological advance will undermine the value of specialised initial higher education. In Daniel Bell's post-industrial society the information technology revolution will radically alter our perception of expertise. Although a new corps of ultra-experts will be required,

the majority of the technological intelligentsia will find its detailed expertise undermined by the rapid turnover of theoretical knowledge and its applications. It can be argued that this will only make explicit what has always been implicit. After all, a majority of science and technology graduates work on the periphery of their disciplines, in sales, management, and so on, rather than at their cores in research and development. Nevertheless, the accelerating pace of knowledge will deeply influence not only the content of higher education (towards more general or more abstract courses?) but also its structure (more continuing education?). This tendency towards more liberal forms will be supported by a third factor. It is becoming increasingly clear in the advanced societies of the world, and especially in those with stubbornly rooted democratic cultures like Britain, that the main blockages occur in the human 'software' not the technological 'hardware'. The key issue for the next century, therefore, will not necessarily be the advance of science, or the improvement of engineering technology, but the improvement of human technology. This will not be easy because the revolutionary character of some new technologies (and in particular their impact on employment) will provoke stubborn resistance and because the spreading tide of participatory democracy, in particular industrial democracy, will increase the strain on the executors of policy. But both may shift the whole balance of professional and technological higher education away from the authority of the expert towards the sponsorship of collaborative human skills.

The fourth reason is that the relationship between higher education and society is also likely to be modified — and in a similar direction to that taken by the much tighter relationship between higher education, technology and the economy. The value of a higher education may be perceived quite differently as the social or economic advantage it brings declines (either because of slower economic growth generating fewer graduate jobs, or because of expansion of opportunity increasing the supply of graduates). It may be seen less in instrumental terms, less as a few essential rungs on the ladder of social or occupational advancement, and more in humanist terms, more as a personal right without which individuals will feel deprived and unsatisfied. In the former capacity higher education is almost entirely a positional good; in the latter it is potentially at any rate an absolute one.

The fifth reason is more speculative but still persuasive. In the next 20 years, even without much further absolute expansion, higher