

Devolving the Universities PROBLEMS and PROSPECTS J.McIntyre

The arguments for and against the devolution of the universities of Scotland, propounded with such vigour and conviction by both sides to the controversy, in particular over the past two years, are now passing into the folk-lore of the great debate on the future of our nation. In fact the arguments have become almost stylised and legendary so that they can be rehearsed rather like a liturgy. They are public property, to be used by anyone who wishes to raise his voice on this subject. So there would seem to be little excuse for taking the matter up once again were it not my belief that we are in danger of accepting a major fallacy. The fallacy is that it is sound and permissible educational policy to regard the future of the universities in Scotland as insulatable from the future of other Scottish institutions. Whitehead used to speak of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, that is the error of assuming that one sector of reality could be regarded as if it were an entity on its own independent of the rest of reality, and with problems which could be solved without reference to the rest of reality. If we construe our fallacy in psychological terms we can see that it becomes the fantasy of the universities' withdrawal from the real world of Scottish education with its many intractable problems. In moral terms, fallacy and fantasy become irresponsibility if we in the universities think that we can save our own skins and make our universities secure while letting other sectors of education make the best of a bad job. What I propose, therefore, is to try to set the future of the universities within the broader context of education in Scotland.

But first of all, piety obliges me to recite the litany not only so that we may have the arguments for and against the devolution of the universities before us from the start, but also because in these arguments the wider issues constantly obtrude. I should add that I have here and elsewhere in this essay drawn upon material which I prepared for a Conference held to mark the tenth anniversary of the Scottish edition of the **Times Educational Supplement** in Edinburgh in June 1975.

Taking the arguments **against**, first, we note that much is made of the buffer role which the national University Grants Committee has played throughout its existence between the universities and the government of the day, so that the idiosyncratic views of any one government and changes of government should not have disruptive effects on university academic programmes. When the question is asked why a Scottish University Grants Committee could not give the same service, the answer is that a local legislature at close range might be constantly prying into priorities and expenditure. Petty animosities might develop and reprisals for disagreement or non-cooperation would in the end curb all freedom and initiative. In other words, we could look forward to nothing but political interference, and a measure of economic control which would lead to the manipulation of academic affairs. Moreover, some people fear that the universities, having been devolved, might be treated less favourably than other institutions of higher education in Scotland. To support their predictions they point to allegations which have been made that the universities are elitist and have in fact in the past been treated too lavishly. In the wider national setting the Scottish universities could count upon the support of their colleagues south of the border to combat any national move to down-grade universities at the expense of other institutions.

It is further contested that creation of a Scottish University Grants Committee separate from an English University Grants Committee would involve the division of what ought to be a unitary university system and create problems for students and staff wishing to move from one country to the other. The Scottish universities would then become regional or even parochial institutions, and would lose that international reputation which association with their sister institutions in the south brings - an argument, incidentally, which is in no way supported by the history of the Scottish universities before the twentieth century. A great deal is made in the case against devolution of the universities of the fact that the research councils make their awards on a national basis and that the Scottish universities if withdrawn from the national system would forfeit their claim and interest, or at best be severely incapacitated in the competition for places and money. It is also assumed that the academic standards of Scottish students would fall because they would face less competition from unusually bright incomers - an assumption which ignores the possibility that Scottish universities might still be attractive to students even after devolution.

The case for devolution of the universities is equally detailed: It begins with criticism of the case against. The point is made, for example, that some English universities are very close to the seat of power, whether one puts it in Westminster or in Whitehall. Yet they seem to have suffered

neither more or less than the rest of us from the attentions of interfering politicians and civil servants. In other words, proximity to the legislature or the bureaucracy does not seem to matter greatly. Further, in Scotland, quite a few colleges such as the central institutions and the colleges of education are already under the supervision of the Secretary of State or the Scottish Education Department. There is no evidence to suggest that they have surrendered their academic integrity to the state. Perhaps, too, it ought to be said that the existing University Grants Committee is not altogether the buffer that it once was against governmental interest in the universities. The Treasury exerts far greater control over the universities than was ever the case in the boom years, through its financial allocations and so to the University Grants Committee. Not wholly retrievable statements have also been made about the government doing "something more positive in the manpower planning field to guide its choices in the educational field" (Lord Crowther Hunt, quoted in **The Observer**, 25th May 1975).

In short, government interest in universities, whether the government be the present Westminster Parliament or the projected Scottish Assembly, is more likely to be determined by manpower needs, available finance and, one might add, doctrinaire educational policy, than by physical proximity. It has been argued that a devolved Scottish university system would result in the encouragement of Scottish studies in literature, history, art, economics and philosophy, to a degree at present impossible, and would thus halt what has been called "the anglicising of our culture and institutions". I sometimes wonder whether much ought to be made of this argument. Scottish studies have certainly flourished in the University of Edinburgh in recent years and many have received encouragement directly from the University Court. It is hard to imagine that greater encouragement would have come had the universities been financed by a Scottish Assembly. Greater weight ought, on the other hand, to be given to the claim that the unequal yoking of Scottish and English universities as if they were identical partners in a unitary system has sometimes been to the disadvantage of pupils entering university from schools which followed the long-established Scottish custom of offering a broadly based curriculum. Moreover, there is a specifically Scottish tradition of education. This unequal yoking has seriously diminished it in the past thirty years. The devolution controversy has served to bring into fresh focus what Dr G. E. Davie was saying about that tradition in **The Democratic Intellect** fifteen years ago.

Those against the devolution of the Scottish universities seem to have gained a first round advantage, because the White Paper on devolution published in November 1975 excluded the universities from the package. The government has called for submissions on the White Paper and the debate continues, but as yet fresh arguments have not appeared. The thesis which I wish to propound is that not only will no new light be thrown on the issue if we pursue these arguments about it . . . , but that we shall run the far greater risk of being satisfied with the arguments offered so far

and fail to see that the universities are but one part — albeit a significant even dominant part — of the Scottish educational system. For this reason the crisis in Scottish education is the subject of the second part of my essay. Only if the universities play their part, and use their intellectual resources to the full, will this crisis be resolved to the greater good of Scottish education. The devolution controversy must not be used as a red herring to divert us from making a supreme effort to assist in the solution of this crisis. This is our responsibility just as it is the responsibility of all other educationalists in Scotland.

The shape of the solution which we reach will be determined by four sets of factors and will result from the interplay of these factors upon one another. The strategic place which the universities occupy in this analysis will become clear as we go along. We must begin by considering a number of tensions. The first is caused by the system of admitting to the universities students with many varied, but by implication equal qualifications — S.C.E., G.C.E., diplomas of recognised institutions and certain professional qualifications. The fact that these qualifications are not equal becomes apparent only after the students have arrived. The recent public correspondence over failure rates — a problem which affects all the universities and not just the one which was singled out — is evidence of this tension. It is especially encouraging to learn that the Scottish universities have begun to work out ways of solving this problem. So long as it remains unsolved much distress is likely to occur among undergraduates.

A second tension which is partly responsible for the previous one is to be found in school curricula. These, it seems, are expected to serve what might be thought to be irreconcilable objectives. The first is to provide pupils with the necessary qualifications for university entrance. The second is to offer either a general education or some kind of entrance qualification for non-university education or for some profession. These irreconcilable objectives are sometimes dealt with by choices of subjects; what is not clear is that they can be satisfactorily accommodated within one structure of education. This second tension has also appeared in universities which seem on the one hand intent on giving a general education — the old Scottish M.A. being the classic example — and on the other committed to preparing entrants for several different professions. In this connection it is interesting that the faculty of law which was once very closely related to professional training is now attracting many students who do not intend to take up law as a career, but who see the curriculum of that faculty as providing them with a broadly based education. Ideally these two aims should be combined in universities, but they do from time to time create tension.

“Comprehensive” is rapidly becoming an established attribute of education. Whether or not a school is “comprehensive” determines both the financial aid it receives from the government and its curriculum. Within schools comprehensive education has given substance to the concept of universalism which had already received its form in the raised school-leaving age. But that universalism begins to be at odds with the long-standing elitism of the universities. In the universities the tension has

led different people in different directions. Some maintain that the comprehensive principle should be extended to universities; others that selectivity is essential to the success of the universities. In the recent discussions of higher education in Scotland, a great deal has been made of the next tension. That is, the tension between the universities — with their long-standing role in Scottish society, their international status, their clearly defined academic standards and their acknowledged place in the academic structure of Scotland — and the other centres of tertiary education. The role of these other centres has still to be determined by the planners and they have as yet had little opportunity to establish themselves on the international scene or to define with precision the standards which they can reasonably expect from their students. This tension is not simply one of status, or role, or even of universalism versus elitism. It is caused by uncertainty about the function of these different institutions in the community and about the kind of service they should be giving to the young of this nation.

This last reflection takes us at once to a tension of which the universities have become aware in the harsh economic climate of the last three years. It is the tension between a past in which the universities had come to regard themselves as largely autonomous within the kindly protectorate of the University Grants Committee, their development following in considerable measure their own assessment of the points at which academic growth should take place and a present, in which sharp and at times hostile questions are being asked about their contribution to the community, and about the value of certain kinds of research.

Utilitarian criteria are now beginning to be applied to universities and new responsibilities placed upon them. Whereas in the past the universities concentrated almost exclusively on the admission of school leavers, it is now firmly proposed that they should take responsibility for late entrants to university and for “in-service” and “post-experience” education. This dual commitment creates new problems. What admission criteria should the universities use? Their anxieties may be increased when it is suggested that the term “comprehensive” should be applied to university education.

There is another tension which derives from the simple collocation of the adjectives, big and small, bad and beautiful. We have not yet been able to decide whether the student is better cared for in the small institution, where his identity is immediately clear both to himself and to his tutor, or whether it is now unrealistic to think of any tertiary education — other than that in the liberal arts — except in a large institution which can bear the costs of expensive equipment and the salary rates that go with its maintenance. Happily most universities have stopped playing “the numbers game”, but there is a danger of making a virtue of the necessity imposed upon us by economic stringency and of pretending that the size we are (whatever it is) is beautiful.

Polytechnics are becoming popular, particularly south of the border. This development is obviously relevant to Scotland, but it raises an important issue. Is there any place at the tertiary level for the “monotechnic”? Or should all institutions at the tertiary level strive to be

poly-disciplinary? The problem is that some universities, having expanded to five or ten thousand, find themselves threatened with fragmentation into faculties which are larger than many tertiary institutions. They are now beginning to wonder whether they are in fact agglomerations of monotechs. Meanwhile other tertiary institutions are moving in the opposite direction from monotech to polytechnic.

Our final tension is an emotional one. On the one hand a certain disenchantment with universities is arising in part because of the employment situation, and in part because of unfavourable publicity about student attitudes and behaviour. On the other hand, many Scottish people have a deeply rooted conviction that universities have a special part to play in the training of the young. Perhaps the tension arises because the universities cannot always be seen clearly to be playing that part.

Before proceeding to the major proposals which form the second part of this essay, I should like to delineate the second set of factors which I believe should determine the shape of tertiary education in Scotland. These are a series of principles which can be derived from the tensions indicated above. For tensions if allowed scope and employed constructively need not inhibit us nor be pathological nor paralysing.

The first principle is that of **continuity**. Pupils should be able to "flow through" the educational process from primary, or even nursery, level to tertiary level. Many schools have now succeeded in eliminating the trauma of the eleven-plus, but it remains for us, particularly in Scotland, to make every effort to deal with the even more serious trauma which occurs when students make the transition from school to university, or worse still, fail to make it. The problem is partly one of entrance standards, but perhaps the closer accommodation of school and university curricula is even more important. At the same time the universities must continue to ensure that people with varied qualifications can enter.

Perhaps the time has come to say firmly that the dichotomy between professional training and general education is a false one. Within higher education, no matter what the institution, educators are failing if all they are providing is the technical ability to do a certain job. Their aim should surely be to foster their students' critical capacities and increase their ability to weigh evidence, perceive general principles, state and argue a case and co-operate with colleagues. The false dichotomy should be replaced therefore with the principle of **professional education**.

The principle of "comprehensive education" ought now to be re-examined to see whether it is relevant to universities. The principle which it enshrines is more readily identifiable as "openness", as willingness to explore more scientifically than we have hitherto, the concept of "educability". There are certain disciplines which are available at university and not at school, and in which mature students often demonstrate ability which cannot be correlated with their entrance qualifications or lack of them. For such disciplines, I am prepared to argue that the sole qualifications should be the capacity to read and to express oneself in writing. However, these qualifications are perhaps rarer than we think.

The integration of all Scottish tertiary education has now become a clamant necessity. By that term I do not mean "homogenisation", or the consumption of the less by the greater, or the reduction of all to some dead uniformity. An alternative word would be co-ordination. How this co-ordination might work is a subject to which I return. It would be good too, if the community role of all sectors of tertiary education could now be accepted and accepted willingly. Nostalgia for the days when we could follow the argument wherever it led, regardless of time and expense is misplaced. The ivory tower is no more, and perhaps that is a good thing. What we do, in the universities in particular, has to be seen to have some significance for society, either in the short or the long term. If it doesn't, we have to give serious consideration to the question of why we do it. Unless carefully watched, research can become a very costly form of self-indulgence.

May we say once and for all that there is no optimal size for an institution at the tertiary level? In fact, it is best to have a mixture of different sizes of institution to allow for idiosyncrasies both in discipline and personality. Small and big may be either bad or beautiful; and you will not know till you try.

The third set of factors to affect the shape of tertiary education in Scotland are the constraints within which planning must take place. While the tensions outlined above may actually help us to be creative and to develop a set of working principles, it would be unrealistic not to acknowledge that we shall have to operate within certain very strict limits. It is to these that I now turn.

We have already come sharply up against the control imposed upon the universities by the fixed financial allocation allowed for the forthcoming year 1976-77. We have grown accustomed to a reduction in the number of our staff, but we shall now have to face an educational "squeeze" as we realise the cost of the multiplicity of honours and joint-honours courses which we have devised in the past decade. A hard-headed assessment of priorities and preferences will be essential. Financial stringency is the first constraint.

A second constraint is that projections about the number of entrants into the tertiary education in the next decade are uncertain. Indications are that the numbers will drop because of a decrease in the population aged 18-21, but against such a decrease we have to set a possible growth in in-service trainees and late educands.

The third constraint will be our own capacity to plan. In the hard times ahead our planning will need to be much more accurate than it was in the days of plenty, when we received one year what we failed to get the year before. But the years of plenty yielded no wisdom; we went in fits and starts, living somewhere in the middle-space between our hands and our mouths.

And finally our development will be bounded by the philosophy of tertiary education that we devise or fail to devise. It is surely a major lacuna in our self-knowledge that in a decade of rapid expansion in the universities we never really knew what we were doing. We never worked

out a comprehensive philosophy of education. We added piece to piece with the abandon of opportunists. Now that that era is ended, perhaps we will take time to discover what we did do, and to introduce some fundamental concepts and structure into what is still too often chaotic.

We now come to the fourth set of factors which may have some bearing on the future of tertiary education in Scotland, namely, proposals for reshaping it.

Before the publication of the White Paper on devolution many people seemed to feel that if the universities were excluded from the plan and remained with the national University Grants Committee then somehow the Scottish universities were free to continue as before, cocooned and isolated from the rest of Scottish higher education. In the event, the universities were excluded, but the controversy which their exclusion aroused led to one of the most interesting discussions in Scottish educational circles for many years. Many people feel, indeed many are convinced, that the universities cannot for much longer disregard what is happening in the parallel institutions. Here, I am prepared to argue, is an opportunity for them to assume the role of leadership. Or if that sounds too imperialistic, they could at least indicate their willingness to share in solving what is after all a common problem! There are encouraging signs that they may soon do so.

Let us begin with the schools for they featured quite extensively in my analysis of the tensions within Scottish education. Clearly some schools have solved the problem of the smooth "through-flow" from school to university, though even in these there are each year pupils who do not conform to the pattern which the school has achieved, and for whom some alternative approach to the university would be useful. It would be folly to suggest any changes in the normal pattern of approach which such schools have achieved.

Certain other schools might welcome a reappraisal of what takes place in their upper years. Some have made determined efforts to introduce sixth form studies, but have found their efforts unrewarding. Some pupils who still have highers to take to meet university entrance requirements mix sixth form studies with preparation for highers, taking the latter more seriously than the former. Others embarking on sixth form studies with good intentions in August, find their interest draining away after the universities issue unconditional acceptances in February or March. To meet what is now quite a general malaise about the sixth form, and for the benefit of schools other than those mentioned in the previous paragraph — a very important exception — it is proposed that school education should end in fifth year, the normal year for the taking of highers by the average to good pupil. The tertiary colleges should then make available courses of two or three years duration, which would cater (as they have done so excellently in the past) for those who leave school without achieving university entrance, or who are still undecided about their academic future and wish to take qualifications other than those available at school.

This reference to colleges suggests that we now look at the role which they should have in a restructured tertiary scheme. I do so with a certain

diffidence and only because I feel that their position ought to be enhanced and the role they play clearly defined. Obviously they will wish to continue with the professional training which they have traditionally supplied, though they themselves are moving in the direction of what we earlier called **professional education**. In recognition of their Scottish character, they might be persuaded to include in their curricula courses in logic, metaphysics and ethics, as was the case for many decades in the old Scottish universities in times when students were much younger than they are on average today. But if we follow up the proposal in the previous paragraph, we could think of them continuing with the students who came in from school right through to graduation level.

The term "graduation level" is used advisedly, because they will be, as some already are, degree-conferring bodies. But their great strength would lie in the fact that they would maintain open access for students from school or for late educands, while still holding to rigorous standards of exit and graduation. But the restructuring would not be complete if we did not integrate the colleges explicitly with the universities, extending an arrangement which already obtains between certain colleges and universities in some of the science and technology subjects. This integration would take the form of permitting students from the colleges at the end of the second or third year to move over into the university for, say, the last two years of an honours degree. Equally, a student from the university might take the reverse step. One condition of such an arrangement would be that the universities and the colleges collaborate in the planning of courses. Such collaboration may in any case be forced upon us by financial stringency or adopted by us on the grounds of common sense.

This system would require considerable goodwill from many quarters. Indeed success would probably only be possible if the participating bodies were represented on the supervisory group, which some have already christened "The Scottish Academic Council". Such a council would need to be supported at the local level by governing bodies such as the present University Courts with lay, staff and student membership and by some academic bodies with responsibility solely for curricula, examinations, admissions and so on. If devolution were extended to cover all Scottish academic institutions, then the council I have suggested could well become a Standing Committee on Education, to which a Scottish University Grants Committee would have to be answerable. It would be quite unrealistic to expect that a Scottish University Grants Committee could remain autonomous, in a way which does not hold even for the present University Grants Committee, vis-a-vis the Department of Education and Science.

If, however, the Scottish tertiary institutions are unwilling for one reason or another to set up something like the organisation described above, or to show the spirit of co-operation which such a scheme presupposes, then three courses are open for consideration. First, we may just await the outcome of the parliamentary debate on devolution. If we do this we shall have to allow the processes of innovation, should the universities be devolved, to produce some plan or other or if the universities are excluded

resign ourselves to the **status quo**. Either way, I see little hope of improvement in Scottish higher education. Secondly, we may adopt the proposal of the Scottish executive of the National Union of Students made in March 1975 that an independent public inquiry be instituted to examine the purpose, administration and finance of the Scottish post-school system, and make recommendations to a future Assembly. But that will not do for several reasons. To begin with, it is totally inadvisable to focus the examination upon the possibility of some as yet non-existent Assembly, with as yet controversial powers in the educational field. We need the examination of tertiary education **now**, not a year or two years from now. Next, the findings of such a public inquiry would in no way bind the Assembly. The findings of the Reporter in the public inquiry in the case of the Turnhouse runway were disregarded by the Secretary of State; and what one man can do 142 can do. The public inquiry is not a medium of democratic decision; and tertiary education, because of the future and destiny of the thousands of young people involved, must not be left to the arbitrariness of such an idiosyncratic process.

Accordingly, I can see no satisfactory alternative in our present plight but to demand some kind of Royal Commission to deal with the issues discussed in this essay. I suggested a possible remit for such a commission at the Times Educational Supplement (Scotland) Conference mentioned earlier and I see no reason to alter it now. The situation has not improved in the year since that conference, and in many ways it has deteriorated. The remit would run as follows:

(1) To define the aims of education in modern society, and in particular in Scotland;

(2) To outline how these aims might be achieved through schools, colleges and universities;

(3) To restructure the relations which at present obtain among these agents of education with a view to co-ordinating them to allow of transfer from the one to the other;

(4) To take account of the possible ways in which the history of thought concerning educational theory in Scotland might be of value in the present situation;

(5) To make provision for the admission to the system of those who wish education at a mature stage in life and are without the normal qualifications;

(6) To include in the system provision for post-experience and in-service training;

(7) To design constitutional arrangements for the supervision of this co-ordinated system of tertiary education, both at the national and at the local level;

(8) To define ways in which a Scottish tertiary system would relate to the educational systems of other parts of the United Kingdom.

The findings of such a commission would have to have a more binding power than a public inquiry; and provision would be required to ensure that we did not have a repetition of the runway debacle.

If there is a single unifying theme in this essay it is that the educational

crisis in Scotland which affects not only the tertiary institutions but also the schools will not suddenly be resolved, whichever way the question of the devolution of the universities goes. The issues are far too important and too complicated. They should in all fairness be given proper attention and no longer be treated as if they were of minor consequence in some larger game. Indeed the Scottish education system is in danger of being used as a negotiating piece in what are increasingly cynical and squalid manoeuvres.