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The Curious Case of General Education in England

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Abstract — Apart from seven ‘plateglass’ universities, newly-created in the 1960s, which were all specifically designed to counter departmental specialization, British universities have not given sustained attention to general education. Most were built around specialist disciplines, and the ‘A’-level entrance exams were also highly specialized. Such rough indicators as we have (tv and media, publishing, library usage) suggest, however, that, in the past at least, Britain did not suffer unduly from this neglect, even though it was simultaneously developing strong research universities. Certain historical peculiarities of its universities seem to have mitigated the ill-effects: their elitism and small size, their lack of vocational mission, their collegiate and tutorial systems, their traditions of self-government and of ‘common rooms’, their extensive voluntary student activities, as well as their examination systems. British experience therefore suggests that one should look beyond formal pedagogic relationships and curriculum requirements to consider the ways in which informal integrative mechanisms of an academic community may help, or hinder, the cause of general education.

In recent years Britain has created a mass, vocationally-oriented system, and it is debateable whether the accidental and haphazard provision for general education of the past will be sufficient in the future.

1. INTRODUCTION: ENGLAND AS A FURTHER POINT OF TRIANGULATION

In the mid-18th century, when French surveyors had finished several decades of work triangulating and mapping France, they informed the king, Louis XIV, that it would be necessary to do one at least one further triangulation from a point outside France, so they could ascertain where France was, relative to the rest of the world. They then went to the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, among other places. It is in this spirit, of ‘one further point of triangulation’ that I make these observations on English experience of general education.

Japan has, of course, long taken the US as its point of reference, but one or two others might still be useful.

2. THE ODDITY OF ENGLISH EXPERIENCE

In the context of general or liberal education, I must first say that England is an extremely odd and curious case. (The Scots, by the way, are rather different, so I will refer to English, not British universities.) England is an example of a reasonably successful university system that has paid virtually no attention to general or liberal education! Most of her universities were established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and were built around specialist

disciplines, organized as departments. The department was the effective working unit. It admitted the students, most of whom took single-subject degrees based in them.

The partial exceptions are the seven universities established in the 1960s, and sometimes referred to as ‘plateglass’ universities.¹ These were all designed specifically to combat what was thought to be excessive departmental specialization. They were therefore organized, in their different ways, into ‘schools’ or ‘colleges’, which, it was hoped would transcend or intersect disciplines and departments in the manner of Oxford and Cambridge colleges. The colleges and schools of these universities were often linked to student halls of residence -again in the manner of Oxford and Cambridge.

Despite these, and one or two other exceptions, the disciplinary and departmental specialization of the numerical majority of English universities had long imprinted itself on secondary schools. So 16- to 18-years olds, preparing for the ‘A’ (Advanced) levels, which are the university entrance exams, were highly specialized, and some teachers complained that the specialization reached still further down to 15-year olds, even 14-year olds, since their ‘O’ (Ordinary) level results would influence their choice of ‘A’ levels!

England, ought, then, to have shown the ill-effects of disciplinary specialization, and of the absence of general education. It is, however, difficult to identify these ill-effects.

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3. TRYING TO MEASURE THE SOCIAL CULTURAL COSTS

In the early 1960s, the novelist C.P.Snow, thought he had done so. In a celebrated lecture on 'the two cultures', he argued that Britain was led by those who studied classics and the humanities, and had no understanding of science and technology. This was one of the main reasons, he thought, for Britain's low rate of economic growth.

Maybe. But if we look at the Japanese political and administrative elite at that time, when Japan was enjoying its most rapid period of economic growth, I don't think it had much scientific and technological expertise. Most of its members seem to have been trained in the law faculty of the University of Tokyo! The idea that there is a causal link between leaders' scientific understanding and expertise and a country's rate of economic growth does not seem very plausible. Are Chinese leaders to-day scientifically and technologically well-informed?

The fact is that it is extremely hard to measure either the quality or the effects of university education, whether we are speaking of the whole system, of one particular institution, or of one particular programme.

Other possible measures of the quality of English life, or the quality of her cultural life, do not suggest that she suffered unduly from the neglect of general education. According to United Nations statistics in the mid-80s, Britain had a public library system that was more than twice as large as that of France, nearly three times the size of that of Western Germany, and about one third larger than Japan, for a population about half the size.² If public libraries are some kind of index of the literacy of a population, then Britain did not seem to be too bad.

Book publishing might be considered another rough index, and British publishing is slightly smaller *per capita* than Germany's, but it is larger than that of France and much larger *per capita* than the US.³ Along with 'live' theatre, book publishing has been one of the more successful British industries. British broadcasting also seems to have maintained rather high standards, in both the public and private sectors, so on the face of things, it also offers no evidence to suggest that Britain suffered from the lack of general education. Similarly with newspapers. Britain certainly had, and still has, some of the worst newspapers in the world, but it also has four national daily papers of an extremely high standard, each of which bears comparison with the best papers of any other country.

Nor is there any evidence that science itself suffered. On the contrary, Britain always figures strongly in citation indices of scientific creativity and productivity.⁴ Since World War II, Britain has had 46 scientific Nobel prizewinners. In a recent study of all the most important prizes in all fields of scientific endeavour, including mathematics, over

the whole twentieth century, Britain emerged *per capita*, as number one, ahead of France, Germany, and even the United States.⁵

Perhaps you think these are not right measures. If so, I hope you will tell me of better ones. But such as they are, they do not suggest that the lack of general education has, so far, had disastrous consequences for English society and culture. And they prompt me to ask -why not? How were the English able to do without general education for so long?

4. PECULIARITIES OF THE ENGLISH UNIVERSITY -UP TO ABOUT 1980

One of the benefits of devising a general education curriculum is that it forces a university to submit itself to a profound and salutary self-examination. It compels its members to ask what it is that brought them together in the first place, what it is that keeps them together, and why do they not disperse into so many separate schools. In this case, it is the absence of general education in England that has prompted me into a similar kind of examination.

The answer to the question of how England got by without general education, is, I think, to be found in certain peculiarities of English universities. And by identifying these peculiarities, we may perhaps learn something of relevance to the present and future direction of Japanese universities, and perhaps even something relevant to the organization and place of general education here at Hokudai.

To begin with, one has to say, that until quite recently English universities were highly elitist. In the 60s they admitted a little over 6% of the age cohort, and by the early 80s only 12%.⁶ When universities are that selective, they do not have to worry much about curricula, and organizational structures, since most of their students are not only highly intelligent, but highly motivated, energetic, and inquisitive. Most of them are going to learn, whatever the curriculum structure of the university might be.

Second, British universities were also largely non-vocational, and rather unworldly. Students did not enter them, for the most part, to obtain a vocational qualification, the main exception being future university researchers and lecturers themselves, and a minority of future school teachers. The reason for this is that all the important English professions, such as law, medicine, engineering, architecture and accounting had their own practice-based and practitioner-controlled systems of qualification. They did not, therefore, expect universities to have much part in the training of their future members.

This explains why in 1950, for instance, the University of London had 23 medical schools loosely attached to it, while Oxford and Cambridge had none. It explains why many British professionals today have odd degrees or no degrees at all. Very few English judges today, for instance, have law degrees. Very few English doctors are MDs, in-

stead they are MRCPs, or FRCSs, meaning member of the Royal College of Physicians, or Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. It was only in 1977, that the engineering institutions insisted on a degree for all entrants to their profession.

This lack of vocational pressure gave a considerable degree of freedom, not only to faculty but to students as well, since they were free from the pressure to get a good vocational qualifications. They were also freed, to some extent, from day-to-day financial pressures. Most students in England were supported by government grants which were intended to allow them to study full-time for their entire university life, including vacations. When I was an undergraduate it was considered slightly unusual, even 'bad form', to work while at university.⁷

The third thing, to say, is that English universities were all numerically quite small, most of them well under 10,000 students. London was always something of an exception, bigger than Oxford and Cambridge put together, but London was a federation of four big colleges that were *de facto* independent universities in themselves, and about six others that might well have been, plus the medical schools. Even in the 60s, when Britain first began to expand university intake, and began to create a mass system of higher education, it clearly operated under some constraining notion of the desirable size of a university, some rarely specified 'ceiling'.⁸ England never, therefore, created anything like the gigantic, urban universities of continental Europe, or the larger American state universities.⁹

5. UNDER THE SPELL OF OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE

My guess is the notion of the desirable ceiling was set unconsciously by Oxford and Cambridge, (or Oxbridge for short), since the entire system of English universities grew around them, and under their influence. They remained throughout the ideal, the model of what a university ought to be -even for those who criticized them for one failing or another. To a considerable extent, their graduates 'colonized' the rest, and most of the other universities, imitated, borrowed, adapted or amended their customs and institutions whenever they could.

To begin with, most, including the seven, tended to follow the Oxbridge tradition that going to university meant leaving home, that students should not go to their local university, a tradition that emphasized the break both from home and school, and obliged students to identify to some degree with the new academic community they had entered.

Most of them also tried to adopt the Oxbridge tutorial system in some form, which meant that every new student was assigned a tutor. This ensured that thereafter there was at least one member of the faculty to whom the new student was personally known and directly responsible, who would

thereafter meet the student regularly for tutorial discussions, and would develop a personal interest in the student's academic career and often in their domestic problems as well.¹⁰ This kind of one-to-one tuition was, of course, only possible in an elitist system.¹¹ In the context of general education, it is however interesting because, curiously enough, this tutorial relationship was not invariably discipline-based. Tutor and tutee did not follow any particular lecture or seminar course or any particular subject. Intellectually speaking, they wandered together. Tutorials therefore often intersected, or at any rate blurred, disciplinary boundaries, and obliged both students, and their tutors, to look over their disciplinary fences.¹²

Next, one must notice that while only the 'plateglass' universities tried to copy Oxford and Cambridge's college structure, and none could ever hope to reproduce their hallowed 'halls' for dining and festivities, there was in most other universities a strong faculty club, or in English terms, 'common room' tradition, meaning a place where faculty routinely dined, drank tea or coffee, read newspapers, chatted and relaxed.¹³

In addition, all English universities were self-governing in the same manner as Oxford and Cambridge, which meant that administrative chores were widely, indeed equally, distributed amongst the faculty. They were all, therefore, continuously reminded of their part in a larger academic community. Departments were, as a result, rarely inclined to go off completely on their own track. Apart from anything else, it would have been discourteous to colleagues with whom one dined, and with whom one might have had to work on committees.

Beneath this high degree of faculty self-government, there was also a considerable degree of student self-government, in the sense that virtually all students' recreational, leisure, sports, political and social activities were organized by students for themselves. Substantial subsidies were usually given by the university directly to the students' union to demonstrate the university's strong support for their voluntary, spontaneous activities. These student activities seem, incidentally, to have been a vehicle for a certain amount of student-to-student, informal, general education -though obviously this is a difficult thing to measure.

Finally, I should say that regulation in English universities was informal, unwritten and normative, rather than formal and bureaucratic. There were rarely any attendance registers, so a student was free to wander into any lecture that took his or her fancy. A casual, voluntary general education was therefore possible and easy for the more curious. Moreover, the examination system often did not rest on continuous assessment, but on one big set of exams at the end of the degree. Today, this is often thought to be rather horrific and has generally been abandoned, but it did allow students considerable freedom to pursue other interests or enthusiasms during their university years.

6. ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES AS AN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION

In a nutshell, my answer to the question I posed a moment ago is that, English universities were for long able to make do without general education because they created a strong sense of community within them. Informal, integrative institutions, which were often taken for granted, often considered peripheral, which often had nothing whatever to do with the organized curriculum, and with formal pedagogic relationships, mitigated the fragmenting effects of disciplinary or departmental specialization.

They created a sense of belonging to a larger community of scholars, even if students only belonged temporarily. They encouraged a certain amount of contact with staff outside the classroom, and of student-to-student learning, and tended to discourage an 'instrumental' attitude to university education- meaning 'I am here to learn only what the professor teaches me in class, and expect to be examined exactly on what he or she teaches me.' It encouraged a research-oriented culture, a learning culture, which was evidently congenial for potential Nobel prize-winners, but it could also touch the newest undergraduate.

I have been using the past tense because British universities were subject to a sustained assault over the eighteen Thatcher and Major years, so they are not now particularly self-governing, but managed very bureaucratically from the centre.¹⁴ In the 80s and 90s, Britain reconstructed its universities, reinvented them one might almost say. It created its own Monbusho, though some observers think that a Soviet comparison is more apt.¹⁵ Many of the institutions I have been describing, are therefore on the retreat.

7. WHAT, IF ANYTHING, IS TO BE LEARNED FROM THIS EXPERIENCES?

What, you may wonder is to be learned from this past English experience? An elite system of university education is a thing of the past, and no one would want to return to it -though the best universities everywhere must still, inevitably, constitute an elite within a mass system. I am certainly not suggesting that there is no need for academic vision, of the kind that we have heard from President Tambo, or that there is no need for planning imaginative curricula, or for general education. That is not my meaning at all!

My point is simply that universities have a life beyond formal pedagogic or management models, and that to understand them, we had best try to identify their peculiarities as communities, and in particular in the context of our discussions here, identify those peculiarities that might support the spirit and aims of general education.

If you will allow an outsider to do this, I would observe that, with the exception of the medical schools, Japanese

universities do not seem to be under intense pressure from employers, from students, or from parents to provide vocationally relevant, vocationally specific skills and information. That is one of their striking peculiarities, and it might also be one of their opportunities and their strengths. Similarly, Japanese students seem to be relatively free of the intense pressure to get good grades at university, and thereby access to the best professional schools and jobs. That is one of several ways in which they are quite unlike American universities.

And with respect to general education at least, Japanese now have a chance of creating self-governing academic communities. Monbusho has no clear policies, is giving no clear direction, laying on no heavy hand in this respect. My own recent tour of nine Japanese universities showed to me that they are already doing things very much in their own way.

Moreover, many of the other institutions I mentioned, such as faculty clubs, sports and voluntary student activities, and other institutions I did not mention, such as weekend schools, already flourish here and there in Japan, not in quite the same manner as their English counterparts perhaps, but that hardly matters.

Other changes already seem to be pushing Japanese universities towards more of a 'learning', as opposed to a 'teaching' or 'school-teaching' culture. English universities were always helped by the fact that the best secondary schools, despite 'A' levels, prepared their students for leaving the school classroom and studying at a university. And in any case, 'A' levels were never the fiendish test of memory that Japanese university entrance exams were, and are. English universities were also helped by the fact that they had a very high ratio of graduate to undergraduate students.¹⁶ In both respects, Japan seems to be changing. There is, here at Hokudai as elsewhere, some interest in devising more humane, more appropriate entrance exams. And the ratio of graduate students is increasing fast.

By way of conclusion, I would observe that Japanese industry's capacity to create a community spirit, in what are surely rather inhospitable circumstances of employer and employee, is known and admired around the world. Japanese universities do not attract such attention and admiration. Perhaps this is because they are not known and studied, but there seems no reason why they should not be equally distinguished in this respect. General education may play a key part in the creation of these new academic communities, but other institutions are important as well.

NOTE

¹ At York, Kent Lancaster, Sussex, East Anglia, Essex and Warwick There was one earlier exception, Keele University established in 1946. The term 'plateglass' refers to the supposed frequent use of plateglass in their buildings on

their campuses, and is meant to distinguish them from the 'redbrick' of the universities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and from the stone of Oxford and Cambridge. But today you will find both plateglass and redbrick at Oxford and Cambridge. The successes and failures of these universities were reviewed in a special edition of *Higher Education Quarterly*, 45(4), Autumn, 1991.

² "Statistical Yearbook." United Nations, New York: 1983-89. In recent years the UN has stopped publishing this kind of data.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Citation indices measure the extent to which a scientific paper is cited by other researchers, hopefully, worldwide and hence are taken as a proxy of the value or merit of the paper. In the most recent measure the United States came first with 49% of all citations, Britain second with 9.1% and Japan third with 5.7%. They endeavour to be free of English language bias, but whether they succeed is anyone's guess. On a per capita basis non-English-speaking countries such as Switzerland, Israel, and Sweden finish at the top. p. 793, May, Robert M. "The scientific wealth of nations," *Science* 275, 1997.

⁵ p.795, *ibid.*

⁶ There is no evidence, by the way, that at this time they were elitist in the sense of restricting access to children from poorer family backgrounds. There was, of course, a steep class differential in access, as there is in all university systems, but compared with other European countries, Britain was among the most, and perhaps the most, open and meritocratic. In his 1985 cross-European comparison of access to higher education since World War II, Müller found that Britain was 'among the less socially selective.' Countries were, he found, 'spread along a considerable range, the extremes of which are represented by France and England. In France more than 55% of graduates have grown up in one of the two service classes...In England only 35%.' quoted Halsey p. 266.

⁷ I still remember my slight sense of shock in the '70s when dining with a Harvard professor in a Cambridge, Massachusetts restaurant when the waiter turned out to be one of his students.

⁸ In 1958, the head of Imperial College, one of the University of London's larger colleges, declared flatly that the maximum size for any university was 4,500. The founding

vice-chancellor of Sussex University, one observer recalled, 'attached almost mystical significance to the figure of 3,000..' p.328-329, Lord Asa Briggs, "A founding father reflects." p.311-332, *Higher Education Quarterly*, *op.cit.*

⁹ By 1990, Cambridge had grown to 14,700, Oxford to 14,800. The only larger university was London with 59,200 but the largest college within it, University College, had only 9,100 students of all kinds. "Higher Education Statistics for the United Kingdom." HMSO, London: 1994

¹⁰ The president of Trinity College, Oxford recently called the collegiate system and tuition by tutorial, 'the twin pillars of Oxford Education.' Michael Beloff, *The Times*, July 25th, 1997. The relationship frequently becomes a lifelong one. When President Clinton returned to Oxford, he first asked to see his old tutor. My own have been rather less distinguished. One of my tutees, some ten years after her graduation, became a member of a terrorist group, the Angry Brigade. When she was arrested and convicted, both the university and the media turned to me as if, as her former tutor ten years before, I must have had some special insight into her motives.

¹¹ In 1979, the staff-student ratio at all English universities was 1:9.4.

¹² In my experience, it is students who now press to make it discipline specific and subject focussed, presumably to help them in their examinations.

¹³ There were also many bars. My own small school has three, run by the school I should add, one for staff, one large one for the students, and one for both. Oxbridge's wine cellars are, or were, the stuff of legend and myth.

¹⁴ I discussed these changes in detail in a paper given to the seminar of the Centre for Research & Development in Higher Education, Hokkaido University, "British Universities Before and After Mrs Thatcher," July 1997 (mimeo).

¹⁵ For one example, see Ryder, Andrew "Reform and UK higher education in the enterprise era", *Higher Education Quarterly* 50(1), January, 1996.

¹⁶ British universities had the highest such ratio in the industrial world, 37.5% versus 18.8% in France, 15.6% in the United States, and 6.1% in Japan. p. 8, "New Faces of Japan's Universities: A Brief Introduction to Advancing Reform." Center for Research & Development, University of Tokyo, 1997.