What Not to Learn from England

FOR CENTURIES, the older English universities have occupied prominent positions in the realm of higher education, inspiring visions of excellence and serving as models for universities worldwide. In recent years, however, their status has been seriously threatened by British politics and by values deeply rooted in British political culture. Robert Stevens, former master of Pembroke College at Oxford University, who earlier served as chancellor at the University of California, Santa Cruz and president of Haverford College, compares higher education in England and America. Stevens offers lessons not to be learned from England, where centralized control and lack of diversity, together with inadequate funding, have weakened all aspects of higher education.

Anglo-American Comparisons

It is a mistake to assume that because the English and Americans speak a form of the same language, their colleges and universities are set against the same cultural background. They are not. Comparisons between the two are fraught with danger—comparative study being more an art than a science—yet there are fundamental differences between English and American society.
The great characterization of American society, reflected in American higher education, is diversity. There is room in the United States for state and so-called private institutions, for religious and secular institutions, for planning along the lines of the Master Plan of California or a massive free-for-all, subject only to self-regulation through accreditation. The result is that in the United States there are over 4,000 institutions of higher education, best encapsulated in the old line, “including probably 50 of the best universities in the world and undoubtedly 500 of the worst.”

England, in contrast, is highly centralized. Everything flows from parliamentary sovereignty. There is little separation of powers in government. Diversity of institutions is frowned upon. If a country is run from its center, the tendency is toward uniformity. In the United States, when an academic committee discusses a problem, the conclusion often involves thinking about which person or foundation could help fund the solution. In England, the issue comes down to which government program to apply to. (That is one of the reasons why English universities have such difficulties fund raising from British alumni, who assume funding of universities is a government responsibility.)

The dirigiste atmosphere in England, where the economy and education are essentially guided and controlled by a central authority, is accompanied by a heavy rhetoric of equality: witness the centralized attempts over the last decade to control and standardize England’s 130 colleges and universities. The effort to ensure standards across institutions is laudable, but only to a point. How one ensures, for example, that the standards for the B.A. in tourism at South Bank University are identical with the standards for the Greats at Oxford is unclear. Yet, such a possibility is a fundamental belief of the English.

The other side of an egalitarian rhetoric is the notion that excellence is suspect. Americans generally are able to distinguish between elitism and excellence. They favor equality of opportunity, which assumes that excellence is socially and politically acceptable. American higher education readily tolerates the coexistence of community colleges, state universities, and the Ivy League—without being obsessed with whether standards are identical or whether resources should be standardized. In contrast, a vast swath of English public opinion is more concerned with equality of outcome than equality of opportunity. This leads to political views that would rather see top universities underfunded than be given differential government capitation fees or allowed to charge variable fees.

There are, however, many things one should admire in the English system. In the late 19th century, Oxford and Cambridge developed teaching within the colleges based on the tutorial method. It is arguable that the tutorial method, at its best, is the ideal form of undergraduate education. English higher education has in general taken teaching seriously, and the notion of the tutorial has spread down the hierarchy of universities, providing pastoral support and discouraging attrition. With universities’ rigorous requirements for admission and virtually no fees, attrition has not been a serious problem.

English higher education is also mercifully free from the religious bigotry that undermines some American private institutions, both in terms of seeking faculty and intellectual integrity in teaching. University athletics or sports programs are wholly amateur—there are effectively no paid coaches or athletics admissions. Further, the days when children of alumni and major donors received an admissions assist are, for all practical purposes, gone. Thus, the English university has not been undermined by the things that so often drag down American higher education, but rather by its centralization and resultant homogenization, and by its increasingly embarrassing underfunding.

Where Are We Now?

In 1950, when some quarter of American high school graduates were going on to higher education, there were just 50,000 students enrolled in university in England—scarcely 2 percent of the cohort. Oxford and Cambridge enrolled more than a third of those students, and some 20 other universities accounted for the remainder. With the Robbins Report in 1963, the idea of mass higher education—and a more purposive view of its role—was born.

Throughout the period of expansion that followed, especially with the emergence of polytechnics (which became universities in 1992) the role of university education became less clear. There is continuing debate about whether a surplus of university graduates exists for the
limited number of jobs demanding graduate skills (although if there were a diverse higher education sector such stereotyping could be avoided). Concern is also expressed not only about the goal of seeing 50 percent of secondary school graduates in higher education, but for the other 50 percent who fail to make it. Finally, if the state secondary schools cannot prepare 50 percent of students for university-level work, pressure on weaker universities to lower their standards is inevitable. Only the highly selective system of distributing research funds has kept some of the better-known universities afloat, and even then inadequate overhead reimbursements have weakened some of those universities.

All British universities, especially the best-known institutions, can trace the beginnings of their demise to the long reign of the Conservative Party (1979–1997). Twenty years ago, each university received approximately £8,000 per student (in 2000 money); today that figure is roughly £4,000—about the same as a state high school. In the mid-1980s, the faculty-student ratio was roughly twice as good in English universities as it was in American universities. It is now worse. The average full professor’s salary in 1984 was appreciably above the average assistant professor’s salary at four-year American colleges. Now it is below, and in an increasing number of subjects it is difficult to recruit under the constraints of the national salary scale. At Oxford, the tutorial method is under serious threat in some subjects. In other universities, seminars have become so large they barely still qualify for that name. It is now argued that universities need an additional £3 billion per annum, plus an estimated £9 billion to address deferred commitments.

As a result of central control, there has been little English universities can do to address their problems independently. The governments’ per capita payments for students, varying by subject, are set nationally and apply to all universities. Universities have not been free to charge fees—although they have to collect the nominal government fee. Faculty salaries are set nationally, although there is some limited flexibility at the full-professor level at universities. There are mandatory centrally run assessments to evaluate research by department, and a similar program to evaluate teaching. There is an effective cap on the number of students a university may admit, with financial penalties for taking too few or too many.

Indeed, the egalitarian impulse is so strong that the British are uncomfortable with some universities being highly selective in their admissions processes. The push is on now to admit more working-class students into leading universities, and all universities have goals for enrollment levels of state school graduates. The Department of Education has suggested further admissions criteria to be considered, including counting high parental income and a private school background against the candidate. Postal codes may also be checked to increase socioeconomic diversity.

Looking Ahead

The Higher Education Act of 2004 represents the most important rethinking of higher education in England in 40 years and could address some of the problems described above. The debates surrounding it, however, would leave an American either depressed or mystified. There appears to be little consensus on what universities are for and an irrational aversion to diversity in their roles. Pretending that one size fits all 130 British universities does not make sense. Imperial, Manchester, Bristol, the London School of Economics, and other top universities are viewed negatively for having international reputations. (They are charged with being “elitist.”) It seems that a significant number of British politicians would rather dumb down the nation’s top institutions than have universities with different roles. Most insist that there must not be a two-tiered system of higher education in Britain. New Labour, however, led by Tony Blair, has maintained that universities should be allowed to charge fees and that those fees should vary since universities inevitably pursue different missions. It is a courageous position that could have toppled the Blair administration.

That is the encouraging news. The bad news—at least for those who believe in diversity—is that the variable fees are capped at £3,000 per year. A student does not actually pay fees, however: the government pays and the student starts paying the fees back, via his or her taxes, after reaching an income of £15,000 per year ($28,000). Regardless of the method, the significance of these contingent fees is that they represent the end of total state control and the return of some independence to higher education. Their adoption also represents the end of the assumption that all universities have the same function. When Charles Clarke, Blair’s current education secretary, introduced the new system, he was blunt about it: “It is hopeless to pretend that all universities are the same or even similar since they are manifestly not. This should be recognized, even celebrated... government should acknowledge this in the way uni-
versities are funded...and should try and offer universities the opportunity to find their own vision and then carry through with minimum central government interference...academic independence is a genuine value which should not be jeopardized.”

This was remarkable to hear from an allegedly socialist government—and an enormous reprieve following 19 years of Conservative attempts to undermine English universities, or at least starve them to death. Indeed, perhaps the best result of the passage of the Higher Education Act of 2004 is the widespread recognition that all English universities are vastly underfunded, although some observers claim it is too little, too late.

Consider these numbers. Under the new scheme, it is assumed that Oxford would receive £4,000 per student from the government under present programs and be able to charge an additional £3,000 per student. Oxford therefore would take in £7,000 per student per year. But since an Oxford education is estimated to cost £14,000, where is the other £7,000 to come from? Some Oxford colleges may have endowments to help close the gap, but for most colleges and universities that is not a viable option. Thus, while embracing the new opportunity to charge fees, most leading universities are also adopting survival plans, generally based on the ethically dubious goal of recruiting more fee-paying students from the less-developed world.

The proposed plan for Oxford is to increase significantly the number of foreign undergraduates from non-European Union (EU) countries, who can be charged the full £14,000, and to increase the number of graduate students, who also pay fees, while reducing the number of UK and EU students. The London School of Economics, for example, now has well over 50 percent of its students from outside the EU and has become de facto privatized.

Conclusion

The Higher Education Act of 2004 is not ideal. Certainly, the act’s Office of Fair Access, charged with ensuring that universities have sufficient numbers of working-class students, raises difficult questions relating to admissions standards and institutional missions. While mass educa-

tion is a laudable goal, in an environment in which universities are heavily dependent upon government funding and differences between institutions are reluctantly tolerated, the trend could be to dumb down all of higher education. It would then become extremely difficult for any university to pursue excellence, whatever its goals. In the meantime, the true situation of English universities is hidden because reputations are inevitably two decades behind reality, and the current older generation of English scientists can still compete, impressively, on the world stage.

Whether all this matters to students in the end, however, is arguable. Globalization has greatly increased students’ mobility, and hundreds of thousands of students each year leave their home countries to pursue a university education. Moreover, universities are opening campuses around the world. Just as the University of Nottingham recently opened a campus in China, so too will American and other countries’ universities open more campuses in Europe and beyond. It is clear that globalization and competition have increased the drive for excellence throughout the EU—and, more importantly, that those seeking top-quality universities will find them, either in England or elsewhere.

Robert Stevens is an Honorary Fellow of Keble College, Pembroke College, and the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies at Oxford University. He served as Master of Pembroke College from 1993 to 2001. Prior to that, he was chancellor of the University of California, Santa Cruz, and president of Haverford College. Stevens has published several books, most recently, University to Uni: The Politics of Higher Education in England Since 1944 (2004). Stevens can be reached at rstevens@cov.com.