

From: Raphael Loewe, 50, Gurney Drive, London N.2 (Borough of Barnet)

To: The Right Hon. Mrs Margaret Thatcher, M.P. for Barnet, H. M.
Principal Secretary of State for Education.

Aide Memoire

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EDUCATIONAL POLICY FOR THE UNIVERSITIES

My qualifications for addressing you on this topic are as follows:

- (1) I am a Lecturer of London University in the Faculty of Arts (Hebrew, at University College), and have held similar appointments, including one year in the United States, since approximately 1949.
- (2) I am a governor of a maintained grammar school within I.L.E.A. (St Marylebone Grammar School).
- (3) I have two daughters who are pupils in a direct grant school (South Hampstead High School for Girls).
- (4) I examine for the London University Board at A Level (in Hebrew).

It may be helpful to add (a) that I am a graduate of Cambridge, and that as son of a don I spent my first twenty years in Oxford and Cambridge; (b) that I attended a public school of a middle grade (The Leys, Cambridge), but as a day-boy; and (c) that my Wife, who holds a Ph. D. in Biochemistry and who has both some research and some university teaching experience, attended a maintained school of the L.C.C. (Owens).

The present Government, in virtue of their silence whilst in opposition and since taking office, must be assumed to endorse the previous Government's attitudes towards university expansion on the basis of an ever increased implementation of the Robbins recommendations. In particular, the target figure of - I think - 850,000 student places by some point in the 1980s (which is approximately 1 in 5 of the relevant age group) has not as far as I am aware been disavowed.

I urge you to re-examine the situation fundamentally, together with its implied consequences for secondary education: and I set forth here, in a few brief paragraphs, (A) some aspects of the situation, (B) some considerations, and (C) finally, one practical suggestion.

(A) Aspects of the Present Situation

(1) The number of available university places already means that in some first-rate universities there are places not being filled, the most significant amongst the several causes for this being the Universities' proper determination to maintain standards of admission, despite governmental pressure to increase "productivity". Such defence of standards is easier for science departments to maintain, since government is bound to rely on the scientists' own opinion as to what applicants ought not to be accepted only to be unleashed ultimately to occupy scientific and technical posts in which they will prove incompetent. Arts faculties live under the scarcely veiled threat that if "productivity" is not maintained or increased, funds for the filling of staff vacancies will not be made available, let alone for expanding teaching posts and programmes.

For example: at University College London there are vacant science places except in the medical faculty, since the ratio of applications to places is now down to 4 to 1. Out of each four applicants some are offered places at Universities for which they have expressed higher preference, and others fail to meet the A Level qualifications required.

(2) As the example cited indicates, the student material coming forward from the schools is often either inadequate intellectually to cope with an honours degree course, or has been inadequately prepared for it because of inferior quality teaching at school. The cause is not simply the difficulty of recruitment of first class people for school-teaching, particularly in science and mathematics. In my view, it is also bound up with the reduction of standards in many O and A Level subjects that has been forced by the consumer-market, i.e. the schools themselves, on to the examining bodies. I emphasise that my own experience is restricted to arts, or more precisely observation of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, but I am fairly sure that the same is in some degree true in other arts subjects, especially languages: I cannot speak for science. The current suggestion of abolishing O Levels by merging them with the C.S.E. must inevitably accelerate the same process of deterioration.

(5) I consider that the generous policy regarding L.E.A. grants is exposed to abuse, not merely because of the reduction of O and A Level standards alluded to in (2) - the L.E.A.s have obviously to work with the Boards of Examination - but because of the vociferousness of the student age-group most of which now commands the vote. Suggestions have been forthcoming from such quarters, and are likely to become more strident, that two A Levels of whatever quality ought to secure a university place. A level passes are flaunted, with the implication (or more) that "an A level is an A Level is an A Level". My experience as an A level examiner convinces me that nearly all those who scrape bare passes have been saved by the arithmetic, and that my academic ~~conscious~~ conscience would be clearer if I had failed them. In the London Board, where the A Level pass-mark is 40%, a mark in the 30-39 bracket secures a pass at O Level; in my view this is unwarranted and deleterious. An examiner who plays Judge Jeffreys will probably elicit complaints from the schools, which he may not mind very much; but he is liable to be let down by a more tender-hearted but less perspicacious colleague, who may be called in to check or assess his marking standards.

(4) Another example is here apposite. The History Department of University College London enjoys a deservedly high reputation. It is able to admit an annual intake of 35, and for these places it received during the session now ending 350 applications. Out of these 350 it can find about 20 that it is glad to welcome; its lukewarmness towards the remainder makes the selection of the balance an experience that can be unrewarding. Yet every new university set up, practically speaking, is equipped with a department of history.

(5) As indicated above (1), the defence of standards in arts faculties is precarious, and it could conceivably be becoming so, to a lesser extent, in the science faculties as well. Quite apart from the technical aspect of the quality of the end-product as either a potential specialist in his subject or as an educated person capable of being entrusted with responsible work, I am apprehensive about the situation in regard to a general philosophy of education. The logical conclusion of the process of academic deterioration in which we are involved seems to me to be that in time to come the really gifted boy or girl with a sense of

vocation for science or scholarship may jib at wasting 3 or 4 years in what is nominally an honours course but is pitched to the level of students whose intellectual powers are substantially lower than his own. In such a case, I foresee specialist institutions - a kind of new-style ^{monastic} order, e.g. Augustinians for ~~Architecture~~ Anthropology, Benedictines for Botany, Carthusians for Chemistry, and Dominicans for Law, arising to train the really gifted youth vocationally rather than generally, and the free interplay of students from varying faculties and subjects as we have known it in the British universities of the last half century or more would be a thing of the past. I do not ignore the circumstance that in pre-war Oxbridge, and elsewhere then as well as later, there were undergraduates of no intellectual pretensions but who justified their existence by the blues that they got. The educational value of such individuals to the community was tied up with the corporate life of colleges and halls of residence. As more students live as married or cohabiting couples, and for the single ones student flats and similar arrangements come more and more to encroach on the traditional pattern of college and hall of residence, it becomes all the more necessary - if mutual fructification of minds is to take place - to raise the common denominator of student intellectual ability; if the first class man's universe of discourse is ~~comprehensible~~ incomprehensible to the man who is going to get a third, the university has ceased to function. It is a matter of urgency to restore standards to a point at which a third class has some intellectual significance rather than ^{being} an expression of the examiner's chagrin at an academic performance that is virtually worthless.

(B) Considerations

I recommend for the Minister's urgent consideration:

(1) Disavowal of the present ill-considered policy of university expansion - ^{and advancement} i.e. other than consolidation/ of established centres of excellence - and in particular the disavowal of the present target figure of students for the 1980s. This figure should be reduced to realistic proportions that will protect the B.A. and equivalents from becoming a mere piece of paper, similar to what members of American university faculties know (amongst themselves) as the "black Ph. D."

(2) A rigorous policy regarding the geographical distribution of departments offering honours degree courses, in order to prevent dissipation of talent and its being placed where library facilities, etc are not adequate to sustain it properly, as well as preventing the present situation by which places in first-rate institutions are not all being taken up. A firm decision should be made that some of the newer universities, or institutions that have recently been accorded university status, should teach for pass degrees only, and where necessary honours degree programmes already current in them should be phased out. It is worth suggesting that it might not always be necessary to carry out such a reformation wholesale throughout a given institution, e.g. a science faculty teaching for honours could company with an arts faculty teaching for general degrees or vice versa: although there ~~is~~ are disadvantages as well as advantages in this, in regard to cross-fertilisation. The distinction between an honours and a general degree should be reasserted, and the public should be re-educated regarding the differing scales of financial reward that each ought to command for graduates entering industry.

(3) I applaud the present Government's intention, as set out in their election programme, to put their main effort into increasing the educational efficiency of the primary schools. If this could mean that children aged 12 could be expected, as a normalcy, to have achieved both a numeracy adequate to cope with computerised existence and also some real competence in one foreign language - presumably French - it might still be possible to stop the educational rot - and much else besides in the long run.

(6) A Suggestion

The foregoing are my personal views, partly formed through discussion with colleagues in other departments, mainly though not exclusively in arts. They are supported by my Wife, who possesses scientific qualifications of substance. I am, however, anxious that the Minister should have opportunity to hear a wider cross-section of opinion from those concerned with the day-to-day working out of university selection, as opposed to the administrative apex in the U.G.C. and Vice Chancellors' Committee with which she is in frequent contact.

I venture, therefore, to invite you to a working lunch which I should like to arrange at University College London on some convenient date - I would suggest in the latter half of September and ask you to say whether your diary has any room then. I would expect to bring together to meet you a small group of colleagues and would endeavour to include the head of the science department in a school as well.

I do hope that you can manage to find time for this yourself, rather than sending a deputy, since I would like your first-hand impressions of those actually doing the selecting of applicants to be available at first hand in the Cabinet Room.

15th July, 1970

Raphael Loewe