

STUDENT - PLACE PREDICTIONS AND STUDENT

DROP - OUT

Notes for working lunch with the Minister of Education, 16th Sept. 1970:  
By Raphael Loewe

1. Universities are constantly pressed now to increase "productivity" in terms of student numbers graduated, and estimates of future "needs" for student places based on projections of "qualified" school-leavers down to 1981/2 based on (but substantially exceeding) the Robbins predictions have been put out by the Ministry of Education (press release, 5th Dec. 1969). "Qualification" is there assumed to mean at least 2 'A' Levels, the quality being unspecified; but it is also assumed that - as in 1963 - c. 53% of such 'A'-Level achievers would have reached an acceptable grade. This might be a reasonable basis for discussion provided that there was a certainty of the maintenance of standards intact by the school examining boards. My own limited experience in Arts makes me more than sceptical about this, and I gather scientific colleagues have evidence to reinforce my own misgivings.

2. Over the last few years student numbers have increased very heavily. The only figures immediately available to me to quote for comparison ~~are~~ are the total, <sup>potentially finalist</sup> undergraduate number for 1965/6 (see below) of 35, 386, and a figure - supplied by the Ministry - for all students (undergraduate and those working for further degrees) for 1969/70 of 388, 000.

3. Neither the Ministry nor the University Grants Committee have available any overall national statistics for student drop-out later than those published for 1965/6 (Enquiry into Student Progress. U.G.C., 1968. H.M.S.O.), where the figures are presented in a most sophisticated and valuable form. A U.G.C. spokesman (Mr Ingold) told me that they expect, after further computerisation, to be able to produce very detailed and up-to-date statistics; but although pressed by me, he could give no date even approximately for the realisation of such plans.

4. The following details are excerpted from the summary in the Enquiry (p. 6) relative to the total number of students "who would normally have graduated" with first degrees in 1965/6. It should be stressed that the Enquiry (pp. 4-5) defines success in obtaining a first degree so as to

include the award of a pass degree to those who originally entered for honours courses. This is not unreasonable, especially since the Enquiry indicates that there was also "some movement" in the opposite direction. But what the Enquiry did not do was to offer any figures for either aspect. One would like to know, in contemporary terms, just how much demotion is going on of those who were originally admitted to honours courses, and were transferred into what those teaching honours courses will nearly always consider second-grade academic syllabuses, in order to save them from total withdrawal. Are the figures sufficiently high to raise the question of whether such applicants should have (in many cases) ever have been admitted to an honours course at all? We do not know.

1965/6 Total students for first degree: 35, 386.

Left without obtaining a first degree: 13.3%. Only 1.4% are accounted for by failure in final examinations; 9.5% proved academically inadequate earlier on, and the remaining loss is due to other circumstances.

Broken down by faculties, the drop-out/failure rates were:

Arts	4.8%	Social Studies	5.4%
Medicine	5.7%	Science	nearly 10%
Engineering & Technology	nearly 19%	Architecture	nearly 20%

5. It seems to me curious that we - i.e. university teachers, vice-chancellors, the U.G.C., the Ministry of Education and Government generally, can feel able even to conduct discussions about increasing "productivity", to say nothing of agreeing to promote it, without having available to us even the unrefined statistics plotted into a curve showing both admissions (for honours and pass courses), drop-outs, and transferences between honours and pass courses for the last few years of enormous university expansion. The taxpayer, too, is entitled to some information: a paper prepared in University College states (presumably with some authority) that on the basis of figures available for comparison of 1961 and 1968, the drop-out rate costs some £8m to £9m.

If, alongside increased numbers, we point with self-satisfaction to a decreasing drop-out rate (and can we yet do so?), we may in fact be deceiving ourselves, and <sup>it might simply mean</sup> that our own university standards are being eroded. If things are academically healthy, the curves that I would

expect to see would be (1) a gentle rise in the intake rate for honours courses, with (1\*) the failure/fall-out rate for 1955/6 of 13.3% being approximately maintained, but not rocketting; and (2) a much steeper rise in the intake rate for pass-degree courses, with (2\*) a fall-out rate in which academic inadequacy played a virtually negligible part. There is, in my view, very great danger to the community in confusing the labels of pass- and honours graduate (although I overrate neither <sup>nor the class awarded in finals,</sup> as effective criteria of true intellectual-cum-psychological ability); and the effect of disguising as honours courses and degrees programmes and achievements that are really sub-standard would have significant repercussions in science and technology, and (in a much more insidiously subtle way) in arts as well, should this country join the common market.

6. It is therefore my own view - which I hope that my university colleagues will feel able to endorse - that the Secretary of State for Education and Science ought to insist, as a matter of urgency, on the production of the necessary "raw" figures to make it possible to plot the graphs adumbrated above. University College London could produce its own figures forthwith.

R. L.