

Tuesday, 27th April, 1965

I want tonight to speak of the role of the leading technical colleges in the future development of higher education in Great Britain.

In their great Report, the Robbins Committee pointed out that it would be a misnomer to speak of a system of higher education in this country; and they posed the fundamental question as to whether it was desirable that there should be such a system. Their conclusion deserves to be quoted: "Higher education", they said, "is so obviously and rightly of great public concern, and so large a proportion of its finance is provided in one way or another from the public purse, that it is difficult to defend the continued absence of co-ordinating principles and of a general conception of objectives. However well the country may have been served by the largely unco-ordinated activities and initiatives of the past, we are clear that from now on these are not good enough. In what follows therefore we proceed throughout on the assumption that the needs of the present and still more of the future demand that there should be a system".

The Government accepts this conclusion. We believe that there must be a system in the sense defined, with "co-ordinating principles and a general conception of objectives". And in Britain the system must be based on the twin traditions which have created our present higher education institutions. These are broadly of two kinds. On the one hand we have what has come to be called the autonomous sector, represented by the universities, in whose ranks, of course, I now include the Colleges of Advanced Technology. On the other hand we have the public sector, represented by the leading technical colleges and the colleges of education.

The Government accepts this dual system as being fundamentally the right one, with each sector making its own distinctive contribution to the whole. We infinitely prefer it to the alternative concept of a unitary system, hierarchically arranged on the "ladder" principle, with the Universities at the top and the other institutions down below. Such a system would be characterized by a continuous rat-race to reach the First or University Division, a constant pressure on those below to ape the Universities above, and a certain inevitable failure to achieve the diversity in higher education which contemporary society needs.

To be precise, we prefer the dual system for four basic reasons.

First, in Britain as elsewhere, there is an ever-increasing need and demand for vocational, professional and industrially-based courses in higher education - at full-time degree level, at full-time just below degree level, at part-time advanced level, and so on. This demand cannot be fully met by the Universities. It must be fully met if we are to progress as a nation in the modern technological world. In our view it therefore requires a separate sector, with a separate tradition and outlook within the higher education system.

Secondly, a system based on the ladder concept must inevitably depress and degrade both morale and standards in the non-University sector. If the Universities have a "class" monopoly of degree-giving, and if every College which achieves high standards moves automatically into the University Club, then the residual public sector becomes a permanent poor relation perpetually deprived of its brightest ornaments, and with a permanently and openly inferior status. This must be bad for morale, bad for standards, and productive only of an unhealthy competitive mentality.

Thirdly, it is desirable in itself that a substantial part of the higher education system should be under social control, and directly responsive to social needs. It is further desirable that local government, responsible for the schools and having started and built

up so many institutions of higher education, should maintain a reasonable stake in higher education. ~~should maintain a reasonable~~

Fourthly, we live in a highly competitive world in which the accent is more and more on professional and technical expertise. We shall not survive in this world if we in Britain alone down-grade the non-University professional and technical sector. No other country in the Western world does so - consider the Grandes Ecoles in France, the Technische Hochschule in Germany, Zurich, Leningrad Poly in the Soviet Union. Why should we not aim at this kind of development? At a vocationally oriented non-University sector which is degree-giving and with an appropriate amount of post-graduate work with opportunities for learning comparable with those of the Universities, and giving a first-class professional training. Let us now move away from our snobbish caste-ridden hierarchical obsession with University status.

For all these reasons we believe in the dual pattern. The University sector will continue to make its own unique and marvellous contribution. We want the public sector to make its own equally distinguished but separate contribution. And between them we want - and I believe we shall get - mutual understanding and healthy rivalry where their work overlaps.

The Government have already made a number of policy decisions which reflect this philosophy. We have decided that, with one possible exception, there should be no new universities or accessions to university status for about ten years. In the field of teacher training, we have decided that the number of places should be greatly expanded, and that the colleges of education should remain under the administrative and financial control of their present sponsors. And for the Technical Colleges, we see a distinctive and growing place in higher education, of which I shall say more later. These decisions have laid the foundation for our policy on higher education and will determine the shape of the dual system which we wish to see developed.

These courses are of varying length; they are both full-time and part-time; and they cover many and diverse subjects. But they all come within the "further education tradition" which has been so well described in the recent A.T.T.I. report on "The Future of Higher Education within the Further Education System".

"The underlying assumption", the authors write, "is that the student's primary motivation is the profession he intends to follow. He is committed to a profession from the outset and his course of study is closely integrated with his professional work. He is given direct experience of professional practice at an early stage in his course .... He and the staff who teach him maintain close contact with the profession and, as a rule, many of his teachers have themselves spent time practising the professional occupation for which they are preparing him .... The technical college tradition is to maintain close contact with the world of employment and to provide higher education in which education and professional experience are obtained concurrently in a single integrated course".

Within this valuable tradition, the colleges have a threefold role to play as institutions of higher education. First, they will provide full-time and sandwich courses for students of university quality who are attracted by the more vocational tradition of the colleges, and who are more interested in applying knowledge to the solution of problems than in pursuing learning for its own sake. Up till now such students - and the staff who teach them - have been discouraged because in most colleges such studies could not lead to a degree unless there happened to be a relevant external degree. The students often faced the unhappy dilemma: of either abandoning a course in one of the applied arts or sciences in favour of a more academic course because only the latter would qualify them for a degree; or of sticking to their chosen course, but foregoing a degree

with all it implies in our society as a mark of achievement and prestige.

This difficulty - and with it a major obstacle to the achievement of higher status by the leading colleges - has now been removed by the creation under Royal Charter of the Council for National Academic Awards. The Council will realise in practice the principle laid down by Robbins that equal academic awards should be given for equal performance. It has already been announced that in deciding whether a course qualifies for a C.N.A.A. degree, the test will be whether it is comparable in standard and quality with a university course.

I am especially glad that the Council shows itself determined to support the continued development of the sandwich course - first in the technologies and then in business studies and other fields. The sandwich course concept is now well established in the former field; but in subjects outside science and technology it is scarcely known save in a very few colleges and firms. With the encouragement of the Council, the colleges can now develop a range of suitable courses for the growing number of students with a background in arts and social studies for whom they will need to provide.

These are fields in which there are big opportunities for innovation and experiment. As compared with technology and science, they are relatively new fields for most of the colleges. But this should not necessarily be a disadvantage. At least there will be no incubus of precedent to hamper thinking and the colleges start out with important assets.

Some highly promising developments seem to be on the way. Much thought is being given to what I might call professionally-oriented courses intended to prepare students not only for careers in business and commerce, but also for other professions such as social work and librarianship. We shall need a wide range of such courses. And we shall also need courses for students who are not ready to commit themselves to a particular profession, but who want a preparation for the various careers which are open to arts and social studies graduates - public administration, journalism, broadcasting, as well of course as teaching and business.

There must be similar rethinking in other subjects, and I see ample scope for imaginatively-devised courses which break with traditional patterns without sacrificing quality. You will agree with me that we have only scratched the surface of such possibilities, and that we shall certainly find an infinite variety of possible courses.

But in pursuing this aim, the leading colleges must surely build on their own proud tradition of service to industry, business and the professions, and not set out simply to duplicate the provision in the universities. As the A.T.T.I. Report points out, if they seek merely to extend the number of external degree courses they offer, they will come to be regarded as places for students who fail to get into university. Of course they should not try to be different just for the sake of being different. But they should exploit their own traditions and standards of excellence, and develop the fields in which they can make their own distinctive contribution to meeting society's needs.

So much for the first function, in which the colleges complement the work of the universities. Their second function, of vital importance today, falls outside the scope of normal university work. They have the primary responsibility for providing full-time and sandwich courses which, while falling within the higher education field, are of a somewhat less rigorous standard than degree level courses. It is here that the colleges meet the needs of the thousands of young people who will occupy the all-important intermediate posts in industry, business and the professions - the high-level technicians and middle managers who must support the scientists, technologists and top managers in a modern community. These students, both for their own sake and for obvious

social and economic reasons, must have a full share of the resources of the colleges, and not be neglected through preoccupation with the first category of student.

Thirdly, there are the tens of thousands of part-time students who need advanced courses either to supplement other qualifications, or because for one reason or another they missed the full-time route. There are immense fields of talent and aspiration here; common justice and social need combine to demand that they should be harvested.

These tasks offer an exciting prospect to all the partners in the system - to the local education authorities, who must show that a reasonable institutional independence is consistent with reasonable democratic control; to those leading colleges, to strive for their own excellence rather than to copy the Jones's or try to change their name; and to my Department to find, along with our partners, both a clearer and more rational pattern of senior colleges and advanced courses, and the best arrangements for the government of the colleges. As I told the House of Commons recently, I shall shortly be initiating talks on these last topics. I am also determined that the great energies of some of these colleges should be brought to bear on the urgent task of increasing the supply of teachers for the schools. This is an important new development and we are now getting down to ways and means.

The developments which I have described this evening offer an exciting prospect for the further education system as a whole.