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British Education Bill To Affect Polytechnics

by Roberta de Joia

The Further and Higher Education Bill currently working its way through Parliament will soon eliminate the "binary line" in British Higher Education which separates the universities from the polytechnics. Expected to become law by April, the bill will give the U.K.'s 38 polytechnics the right to include the word university in their titles, if they choose.

So far, it appears they will all choose to do so, thereby substantially bumping up the number of U.K. universities from its current 47, and forever changing the face of the country's higher education scene.

Ironically, although the polytechnics have been around for nearly a quarter of a century and now collectively have more students (400,000 by next year) than do the existing universities (363,000 by next year), it is only with their new names that these extraordinary institutions will come into their own.

The government published its intention to erase the binary line last May in a white paper entitled "Higher Education: A New Framework," arguing that while the polytechnics had been designated specifically to promote vocational higher education, the distinction between them and the universities was never clearly understood, and was in large part an artificial one.

Since their designation starting in the mid-1960s, the polytechnics have suffered from an irrational worldwide academic snobbery that, at best, has made the going tough and at worst, has sometimes disadvantaged their students. In the first place, their name

was shrouded in mystery and confusion. Whereas most people hear the word polytechnic as an adjective, the British chose to use it as a noun, leaving most Americans, for example, to query, "Polytechnic what? Polytechnic Institute? College?"

"Just polytechnic," comes the unsatisfying reply.

In any event, the international academic and lay communities alike understood polytechnics to be poly-technical, meaning that they were primarily involved in technical education. Not so. Polytechnic's Greek origins, said the founding fathers, means "many arts, many skills." All the institutions offer degrees in the humanities, social sciences, education and business studies, as well as the engineering and science subjects. They do not, however, offer medicine, dentistry or veterinary science, deemed the domain of the existing universities, whereas the universities do not offer the range of art and design degree work for which the polytechnics are now well known.

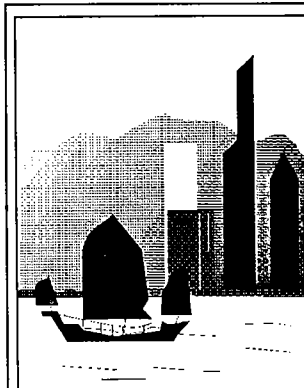
Then there was the way courses were validated and who gave the degrees. In creating the original 30 polytechnics, the government set up the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) at the same time, an independent body which, like the existing universities, held a royal charter which vested it with the authority

to award degrees. These degrees, said the charter, would be "of the same standard" as those awarded by the universities. Try telling that to an overseas academic who had never heard of a polytechnic.

So while students were enrolled in any one of 30 institutions, they were also registered with CNAA for their degrees. It was only until recently that CNAA shared accreditation and validation powers, giving individual accredited institutions the right to validate their own courses. The legislation will also give the new universities the authority to award their own degrees and will close down the CNAA at the same time. Quality control for all the universities—old and new alike—will be vested in a new body.

While the old system worked, it gave rise to much discomfort in the academic community. In America, for example, where students are encouraged to spend a semester or year on a study abroad program, it took years to convince institutions to send their students to polytechnics.

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The colony struggles to cope with brain drain and uncertainty as it prepares for China's takeover in 1997.

Even now, in their 23rd year, the polytechnics are not fully accepted abroad. One prestigious Belgian university has made it clear to its academics that joint research programs with British polytechnics would not be approved. In Singapore, the government even now does not recognize CNAA engineering degrees.

...new status for polytechnics

So their new names and their new powers may well give the polytechnics the recognition and the position in the international academic community which they have been denied. At home, they will face other problems.

The polytechnics, after all, will be joining a very elite academic club which has had a very limited membership. While there was a burst of expansion in the university sector in the early 1960s, creating the polytechnics managed to forestall expanding the university club for nearly a quarter of a century. The university establishment, rooted in an elitism, welcomed only some eight percent of 18-year-olds into higher education.

With the advent of the polytechnics, that number has doubled over the past 21 years and now the government is pushing hard for mass higher education, aiming for at least one in three of the age group to go into higher education by the year 2000.

No matter how convincing the evidence to the contrary, whether in student success or even employers' preference for polytechnic students, many of whom would have experienced the world of work as part of their courses, it was clear that polytechnics were considered second best by the academic community and by the public at large. Although more and more students were choosing polytechnics over universities, it was more often a case of the polytechnics serving as a safety net for a failed university application.

And it was true that the polytechnics, dedicated to teaching and innova-

tive in introducing problem-solving to many courses, paid less attention to students' Advanced Level examination grades (tests given after two years of study in secondary school for which two or three passes at a specified grade are normally required for university entrance), and more to their motivation and potential. The upshot was that so-called "mediocre" students were turning up with excellent degree results, thereby making a nonsense of premature predictions which can brand a student for life.

Even more surprising was that the polytechnics were attracting mature students (those over age 21) back into higher education. These were students who had either left school before taking the all-important A-Level examinations or had done badly on the exams and thought that higher education was not for them.

Mature students were not required to have A-level qualifications for entrance to polytechnics. The polytechnics discovered that these students were highly motivated and that their life experience and private study usually made up for what they lacked in formal education. It was a success story beyond their wildest dreams. A few of the polytechnics attracted large numbers of mature students and as unit-based credit and credit accumulation became established, mature students took advantage of this new flexibility.

...widened access to higher education

It was the flexibility in course design and entrance requirements which gave the government hope for expanding student numbers. The unit-based credit (modular schemes) suddenly opened programs to those who did not wish to be locked into a single subject track—or even those who could not make up their minds on early specialization. The approach was a breath of fresh air, is now widespread and more important, is most certainly widening

access to higher education in the U.K.

The polytechnics are recognized as having come of age and having covered themselves with glory by dramatically increasing numbers in line with government policy, while the universities continue to protest about quality and only reluctantly increase numbers.

There is still a way to go before the bill becomes law and the polytechnics are allowed to change their names. Assuming no serious hurdles along the path to royal assent, institutions themselves must follow certain procedures before changing their names, consulting their communities and checking with nearby universities to be sure that there is no confusion. In the end, it will be up to the privy council (a body consisting of all present and past members of the Cabinet and other eminent people) to agree to the changes.

The changeover is likely to be a bit messy initially, as it will involve the setting up of new funding mechanisms and for students, applying through a new clearing house. This coming year, however, students must still apply to the Polytechnic Central Admissions System (PCAS) if their university is a former polytechnic, while applications to the "old" universities will go through the Universities Central Admissions System (UCCA).

At every level in the binary system—from chief executives (vice-chancellors or directors) to registrars and information officers—there were separate professional organizations on both sides of the line. The arguments about who should join whose organization or whether they should all dissolve and regroup has just begun. ■

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