

# WENR

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## International Trends

# 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.

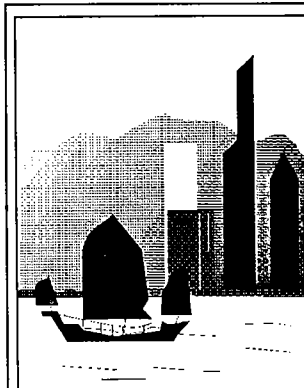
Then there was the way courses were validated and who gave the degrees. In creating the original 30 polytechnics, the government set up the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) at the same time, an independent body which, like the existing universities, held a royal charter which vested it with 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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## Hong Kong: A Blend of East and West page 10

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

**International Trends**

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**Publisher's Corner:*****Credential Evaluation Revisited***

The recognition of foreign educational credentials is key to international educational exchange. Recognition is achieved by various means ranging from detailed analysis of individual credentials, including the level, quality and quantity of education they represent, to treaties binding nations to recognize each other's educational credentials.

In many countries governmental agencies are responsible for evaluating foreign educational credentials and their determinations are legally binding. In the United States each institution is responsible for evaluating the credentials submitted by foreign-educated applicants and there is great variety in the manner in which foreign credentials are evaluated. The differences are the result of several factors such as the evaluator's familiarity with foreign educational systems, the quality and reliability of the information available, and evaluation methodology. There is no disagreement that evaluations must be performed by qualified individuals who are familiar with education in the United States and in foreign countries, and that they must rely only on complete information from credible sources.

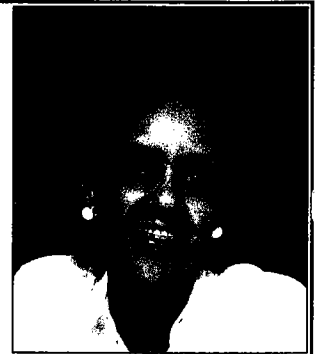
Evaluation methods, on the other hand, vary greatly but fall into one of two distinct categories: one assumes that all educational programs follow a pattern common in the United States. For instance, in all foreign university programs, the first and second years of study will be identified as "lower level" and subsequent years as "upper level." It is expected that all degree programs will be at least four years in length, as in the United States, and will lead to a bachelor's degree equivalent.

The second approach assumes that since educational systems are inherently different, and there may be no direct correlation between programs and credentials, the evaluator has to consider the level, scope and content of a program to arrive at an equivalent value of education.

These differences are so fundamental that they lead to widely divergent assessments of the same credentials and have caused serious controversy. Some of our colleagues overseas have made it plain that they are dissatisfied with some of the assessment and subsequent placement of their students.

Individual evaluators do not often have the time, resources or experience required to study the relative merits of different evaluation methods. Most want to get the job done as quickly and as efficiently as possible. They rely on experts to provide the guidance through training and publications lest they fall back on the easiest of methods: counting years. This has implications for students whose admission and placement at an institution is determined almost exclusively by the method chosen by one evaluator.

The mandate for the 1990s is to increase the quantity and improve the quality of international educational exchanges. As an instrument of exchange, foreign educational credential evaluation needs to be reviewed and brought into line with the new imperative.



■ *Mariam Assefa*



## COUNTRY UPDATES

### Afghanistan

■ **Trying to erase memories suffused with dread and horror**, Afghanistan's educational system, at least the part run by the government, is systematically obliterating all references to the recent past.

An example is the Lycée Malalai, a school for 2,640 girls in Kabul, where the curriculum is completely changed. Teaching of the Russian language is gone. Old textbooks used before the 1978 revolution have been brought back. French is being taught again, as well as the history of Islam and theology.

The removal of Communist terminology and Communist interpretation of events is mirrored in the halls of government. Last year a woman, Masourna Ismaili Wardak, was appointed Minister of Education. Her ministry's severe cash shortage has prevented the publication of new history and geography texts, but teachers are revising existing texts by pulling out all pages with references to the revolution. Gone, too, is the rise of the fundamentalist guerrillas and the war they brought to the mountains and valleys, villages and cities of Afghanistan. (*The New York Times*, 10/3/91)

### Albania

■ **Under new reforms** designed to improve education and further democratize society, unified compulsory education will be extended from eight years to ten years and will be of an academic nature. This will be followed by two years of more specialized education/training.

At present, about 74 percent of students who complete the eight-year school are enrolled in secondary school. This compares with 38 percent in 1980. By 1995, the goal is to enroll 85-87 percent of the age cohort in secondary school, and in the year 2000, 95 percent.

The curricula for grades 1-8 have been updated for mathematics, Albanian, natural science, history and geography.

Pre-school education for five- to six-year olds will be emphasized also, with the goal of having 85 percent of this age group in preschool by 1995. (*Newsletter/Faits Nouveau*, 3/91)

### Australia

■ **A crisis in the Technical and Further Education System (TAFE)** is projected for next year when it is expected that 145,000 students across Australia will be refused vocational training courses for lack of places.

Federal Minister for Education, John Dawkins, blames the shortfall on the States, saying they have starved the TAFE system of funds. But Victoria and New South Wales say the shortage of places is due to industry restructuring and high unemployment, and called on the Commonwealth to boost funding for the state-based TAFE systems.

Mr. Dawkins is proposing that the States hand over full funding responsibility for TAFE to the Commonwealth in exchange for the Commonwealth vacating the field of education up to year 12. This would mean the States would have to adhere to national agreements on curricula, enrollment targets and industry training needs. The government's goal is have 95 percent of 19-year-olds either completing year 12 or involved in some form of higher education or training.

State education ministers have responded with suspicion to the plan, with South Australia's Minister for Further Education warning that South Australia would reject any "East German centralist model" for TAFE. (*The Australian*, 9/25/91 and 10/16/91)

■ **The dramatic success in selling Australian full-fee courses** to overseas students is being threatened by overcrowding and poor conditions at university campuses, warn two senior academics from the University of Sydney.

"The over-enrolments in popular courses have led to international students paying large sums of money for the privilege of joining 400 students in lecture rooms built for 250, queuing for hours for access to a computer, fighting over inadequate library resources, and so on," said Professor Murray Wells and Tim Beckett.

Professor Wells says the "honeymoon" is over and that Australia's reputation as a good place to study has been seriously damaged. (*The Australian* 8/28/91)

## Austria

■ A major innovation is planned for 1993, when practice-oriented *Fachhochschulen* (polytechnics) will fill the gap between upper secondary vocational schools and traditional long-cycle university courses.

The *Fachhochschulen* will offer new three-year courses which, it is hoped, will absorb two-thirds of higher education students in the long run, easing the now overcrowded universities.

*Fachhochschulen* will be located in existing vocational/technical colleges, recruiting staff from these colleges, from universities and from industry. The diplomas awarded will be recognized throughout Europe. The new institutions will concentrate on four areas: technology, economics, social affairs and health, and education of media specialists. (*Newsletter/Faits Nouveaux* 3/91)

## Brazil

■ Brazil has become one of the world's most unequal societies, with one of the highest rates of adult illiteracy in South America. Spending on health and education has been squeezed by policies which take money from the poor and give it to the rich. Although around 20 percent of federal and state government spending now goes on education, 60 percent is spent on public universities, which are free of charge to the 500,000 students, almost entirely well-to-do, who attend them. The remaining 40 percent is spent on basic education for 30 million Brazilian children.

Each university student, in other words, is lavished with 90 times as much public money as each primary and secondary student. As many 5 million children aged 7-14 do not go to school at all. For those who do, the average school day is three hours long. Even around São Paulo, says Education Minister Jose Goldemberg, four shifts of pupils a day is common. The lobby of professors and middle-class students who back the universities is so strong that the government considers it an ambitious aim to reduce spending on higher education to half of all public spending on education. (*The Economist*, 12/7/91)

## Country Updates

## Canada

■ Battered by what they saw as a decade of government underfunding, university presidents last year commissioned a former leader of the Ontario Liberal Party, Dr. Stuart Smith, to conduct the Inquiry on Canadian University Education. The report was expected to rally public support for the universities' cause, but no one is rushing to acclaim the results.

Dr. Smith, while downplaying any financial crisis, faulted the universities for "seriously undervaluing teaching" in favor of research. His report made 63 recommendations on hiring, tenure, and other reforms aimed at making universities more accountable to the public.

He also called for an increase in tuition levels to account for 25 percent of university revenues rather than the average of 17 percent today—a call decried by students.

Government officials, responding to the report's recommendation for a gradual increase in funds for higher education, said they saw little prospect of immediate action, given the intense fiscal pressure on federal and provincial budgets.

Overall, according to Dr. Smith, "Canada's universities today are fundamentally healthy and are serving the country well...most, if not all Canadian universities would, on balance, rank with the top half of American universities." (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10/23/91)

