

# Universal Universities

*The English policy of making university available to almost everyone is wrecking the universities.*  
By Chris Woodhead

The English government is driven by the egalitarian desire to widen access to the country's universities, so that anyone who wants to study for a degree is able to find some institution somewhere that is prepared to accept him, however ill-qualified he might be.

Thirty years ago, one in 20 young people went to university. The figure now is just over one in three. This, though, is not enough for the government. By 2004, Tony Blair wants 50% of people between 18 and 30 to be educated to degree level.

Nowhere, however, has the government explained why it thinks so many people need to go to university. It is simply assumed that half our young people are keen to undertake — and able to profit from — higher education, and that the economy needs this number if we are to compete in the 'knowledge society' and 'global economy.'

Neither of these assumptions stands up to scrutiny. With regard to the number of students who are suited for a university education, a 1992 survey by the Queen's English Society showed that university teachers from 148 departments, across all disciplines, considered 20-30% of their students to be poor in aspects of English.

When it comes to the needs of the economy, the Education Secretary noted recently that research for the National Skills Task Force had shown that it was in craft and skilled trades that most shortages occurred. 120,000 new entrants are needed.

It is the further education sector, not higher education, that should be expanding. We need those plumbers and electricians and not, to take the letter C at random, graduates in Caribbean Studies, Caring Services Childhood Studies, Cinematics, Clothing Studies, Cosmetics, Community Studies, or Creative Therapies.

We now have the worst of all worlds. British universities were once admired throughout the world. Fine examples survive, but only just. Funding will now, it seems, depend upon a university's willingness to accept enough students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

What we have now is little more than a system of mass further education, with a nasty dose of anti-élitism thrown in. Meanwhile — and this is the double whammy — it is further education that has turned its back on the useful in order to bask in the warm academic glow of spurious degrees.

More, as Kingsley Amis famously predicted, has inevitably meant worse.

Here is Kevin Sharpe, Professor of History at Southampton University: "All degree courses cover far less ground in less depth (than a decade ago). Moreover, the quantity and quality of the work submitted is immeasurably lower. Students are expected to read much less, write much less and, most disturbingly of all, think much less."

By speaking out, Professor Sharpe is the exception. In private, many of his peers agree with him but, because universities are in competition with each other and most vice-chancellors are pursuing knighthoods, very few academics are prepared to comment.

Their silence is understandable, but it is nonetheless culpable. We desperately need more scholars who are prepared to challenge the utilitarianism of the government's approach if the traditional idea of a university is to stand any chance of surviving — that is, as a place where students have the opportunity to follow a recognized branch of learning.

Does no politician understand what Baroness Warnock meant when she wrote that "the test" of a "real" university education is that "students

through their teachers should be conscious of standing on the edge of a developing and changing world of learning?"

Does nobody appreciate that wholly vocational subjects (such as golf course management) are different from subjects that are either not vocational at all (such as medieval history) or are vocational with a strong academic content (such as law) and that only these last subjects should be studied in a university to degree level?

Moreover, does nobody understand that the key statistic is not the percentage of the population that should be educated to degree standard, but rather the percentage of university students that come from the lower social classes? Just 1% of students come from social class 5. So much for equality of opportunity!

But the way forward is not to embark on an anti-élitist drive that will succeed only in dumbing down the whole sector. Neither is it to impose post-code quotas or to thrash around trying to find ways to reward potential rather than actual achievement.

The only solution is to raise standards in schools: to ensure that all children leave primary school literate and numerate and that those who are capable of academic study have the chance to realize their potential in secondary school.

The survival of universities that are worthy of the name depends on three things: the drive to raise standards in our schools; the recognition that social and academic egalitarianism on the one hand and education and training on the other are different things; and, above all else, the restoration of the quaintly out-moded belief that scholarship and learning have their own intrinsic importance.

*(Adapted with permission from the Daily Telegraph. Mr. Woodhead is the former Chief Inspector of Schools.)*