



AS-004672

CSL

Rep. 22-2-04

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Ramcay on Universities in India



280.3



Reprinted from EAST AND WEST, January 1903.

UNIVERSITIES IN INDIA.

THE scientific investigator, it may be said, can never find a subject for research, which has not previously been examined by his predecessors. And, if he is a sensible man, he will, before beginning to experiment, acquaint himself with the results of former investigations. It does not follow, however, that this course of action is confined wholly to men of science; for every business-man of capacity (and capacity carries with it success) before engaging on a new undertaking, or modifying one actually in hand, makes a point of finding out what others have done and are doing in the same line, in order that he may compete with them from a firm basis. In all such cases some plan of action is conceived and carried out; but it is based not entirely upon abstract principles; much care is spent in mastering the consequences of former experience, from whatever quarter it may spring. The mental process consists, first, in conceiving an idea which commends itself; next, in improving on that idea by consulting authorities: the rejection of useless attempts follows: and lastly, the effort, which, if sufficient care has been spent on the preliminaries, runs a fair chance of a successful issue.

It appears to me, after reading the Report of the Indian Universities Commission, that that distinguished body of men, after forming an accurate conception of the function of a University, have ignored the fact that their conception is precisely the one which has brought about in the past, and is bringing about in the present, the enormous success of most of the Universities of the world; and because it is not the ideal of the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and London, or (if they are aware of the fact) of the Royal University of Ireland, or of New Zealand, they have refused to act on their convictions, and have attempted to run the Universities of India on the old lines, merely introducing some small modification, which, so far as I can see, will be of influence neither for good nor for evil.

In paragraph 81 of the Report, the true conception is explicitly and well stated :—"In a rightly governed University, examination is subordinate to teaching ; in India, teaching has been made subsidiary to examination." The ideal is, therefore, (1) that the University in which examination is subordinate to teaching must be a rightly governed one ; the converse also holds, (2) that the University in which teaching is subsidiary to examination is wrongly governed. The deduction, therefore, surely follows :—In India, the Universities are wrongly governed.

Again, in paragraph 156, the statement is in effect repeated :—"We think that it is beyond doubt that the greatest evil from which the system of University education suffers in India is that teaching is subordinated to examination, and not examination to teaching." I shall have more to say later about this paragraph. Let us first consider the question of government.

To provide a great machinery of government carries with it one of two evils :—Either the government lies in the hands of persons—it may be of the greatest eminence—whose time is much occupied with administrative or judicial functions, or with commercial pursuits. Such men can afford to give only moments snatched from their leisure to considering problems lying outside of their sphere. The occasional hour, at the end of a hard day's work, is ludicrously insufficient to give to the working of an intricate organisation, where all kinds of special matters must be considered. The other alternative is to place the government in the hands of the teachers ; this, in its turn, if the machinery is complicated, takes their attention off the matters with which it is their province to busy themselves. The conclusion is, accordingly, that the simpler the constitution of the University, the more smoothly it will work.

Now the Indian Universities are nominally governed by Fellows, who constitute a Senate ; actually, by a small Syndicate of these Fellows. The election of Fellows has acknowledgedly grown very careless ; reform in this respect is advocated ; but the Fellows are still to be given control of the academical side of the Universities. This is opposed to the practice of all existing Universities, those already mentioned excepted. Formerly, in Scotland, the whole control of the University, financial as well as academical, was in the hands of the Professors, who constituted a Senate : but this



was to burden men of no special business ability with a task for which they were unfitted, for the most part. The Scottish Universities Commission, while reserving academical control to the Professors who still form a Senate, has constituted a University Court, which deals with all financial arrangements. In Germany, the body of Professors elects a Senate from among their own number; the duties of this Senate are small; they represent the University on ceremonial occasions, and have a voice in the disposal of the funds allotted to the Universities by the various German Governments. With small variations, this plan is adopted in all Continental Universities. In America, much power is vested in the "President" of the College or University. He is influenced by his colleagues as regards educational matters; in financial matters, he is almost supreme; he is regarded as the managing director of a business concern, and his power is in most cases nearly absolute. He reports to a small committee, however, which exercises functions analogous to those of the Scottish "University Court."

There would, therefore, have been every precedent for the Commission to recommend that a small number of persons, not exceeding ten, should have been given control of the funds of the University, leaving to the Teachers—*i.e.*, Heads of Departments—the entire management of academical affairs.

It has always appeared to me that in the Colleges of Oxford and Cambridge there is a great waste of brains in their practice of relegating financial matters to a "bursar"—a man who, in many cases, is a brilliant scholar or mathematician—whose whole time is occupied in balancing accounts and collecting and spending revenue, controlled, of course, by a committee. A reasonably paid clerk or a branch of a business firm could do the business as well, if not better; money would be saved, and a valuable man would be gained for the University.

One of the apparent difficulties which faced the Indian Commissioners was the large number of colleges in so-called affiliation to the Universities. At first sight, and from the point of view of Oxford, Cambridge, or London, this difficulty seems insuperable. Granting that in India it would be an advantage to subordinate examination to teaching, the Commissioners consider a remedy, suggested apparently by some of the witnesses whom they have

examined. To quote paragraph 156 :—"The University examines candidates in order to ascertain whether their learning qualifies them to receive degrees. [I will afterwards draw attention to the word 'learning.'] The suggestion has been made that this last process should be omitted. The Colleges, it is urged, can test their own students as they think fit, and may present those who have passed the test to the University, as persons qualified to receive a degree. To the objection that Colleges would present candidates not really qualified, it is replied that Colleges acting in this way would lose credit, and that their graduates would not have the same standing as those of other Colleges." "We do not, however, see our way to advocating a proposal which involves a departure from the practice of all Universities, without, as it seems to us, any security that it would attain the object aimed at. In our opinion, the suggestion is quite impracticable, however admirably the teaching in Colleges may be conducted. A man becomes a graduate, not of a particular College, but of the University, and it is not possible to contemplate his being examined for a degree by the staff of the College to which he belongs, without the assistance of outside examiners. Once the latter are called in, the change advocated would be tantamount to the establishment of many University examinations, instead of one."

To one who is familiar with the practice of Continental and American Universities, these sentences convey an impression of amazement. First, the degrees of such Universities are given, not for "learning" but for ability to exercise independent thought. Second, this proposal does not "involve a departure from the practice of all Universities," but only from those of Oxford, Cambridge, London, Ireland, and New Zealand. It is in absolute consonance with the practice of all Universities, with these exceptions. Lastly, why regard with horror "the establishment of many University examinations, instead of one" ?

It appears to me that two courses, which are really almost identical, were open to the Commissioners. I gather from the Report, as well as from personal observation all over India, that many of the affiliated institutions are not worthy to be associated with a University, but that they have more the character of secondary schools. There is also, I think, a feeling that University education

reaches too many persons—persons who do not profit by it, and whose careers do not justify their having received it. Whether that opinion is correct or not, I have had little opportunity of judging. But it appears to be a widely spread idea. One solution of the problem is to make the B.A. and B.Sc. degrees, or the former only, if thought desirable, equivalent to the exit examination from secondary schools. In France, this is the custom. The boy leaving the Lycée, should he so desire, leaves with his B.A. degree. In Germany, and in general on the Continent, such degrees are not awarded: the University gives only degrees which carry with them the title "Doctor." It may be said the "Bachelier-ès-arts" corresponds to the German exit or "Abiturienten" examination, and is the finish of the school career of a lad of eighteen. It was within the scope of the Commission to adopt the French plan, and sever the less well equipped colleges from the University, except for this:—That graduates from the Colleges should have the privilege of pursuing their studies at the Universities, taking, in due course, the degrees of M.A., M.Sc., D.Litt., or D.Sc.; it may be also M.D., for that would have ensured that medical graduates should have received a satisfactory general education. The second course is based upon American procedure. During the past 25 years, ever since the foundation of that place of post-graduate study, the Johns-Hopkins University of Baltimore, there has been a differentiation of the "College" from the "University." The numerous colleges, which exist everywhere in the States, give the lower degrees of A.B. and S.B. (for the order of the letters is reversed by them). These degrees are also given by the Universities. But they belong to the "College" side of the Universities. Some Universities have a large, some a small, "College" side. For example, the old University of Harvard, originally modelled after Oxford, has a large "College" side, and a fairly large "University" side, that means that the number of undergraduate students and of their instructors is large in proportion to the graduates who are proceeding to higher degrees. On the other hand, it is only recently that the Johns-Hopkins University has started a "College" side; its work is done almost entirely with those who are already graduates of some other College. The Indian Colleges might have been placed in a similar position, reserving to the more important—possibly to the Presidency Colleges, although without



strengthening, I fear, they would not be able to undertake the responsibility—the functions of teaching Universities.

But the objection has been raised by the Commissioners that unless external examiners were called in, the examination for degrees by Colleges could not be contemplated ; and even if they were retained, the change would be “ tantamount to the establishment of many University examinations in place of one.” To this comment I have some observations to offer. The Commission does not appear to be aware that the recourse to external examiners is peculiar to Great Britain, Ireland, and New Zealand alone. It is difficult to get a German, a Swiss, a Russian, or an American, be he teacher or student, or outsider, to realise that there is a country where the teacher cannot be trusted to gauge the capacity—I do not say to test the knowledge, for that is not the function of any real University—of candidates for degrees. The question with which I have been met has always been :—“ How is it possible for one who has not been the teacher of the student to find out *what his powers are ?* ” And to my reply that the ideal of examination in Great Britain is not to gauge the powers of a young man, but to test his knowledge, the reply has been—and from the most eminent of German Professors, not once but many times ; from the President of Johns-Hopkins ; from the best known of the Professors of St. Petersburg :—“ It is of indifference to us *what a man knows*, provided he is able to think, and make use of what he knows.” “ He can satisfy us that he is able to acquire information from books ; we wish to ascertain whether he can use this information.”

Here, again, an analogy from science comes in *apropos*. In all our dealings of commerce, we pay a price for what a thing will do ; not for its size, or its weight, but for its energy. When we buy corn or meat, we pay a certain price for it because it, will enable us or others to do so much labour ; for coal, because by its means so much work can be got from a steam-engine, or in cold climates, because it will keep our temperature at working-point ; for clothes for the latter reason : in short, we pay a price for energy. There are objects, such as diamonds, or choice estates, which have another criterion of value ; we buy them for their appearance, because they minister to our artistic sense.

But we do not train students in order that they may be useless



ornaments ; and yet this is all that purely examinational degrees testify to.

I contend, therefore, that the almost universal practice of examination by the teacher whose students are being examined is the wise one. But I can see how an external examiner may serve a good purpose in Indian Universities. The Commissioners imply that if examinations were held in each College by the teachers of the students examined, there would probably be lack of uniformity of standard. Here, I imagine, the external examiner may play a useful part in acting with all the teachers in the different Colleges. They might be required to show him the papers they propose to set ; and he might also be given the right to see a certain number of the answers. With these before him, he would be able to suggest alterations which would conduce to a level standard. This would present less difficulty than that which faces all examiners in keeping the standard of equal level from year to year. On the doctrine of probability, granted outside examiners, it would certainly be fairest to candidates always to allow a definite percentage to pass ; for the chance that in any given year the ability of say a hundred candidates fluctuates evenly round a certain standard is much greater than that the examiner always sets questions of the same order of difficulty. Where the teachers examine their own students, however, the matter assumes a different complexion. The examination becomes to a certain extent formal ; the true examination has lasted throughout the whole career of the student ; and the results of continuous testing need merely be recorded in the final examination. This is the plan universally adopted in all American Colleges ; it is in effect the plan adopted on the Continent of Europe, and it yields admirable results.

I hope I need say nothing of the honour of the teachers. When men are trusted, they become trustworthy ; and it stands to reason that Professors in Colleges and Universities should never be appointed without having served an apprenticeship as assistants and junior lecturers, and attained by their ability and integrity the confidence of their colleagues and of their superiors. If the Professors are well chosen, favouritism need not be feared. Indeed, favouritism, or preference for one student over another, is generally the result of an analysis of character. It cannot but happen that all past students



are regarded by their teachers impartially ; it is those who impress him by ability or character who gain his esteem.

The true prosperity and success of Colleges and of Universities in training men for their later careers, and in creating and disseminating knowledge, depends on the observance of two fundamental maxims :—First, choose for Professors men who have made some reputation, and are engaged in active prosecution of research ; second, give such men a wide liberty in dealing with their subjects and with their students. Where these maxims have been acted on, University education has been a conspicuous success, and the creation and progress of knowledge have been maintained. May India see fit to adopt and practise these maxims !

WILLIAM RAMSAY.