

New British Universities*

John Povey

Twentieth century England has been remarkably slow in expanding its universities. For six hundred years there were only two — Oxford and Cambridge — and they still dominate. After the 19th century growth of the so called Red Brick Universities in the new industrial towns such as Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield there was little change until the Robbins report of 1963. This recommended the building of six new campuses to meet increased demand and need.

The new colleges should have allowed British education to undertake ambitious innovative programs, but except for some extra emphasis on interdisciplinary studies for undergraduates (in contrast to the common honours degree specialization of the established schools) change was minimal. The Robbins report had recommended that these new universities should be located in areas of population density. It is highly indicative that they were actually built in the old cathedral towns such as York and Canterbury as if it were believed that their history could rub off the regrettable modernity of these upstart institutions. The traditional paraphernalia of gowns and high tables and royal chancellors remains.

The British assumption that a university's distinction rests on its exclusiveness is held just as strongly now when the elite is more intellectual than aristocratic. This attitude has engendered new universities remarkable for their conservatism in a period of rapid social change.

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