

Key Areas

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- *The financial system.* Some areas in need of reform are the system of allocating public funds—introducing performance-based financing; the capacity of institutions to control their own financial resources—allowing them to fix tuition fees and staff salaries; and an increase in the participation of the business community and students in the financing of universities.
- *Diversification and mobility of staff and students.* Although universities have taken timid steps toward diversification, the process needs to be stimulated. Universities should send signals to potential clients (students and enterprises) informing them of the specific character of each institution. Currently, staff have the status of civil servants, and working conditions are similar at the various universities. Universities need mechanisms that would allow them to compete for the best staff. Student mobility and the option of selecting from among programs at different institutions, either Spanish or European, would be key factors in helping the university system to become more responsive to the market. An effective program for student aid would also greatly improve student mobility.
- *University governance.* The governing structure of universities has changed dramatically, which has introduced a high level of internal democracy into the institutions. This change has contributed to the renewal of higher education institutions. Nevertheless, approaches that were adequate for the reform and expansion of the system are less effective in the current situation, in which institutions have to compete for resources and for students and quality is the main goal. Experts on higher education generally agree on the need to alter the governing structures of universities to make them more entrepreneurial and managerial and thus better able to cope with the challenges of the future.

At present, these issues are being thoroughly discussed among politicians, university leaders, and experts. There is a general agreement that new initiatives must be introduced, and it is likely that major reforms will soon be implemented. ■

Oxford University: Reflections of a Visiting Scholar

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Whenever I think about Oxford University, the image of the seven big trees standing at the northwest gate of University Park comes to mind. With their massive trunks and crumbling bark as well as surprisingly green leaves and upward-branching new growth, these trees appeared to me as a wonderful symbol of Oxford today: traditional and conservative, as well as modern and innovative.

Oxford is the oldest university in the English-speaking world, with a history of 800 years. With 39 colleges, over 150 departments and centers, 13,261 students, and 6,655 faculty and staff, the university serves as one of the world's leading institutions for teaching and research in higher education. During my six months there as a visiting scholar, I was often amazed by the interesting combination of a historical tradition of preserving the old and a desire to transform the institution to meet the needs of a changing society.

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One example is Oxford's renowned college system. The colleges at Oxford are independent units with their own ruling bodies, decision-making power, financial resources, and academic disciplines. One at a time, the 39 colleges were established over the centuries with the support of the clergy, the community, and individual philanthropies. While providing the opportunity for close interpersonal communication, interdisciplinary exchange of ideas, and cheaper housing and food to its members, the college system has also tended to isolate the colleges from one another and create a disparity between the richer and the less wealthy colleges. College facilities—including libraries—are normally closed to nonmembers, preventing resources from being fully shared by the university as a whole. Although a fund has been established to help the poorer colleges, resistance from the more well endowed ones is still rather strong. Interestingly, whenever I asked why the existing colleges could not be reorganized accord-

ing to academic disciplines or on a more equal financial footing, the answer given, in addition to a list of good things about the college system, was always “because of tradition.” For Oxonians, “tradition” seems to be the immediate response to anything difficult. Based on a sense of identity that cannot be altered through logical reasoning, tradition represents both a treasuring of Oxford’s identity and a major obstacle to change.

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One of the factors that has helped the college system to survive, it seems to me, is tutorial teaching, to which Oxford owes much of its accomplishments. (Over the course of its history Oxford has produced five kings, 36 Nobel Prize winners, and 25 British prime ministers.) The tutorial system is also a very expensive one, which has become an issue at a time when the demand for mass education is rather high. In fact, the Higher Education Funding Council for England has recently withdrawn its undergraduate funding from Oxford and Cambridge. Nevertheless, the university has decided to retain this traditional way of teaching. The individualized instruction is reported to be effective in helping students develop the capacity for critical and independent thinking, which is indispensable for the advancement of modernization.

Due in part to the college and tutorial systems, teaching in Oxford impressed me as rather compartmentalized. Most classes are usually open to full-time resident students, who pursue their studies in their own college or department, not venturing out into other fields as often as they might. A very decentralized institution, Oxford seems a complicated maze to outsiders. For example, I had to go to each college or department to obtain information on classes, and quite a few times permission to attend a certain class was denied because it was not open to “outsiders.” Although Oxford has taken steps to expand opportunities for continuing education, it seems to me that it should open its doors more widely if it wants to meet the growing needs of society.

Another area that brought to mind the theme of tradition and modernization is Oxford’s preservation of certain old rituals that serve to maintain its image as an ancient institution. During my stay, I was invited to a few college dinners and found myself quite amused by the rituals per-

formed and especially the seriousness with which they were performed. The tradition of wearing academic gowns at formal dinners and keeping the “high table” for faculty and “low table” for students has been going on since the founding of the university. I was told that although there had been calls for reforms of the practice at certain times in history, they had met with resistance from faculty and students alike. Both sides wanted to retain the privacy to talk freely with their peers.

I also had the honor of attending the Encaenia (graduation ceremony) this year. Latin was used throughout the event, and when long passages were read in Latin, there was dead silence in the hall. Out of curiosity, I glanced at the English script, and found myself enjoying the humor in it. Not until the end of the ceremony when the orator changed to English did people come alive and burst into laughter at the jokes. I wondered why Latin was used if it did not make sense to the audience.

The seriousness shown on the above occasions made me ponder whether these rituals were really considered important for the university or merely served to maintain a sense of superiority, privilege, and even fun for Oxonians. The rituals certainly help to produce a sense of history and nobility, but they can appear daunting and exclusive to outsiders. Whereas I used to believe in the function of an Oxbridge education in nurturing the well-rounded gentleman or (-woman), I now realize the elitism, classism, and power hidden within these rituals.

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To be fair, Oxford is also a very innovative and adventurous institution. The whole university is ruled by a democratic process governed by the congregation, a representative body of college fellows and university staff. Classes on such controversial topics as postcolonialism and postmodernism are offered, and student sit-ins take place without interference from the authorities. I was most intrigued by the current structural reform of the university, aimed at improving the transparency, efficiency, and fairness of the decision making of the administration. A thorough investigation of the existing problems has been undertaken, and a working committee was organized to formulate the agenda for public debate. In the meantime, strategies to recruit minority, working-class and state school students to Oxford have been adopted in order to promote equal access. Examples like this have convinced me that Oxford, old and traditional as it is, is still renewing itself—like those seven big trees. ■