

ACCOUNTABILITY IN UNIVERSITY LIFE



THE SCRUTINY OF THE AUDITOR
GENERAL

F. F. Bruce

1. Public accountability

It is only a few years ago that university accounts in the United Kingdom became subject to the scrutiny of the Auditor General. This was a decision with which no one could reasonably quarrel. So much public money is allocated to the universities, in comparison with the situation before World War II, that it is only right that the Treasury should be satisfied about the way in which this money is spent.

It is natural, nevertheless, that suspicion should be felt about the implications of such accountability. If once the universities are held accountable to the state for their use of public money, it has been felt, may the state not assume the right to dictate how the block grant allocated to a particular university should be apportioned among faculties or departments? It is easy to see how, if this right were conceded to the state, academic freedom as we have known it in British universities would be seriously diminished.

Presumably, so long as the block grant is apportioned in a responsible manner, the state will prefer not to burn its fingers by interference. It is obvious that departments requiring large supplies of expensive and up-to-date equipment must have the lion's share of the grant if they are to function at all. The requirements of the

humanities are modest when compared with (say) those of chemistry or technology. The humanities can make do with an adequate supply of books and stationery, together with photocopying, audio-visual and (for language study) tape-recording equipment which can be shared among several departments. If members of an Arts department require the use of a computer to calculate literary statistics or to compile a concordance, the computer laboratory is accessible and suitable payment for material and services can be arranged.

2. The question of relevance

Some years ago, in the heyday of 'student unrest', there was much windy talk about 'relevance'. Relevance is one of those terms, like progress and reaction, which acquire a definite meaning only when they are related to some standard. 'Relevance to what?' must be asked (like 'progress whither?' and 'reaction against what?'). 'Relevance to the needs of society' would probably be the answer, but who is to say authoritatively what the primary needs of society are? Not only as in private duty bound, but also out of a conviction about the paramount importance of the knowledge of God in human life, I myself would claim that theology is the most socially relevant

of all subjects—but I fancy that those who called most loudly for relevance in the days of student unrest might not agree with me. On the other hand, sociology by its very name might appear to be socially relevant in a high degree, but in some quarters it is regarded as the most expendable of all university subjects. There will be common agreement on the necessity of medicine and engineering, and therefore of those subjects which are preparatory to the study of these. The claims of legal study would probably be admitted: even those who are out to smash 'the system' may regard a professional knowledge of law as an aid to smashing it from inside.

The state may do what it can to encourage entry into certain departments which are undermanned (or underwomanned, if a neologism be allowed); but to direct or compel students to specialize in subjects which they would prefer not to study may be counter-productive. It is bad enough when parents exercise this kind of coercion, but it would be worse if the state were to do so.

3. Undergraduates

The position with regard to undergraduate grants has changed out of all recognition since my own youthful days. It is natural that the taxpayer, who

contributes so handsomely to the maintenance of students, should expect them to acknowledge some kind of accountability. The climate of opinion is still sufficiently liberal to discourage coercive policies, but it is helpful when students conduct themselves as if they recognized their debt to the taxpayer (which indeed most of them do) instead of treating their grants as a right which society owes them. Students in receipt of the full grant sometimes fare better than those who, by the operation of the means test, are partly dependent on parental support. Many students in receipt of the full grant are deeply grateful for it, and some will agree (in private conversation, at least) that their grants are ample for their requirements, or indeed more than ample—like one recent student of mine who saved enough out of her undergraduate grant to finance a year of post-graduate study.

The trouble is that a minority of students, who attract the public attention by antics which bear no obvious relation to the purpose of their being at university, create a very unfortunate public image of students in general. Happily, the situation is better today than it was ten years ago. 'Students!' said a Manchester taxi-driver to me at that time, when I asked him to drive me from Piccadilly Station to the university: 'that's the filthiest word in the Manchester working man's vocabulary!' Those were the days of the Battle of Grosvenor Square and all that, in which students visibly participated, and the repercussions reached as far as Manchester.

4. Post-graduates

With regard to second-degree students, the situation is different. Self-financing candidates for second degrees have often to face a monstrous increase in fees, but there are some who are prepared to make the necessary sacrifice, or whose families are prepared to make it for them. That such students should have unrestricted liberty in choosing their fields of research should go without saying.

Many overseas candidates for higher degrees are financed by their governments, who no doubt have clear ideas about the subjects for which, by preference, such financial support should be given. Medicine, economics, technology rank high among these subjects. But I know one student

whose home state was prepared to finance his research into a particular area of the history of religion provided he pursued it not in the Manchester Faculty of Theology (which was his preference) but in the Liverpool School of Archaeology and Oriental Studies—so I had to relinquish him to Alan Millard!

A number of universities administer funds for post-graduate study which are earmarked (by their donors or otherwise) for particular fields of study; they naturally go to candidates proposing to work in those fields. As for state studentships, those allocated through (say) the Science Research Council or the Social Science Research Council are awarded for research within those areas; those awarded direct by the Department of Education and Science are not tied in the same way. The Department could, if it wished, regulate the allocation of state studentships in various ways; but even when money is tighter and costs are higher and grants are fewer, the Department continues to finance research over a wide spectrum of the humanities, even when the subject is so economically unproductive as "The Serpent in Ancient Near Eastern Religion" or "The Structure of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs" (to mention two which have actually been undertaken on state studentships). So long as the state is prepared to finance such work by those who are attested as fit to do it, let us be thankful. The only accountability that plays a part here is the obligation to do the work diligently, so that the supervisor may be able to submit a satisfactory report on it year by year.

5. University teachers

University teaching in this country, and probably in most open societies, is carried on under a fairly flexible procedure which on the whole works quite well. Complaints are heard from time to time that, probably in some subject-areas more than others, the frontier between education and propaganda has been crossed, but even if there were substance in such complaints, there would be no cause for undue anxiety: university students are usually seasoned enough to 'have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil'—or hawks from handsaws.

To whom was I accountable during my forty-three years of university teaching? So long as I was a junior

member of a department, I was immediately accountable to the head of my department. After I became a departmental head myself, I was immediately accountable to the faculty in which I taught—but I enjoyed the widest freedom.

In fact, the universities in which I have worked, and their paymasters, have for many years given me the opportunity to do what I should have most wished to do in any case, and have paid me handsomely for doing it. In a secular university I have had greater liberty to say and write exactly what I think than ever I should have had in most theological colleges.

This is a great privilege, and I find it disquieting when colleagues who ought to know better treat it as a right, and threaten to make themselves awkward if their remuneration is not increased—especially when such awkwardness involves their students in some inconvenience (to put it no higher).

I have never regarded myself as having a prior accountability to our professional association, the Association of University Teachers (to which I have belonged for the greater part of my working life)—least of all since it became affiliated, a few years ago, to the TUC. My two supreme professional accountabilities, while I was in university service, were my contractual accountability to the university and my moral accountability to my students. As the most vulnerable section of the university community, my students had claims on my consideration which came well before those of my colleagues.

My colleagues, of course, did have valid claims on my consideration, and so did other members of the university community. And since a university cannot be walled off from its environment, all sections of the university community must be mindful of their accountability to society in general.

Our ultimate accountability is to God. This applies to all, but especially to people like ourselves who acknowledge this accountability in principle. Where there is a genuine sense of accountability to God, that will add strength and sanctity to our lesser accountabilities. The Christian believes that no one lives for himself or herself: in professional life as in other respects we live for the Lord, and under him we live for others.