Oxford, the Collegiate University

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Ted Tapper · David Palfreyman

Oxford, the Collegiate University

Conflict, Consensus and Continuity

Foreword by Sheldon Rothblatt

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To those two great landmarks in English higher education: The Franks and Robbins Reports

Foreword

In recent decades fine histories of universities have appeared, detailed and comprehensive. These include composite multi-volume histories, of which the most elaborate is the massive Oxford History of Oxford University. There are also general accounts, more panoramic, covering more than one country and more than one century. And of course articles and monographs in profusion, taking up the story of universities from their first appearance in the twelfth century. Not all publications bear directly on present-day concerns – historians should be entitled to some freedom. Furthermore, present-day concerns can be narrow and short-sighted, lacking in breadth and perspective. But insofar as the university, or rather, higher education, is regarded as a marker of national success, we are the richer for this scholarly activity.

Nevertheless, no matter that the subject of the history of colleges, universities and technical institutes is heavily studied, few works provide as concentrated an analysis of the inner functioning, the structure, the tensions and disputes arising from that structure, or the possible external triggers, as does this greatly revised version of Ted Tapper's and David Palfreyman's 10-year-old book on Oxford University, probably the most studied of any university in the world today.

Oxford is closely studied for any number of reasons, but amongst them is the fact that it has a unique history, even – outsiders may not always grasp the differences – when compared to Cambridge, which, as the authors often demonstrate, has moved towards a more centralised mode of leadership that, in their view, may well foretell Oxford's future. In the age of the celebrity or 'branded' university, which is also the age of world rankings, status hierarchies and fierce competition for prestige and resources, a world in which higher education is frequently discussed as a commodity (instead of as knowledge or culture), many universities claim to be unique. This is probably an Anglo-American obsession, although glimmers of it may be found in other nations. Laying claim to a special heritage has long been a part of the American college and university system, not only that segment driven by fees and endowments but public sector universities eager to join in the high status game.

Yet, it is difficult to name an American university, whether it is Harvard or Virginia or Chicago or my own Berkeley, that is structurally unique. With a few exceptions, even the most famous liberal arts colleges resemble one another. They have similar teaching formats, reward structures and career aspirations, and these are taken from the research-led universities. This is not surprising since those who

teach in liberal arts colleges possess advanced degrees from precisely those universities. The University of California with its ten campuses may be thought of as structurally unique; but the separate campuses are more identical than different, especially as the Santa Cruz experiment did not, as once hoped, quite succeed in establishing an Oxford or Cambridge on the Pacific Coast. And whatever internal campus partitioning may exist – honours or disciplinary colleges, professional schools, research institutions, laboratories, programmes and centres – the whole is systemically held together by a central administration, whose authority is sometimes mediated by the power of faculty exit (depending upon markets) and the grantsmanship of researchers.

Oxford certainly has much of this familiar configuration, but it has more. It has teaching colleges (with one exception). The organising theme of the book is consequently collegiality, the past and present meanings of values and procedures derived from the accidents of history. The two authors have also written a companion and broader comparative book on that subject appearing in 2010 under the title *The Collegial Tradition in the Age of Mass Higher Education*. Collegiality is a word much favoured by academics, whether or not the institution in which they find themselves has a network of distinct colleges orbiting around a central administrative system that has varied in function, resources and importance over the centuries. The word 'collegiality' is appealing. For most academics anywhere it implies a society – the original Latin meaning of 'collegium' – joint decision-making, a fellowship, a guild, a profession, whose members, acting in concert, have more or less full control over their common activities. That is the ideal, but its reality varies radically as Tapper and Palfreyman are at pains to explain. Even though American colleges and universities have strong central administrations, the collegial ideal is also there to be found, to be invoked against what are taken to be intrusions into core teaching and knowledge-generating activities. Today that takes the form, in Britain and America and doubtless elsewhere in Europe, of a denunciation of 'managerialism' in all of its internal and external formulations.

Collegiality possesses a fuller range of meanings in the Oxford environment. It encompasses ideas about teaching, examining and research, about policy-making with respect to finances and maintenance of the college fabric and about career directions. It includes commensality, the act of breaking bread together – in all societies the sign of a superior sociability and generosity, raised to high art in the rituals of hall. Each of these aspects of Oxford's history receives very close scrutiny from the authors whose pursuit of both micro- and macro-changes is relentless. The general object is to determine whether such changes collectively alter the inherited character of Oxford, in which case it ceases to be unique, or whether in fact, despite radical pressures from outside, a special heritage is preserved, indeed, even strengthened. The issue is subtle. The evidence appears to favour the latter conclusion, but it is the process of discussion and argument that is perhaps the most absorbing, especially because the greater the amount of internal differentiation, the greater will be the number of issues in need of resolution. And that is one reason why Oxford provides a case study from which observers may profit even if circumstances are different.

The dons have worked hard at preserving their heritage even though arriving at agreement is never smooth. Differences of opinion have sometimes been bitter. But special efforts are required. Survival of the college system at Oxford relies upon activity that often has nothing to do with personal standing in a given specialty. So that is a problem where teaching receives less global recognition than research specialisation, and the authors address it.

But let us now also recognise that Oxford has help. Elite institutions possess advantages denied to other kinds of higher education institutions. They usually have history on their side, meaning a splendid architectural fabric, accumulated resources (never enough) and a loyal alumni, often with means. Close relations with political and social leaders are an additional assist, if not foolproof. Amongst the greatest assets of celebrity institutions is the ability to draw from a pool of the ablest available students. Top students in turn attract teaching talent, but would they appear quite so talented if their students were not so clever? The necessary expansion of higher education opportunities in the twentieth century has produced something like a bimodal distribution of student achievement. Institutions that were always in some sense select have become meritocratic as the best secondary school graduates compete for entrance. That leaves the less favoured institutions. Many of them are of more recent origin. Their intake includes large numbers requiring remedial instruction where the challenges of teaching are indeed significant. Before the advent of mass access higher education in Britain, remediation was the American disease. It is now everyone's academic disease.

The ability to attract superior students is a huge advantage for Oxford, for Imperial, for Princeton, for Stanford, for Amherst and Williams colleges and, in a far more complicated way, for campuses of the University of California where the undergraduate population is of mixed achievement but postgraduate quality is strong. A debate is now commencing at Berkeley on whether a significant amount of undergraduate instruction ought to be offered on-line. Such a move, for which political and financial pressures are building, would surely alter historical relationships and connections. I see no challenge of this magnitude in the case of Oxford.

Critics have always accused Oxford, and other privileged universities, of resisting change. Those who make the charges (often from their own agenda) have not studied history. They certainly ought to read this book. Universities are always changing, although the pace of change is not uniform or predictable. Those who see universities as always conservative do not grasp the imperatives of intellectual discovery, which are continuous even when quiet. Those who argue, using Darwinian language, that universities must always 'adapt' do not understand that cultural and institutional life is not primarily survival. Adaptation is a complicated response to circumstances involving traditions whose absence impoverishes everyday life. Traditions provide the enchantments missing in a humdrum world. They also provide continuity, and the acquisition and transmission of learning in particular do not occur overnight. Traditions also furnish benchmarks against which departures can be measured. If there is to be a destination, as the Oxford don A.H. Halsey remarks, there must be an origin.

These observations are not meant as apologies. In the long history of universities there have been dreadful moments, from the willingness of professors to support authoritarian governments and religious exclusion to anti-semitism, discrimination against women (Oxford much less so than Cambridge) and social snobbery. Academics in brand-name universities have also often failed to recognise the important contributions of less favoured institutions. Worst of all has been the timidity of academics in facing up to the brutalities of twentieth-century totalitarian governments. It remains to be seen whether the current educational ambitions of non-western governments will surmount these tendencies. Another difficulty is a consequence of ideological and political partisanship that has raised concerns about intellectual honesty, value-free knowledge and the degree to which taxpayers can trust the members of their higher education communities. The fabrication of research results and plagiarism are particular temptations in the age of the Internet and market discipline.

All national higher education systems are currently encountering financial difficulties, intensifying problems arising from plentiful other sources. Oxford's college system is particularly expensive. Nevertheless, this second edition, besides incorporating a large amount of new material and updating earlier conclusions, is more optimistic than the edition of a decade ago. The changed title reflects the mood. While the earlier version featured the 'decline of the collegiate tradition', the revised one focuses on 'conflict, consensus and continuity'. What has been learned is this: despite the gloom to which academic monks are periodically prone, Oxford has risen to the occasion and intensely studied itself with profit. Thanks to Tapper and Palfreyman, the rest of us are now the fortunate beneficiaries of an enlarged understanding of how the academic controversies of a new millennium can be negotiated.

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Preface

This is the second edition of our *Oxford and the Decline of the Collegiate Tradition*, which was published in 2000. The new title reflects both more optimism about the process of change in the collegiate universities and our stronger belief in the merits of collegial governance. This second edition has been revised to reflect the changes that have taken place both in the University of Oxford and in British higher education over the past decade. Several chapters have been rewritten in depth and one new chapter, which presents a map of the colleges and an overview of the University's academic character, has been included. This edition, therefore, places the collegiate tradition more firmly within context. As such it represents a contemporary overview of the collegiate university as seen through the evolving prism of its most distinctive characteristic – its collegial tradition.

Many would argue that the current model of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge took shape in the latter half of the nineteenth century and ever since has been reformed steadily. But those nineteenth century reforms restructured practices that were centuries old. Did the nineteenth century betray the past? Is the contemporary process of change jeopardising a sacrosanct idea of the university? Or, as this book argues, do institutions have to adapt their pasts if they are to continue to thrive? Perhaps the ultimate challenge for institutions is how to adapt successfully without appearing to change radically.

But, with particular reference to Oxford, contemporary developments have shown a deep-seated commitment within the University to some of the established ingredients of collegiality – the resistance to the creation of a Council in which lay membership predominates, the continuing advocacy of tutorial teaching, vibrant defence against the widespread attack on college control of undergraduate admissions in the wake of the 'Laura Spence' fracas and the continuing fact that colleges – thank goodness – occasionally still portray their idiosyncratic characters. Moreover, this has occurred as many of the world-class league tables continue to place the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge at the top end of the totem pole.

Although it is not a central theme, there is a comparative dimension to this book that recognises important differences in the interpretation of the collegial tradition between the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Furthermore, in the conclusion we explore the idea that their respective interpretations of collegiality are converging, with Oxford moving towards Cambridge. However, in terms of our wider

writing a more significant reference point is our broadly based book on collegiality, *The Collegial Tradition in the Age of Mass Higher Education*, which was published by Springer in 2010. This book complements that earlier volume by examining the contemporary challenges facing the collegial tradition within the context of arguably the most pristine model of the collegiate university, the University of Oxford. In essence it is a case study of collegiality in action in its strongest and broadest form. The earlier volume explores the argument that the collegial tradition is embedded in the very idea of the university and, although in its Oxbridge context it may find a particularly powerful representation, it has penetrated the general understanding of what is meant by the university. The two volumes, therefore, complement one another.

Chapters 1 to 3 examine the idea of collegiality, the form it took at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and the reasons it survived at those two places but disappeared elsewhere. It is part of our argument that Oxford and Cambridge have always been collegiate universities, and while aspects of their collegiality have been replicated elsewhere, the collegial tradition in its most pristine form emerged in the latter half of nineteenth century England. The two universities were responding, albeit reluctantly, to increasing government intervention in their affairs stimulated by the political pressures exerted by an ever more forceful professional class. The collegial tradition developed as Oxford and Cambridge shed the functions they performed for the established church and became universities serving the wider society. This was the revolution of the dons; clergymen became dons and donnish dominion reigned supreme (Engel, 1983; Rothblatt, 1968). Thus the emergence in different forms of the collegial tradition was a response to broad societal change embracing, besides the ancient universities, the leading public schools, the army, civil service, local government and indeed the London livery companies.

It is evident that the collegial tradition has never been a static entity; indeed, traditions that survive must be responsive to the changing needs of society. Immediately the question is raised as to whether key educational ideas – such as the collegial tradition, university autonomy or a liberal education – have any integral meaning or whether they are infinitely malleable? Therefore, our second major concern is to look directly at the question of continuity and change within the collegial tradition. But this is not a new concern. In the very throes of its nineteenth century reconstruction, Oxford was facing serious challenges to incorporate both the experimental sciences and women: a male construct centred around teaching and scholarship within arts was under pressure to include women and the sciences, that is to broaden its base both socially and intellectually. The question was, and indeed still is, could the collegial tradition respond to these pressures in a manner that would enable it to retain its essential characteristics while meeting new demands? Moreover, the collegial tradition has had to marry external pressures with the career interests of its own academic labour force. In the latter half of the nineteenth century it succeeded, but whether it can continue to do so in the twenty-first century is more problematic.

Chapters 4 to 8 analyse the responses of the University of Oxford to the contemporary challenges it faces and its ensuing patterns of adjustment. It will follow

the pattern of change in relation to a number of critical issues: collegiality as a sociocultural experience (commensality), control of undergraduate admissions, the tutorial system, the self-governing community of scholars and the pattern of financial resources. However, collegiality – certainly with respect to how HEIs are governed – is under attack on a broad front, including in 'the new universities', which emerged as a consequence of the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992 (Ryder, 1996; Warren, 1994, 1997). Therefore, aspects of this wider attack will be analysed: an attack that according to international surveys has left British academics amongst the most demoralised in the world (Altbach, 1997, p. 333).

The precise manifestations of the collegial tradition have been considered only rarely and we are interested to see in what ways our definition will be embellished and challenged. What appears is a robust tradition, one that has been able to reformulate itself while retaining a recognisable form and one that has (so far) blended continuity with change. The Victorian tutor-don has become 'research active' but the tutorial system continues; graduate students appear en masse but most of the colleges are still dominated by the traditional 18- to 21-year-old undergraduate intake. 'Big science' evolves in its enclave of specialist buildings but the scientists still have college rooms and many lunch regularly with their arts colleagues. The college library is computerised, the internet reaches student bedrooms that are steadily *en suited* and centrally heated, and although the college gates may slam shut at midnight students no longer climb over walls to get back in since they now have 'swipe' cards. The JCR Pantry and the Hall Buttery still sell port and wine but the students may prefer fruit-flavoured bottled lager, all purchased on the basis of electronic 'cashless vending'. While many students still row and play rugger, others will enjoy such contemporary activities as bungee-jumping and para-gliding. The Old Members (alumni) return for the Gaude to wallow in nostalgia but are pursued professionally by the Development Officer for their donations and legacies and the same Old Members may well attend the Carol Service in a timeless Chapel now lit by fibre-optic cabling, the Bursar is still called the Bursar (rather than the Chief Financial Officer or the Finance Director) although he may have an MBA, the Porter's Lodge may have CCTV monitors but is not labelled Security Control. And so it has gone on – changing but seemingly immutable.

In the final chapter and postscript we turn to the future. As we were writing the first edition Oxford and its colleges were attempting to come to terms with the latest attempt at internal reform in the shape of the North Report (University of Oxford, 1997a). Subsequently, there were the troubled years of the vice chancellorship of John Hood as he tried to reform (others would say, undermine) the University's structure of governance. The colleges have faced both a whittling of their fee income and the fact that public funding is now channelled to them through the University. The authority of the University in relation to the colleges has been augmented in recent years, thanks to the government-imposed accountability regime, the pressure exerted by the widening participation agenda, the channelling of core research income through the mechanism of the research assessment exercises and most recently the sanctioning of variable fees. The collegiate university continues as a federal model of governance but, in view of these developments, perhaps the

balance of power within the model – between colleges and university – has now shifted so far in favour of the latter that federalism increasingly exists in name only.

To a limited extent we also examine the future governance of higher education in Britain more generally, an interest that has been pursued with an international viewpoint in our *The Collegial Tradition in the Age of Mass Higher Education*. Is the drive towards managerialism so strong that those dimensions of collegiality, which have penetrated British higher education, are now in terminal decline? Is it possible that the state, within a diversified model of mass higher education, will actually permit – even encourage – collegiality? Can high-quality teaching and research be delivered without being organised collegially? Will collegiality, perhaps conceived of in different ways, thrive at the grassroots of HEIs? Alternatively, is 'a nightmare scenario' unfolding? Are we witnessing the disappearance of autonomous colleges at both Oxford and Cambridge through amalgamations and bankruptcies as the Listed Buildings are converted into halls of residence? Is this linked to greatly enhanced central authority being located in the two Universities, while these two former collegiate institutions find themselves embedded within a wider system of higher education in which the state and the market reward those who can most cheaply (efficiently!) deliver a national curriculum degree course and enhance their league-table positions in the research assessment exercises?

Contemporarily the problems of successful adjustment to changing circumstances are intensified by a strong measure of continuing financial dependence upon a state, which, with alternative models at its disposal, appears to have become increasingly unsympathetic both to Oxbridge's exceptionalism and to the manifestations of collegiality within the system of higher education at large. Furthermore, within the context of the current fiscal crisis facing the state, it is to be expected (regardless of the political persuasion of the next government) that public expenditure on higher education will be curtailed (with cuts of the order of those imposed in the early 1980s, some 15% spread over 3 years). Within this context university funding is likely to become increasingly dependent upon the market – with, in due course, higher student fees assuming a significantly enhanced input. It is difficult to predict the precise ramifications of such a development for the long-term welfare of the collegiate universities. Does the collegial tradition become too expensive to sustain? Or, does it give the collegiate universities a distinctive cutting-edge in the market? And, if so, how will the colleges respond to the challenge of attracting academic talent and potential as well as ensuring that prospective students can afford to pay the fees?

Besides the University's own reports, we absorb into our interpretation of the restructuring of the collegial tradition several contemporary perspectives on Oxford: the modernisation thesis (Soares, 1999); a model of governance still dominated by collegial interests (Halsey, 1995, pp. 149–174); and how Oxford could be improved (Kenny and Kenny, 2007). This, therefore, is a book with the usual scholarly pretensions, which we see as offering a serious in-depth discussion of the idea of the collegial tradition in action. The intention is to encourage the reader both to interpret the histories of the two ancient English Universities in a reflective manner and to understand more fully the role of ideas in the process of educational change. By

drawing attention to the collegial tradition we hope to have thrown a sharper light upon the current restructuring of the British system of higher education – to make us more aware of what we are in danger of losing. One of the authors is a full-time college official while the other is a retired academic and, consequently, we have different relationships to the current changes in higher education. Not surprisingly, that has been reflected in our contributions to this book. But we have a common commitment to ensuring that the best emerges, in terms of both academic understanding and institutional change. This is a book written to appeal to the educated citizenry at large and, above all, to those – like ourselves – who have been both seduced and infuriated by the magic of Oxbridge.

Oxford, UK

Ted Tapper
David Palfreyman

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As authors, we take full responsibility for all errors, omissions, interpretations and the prognosis offered in the Postscript.

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