

A Caledonian college in Cape Town and beyond: an investigation into the foundation(s) of the South African university system

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ABSTRACT

Adopting a historical approach, this article traces the origins of key features of the South African university system, namely the general nature of its undergraduate degrees, its heavy reliance on lectures to convey information and its extensive use of examinations to assess levels of student achievement. This historical investigation finds the roots of these features in the unreformed Scottish university system which was enthusiastically embraced by South Africa's first two teaching universities, the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Stellenbosch, in 1918, and which then was adopted by those universities which were set up in their image during the next 70 years. The article suggests that any attempt to reform the country's university system today must take account of the historical circumstances which produced it originally.

With the South African university system in the midst of a radical overhaul, it is important to identify how and why its key features came about in the first place, so that they are not carried forward into a new dispensation unthinkingly, without the benefit of, *inter alia*, a long historical perspective. Chief among such features is the formal academic structure within these universities, which determined the form of their degrees and, to some extent, their teaching and examining procedures.

What follows will make clear that this structure has

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long roots in the country's past, being the product of deliberate colonial emulation rather than independent national innovation, which created institutions that were what Malegapuru Makgoba has described as "imitative and replicative" of their colonial motherland (Makgoba 1997:174). But historical inquiry will also reveal that this imitation and replication were not as linear as Makgoba's words suggest. Firstly, they were part of a two phase process which began in the 19th Century, initially from the Cape Colony's metropole, Great Britain, to the colonial capital and its environs (ie Cape Town and Stellenbosch), and then from there to the rest of what in 1910 became the Union of South Africa. Nor would it be correct to assume that a single British model served as a standard template for such emulation, for, as this article will show, no such single model existed.

To trace this process, this historical examination will concentrate on identifying the source of South Africa's university emulation, seek to account for it, and then examine how it was built into the very foundations of the country's first post Union universities, and from there into those institutions which were subsequently set up in their image.

To unravel the process of emulation it is first necessary to scrutinize the idea that in the 19th Century there was a prototypical British university to be replicated in Britain's colonies.

A survey of the university scene in Victorian Britain immediately makes clear that there was no uniform type of British university in Great Britain itself at this time "generalization about British universities has

not always taken account of the multi national character of the British state", R D Anderson delicately reminds us (Anderson 1995:22). But even within its chief component, England, at least three different breeds of "English" university existed by the end of the 19th Century.

In the first place were Oxford and Cambridge. Richly endowed and unashamedly elitist, even after the modernizing "revolution of the dons" in the mid 19th Century, they were in a college based category of their own, both in England and in Britain. To them London University (established in 1830) and a dozen civic universities (established in the second half of the century) offered a sharp contrast, reflecting in their ethos and structure their origin in the Industrial Revolution and the Dissenters' struggle for religious toleration. These thus constituted two further types of English universities.

North of the Tweed, the four "Ancient" Scottish universities (St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh) presented a very different class of university, reflecting roots deep in the distinctive social and cultural environment of their native land, while across the Irish Sea, in mainland Britain's first overseas colony, rival Catholic and Protestant universities added a yet further dimension to the genus "British University".

Settler elites in Britain's colonies thus had several models of British universities (or combinations thereof) to draw on when they sought to set up institutions of higher learning to cater for the maturing educational needs of their sons and (eventually) daughters. In doing so, their decision was usually the product of a mixture of their own cultural predilections, the existing level of schooling in the colony, its financial state and the distribution of the settler population. Thus, in the Thirteen American Colonies, Oxford and Cambridge had been taken as models for the nine colleges founded before 1776, while in English speaking Canada both Oxford and Edinburgh were drawn on as prototypes for new universities in the 19th Century, depending on the specific ethnicity of the founders. In Australia "hybrid" universities combining elements of both Oxford and London emerged in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide.

In the Cape Colony, with its small, scattered, ethnically mixed settler population (not until the 20th Century was serious thought given to higher education for the majority indigenous population), London University, with its federal character, was at first seen as the most appropriate model on which to build a system of tertiary education. Accordingly, the University of the Cape of Good Hope (UCGH), founded in 1873, followed the London pattern of being a purely examining institution which laid down the form and content of its degrees, but left the teaching required to prepare students for its exams to

eight independent, presumptuously titled "colleges" scattered around the colony, many of them no more than ambitious schools which aspired to turn their tiny post matriculation classes into fully fledged university colleges. As at London University, the UCGH's BA curriculum was streamed and constraining in structure, requiring most students to specialize from their second year of study.

However, the actual teaching for this degree, as provided by the eight colleges, varied enormously, depending on the ethno religious character of the particular institution. Thus, Diocesan College in rural Rondebosch and St. Andrews College in Grahams town, Anglican public schools which aimed to turn out English gentlemen, modelled their post matriculation teaching on Oxford, while others took their cue from the Scottish universities. Among these, the South African College (SAC) in central Cape Town was the foremost.

Founded in 1829 as a private boys' secondary school by Dutch and English speaking colonists, the SAC imbibed its academic ethos from the Scottish teachers who began to proliferate at the Cape from the 1820s at the initiative of a British colonial administration keen to inculcate the cultural dominance of English into the new colony. Products of an oversupply of Arts graduates by the Scottish universities, such men readily grasped work opportunities in the empire and there proudly sought to recreate the venerable educational institutions they had left behind at home. In its first 70 years, nearly 35 per cent of the SAC's grandly titled "professors" were graduates of Scotland's four universities, while once it had shed its high school classes and become exclusively a university college in 1900, this figure rose to over 40 per cent.

Not for nothing did it, in the first decade of the 20th Century, as newly arrived Jewish immigrants flocked into its classes, gain the tag of "the Scottish mission to the Jews". (It is worth noting that this label was doubly Scotch, alluding as it did not only to the Scottish character of the professorate but also to the absence of any religious barrier to admission; these were both hallmarks of the Scottish universities).

In the provision of medical training the SAC's alignment with Scotland's universities was even more explicit. Lacking the resources to offer a full medical education straightaway, in 1904 the SAC convinced the Faculties of Medicine at Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen to accept four of its first year courses as equivalent to the courses they offered in the first year of their MB, ChB degree course. Students who passed these courses at the SAC were then automatically accepted into the second year of study in Scotland. In 1912 this arrangement was taken a step further when the SAC introduced courses constituting the second year of the Scottish MB, CHB. Again these were recognized as equivalent by Edinburgh,

Glasgow and Aberdeen and as qualifying those who passed them to enter the third year of study. Nor did the transformation of the SAC in 1918 into the University of Cape Town (UCT), one of South Africa's first two teaching universities, cut the College's Caledonian umbilical cord. At its inception, Scots carried over from the SAC held hegemonic sway over the new university, both academically and administratively, with 50 per cent of the professors and most of the top administrators being products of the Scottish universities. An English born professor described a Senate meeting in the 1920s as being solid with "northern faces", with whom he jested "that something might be said for relieving his splendid isolation" (Drennan 1951:8).

It is no surprise therefore that, once freed of the UCGH's overrule, the autonomous, Caledonian dominated UCT drew heavily on the traditional Scottish university model to shape itself. Not only had UCT's leading movers and shakers come through this system themselves in the 1870s and 1880s, but they were convinced that its underlying premise that their university had to deal with poorly prepared and immature incoming students was as valid in the early 20th Century Cape as it had been in mid 19th century Scotland. Given that the average South African undergraduate was usually two years younger than his/her English counterpart, pointed out UCT's first principal, Carruthers Beattie (himself an Edinburgh graduate), "It was not possible to expect people who came to them at this age to possess that wide culture which men of the older countries had, and that had been an important consideration in drawing up the course for the BA degree in Arts" (Anon 1918:44).

Consequently, UCT turned its back on UCGH's basic degree structure and instead followed the traditional Scottish BA pattern which sought to provide a "liberal education for schoolboys" (Ashby 1966:6) via a broadly based Arts degree resting on a "tripartite alliance between philosophy, language and science" (Davie 1964:17). UCT's new 3 year BA was thus deliberately wide ranging and general in character, requiring students to include at least one language course, one philosophical course and one science course among the nine required for the degree, and at least two 2 year majors. The aim of the BA curriculum "is an all round education, with a certain amount of specialisation ... to suit various tastes", explained UCT's first Dean of Arts, himself an Aberdeen graduate (Ritchie 1918:660). The new prospectus made this intention plain: "The main idea underlying the curricula of the BA degree is to provide a wider education for the student, and at the same time to prepare him for the profession he proposes to adopt; the curricula are also sufficiently elastic to permit of specialization on the part of those students who are fitted for it" (University of Cape Town 1919:18).

Indeed, so anxious was UCT to prevent what it deemed to be premature specialization along the Oxbridge and London lines, that its regulations actively discouraged students planning to go on to the MA degree from embarking on the preliminaries for that course during their final undergraduate year (UCT Senate 1917:46 7, 56 and Annexure B). As far as Beattie was concerned, the BA ought to be "the end of a general education which I should like every one to have, after that comes the professional training" (Beattie 1926). To provide such a general education for young South Africans the traditional Scottish style first degree was tailor made. Universities like Glasgow were, in the words of one of its 19th Century graduates, "a very good place for acquiring general information and laying in a stock of general knowledge on various subjects" (Scotland 1970:331).

From this avowedly catholic perspective even a BSc in pure science was initially deemed too narrow, just as it had been in Scotland until the 1890s "a 3 year course in one science subject would mean too much specialisation in that subject for a pass degree", declared the new university's interim Science Committee in 1916 (University of Cape Town Science Committee 1916:61), and it promptly put the idea of such a "specialized" degree on ice. A student wishing to pursue a first degree in science in 1918 had therefore no option but to register for a nine credit "science BA" which required seven science courses, one in a foreign language and one in a "philosophical" subject like history, ethics and politics, logic and metaphysics or economics.

It was not long, however, before the distinct limitations of such a rigid, generalist approach became intolerable. As early as 1921 UCT's Science Faculty began to moot the reversal of its earlier decision not to offer a "too specialized" BSc in pure science. A year later this degree was introduced, though not without the assurance to Senate that this step "appears to meet the demand without compromising the general education of the student" (University of Cape Town Senate 1921:Appendix). Not surprisingly, therefore, it took another ten years for the students' call for full 3 course majors in science subjects to be accepted by UCT so as to intensify the coverage in subjects that had until then been 2 course majors. This meant that from 1932 students might do six of their nine required courses in just two subjects if they were majoring in them. The stipulation that two of their remaining three courses had to be in Arts subjects, a carry over of the principle of a broad first degree, remained in place until 1940, however.

Even in the case of a degree as specialized as the BCom, the traditional Scottish belief in the need for some general education was evident in the new curriculum. The curriculum for UCT's eleven course BCom degree closely followed Edinburgh's wide

ranging example, and included courses in at least two languages, as well as a course in history or another arts subject. The object of the course, explained its Edinburgh trained designer, UCT's professor of economics, Robert Leslie, "is not to turn out a graduate who could at once take a responsible position in a merchant's office or in the public service, or become the manager of a factory or bank, but to give such a general education as will best fit the student to receive the special practical training his vocation requires It follows that only a small part of the course in Commerce need be different from that provided in the Faculties of Arts, Science and Law" (University of Cape Town Council 1917:Annexure B).

Indeed, so concerned was Leslie about BCom students' lack of breadth, even with the new degree, that in 1924 he persuaded UCT to introduce a joint BA/BCom degree, especially for "those candidates who propose to take up the study of commerce immediately after matriculation without having any practical experience" (University of Cape Town Faculty of Commerce 1924:4). The first three years of this combined degree were devoted chiefly to Arts subjects and the last two solely to Commerce. Where UCT's attachment to the principle of a generalist first degree could not be easily upheld in the case of explicitly professional degrees subject to the approval of outside professional bodies it followed the same route taken in such circumstances by its Scottish exemplars. Its MB, CHB degree was thus almost a carbon copy of Edinburgh's, only it was one year longer, to allow for the thorough coverage of all the subjects Edinburgh deemed necessary to turn out a well rounded, Scottish style general practitioner. With words recalling the traditional Scottish predilection for the general, UCT's Aberdeen trained professor of Medicine told his students, "The aim ... was to produce competent general practitioners and to avoid any form of specialization in the undergraduate course" (Falconer 1937:9), a goal effectively perpetuated until the late 1990s. As UCT's Health Sciences prospectus put it ruefully in 2002, until the process of curriculum change began to emerge in the late 1990s, "little change or modernization of medical education had occurred since the 1920s" (University of Cape Town Faculty of Health Sciences 2002).

In the Caledonian stronghold of the Faculty of Arts student dissatisfaction with the general nature of the BA degree met with little sympathy. Though some might rail that "[O]ur range is unlimited, and our ignorance at the end almost correspondingly so", and that, "We skirt the fringe of so many subjects [...] that we enter deeply into only one or two, and our slight knowledge of the others evaporates before the next session has begun" (Rodger 1924:13), between the wars the bulk of Arts professors could not be swayed. In 1926 the Faculty actually rejected outright the proposal by an inter university conference that a limit

of two should be placed on science courses taken by Arts students, even though it was abundantly clear by then that many such students were finding even the one compulsory science course in their degree to be one too many. A student "chooses the easiest that will fit in with his time table," admitted one, devoted to it "the minimum of time and energy so as to concentrate on his own chosen subjects, and, except in rare instances, derives from [it] no benefit at all" (Rodger 1924:17).

Even when, as in the Science Faculty, third courses were introduced in the Faculty of Arts as the majors in 1932, the compulsory one course in a science subject remained in the BA curriculum. Not until 1942 was this requirement removed, primarily because of the growing recognition in the faculty that it was losing students to those faculties which offered a specialist degree that led in a very clear vocational direction. However, the requirement that all BA students had to take one course in a foreign language and one in a "philosophical" subject lingered on as an echo of the original general Scottish BA, until 1968 in the case of the latter requirement and until 1972 in the case of the former. The original 1918 description of the aim of the BA degree as "to provide a wide education" remained unchanged in the prospectus until 1978.

More recently, in 1999-2001, an attempt to re shape the BA curriculum via the introduction of more specialized and rigidly structured programmes, so that graduates would emerge with a degree which was, in the Vice Chancellor's scornful phrase, less of "a dog's breakfast of courses" (*Varsity* 1999), ran aground on the rocks of student resistance and vested departmental interests. Opposition was strongest, she declared, "among those who believed in a *laissez faire* approach which allowed students ... to choose freely from a very large array of subjects" (*Monday Paper* 1999). The 19th Century Scottish mould is not easily broken.

An equally firm and long enduring Caledonian imprint is to be found in UCT's teaching and examining procedures, activities which, initially as in Scotland engaged far more of its professors' time than research. To cover the wide spread of subjects in the curriculum, didactic, fact filled lectures on the old Scottish lines "a sort of lay preaching" (Moss, Forbes Munro & Trainor 2000:59) by superior, aloof beings were for decades a central feature of its teaching, their contents differing little from what was taught "at home". What one Oxford trained professor at UCT called "the Scottish schoolmaster professors with their hackneyed pumping in of lectures" (Murray 1987) was long the norm. "[T]here are facts to be learned ... and there are techniques to be learned", asserted one Aberdeen trained medical professor bluntly (Forman 1984:299). Descriptions of Victorian era Scottish students sitting hunched over their note books in a lecture, "scribbling fiercely in serious

silence" (Scotland 1970:336) echo precisely accounts of their counterparts' experiences at UCT two generations later. The very architecture of the seating in lecture rooms at UCT, serried rows of benches to accommodate note taking not debating, was borrowed directly from Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen.

UCT's student press of the 1930s and 1940s is studded with complaints about lecturers being "human gramophones" who dictated lectures and of students becoming "writing machines" and "stenographers". The existing system of lecturing was "utterly obsolete", fumed one student: "[N]o honest attempt [was made] on the part of the majority of professors to even experiment with less pernicious systems. As to the reason for this reluctance", he speculated with unusual historical awareness, "... one only has to realise that these professors were themselves conditioned by a generation of teachers whose whole outlook was coloured by an early Victorian upbringing". Consequently, small group discussion tutorials in the Oxbridge style were rare at UCT before the 1950s.

As unchanged as the August professorial lecture was in its translation from north of the Tweed to south of the Hex was the Scottish emphasis on examinations. This, however, was no departure from the old UCGH system under which the SAC had operated before 1918, for examinations were the very *raison d'être* of the former institution. With this institution, UCT's Scottish professorate saw little reason to tamper save to make their examinations even more frequent, once a year instead of twice in three years. In Scotland's universities in the 19th century, notes a historian of education, examinations frequently meant "word perfect regurgitation ... of lectures handed down through generations" (Scotland 1970:336). For a long time the same applied at UCT, despite recurrent student complaints. Didactic lectures and rote learnt examination answers were very closely intertwined, argued the editor of UCT's student newspaper in 1937: "[W]e work for exams entirely, and naturally prefer dictated notes on the subject to 'swot' from instead of enlightened discussions" (*UCT Tattle* 1937:2).

Nor did criticism of this examination fetish by a few members of staff avail much. Students prepared for their examinations "without ever wandering what it is all leading to or whether it is in fact leading anywhere at all", observed one independently minded lecturer (Sewell 1929:117), while another (a Cambridge graduate), in exasperation, inveighed against a situation in which "our whole educational set up is held back by being based upon the Scottish tradition where examinations are the only aim, with the result that most students barge through their examinations and drop everything immediately after leaving" (Goodwin 1948). At UCT, as elsewhere in South

Africa's educational system, what one UCT student called "examination idolatry" (Jacques 1932:68) was firmly in place.

Moreover, the effects of the thoroughgoing, general Scottish influence implanted into UCT, both explicitly and implicitly in its foundation years, did not end there. UCT's decisions on its own degrees, teaching and examinations had an unusually large multiplier effect because of its seminal role (with Stellenbosch University, that like minded "Scottish educational mission", this time to Afrikaners) at the most formative moment in the history of South Africa's university system. In 1916-17 the future heads of these two universities, J.C. Beattie and G.C. Cillie (both graduates of Edinburgh, it should be noted) dominated the state appointed University Statutes Commission's decision making on the creation of an academic framework for South Africa's new universities. "I wonder whether anyone dreamed what an Augean stable you were turning us loose on", wrote the Commission's secretary to the Under Secretary of Education as he reviewed the Commission's foundation laying achievements (Boucher 1974:176). As a result, its rationalizing decisions in effect set in stone the structure of the country's university degrees and the consequent form of the accompanying teaching and examination. To a significant degree, these Caledonian moulded structures have remained broadly in place ever since, taking on an almost unquestioned, normative status in the country's higher education environment. A wry remark by UCT's Chancellor, General Smuts, after he had conferred an honorary doctorate on Beattie in 1939 is very illuminating in this regard: "[H]e wondered whether the Scotsmen had been assimilated by the country, or whether they had assimilated the country." (*Cape Times* 1939)

Having made this point about the pervasiveness of Scottish influences on UCT in particular and South Africa's early universities in general, it is essential to ask exactly what the wider implications of this were. To do so, it is important to realize that the "Scottish influence" needs to be seen not as a single entity which remained fixed over time, but as a cluster of elements which might be emulated wholly or in part and which were themselves subject to change. Such a perspective reveals that in the late 19th Century, just as the men who were to shape UCT and Stellenbosch were leaving their Scottish universities, that system itself began to undergo profound changes which, cumulatively, transformed its traditional character. Flowing from the watershed Universities Act of 1889, its degree structure and teaching practices began to be overhauled to meet the burgeoning administrative needs of the British Empire and the scientific and technical needs of industry. A common university entrance examination was introduced, a more specialized first (honours) degree was instituted with a status higher than the old general BA degree,

the stipulation that a "philosophical" subject had to form part of a first degree was removed, the overall dominance of Arts in the university was reduced, small group tutorials gradually began to be introduced to supplement formal lectures and non professorial academics began to be acknowledged as worthy lecturers in their own right. In short, under pressure from the central British state, Scotland's traditional university system was slowly reshaped to accord with the new industrial society which had sprung up about it.

Yet, it must be stressed that it was not this new style Scottish system which was transplanted to the Cape, but the very traditional system which it was replacing, one which, in the words of a recent historian of Scotland, put "ferocious stress on social conformity so characteristic of Scottish civil society" (Smout 1986:218). Paradoxically, therefore, just as this old

university system was being discarded in Scotland, key elements of it were being inserted into the very foundations of the new system being set up in South Africa. The South African university system thus started out its modern life on a basis which was in the throes of being discarded in its very place of origin. Moreover, once in place, this anachronistic foundation was difficult to reform. To apply a crisp Churchillian insight from another field: we shape our universities; thereafter they shape us.

The implications of this for the kind of student turned out by the South African university system since early in the 20th Century have only just begun to be confronted by educational policy makers in South Africa. This article suggests that to do so effectively, it is essential that they understand the circumstances in which the system was originally introduced.

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