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Rich and popular American cousin is not without flaws

Harry Lewis

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Oxbridge could learn a thing or two from Harvard... and vice versa, says Harry Lewis

The colonists of New England were a well-educated lot. More than a hundred who arrived before 1640 had Oxford or Cambridge university degrees, nearly one for every 30 families. As soon as they had provided for shelter, worship and food, they founded Harvard University "to advance Learning and to perpetuate it to Posterity".

For the next 370 years, American and British universities evolved in separate social and political ecosystems. Today, Oxford and Cambridge still lead their peers in the UK, and their fragile acorn, Harvard, has matured into a mighty oak. Yet having grown in American soil, Harvard barely resembles Oxford and Cambridge.

Harvard is stronger than ever, while Oxford and Cambridge worry about their future. Harvard enjoys abundant cash, constant competition and a generally effective governance structure. Oxford and Cambridge need more cash, competition and centralised governance. The extraordinary recent events at Harvard - the resignation of Lawrence Summers after the shortest term of any president since 1862 - invite reflection on Harvard's peculiar riches.

Has the abundance of Harvard's assets clouded its vision?

Perhaps Harvard has too much cash, competition and centralisation for its own good, while Oxford and Cambridge need more of each. Harvard's endowment is about £15 billion. The Oxford and Cambridge endowments combined total at most £6 billion. Much of Harvard's endowment is earmarked for specific purposes, such as the salary of the athletic director or a professorship of Christian morals. Donors have bought immortality, and the assurance that no misguided future administration could eliminate their favoured programmes.

Harvard tends to expand its activities rather than concentrate its resources, so fields of study and research proliferate even as the student body stays the same size. Harvard also does not give away what families are willing to purchase. The "sticker price" of attending Harvard is about £24,000, but the admissions office does not consider ability to pay.

Students unable to afford the price are given scholarship aid. Families with incomes of less than £33,000 a year pay nothing. So prices seem staggering, but both poor and rich vie for admission. Harvard thus cultivates loyalty from alumni, who give back so that others can enjoy the privileges they had. The best education in the UK, by contrast, is offered at low prices even to the wealthiest students. Only recently have UK universities begun to cultivate a familial sense of responsibility for future generations. Their drastic discounting may not be socially beneficial.

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As well as higher fees, British universities need better tax incentives for donations. Personal income given to Harvard is not taxed at all - the UK gift aid system is far less advantageous to potential donors. US families sometimes give away even the money they plan to live on - Harvard manages it gratis and returns the income during the donors' lifetimes. Last year, 40 per cent of Harvard alumni made donations, well below Princeton University's 60 per cent but far ahead of Cambridge's 10 per cent.

But with its abundance Harvard has grown incautious in its use of money.

Aggressive spending decisions have meant projects have started in advance of the donations needed to pay for them. Several science buildings will leave Harvard in deficit for years, an ironic legacy of a president who was once Treasury Secretary. When Harvard undertook to teach Russia capitalism, it had to pay £14.5 million in penalties to the US Government after project personnel were found to have made self-serving Russian investments.

Bureaucracy surrounding the president and deans has become bloated. As Harvard's endowment has come to exceed the gross domestic product of some nations, its operations have become disconnected from its educational purposes.

Harvard faces heavy competition. The need to attract the best students improves the quality of undergraduate life and restrains the tendency of universities to concentrate resources on research. My colleagues telephone newly approved applicants to explain why they should attend Harvard rather than Princeton or Stanford. Superb students are rare. Better students make better professors and enrich the experience of their peers.

The Oxford and Cambridge practice of allowing students to apply to only one of the two institutions is not only incomprehensible to Americans, it would be illegal in the States. US anti-trust laws, set up to prevent collusion among steel manufacturers, analogously bar universities from anticompetitive policies.

The global faculty market works the same way, as Oxford and Cambridge know.

Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology used to agree not to lure each other's professors but stopped the practice before the Government forced them to. Some fear the effects of a market-driven salary structure, but competition has doubtless contributed to the strength of US universities.

But while competition generally breeds excellence, Harvard too often tries to be first, rather than best. Its passion to win every contest blinds it to its larger purpose. Are we building a campus pub or a study-abroad programme just because other places have them, for instance? Harvard is even hiring someone to oversee "branding efforts", as though polishing our Veritas logo is more important than improving our pedagogy. As the strongest American university, Harvard should reserve its competitiveness for things that matter to its scholarly mission rather than succumb to silly image-building.

A few years ago, when Harvard briefly fell to second place in one national league table, some waggish students observed that the misfortune would teach us humility, which we badly needed. Indeed, they thought, we should strive to be number one in humility. Under Summers, such ambitions seem less ironic. Harvard now resembles an advertising agency for itself, its educational values obscured or missing.

Another of Harvard's assets is its centralisation, although by American standards it is fairly decentralised. Money is not easily shifted from the medical faculty to the divinity faculty, and the classicists'

recommendations about hiring classics professors have generally been respected.

Academic innovation bubbles up in this system, rather than being imposed autocratically from above.

But by Oxford and Cambridge standards, Harvard is highly centralised. The governance arrangements over Harvard's ten faculties are simple compared with Oxford's 39 colleges or Cambridge's 31. A single Harvard dean determines financial aid policy for all undergraduates, with only minimal approval by a small governing board. Undergraduate admissions and fundraising are efficiently centralised operations. And because Harvard's money is pooled, its investment managers have opportunities unavailable to Oxford and Cambridge colleges.

A significant source of Harvard's recent turmoil was the president's dramatic effort to centralise power further. At times, he threatened departments, and even entire faculties, with destructive reorganisations.

Taxes on the faculties rose to give the president more discretionary funds.

Resistance to centralisation has been caricatured as the inmates wanting to run the asylum, but professors were mainly resisting Summers's unenlightened academic opinions. The next president will likely have a role more resembling the "general superintendence over all its concerns" provided in the university's statutes.

In 1894, philosophy professor George Santayana reflected on Harvard's debt to England: "[In the] English academic tradition schools and colleges... contained the student's whole life, and they allowed a free and just development to all his faculties.... To this system is due that beauty, individuality, and wealth of associations which make English colleges so beloved and venerable. They have a value which cannot be compensated or represented by any lists of courses or catalogues of libraries - the value of a rounded and traditional life."

Harvard's wealth and power have distracted it from its mission. I hope it can recover the deeper sense of educational purpose that was its most important inheritance.

Harry R. Lewis is Gordon McKay professor of computer science at Harvard University and served as dean of Harvard College. His book *Excellence Without a Soul* will be published by PublicAffairs in May, £15.50.

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