



THE WOLFSON FOUNDATION

'The Future of Higher Education'

Professor Sir David Cannadine, Dodge Professor of History, Princeton University

Lecture given at the University of Glasgow, 1 October 2015, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Wolfson Foundation

Chancellor, First Minister, Dame Janet, Distinguished Guests, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I feel enormously flattered and privileged to be speaking tonight, here in the City of Glasgow, and here in the Bute Hall of the University of Glasgow. When I was doing some background preparation for this event, I learned that this magnificent space has always been used for 'examinations, church services, graduations and other great occasions.' Well tonight there are no examinations, no church services, and no graduations; but this is undeniably a great occasion, as we mark the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the Wolfson Foundation, and celebrate its extraordinary contribution to higher education in general and to Scottish higher education in particular, and we do so in the very city where, during the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Wolfson family began what would eventually become its great dynastic adventure and its great philanthropic endeavour.

But first, and fittingly, let me say a few words about another, earlier, and perhaps unexpected Scottish philanthropist of higher education. As I am sure you all know, Bute Hall was inaugurated in 1884 as part of the new campus that was established here at Gilmorehill when the University of Glasgow gave up its cramped inner city site and moved to these more expansive westerly acres. Designed by Sir Gilbert Scott, in the Gothic Revival style, the new university building was the largest public structure put up in Britain since the completion of the Houses of Parliament. But as so often with such grandiose construction schemes, there was trouble along the way. The initial estimated cost was £250,000, one half of which came from public subscriptions, the rest from a Treasury grant. But the building costs escalated, and the recession of 1878, which hit Scotland hard, and as a result of which the City of Glasgow Bank collapsed, made further fund raising exceptionally difficult.

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Meanwhile, the University had received two major benefactions that enabled some of the construction work to continue, albeit in a scaled back manner. One was a bequest from Charles Randolph, a former Glasgow student and later a partner in a leading shipbuilding and marine engineering firm, for £60,000: hence Randolph Hall. The other was a donation from John Patrick Crichton-Stuart, third Marquess of Bute, for £48,000: hence Bute Hall. (The modern-day equivalent of these figures would probably be in the region of £20 million.) This second gift was far from being the sum total of Bute's interest in, and generosity towards, higher education in Scotland, for his benefactions to the University of St Andrews, including a chair of anatomy, a medical hall, and a students' union building, were not only intrinsically substantial, but also strategically crucial in helping to revitalize and preserve the university from the predatory ambitions of the nearby Dundee College.

Across the last two hundred years, aristocratic gifts to British Universities have been relatively rare: the Fitzwilliam bequest to Cambridge is one example, and the Duke of Devonshire's benefaction to establish the Cavendish Laboratory at the same institution is another. But I am not aware of any titled grandee who gave as generously to higher education as did the Marquess of Bute, and this was only one of the ways in which he was undoubtedly one of the most extraordinary men of his generation. With an income largely derived from the Glamorgan Coalfield and Cardiff's docks and real estate, he was fabulously rich. Yet although a beneficiary of the modernizing forces of the industrial revolution, he preferred the medieval world to his own day: hence Bute's conversion to Catholicism, and his extraordinary career as a patron of architecture, which resulted in such astonishing creations as Cardiff Castle in Wales, and Mount Stuart here in Scotland. (I should add, parenthetically, but perhaps not inappropriately here in Glasgow, that Bute was unusual among his class in being a strong believer in Scottish Home Rule.)

If you were to think of another late nineteenth century figure, who could also boast Glaswegian connections, but who was about as unlike the third Marquess of Bute as it was possible for another human being to be, then you might well be inclined to come up with the name of Solomon Wolfson, described in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography as 'a poor Orthodox Jewish immigrant from Russian Poland', who had been born in 1868. Sometime in the 1890s, or roughly a decade after the completion of Bute Hall, Solomon Wolfson and his wife arrived in Glasgow fleeing, like many of their co-religionists, the pogroms and persecutions of Russian Poland. The appeal of Glasgow was partly that Solomon's brother and family were already settled here; but he may also have been attracted by the fact that it was the second city of the British Empire; and that in addition to the shipyards, it had a strong manufacturing and retailing sector to which he was much drawn. Solomon Wolfson established himself successfully as a maker of picture frames and furniture, his business prospered, and he eventually became a Justice of the Peace.

In 1897, three years before the death of the Marquess of Bute, Isaac Wolfson was born, the second of three sons and one of the eleven surviving children of Solomon Wolfson and his wife Nealia. His early years were spent in The Gorbals, his formal education was slight, and at the age of fourteen he was set to work to augment the family income. This was scarcely a promising start in life. But Isaac Wolfson also (as his ODNB entry went on to say) ‘had the advantage of a strong religious home life and upbringing, which instilled in him the virtues of thrift, self-help and charity; and these characteristics helped him to rise above and to overcome the social deprivation which surrounded him, and they stayed with him all his life.’ And what a life it was! Having assisted in his father’s workshop, Isaac Wolfson took to the road as a salesman, he headed south of the border, he took over an undistinguished mail order company eventually named Great Universal Stores, which he soon turned into an extraordinarily profitable enterprise, and he eventually acquired a host of other retailing interests.

Yet although Sir Isaac Wolfson, as he would later become, successfully established himself as a major player in the business, financial and social world of London, and although he accumulated many honours including a baronetcy and a Fellowship of the Royal Society, he remained abidingly loyal to the city of his birth, which is why it is so fitting and appropriate that I am delivering this lecture here tonight. His favourite song was ‘I belong to Glasgow’, which according to his son Leonard he always rendered in a strong Scottish accent; and the proudest moment of Isaac Wolfson’s life came in 1971 when he was made an Honorary Freeman of this City – the one distinction incidentally, and despite their un-alikeness in virtually every other respect, that he shared with the third Marquess of Bute, who had been similarly recognized in 1891.

But Isaac Wolfson was not merely interested in making money (although he was very good at it), or in enjoying the recognition that came from so doing (although he received plenty of it): he was also, and as befitted someone of his upbringing, committed to charitable endeavour, and interested in giving money away – and it was for his philanthropic generosity that he, like the Marquess of Bute, was given this city’s highest honour. Hence in 1955, exactly sixty years ago, his decision to establish, with his wife Edith and his son Leonard, the Wolfson Foundation. Isaac Wolfson was chairman of the Foundation from 1963 until 1972; his son Leonard succeeded him and was chairman until his death in 2010; and since then the Foundation has been chaired by Leonard Wolfson’s daughter Dame Janet Wolfson de Botton – a remarkable record of family engagement, involvement and commitment across three generations which is, so far as I know, unequalled by any other great foundation on either side of the Atlantic (and the fourth generation is already showing itself eager and willing to take its turn).

From the outset, the Wolfson Foundation focused its philanthropic efforts in three areas: science and medicine, the arts and humanities, and education, especially higher education – areas of attainment and endeavour, incidentally, of which neither Isaac nor Leonard Wolfson had first hand experience or benefit, which perhaps explains why they came to value them so highly and to support them so generously. Across the six decades in which the Foundation has been in existence, it has disbursed slightly more than £800 million (which probably amounts to at least double that in 2015 values). During the same period, grants to Scottish higher education have been slightly short of £60 million in current values (and just shy of £120 million in 2015 values), while grants to all Scottish organizations have been more than £80 million in current values (and £150 million in 2015 values). And since most of this money was disbursed before I myself became a Wolfson trustee, I hope I may be allowed to observe that in giving thus generously to Scottish causes and institutions, the Foundation has fittingly acknowledged the contribution of Glasgow in particular, and also recognized the importance of Scotland in general, in the Wolfson family's remarkable history and trajectory. Indeed, if the calculations are made per capita, the Foundation has given more money to Scotland than to England.

One hundred years before the third Marquess of Bute made his great gift to this university, and before Solomon Wolfson arrived here in Glasgow, the higher education scene across what was just about to become the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland looked very different from how it looks today. As you will not need me to remind you, there were four ancient universities here in Scotland, namely Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews; there were only two in England, namely Oxford and Cambridge; there was only one in Ireland at Trinity College, Dublin; and there were none whatsoever in Wales. On the whole, Oxford and Cambridge existed to educate the sons of the aristocracy, the gentry and the clergy, and to that end they focused particularly on classics and mathematics. By contrast, the Scottish universities taught a much broader curriculum, and they drew their undergraduates from a much wider spectrum of society, and they were also far stronger than Oxford or Cambridge in providing professional training in medicine and the law.

Not surprisingly, a higher percentage of Scots attended university than did their brethren in England, and this would remain true throughout the nineteenth century (although in both cases it was in fact a tiny percentage of the population). And while, during the eighteenth century, Oxford and Cambridge had undergone a long period of intellectual torpor, memorably described by Edward Gibbon, the Scottish Universities became the focus and the forcing house for the great intellectual flowering of the Scottish Enlightenment. But during the nineteenth century the balance of intellectual power between English and Scottish universities began to move the other way: partly because of the establishment of University College and of Kings College in London (albeit to some degree set up in emulation of the Scottish university model, rather than Oxbridge); and partly because of the creation of the new civic universities in

Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Bristol and Birmingham, all of them dependent on the local support of businessman and industrialists: the shipowners and chemical manufacturers of Liverpool, the Nonconformist entrepreneurs of Birmingham, the cotton-ocracy of Manchester, the master cutlers of Sheffield, the Fry and Wills families in Bristol, and so on.

Here in Scotland, the story was rather different. Then, as now, this country possessed a university system legally distinct from that of England, and separate legislation was passed in 1858 and 1889, laying down a four year curriculum, broadening the range of subjects taught, and allowing the admission of women. Whether these reforms were an overdue effort to bring up to date a national system that had stagnated since the golden years of the Scottish Enlightenment, or whether they were an English conspiracy to take over Scottish higher education and to integrate it into a slowly-evolving British higher education sector remains a subject of vexed debate, on which it would not be appropriate for me to comment tonight. But what is clear is that while there was some support from the local business community for the University of Glasgow's move from the inner city to the outskirts, and also for the fledgling college of Dundee, Scottish higher education did not benefit from the wave of local entrepreneurial enthusiasm which in England underpinned the granting of full university charters to the civic colleges during the 1900s.

What did this mean in terms of the composition of the student body and the nature of the financial support of Scottish universities in the 1900s? As a result of the reforms of 1858 and 1889, the traditional route from parish school to university had been replaced by a secondary school ladder, but this meant an extension rather than a decline of opportunity: by the 1900s there were more working class and lower middle class undergraduates attending Scottish universities than there had been during the 1860s, and certainly more than were attending English universities. As for their finances: during the mid 1900s, the four Scottish universities obtained roughly one third of their income from state grants; endowments provided another twenty per cent (though the figure was much higher at St Andrews, in part thanks to Lord Bute); and student fees provided slightly less than a quarter of the income at St Andrews, more than one third at Aberdeen, and over half at Edinburgh and here in Glasgow. Note, then, the varied sources of income of Scotland's universities at that earlier time, which provides an interesting historical perspective on the current debate about the funding of higher education.

The result of these varied and differing nineteenth century developments in England and Scotland meant that by the first decade of the twentieth century, there was in existence something approximating to a national higher education sector across the United Kingdom, though it was neither sufficiently rational nor sufficiently coherent to be described as a higher education system. To begin with, there were three very different versions of universities on offer: there was the Oxbridge model, which was deemed to be collegial, tutorial and – at least allegedly -- character-forming; there was the alternative provided by the Scottish universities

and by the University of London, which was metropolitan, professional and meritocratic, and with most students living at home; and there were the new civic universities in the great industrial cities of England, which often provided practical courses connected to local industries, and which again catered to undergraduates who were living locally. In varying proportions, all these universities drew their incomes from the state, from philanthropy and endowment, and from fees; and in terms of its funding contribution, and its regulatory involvement, the British state was by no means the dominant player or force.

Such was higher education in the United Kingdom on the eve of the First World War, and it continued essentially un-altered in its size, its scale, its scope and financing until the end of the Second World War. The state remained more of an onlooker than an actively engaged overseer or regulator: to be sure, the University Grants Commission was set up in 1919, but by the 1930s, it was only disbursing two million pounds annually. The finances of most universities remained fragile, not because they were excessively reliant on one income stream, for the mix remained that of government, fees and philanthropy and endowment, but because the overall numbers were still small. On the eve of the Second World War, only three per cent of the British population that was of undergraduate age was actually attending university, which helps explain why higher education scarcely impinged on government or public opinion or the media. And while the Second World War brought university-trained scientists closer than ever before to the heart of government, and graduates in the humanities to the corridors of power as temporary civil servants and to Bletchley as code-breakers, the fact remains that no one, contemplating the higher education scene in 1945, would have predicted the extraordinary roller coaster ride -- of change and expansion, reform and regulation, crisis and controversy, political interference and media attention -- that would characterize British higher education across the decades since then.

From the late 1940s, the pace of university growth across the United Kingdom began to accelerate in a way that had not been true since the 1890s and the 1900s, but this time it happened with the growing involvement and financial commitment of government. This was partly driven by a new and increasingly widespread belief that higher education could make a significant contribution to economic growth and performance (there's nothing new about recent claims to that effect), which meant that if Britain was to retain its position as a major world power, it needed more university trained scientists and technologists. But it was also that in an era that witnessed the rise of 'the affluent society' and the widespread provision of secondary education, there was an unprecedented demand for university places. So while in 1939 there had been only 50,000 students in British universities, the number had more than doubled to 113,000 by 1961, which meant an increase from three to seven per cent of the population that was of undergraduate age. And it was in this expansive time that the UGC decided it could finance further expansion, and fifteen new universities in Britain were opened or planned

before the Robbins Report was published in 1963 (Sussex, for instance, opened in 1961, two years earlier).

Although it is too rarely recognized, the Robbins Report did not initiate this first great phase of post-war university expansion in Britain; rather, it justified it in the famous phrase that 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and wish to do so'; and the report in general, and this statement in particular, were welcomed by the leaders of both major political parties. Robbins also emphasized that with the growing availability of mass secondary schooling, the demand for higher education would certainly continue to increase, and would probably do so for twenty years and perhaps even for sixty. In fact, no new universities were founded in Britain between 1969 and 1992; and the 1970s were an unhappy decade for higher education, with a labour market overstocked with graduates, with unprecedented student unrest, with correspondingly unprecedented media attention and criticism, and with general economic misery. Nevertheless, by 1980, there were more than twice as many universities in Britain as there had been in 1945, and student numbers, at 300,000 had almost tripled compared to what they had been twenty years before.

From 1979, the Thatcher government was in power, determined to make deep cuts in public expenditure in general, and in university funding in particular, not least because the Prime Minister did not believe that investment in higher education was a good use of public money. Moreover, as someone who regarded academics as little more than a self-perpetuating, self-regarding vested interest, Thatcher was no less determined to reduce university autonomy and to increase government control. Hence the savage cuts which began with an 11 per cent reduction in 1981, which were not only financially damaging but were also a severe blow to academic morale from which universities have never quite recovered. Hence the imposition in 1986 of the Research Assessment Exercise, which aimed to measure the quality of research carried out in different university departments, and to allocate future research funding on that basis. Hence, between 1988 and 1992, the abolition of the University Grants Committee and the creation of separate Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales, which greatly increased the power of government to influence and control universities by making funds dependent upon compliance in carrying out various reforms or in meeting specific targets; and hence the upgrading of thirty-odd polytechnics, many of them created by the Labour Government during the 1960s, into universities.

This combination of reduced government funding, increased government regulation and control, and a massive expansion in the number of universities was exceptionally destabilizing. At the same time, from the late 1980s onwards, and somewhat to the surprise and regret of Thatcher and some of her colleagues, student numbers began once again to increase dramatically. This was partly because the creation of the GCSE greatly increased the number of

sixteen year olds taking an exam that made it much easier for more pupils to stay on at school and thus consider applying to university, which many of them did. It was also because Sir Keith Joseph's successor at the Department of Education, Kenneth Baker, was more in favour of widening participation and of expanding undergraduate numbers than his predecessor had been. Early in 1989, he declared that by the end of the century, the participation rate for those of undergraduate age in higher education should be thirty per cent. In fact that target was reached in 1991, and it represented a doubling of the participation rate that had held constant since the early 1970s. Only by driving down unit costs, which meant holding salaries down and increasing the student-staff ratio, and by a belated but inadequate increase in the education budget, was it possible to sustain such an unprecedented level of growth.

Then in 1997 came the Dearing Report, the advent of the Labour Government, and the imposition of student fees, initially of £1,000. Participation rates began to increase again, approaching forty per cent of those of undergraduate age by 2003, and this was accompanied by a government commitment to a target of fifty per cent, which no political party has since disavowed, and which has almost been reached. The result has been the creation for the first time of a truly mass system of higher education, encompassing a wider social spectrum, and many more women, part-time students, mature students and post graduates, than ever before. In England, the upper level of tuition fees was raised to £3,000 in 2004, and in the aftermath of the Browne Review, that level was raised again in 2012 to £9,000 a year. But even as such fees and such increases have aroused much political opposition, it is widely believed in some quarters that fees will have to be raised further if the full economic cost of higher education is to be met. Here in Scotland, by contrast, the recent story has been very different. Following devolution, tuition fees were abolished, initially being replaced by the Scottish graduate endowment; but that, too, was in turn abolished in 2008. With an increasingly devolved government, a separate funding council and a fundamentally different policy towards higher education funding, it seems as though the trajectory of Scottish higher education is once again, and increasingly, diverging from what is happening in England.

Perhaps the most important point to emerge from this brief and breathless general survey is the extraordinary transformation that took place in British higher education, from the late 1940s to the second half of the 2010s, from a narrow and generally exclusive system to a mass system, following exactly the same sort of transition that had occurred in secondary education a generation earlier. A second point to note is that across this whole period, higher education has been in an almost constant and continuous state of change: there has never been a time since 1945 which could plausibly be deemed to have been fixed or settled or the norm, even though successive generations of undergraduates may indeed think that that was how it was during their time at university. Finally, it is important to note that while the history of British and English and Scottish higher education has its own specificities and peculiarities, there is much in the story that I have unfolded that is paralleled and replicated and reflected

elsewhere. The transition from elite to mass higher education has been a widespread trend throughout the post war western world. Criticisms of ever more intrusive government have been as common in New Zealand or in Australia as they have been in Britain. And anxiety over student fees, student loans and student debt is much greater in the United States than it is here in the United Kingdom.

What then, in the light of the historical and comparative perspective I have sought to provide, are the challenges facing higher education today, not just in Scotland, but more broadly?

The first is surely the issue of how such a system of mass higher education is funded. So far as I am aware, there is no precedent in the entire history of the world for giving higher education to half the population of who are of undergraduate age, and while that is undoubtedly an admirable development in many ways, it is also a very expensive one. Mass higher education is very costly. And, in the British case at least, the commitment to mass higher education was made, in a typically back-to-front way, before anyone had actually worked out how it was to be paid for -- or who was to pay for it. I realize these are exceptionally vexed and controversial issues, over which passions run understandably high. But as the precedent provided by Scottish universities during the 1900s makes plain, there are basically three ways of funding higher education: state support, endowment and philanthropy, and student fees. So far as I know, no one has come up with any viable alternative, which in practice means that debate and disagreement essentially focus on what should be the balance between these three alternative revenue streams.

Different countries, and different types of universities, strike that balance differently. American Ivy League universities have huge endowments, which mean they can give financial aid to poor students, even as they also charge high fees to those who can afford it, and also receive large amounts of federal funding for the sciences. American state universities by comparison, have in recent years seen a massive reduction in state funding and a corresponding increase in student fees, and that is where most of the spiraling US student debt is incurred. It has been argued that British universities also became too heavily dependent on government funding in the years after 1945, and that they have suffered for it since the 1980s: hence their increasing efforts at fund raising and their general welcome (at least in England) for higher student fees. But it also seems far from clear that the current English arrangement, whereby direct government funding to universities is being reduced, with the cost of higher education ostensibly shifted to the payment of student fees, yet with debts underwritten by the government, and many probably never to be repaid: it seems far from likely that this somewhat bizarre financial merry-go-round is in fact either sufficient or sustainable.

Moreover, and as Alison Richard, the former Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University once remarked, universities are stronger places insofar as they can draw on diverse streams of income, rather than being excessively dependent on one single funding source. This is partly

because fee income, philanthropic gifts and grants from the state all fluctuate, but they rarely do so together. So while one goes down, a second may hold up and the third may increase, which means it is much better to have three such income streams than to be insecurely dependent on one. But in addition, excessive dependence on any one all carries serious risks. Revenue largely derived from student fees turns undergraduates into consumers and faculty into service providers, but that is not the best way to promote education or learning or research. Philanthropy can come with strings, or be ethically suspect, while huge amounts of alumni giving may give some graduates too much say in university affairs. But it may be that the greatest risk comes from excessive reliance on state funding which since the 1980s, in Britain, Australia and New Zealand, has meant ever more intrusive government regulation and regimentation. Yet it cannot be too often stressed that universities are above all places of imagination, creativity and innovation, and for that, they need all the flexibility and all the freedom they can get.

I turn now to a second issue: namely what is a mass system of higher education, as distinct from an elite system of higher education, actually for? Like the matter of university funding, this subject was not thought through before the decision was taken to increase student numbers dramatically. Should it be (to borrow one phrase) 'utilitarian and useful', giving people training and qualifications so they can get a better job, or should it be (to borrow another) 'utopian and useless', opening minds, increasing understanding, broadening horizons, helping people to become better human beings and citizens? These questions have been posed, and these alternatives have been posited, for at least two hundred years, but in a world of mass higher education, these interrogatives and these debates seem more urgent and more insistent than ever. But the answers are far from clear or helpful. In England, universities are no longer overseen by the Department of Education, but by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, which is, I suppose, one form of an answer. Yet now as in the past, it is not at all clear that the overriding purpose of universities is, or should be, to teach and to train people in such a way that once they get a job, they will be able to increase the nation's economic performance; and nor is it self-evidently sensible to see universities primarily as places for awarding people qualifications for jobs which, it all too often turns out, do not actually exist.

Finally, there is what I suspect is the barely-begun impact of the IT and of the digital revolution on teaching and learning and research, and again, this is not a challenge – or an opportunity -- confined to Scotland. There are some who deplore the advent of MOOCs and on-line learning, which they see as a threat to the human and humane interaction between students and faculty that they believe to be the very essence of a university education; which threatens the end of the campus university, with its halls of residence, its lecture theatres, its libraries and laboratories, as we know it; which by reducing the number of people actually teaching will make educational provision less diverse and more uniform; and which offers a low-grade, low-level education, where the non-completion rate is extraordinarily high. Against this,

there are those who argue that the digital revolution will drastically reduce the spiraling costs of higher education, which must surely be something to applaud, and that it will also massively increase global access, of which the same should be said. Either way, I do not think there can be any doubt that over the next decade, the impact of the digital revolution on higher education, in Scotland as elsewhere, is going to be by turns profound, transformative, disruptive and creative.

All this brings us a long way from the late nineteenth century and from Lord Bute and Solomon Wolfson, to whom digital technology, on-line learning and MOOCS would surely have been inconceivable and incomprehensible. And the globalized world that higher education has increasingly become in recent decades would surely have been equally baffling and strange to both of them. But that is, undeniably, how and where things now are. More than ever, Scottish universities, like those in any other advanced country, are simultaneously located in one particular nation, but are also increasingly international in their orientation and in their aspiration: in their research and their teaching, in their recruitment of faculty and students, and in their collective sense of what they are and what they do. As has so often been the case for universities since the 1940s, these are yet again worrying and challenging times, but they are also hopeful and exciting times, with problems a-plenty but also with corresponding possibilities to match.

Nor should it ever be forgotten that, taking the long view, Scotland's universities are one of this country's supreme achievements, outstanding successes, and greatest glories – as evidenced only yesterday when the Times Higher Education Supplement placed five of this nation's universities in the world's top two hundred. And in supporting them so enthusiastically and so generously across sixty years, the Wolfson Foundation has not only repaid many times over the debt the family owes to this city for the shelter and the refuge it gave earlier generations in hard times and difficult circumstances; it has also been unstinting in its commitment to academic excellence and in its recognition of outstanding scholarly achievement here in Scotland. There is, then, tonight, much to be grateful for, much to celebrate, and also much work still to do. And so I end these remarks in the only way I can, as I say: Thank you Glasgow; Happy birthday Wolfson; Long may Scotland's universities flourish and thrive and prosper.