

A CASE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR: AN INTERVIEW WITH HENRIK FYRST KRISTENSEN, VICE CHANCELLOR OF KNIGHTSBRIDGE UNIVERSITY, DENMARK

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INTRODUCTION

Knightsbridge University¹ is one of a small handful of private universities operating outside the state system in Denmark. Founded in 1991 by Henrik Fyrst Kristensen, who remains its Vice Chancellor, its mission was straightforward; to create an international institution operating primarily via the then-emerging technology of distance learning that would cater for the mature, mid-career professional. Offering taught and research programmes in a wide variety of subject areas, the University has produced graduates including royalty, senior diplomats and leaders in the business world and attracted a distinguished adjunct faculty, many of whom also teach at mainstream universities. Amongst the disciplines for which it is now best known are Military Studies and Intelligence, Security and Terrorism. Knightsbridge has remained determinedly elitist in its admissions policy and general approach; operating as a counterblast to the open admissions policies of its Danish state counterparts.

The interview was conducted in November and December 2004 by email and telephone and is reproduced by permission of both Professor Kersey (JK) and Professor Henrik Fyrst Kristensen (HFK).

THE INTERVIEW

JK: Danish education in 1991 was dominated by egalitarian principles, and this factor has intensified considerably in subsequent years. In setting out a deliberately elite vision for Knightsbridge, you were very consciously swimming against the state-originated tide. How did you conceive this mission and what specifically did you set out to achieve in Knightsbridge's foundation?

HFK: Knightsbridge University originated from the concept of supplying a niche market. There are providers aplenty for the mainstream. There are providers for a range of non-mainstream require-

ments. But there are only very few quality providers for the mature individual with relevant experience who entertains higher education from a different motivation basis to the majority of students. Denmark was never a target market, although certainly a good deal of inspiration came from the way higher education is organised here. Knightsbridge represents the diametrically opposite stance to the Danish public university system. Small, flexible, market orientated, accessible, free from political dictate. Granted, free also from subsidies and the possibilities that would bring, but you cannot have everything.

The purpose is to be and remain independent of influence by external authorities. We wish to retain the right to decide what we offer, to whom, where and when. We do not wish to be dictated specific entry or gender quotas, minimum or maximum student numbers, academic year dates, exam dates, or anything else. This desire for total autonomy determines our range of options relative to external bodies. In short, we have no options.

Summing up, our approach is a pragmatic one, albeit one solidly supported by both philosophy and dogma. We have identified and reasonably accurately described a potential market segment, and have developed products and processes to serve this segment. We have been quite successful in attracting highly accomplished individuals to our programmes, individuals for whom the award pursued with us is not necessarily the pinnacle of their life so far, but most often simply one of many milestones in the life of a high achiever.

The quality and integrity of our programmes and provision is borne out by the high number of candidates referred by graduates or other candidates. When people in senior positions in their respective organisations, people used to reviewing options, competent at sorting the wheat from the chaff, contact us on the basis of recommendation by their colleagues, there is no better feeling.

Quality and integrity are also supported and documented every day by the associated adjunct faculty, working to the internal procedures in place. It is self-evident that reputable academics would never agree to collaborate with us if our processes were not at least on a par with what they already know and are used to working to. This is really where the main element of validation originates, in the constant scrutiny of our processes by people who are essentially external to the organisation, people who have nothing to gain and a great deal to lose by not identifying and constantly promoting best practice in our systems.

JK: Do you see the mission of Knightsbridge as being characterised by a dynamism born of an independent agenda, or one that is primarily the product of a conscious attempt to react to developments in the state sector?

HFK: This is not a matter of responding to “the system”, but of being not compatible with it, and having no wish to change to achieve such compatibility. Even if compatibility existed which allowed us to be part of said system, we would still have to consider if being part would in any way benefit our target market, or simply give us the opportunity to move into other segments.

The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, who was hardly an elitist, predicted such a development in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*² when he commented—in easily one of the least convoluted passages of the entire text—as follows:

“Outside the universities, departments, or institutions with a professional orientation, knowledge will no longer be transmitted en bloc, once and for all, to young people before their entry into the work force: rather it is and will be served ‘a la carte’ to adults who are either already working or expect to be, for the purpose of improving their skills and chance of promotion, but also to help them acquire information, languages, and language games allowing them both to widen their occupational horizons and to articulate their technical and ethical experience.

The new course that the transmission of knowledge is taking is not without conflict. As much as it is in the interests of the system, and therefore of its ‘decision makers’, to en-

*courage professional advancement ...any experimentation in discourse, institutions, and values...is regarded as having little or no operational value and is not given the slightest credence in the name of the seriousness of the system. Such experimentation offers an escape from functionalism; it should not be dismissed lightly since it was functionalism itself that pointed the way. But it is safe to assume that responsibility for it will devolve upon extrauniversity networks.”*³

In other words, what we do needs to be done, it serves a greater purpose, and it has been predicted that “the system” will not do it; therefore somebody else has to.

JK: In the light of that, can I ask you to be explicit about exactly how the Danish state system does not provide an environment in which Knightsbridge could happily exist?

HFK: It is very straightforward, really. The Danish state system consists of a range of institutions conceived, established and funded directly by the state. The relevant ministry deals exclusively with these institutions, and wishes to have no dealings with the private providers. The institutions are not “validated”, “recognised” or “accredited”, but simply have been invested with the credibility resulting from being “of the state”.

Private providers are allowed to exist, with the freedom to call themselves, say, “University”, and to offer to the public any educational programmes they see fit. This is a sensible free market approach, and one which must be lauded.

Private providers have only one possibility of engaging with the public system, namely, via student support loans, paid directly by the state to the student. This entails submitting the specific course for evaluation, and subsequently, if successful, to no end of external control. There is no access to any kind of institutional validation. And, it should be mentioned, the course is approved only if it is seen by the evaluators as being of socio-economic value. In other words, the private provider is submitting to the public system a proposal which it may well be in the system’s interest to suppress or not support.

The state institutions are permitted to compete directly with private providers, insofar as they may

offer fee-bearing programmes that have not been evaluated for student support loan purposes.

So, in fact, we have a situation where the state system is allowed to compete directly with the private providers, but private providers have no access to any form of external validation except where related to funding options for students, and thus have no way of competing directly with state institutions, except in the market where they naturally belong.

When state institutions enter the market of the private provider, they are in exactly the same situation as the private provider: a non-externally validated institution offering a non-externally validated programme against a fee.

Lyotard also wrote, in the same work:

“In any case, even if the performativity principle does not always help pinpoint the policy to follow, its general effect is to subordinate the institutions of higher learning to the existing powers. The moment knowledge ceases to be an end in itself—the realisation of the Idea or the emancipation of men—its transmission is no longer the exclusive responsibility of scholars and students...The ‘autonomy’ granted the universities after the crisis of the late 1960s has very little meaning given the fact that practically nowhere do teachers’ groups have the power to decide what the budget of their institution will be; all they can do is allocate the funds that are assigned to them, and only then as the last step in the process.”⁴

He then goes on to discuss the basics of pedagogy in distance education. I can recommend the title very highly.

JK: What key aspects of innovation in curriculum and programme structure do you believe have originated or been assisted by your freedom from state control? I note in particular that Knightsbridge was among the first to introduce a degree in Martial Arts Studies, which concept has now been taken up by a number of other institutions.

HFK: Freedom from funding means freedom from control, particularly political control. We do not have to bow to masters telling us that now we must focus on this or that particular approach or area of study.

The most important result of this is that we have had the freedom to decide which system of provision we wanted to model our own offerings on. The natural choice was, and still is, the UK system.

The freedom from external control or dictate means that we have been able to decide what we wish to offer to the market, and to let course designers be the final judges of content (although, of course, external expert opinions have been a major element in the design phase). We have not had to cater to any form of massaging of the figures by whichever government happened to be in charge of educational policy making, in their constant search for ways to influence socio-economic trends.

The BSc in Martial Arts Studies is an excellent example of this.

JK: What benefits or disadvantages do you see to your students of your independence? Does it facilitate a more personal focus to their studies?

HFK: The main benefit is that we are able to offer up a combination of attributes not often found. The same dictates and controls that come with external funding automatically reduce flexibility. In Denmark, they also mean that the state institutions are over-subscribed, and so entry requirements are based on very specific quotas, which are based again on past exam results, meaning that only the very best grades may be reasonably expected to secure entrance, although mechanisms are in place for mature students, merits and credit points for non-academic work etc.

The main disadvantage to potential candidates is a result of our freedom to choose. We are deliberately very selective, allowing only those to join whom we feel reasonably certain will be absolutely capable of completing. This is not a result of merely looking at past academic achievement, but of a whole-person evaluation. We have a duty to all candidates and graduates to ensure that the best possible experience is received when studying with Knightsbridge. This would not be the case for the borderline applicant.

Elitism? Perhaps in the sense that it represents the opposite of egalitarianism, and that it seeks to create and promote a learning environment where highly qualified people can produce very high quality work in collaboration with dedicated professionals.

What you must understand is that we apply far stricter requirements in terms of work assessment than do the majority of traditional institutions. Knightsbridge University alumni must feel they have earned their awards. Providing this experience gives us the best possible ambassadors, and we do enrol a fair number on the basis of references.

There is a very distinct personal focus on the individual candidate. From the moment they make their first enquiry and until they complete, they will likely be communicating with no more than three or four people in the administration and faculty, all of whom will have at least a fair idea of who they are, what they are studying, roughly where they are in their programme, who their tutor/supervisor is, etc. This means also that we have a very short turn-around time for communications and work.

JK: What attracted you in particular to the means of distance education for programme delivery? How do you reflect on the growth and increasing adoption of that means by state-sponsored institutions?

HFK: Distance education is the perfect partner to our aims and objectives. It offers a global reach, catering to mature individuals with a career to attend to. Such people will not accept having to take years out of their calendar to attend residential study.

There are added benefits. We do not have to spend enormous amounts on infrastructure, or maintain most of the overheads held by residential institutions. This means we can keep our fees at a reasonable level, even if we receive no forms of funding or grants.

It is only logical that traditionally residential institutions should find that distance education is a worthwhile addition to their portfolio. There is perhaps even the risk that in embracing this, they could encroach on what we see as “our” market. That is just a reality we will have to adapt to, and then find ways to offset any potential negative effect. I am not really concerned about this at all. The type of person we tend to attract would be very unlikely to choose such an institution anyway. It is the mix of attributes that attracts them to Knightsbridge, not the distance education provision exclusively.

As Börje Holmberg puts it in *Theory and Practice of Distance Education*:

*“The reasons why adults choose distance education ... are primarily the convenience, flexibility and adaptability of this mode of education to individual students’ needs.”*⁵

The fact is, most of the traditional institutions may offer distance education, but have not quite managed to get the “convenience, flexibility and adaptability” factors straight. Indeed, even the UK Open University is becoming increasingly less flexible, less convenient and seemingly determined to adapt primarily to the requirements of its traditional counterparts.

In reference to a 1980 study by R. Flinck, Holmberg writes:

*“Free pacing, although a privilege not given to all distant students, was found to be an even more important argument [than ‘the support given by the distance-teaching organisation’] in favour of distance education.”*⁶

Nonetheless, free pacing is being increasingly eradicated.

In *Rethinking University Teaching*⁷, Diana Laurillard writes, among many other pointed questions and observations:

*“Why aren’t lectures scrapped as a teaching method? If we forget the eight hundred years of university tradition that legitimises them, and imagine starting afresh with the problem of how best to get a large percentage of the population to understand difficult and complex ideas, I doubt that lectures will immediately spring to mind as the obvious solution.”*⁸

And she has the answer:

“For the individual learner, the lecture is a grossly inefficient way of engaging with academic knowledge. For the institution it is very convenient, and so it survives.”

Laurillard goes on to discuss methods available to “a university not enfeebled by tradition”.

It seems clear to me that as long as the traditional providers adding distance education to their port-

folio do not do enough, if anything, to understand their potential student and what they want, there will always be a space for what Knightsbridge has to offer.

JK: Which educational philosophies have influenced the direction of Knightsbridge to the greatest extent? Do you feel an identification with a particularly free-market or libertarian agenda?

HFK: I am personally very closely attuned to the points brought forth by Alison Wolf in *Does Education Matter?*, and wholeheartedly embrace the following quote:

*“...what governments could and should do, ideally, is to concentrate on their core educational responsibility, which is to provide their citizens with a good basic education at primary and secondary levels. An end to myriad initiatives and micro-management would give both politicians and bureaucrats more time, energy and money to do this properly, and would also allow people to develop the variety of educational approaches, curricula and purposes that a large and complex society demands.”*⁹

Given half a chance, I tend to urge people to read Cardinal Newman’s *The Idea of a University*.¹⁰ One quote is:

“I am asked what is the end of University Education, and of the Liberal or Philosophical Knowledge which I conceive it to impart: I answer, that what I have already said has been sufficient to show that it has a very tangible, real, and sufficient end, though the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself. Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward.”

The study, the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, is a principal concern for us. This is an extension of the notion of freedom of choice. If Student X wishes to study, say, Astronomy for the sake of it, they usually cannot do this in the state system, they have to have a long-term objective, a plan for putting the result of the study into real life. This is because the state must get a return on its investment.

I once, when commenting on an on-line discussion forum that a large percentage of our candidates were on a programme simply for the sake of pleasing their own educational desires, was met with the comment that that was surely the worst possible reason to do any study. There I saw the noblest motive, the motive that supports the idea that man should strive to better himself for the sake of it, described as the absolute opposite.

One wonders what such a commentator would think of Cardinal Newman. Or Cicero, whose thinking Newman obviously derived inspiration from. Or *The Academy*.¹¹

We are here to provide “higher education opportunities for the capable”. There is a very strong identification with the idea that institutions such as Knightsbridge must be allowed to exist, to enable us to service the segments not adequately catered to by the state sponsored establishment, whichever nation it happens to be in.

Being in a free market guarantees one thing: if we do not provide what people want, we cease to exist. We cannot count on a monopolistic ‘right of way’ to the very large majority of potential candidates to save us if we do not come up to scratch. The market decides, and the market is merciless.

Being in the state sponsored market guarantees demise if not providing what the state wants. State institutions do not provide what the potential applicant wants, but what the state has decided it is desirable to spend its money on. The state shows as little mercy as the market, if it does not get what it wants.

For some people, the “stamp of approval” inherent in a state sponsored qualification is not an essential element in their decision making process. Someone who already holds (perhaps several) advanced qualifications, whether they are from a university or similar or not, who is already a goodly way up their career ladder, perhaps already at the top, does not need to rely on that form of hoped-for guarantee that “the next stop” will accept them. This gives them that most delicious of all prerogatives, the freedom of choice. This is the someone we cater to, and when someone who can choose freely chooses Knightsbridge, then obviously we must be offering something worthwhile.

Ironically, while the “establishment” seems to think

that we are potential competition, we are in fact merely complementary to their provision. The vast majority will still enrol with them, and those who enrol with us would have very likely not enrolled with them anyway.

JK: Your statement that the “establishment” regards you as potential competition is worth exploring in greater depth. Do you feel that your position in the market means that you are a leaner, fitter rival to institutions whose adaptation to market forces is constrained by state policy, and that this occasions disquiet on that account?

HFK: It is my experience that there are several reactions, and several reasons for them. One of them is fear. Another is arrogance. A third is a grudging “if only we could do that” respect. A fourth is a “how do I join you?” enquiry. The latter of these is obviously most pleasant.

Some are afraid that we may somehow be a threat to their comfortable little life. One must not be blind to the fact that an awful lot of people in academia are quite aware that theirs is a most comfortable bubble, and one they do not wish to see burst. They are happy that the establishment controls the system, as they and their kindred spirits are the very people who control the establishment. Not many politicians nowadays are *not* graduates of a state funded university system. In whose best interest is it to maintain the status of these institutions, then?

Others are simply arrogant. “You will never be as good as us,” or whatever the phrase. They simply fail to see that we do not aim to be facsimiles of them and their provision. We aim to be better at what we do, and to be a credible alternative to what they offer.

As for fitter, yes, we can reach and act on decisions very, very quickly. Traditional universities may need months and even years to decide on policy changes, even minor changes.

What they largely fail to realise is the accuracy of Desmond Keegan’s characterisation of changes needed in traditional institutions to enable them to adapt to distance education, as follows:

- The industrialisation of teaching.
- The privatisation of institutional learning.
- Change of administrative structure.

- Different plant and buildings.
- Change of costing structures.¹²

Knightsbridge was tailor made to meet these criteria, whilst the establishment needs serious change to be able to adapt. Many will not be willing to make such changes, or willing to, and be able to stay in the system that bred and nurtures them.

JK: Do you believe as a consequence of your own experience with Knightsbridge that the complete removal of state controls on higher education would be advantageous on the whole?

HFK: Generally, yes. I am firmly convinced that as long as the populace is given a very solid and internationally competitive primary education, and access to similar quality secondary education, then they would be perfectly capable of working out for themselves what form of tertiary education would be suitable for them, if any.

Professor Wolf makes the point time and again that the obsession of governments in various countries with pushing the maximum number of people into higher education is borne out of an irrational and entirely unsubstantiated belief that this will boost “production” and “economic growth”. In fact, as amply demonstrated, the higher the workforce is qualified on average, the more the output per hour falls. The enormous amounts of money poured into higher education could be put to much better use elsewhere. The response, however, is always for the system to shout “It’s because we do not get enough money”, and so more is thrown at it.

And, of course, it would be extremely advantageous to the likes of Knightsbridge. With nothing to force those people to choose a state institution, we would benefit tremendously. So that is hardly going to happen!

JK: How can quality assurance be delivered within an institution not subject to state oversight?

HFK: I can show you pages and pages and pages of quality assurance documents, policy documents, assessment documents, questionnaires, etc. The main guarantee of our inherent quality is the quality of the people involved, however. No reputable academic would engage with Knightsbridge if our processes and procedures were not in order. We model our processes on those described by the UK

Quality Assurance Agency, and faculty are very pleased with the experience. Whether engaged as course designers, tutors, supervisors or external examiners, none ever make negative comments about the procedures related to programmes or awards.

Just to play devil's advocate, how can the same be achieved in a state system where it is the state which decides what is "quality" from the point of view of satisfaction of the state's perceived need for "x" number of graduates per year?

Which of the two parties has the greater incentive to ensure high quality in all aspects, and which to change the criteria from time to time, to suit current needs?

JK: Is it your impression that Knightsbridge has succeeded in its mission thus far to the extent that you would have wished? What are some of your plans for the future of the University?

HFK: Knightsbridge has succeeded as far as I have wanted it to. One can always desire more candidates, but it is our policy to aim for the right candidates, and then more of the same. Planning activities have been such for the past couple of years that growth has been not desirable, as it would have likely been growth resulting in enrolment of candidates for whom we'd not be the best match. What we have been planning for, of course, is the future.

It is now time that we put in place planned measures to take us to "the next level". We wish to double our student intake every year for the next five years, to bring us to a certain comfort level. In order to achieve this, a range of new programmes have been and will be introduced. For example, a very interesting MA in Military Studies and a BSc (Hons) in Intelligence, Security & Terrorism Studies, both with world-class faculty, are now available, and receiving considerable interest. The new Master of Healthcare Administration comes with the option of a practicum period with a US hospital, something entirely new to us, and a perfect addition, as it is handled elsewhere.

We have also started a new marketing campaign, utilising almost exclusively the vast potential of the Internet. The fee schedule has been re-structured so that it provides quite significant incentive to complete within the standard period, again something we expect to have an effect on enrolment fig-

ures.

We are also looking into ways of maximising the benefit of the award for alumni, including seeking recognition for individual programmes with relevant professional bodies. Professional body accreditation/recognition is a major sales point, and something that would instantly put a much closer weave to our marketing net. Such arrangements would leave us independent of external control, so offering a situation where all win, the candidate, the professional body, and the University.

Our range of partnerships with local schools and colleges around the world is steadily growing, and current negotiations are expected to result in a significant addition in this respect.

NOTES

(1) Homepage at <http://www.knightsbridgeuniversity.com>.

(2) Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, first published in French in 1979, this version from Manchester University Press, 1984.

(3) Lyotard, op. cit., pp. 49-50.

(4) Lyotard, op. cit., p. 50.

(5) Börje Holmberg, *Theory and Practice of Distance Education*, London, Routledge, 2nd ed. , 1995, p. 13.

(6) Holmberg, op. cit.

(7) Diana Laurillard, *Rethinking University Teaching*, London, Routledge, 1993.

(8) Laurillard, op. cit. , p. 108.

(9) Alison Wolf, *Does Education Matter?*, London, Penguin Books, 2002, p. 256.

(10) Available at <http://www.newmanreader.org>.

(11) See also <http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/academy.htm>.

(12) Desmond Keegan, *A Theoretical Framework for Distance Education*, London, 1986.