

Professor Don Swift's address at the Open University Graduation Ceremony 1978

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Don Swift:

You see I believe that we members of The Open University are making the great discovery. We're learning the real meaning of the term 'ivory tower'. It has been thought to mean that university life and learning was separated from the real world that surrounded it. But I believe, and I believe we're all learning that this is true, that it's better understood as the theory of human ability which universities impose upon their late juvenile neophytes and in so doing, upon themselves. The ivory tower is not a ring of bricks and mortar but the academic ring of confidence which is offered to entrants and denied non-entrants to the awful detriment of our society. The theory on which it's based is tried and trusted and seldom questioned. The pre-university system is a means for sorting and sifting academic talent as the crème de la crème at the end of this process, the newly entering group is bound to contain few sow's ears, and you know the story well.

The ivory tower manifests itself in the restriction upon our social role as university teachers which follows from this restrictive theory of ability. The restriction is found in its purest form, at the apex of the education pyramid in the universities. But it's also a pervasive influence on the remainder of the system. As such, we have to see it as a major barrier in our attempt to improve access to knowledge in our society. Because of it, we offer university knowledge and learning to fewer young people than if we were not so burdened. But not only is education too important to be reserved for a few young people it's also too important to be reserved mostly for young people.