It is one of the distinctive features of the plans for the University of Essex that it will have no colleges or halls of residence. Like many Londoners and New Yorkers, our students will live in flats or apartments, groups of a dozen or so rooms arranged in towers and forming part of a university town. The social centre of each group will be a living room and a small kitchen. We are proposing that some of the rooms shall be used as single study-bedrooms, others as studies for two, three, or four people. We should like every student in the university, whether living in or out, to be a member of one of these groups.

In this lecture I shall be concerned with the idea of self-education week. I shall explain why we are going to provide a new form of living accommodation and shall go on to discuss the place of the library, and of clubs and societies, in the social and working life of the university. Someone who has graduated from a university has not only stayed the course and passed his examinations; he has had the intellectual and social experience which three or four years at a university mean. Apart from its formal teaching the university ought to have given him the chance to think and argue about the fundamental problems of life, and to stand on his own feet; and it should have made the arts accessible to him in a way that they may never have been before. English universities have always felt accountable for the conditions in which their students work and live. This is partly to ensure the proper use of public funds by which so many students are supported, but it is primarily to provide the full community life, traditionally associated with universities. They would regard it as irresponsible, not to say perverse, to admit students and offer them expensive laboratories and lecture theatres and do nothing about housing them. This is why I am devoting a whole lecture to this subject. A university should, I believe, provide an experience of living as well as an opportunity for learning. Without this, education is dehumanized, the student himself defrauded.

The best way of securing good living conditions is to build new accommodation for the purpose in the university itself. But this is expensive and it has never been possible to do it for more than a minority. In 1961-62 five students out of every ten in this country lived in lodgings and another two lived at home. Only three out of ten lived on the university site. If the period of residence were limited to one year it would theoretically be possible for most students to have at least some experience of living in. But the minimum desirable period of residence is believed to be two years, and some students are encouraged to stay on for three. As a result, many others never live in at all. A few of them perhaps find lodgings or flats near the university, but the majority live two or three miles away and are cut off from much of its social life. In most towns good lodgings are extremely scarce, and life is often little or no better for the student living at home.
As universities expand, more undergraduates will be drawn from the families of semi-skilled and unskilled workers, and many will not have the minimum conditions of space and quiet which they need if they are to work in their own homes. And there has been a striking increase recently in the mobility of students, made possible by the system of local-authority grants which allows them to go to any university in the country. Of course, a few students are happiest at home. And if your father is a philosopher and your mother a mathematician it should be intellectually stimulating, though it might be intolerable. But it does most students good to get away from their families.

For the three students out of ten who live in, the social unit, outside Oxford and Cambridge, is usually the hall of residence. Here people of different interests and from different backgrounds live together in units of between 100 and 500. Wardens of halls, sub-wardens, senior tutors, and tutors get to know their students well, encourage them in their work and other activities, and in dining rooms and common rooms ‘foster the corporate life’. Halls of residence do succeed in broadening the experience of their members, and by drawing them into a small society within the larger community of the university give them a much needed sense of belonging. In one form or another it is a system which has been adopted by almost all universities in this country. And in 1957 a sub-committee of the University Grants Committee, under the chairmanship of Professor Niblett, argued that there was no satisfactory substitute, a view endorsed by the Grants Committee itself. This was the form of residence proposed both by the Promotion Committee of Essex and by our Academic Planning Board. It was attractive to me personally, because I had at Liverpool been associated with a hall of residence, led by the most dynamic and enlightened of wardens.

But a nineteenth-century variant upon a twelfth-century creation may not be the right answer for the nineteen-seventies and eighties, and today, only six years after its publication, some of the recommendations of the Niblett report are, I believe, open to question. A good many students do not care for the kind of life which a hall of residence involves. For some perhaps it is just a dislike of institutional life in any form. They do not want to be reminded of school and are by no means enamoured of the regulations which halls have to impose. At the very time when education for so many is continuing beyond eighteen, young men and women are maturing much earlier, and undergraduates of nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one not unnaturally want the same freedom as their young apprentice brother and their shorthand-typist sister. Students of course can be irresponsible. And it is when they misbehave and flout the accepted conventions of society that they attract most publicity, so that they are perhaps thought to be more irresponsible than they really are. The best way to make them responsible in any case is to give them responsibility.

If it is the function of the university to help students in the process of growing up, conditions should be such as to promote and encourage this. Halls, whose purpose presumably is to prepare them for adulthood, can sometimes perpetuate adolescence. And then there is the attitude of many students to tutors and wardens. Students do need guidance, particularly in their first year. They must have someone to go to with their problems and their anxieties, whether these arise directly from their work or not. But they need not live under the very nose of a tutor in a hall of residence. The advantage of their seeing more of each other can be offset by the students feeling that
at best they are being watched, at worst being mothered and molly-coddled. In the corridors of many a women’s hall lingers the ghost of a Victorian chaperone.

Many students enjoy the life of a college or hall and get a great deal out of it, but more and more seem to prefer the greater independence of a study-bedroom block or, better still, a self-contained flat. A lot of them want simply cheap comfort, a quiet room to work in, with warmth and light, and the company of their friends. They can then follow their own interests in the common rooms, society rooms, and restaurants of the university, and in the town outside. Many universities in large towns are already providing student houses, and they would do well to develop their own version of a Latin quarter. The problem for Essex is that it is in the country, two miles from Colchester and a mile and a half from Wivenhoe. Whatever their living arrangements, universities will have to recognize that students have come to regard as their own affair the use of their free time, the organization of their work, their social life, and their friends. I need hardly say that their greater independence calls for a different attitude among parents. Many of them still expect universities to impose restrictions on their sons and daughters which they have been unwilling or unable to impose themselves.

Apart from the preference of many students for an urban rather than an institutional life, there are also certain practical difficulties about halls of residence. The Niblett report, for example, said that they should provide for no more than 130 to 150 people and that there should be formal dining together. But halls of this type with single study-bedrooms and all the ancillary accommodation of dining rooms and common rooms, warden’s house and tutors’ suites, sick-bay, and administrative offices costs £1,400 a place, which is about double the cost of accommodating a person in an ordinary house. They are costly also to run. Kitchens it is believed become economical only when they serve 800 or 1,000 people. The service required by formal dining is more expensive than self-service, and domestic and catering staff are becoming harder to find, especially for the weekends. Wages with overtime form an increasing proportion of hall costs.

Niblett stressed also the importance of resident senior staff to the life of a hall. Yet these are becoming the rarest of birds. Halls are hardly the most suitable places for small children, so that tutors are recruited normally from unmarried members of staff, often junior research workers and assistant lecturers. But with a progressive lowering of the age of marriage these are shrinking in number all the time. I do not want to exaggerate these difficulties and some of them are being overcome without the radical break from tradition which we are making in Essex. For example, the size of halls has steadily been increased to make them more economical. Numbers like 400 and 500 are common now, and the Niblett figure of 130 seems an echo from the past. Yet I believe that Niblett was right. Halls of residence do work best when they are small. As they get bigger students make for themselves a social unit in a wing or on a corridor, and many central common rooms are as empty as railway waiting rooms, coming alive only with vacation conferences. Some universities are now grouping a number of halls together with a common kitchen and sometimes common dining room, and shared services like heating. This federation of halls can surely be a source of strength, although we have yet to see how it will affect the life of individual halls, and the university as a whole.
Before describing what we propose to do at Essex I want to mention two general conclusions that we have reached. The first is that we shall never be fully residential. The particular problem of the new universities at present—that they cannot use Treasury funds for residence—will only be temporary. When they have exhausted the supply of lodgings in the neighbourhood their claims will have to be considered along with those of the older universities. But in the country as a whole the residential needs of students will have to be set against those of the old and sick, slum dwellers and handicapped children. And money allocated to the universities and spent on student residence means less money for teaching and research, and therefore fewer student places. In order that a few may enjoy the advantages of residence, others will be excluded from the university altogether. Many universities have already exhausted their supply of lodgings, and their further expansion is impossible without more residential places.

Seaside Holds and Boarding Houses
It would be unrealistic to assume that Essex will ever be fully residential. It shares with Sussex and Lancaster the circumstance that fifteen or so miles away the seaside hotels and boarding houses are empty for much of the year, and precisely at the time when the university is in session. It is only common sense to use this accommodation as well as lodgings nearer at hand. We believe also that students can benefit from the closer contact with society at large which living out involves. Our second conclusion followed from this. As far as possible we want all students to enjoy something of the communal life of the university, and we shall use what money we have to provide good working and living conditions for everyone. We should like to bridge the gap between the privileged minority with study-bedrooms of their own and dining rooms, common rooms, and the library close by, and the unprivileged majority who have to make do perhaps with a shared room at home, or with lodgings, often cramped and shabby, and worst of all isolated from the resident community. We shall do what we can to avoid this academic apartheid.

This brings me to the plan which I outlined at the beginning of the lecture. The social unit in Essex will be small, with probably between twelve and twenty people. We are reverting in fact to the principle of the Oxford and Cambridge staircase. Groups of rooms will be arranged as flats, with, in each group, a living room and a small kitchen. Students will be able to eat in restaurants in the university as well as in Colchester and Wivenhoe, and they will also be able to make for themselves and their friends simple meals like breakfast in their own kitchens. The living room will be plainly but comfortably furnished and large enough for them to eat and talk, and have a party in. Only some of the rooms in each set will be used as study-bedrooms. The others will have no beds and will serve as study rooms, providing for two, three, or four students who live out in digs. The point of this is to encourage those living out to spend a long day at the university and to come back to it even at the week-end. We hope to arrange for a bus service to take students back to Clacton and Frinton at ten or eleven at night, with perhaps a season or term ticket so that they are not discouraged by the expense from coming in at weekends. Lectures and laboratory classes will in any case be held until at least seven o’clock, and the library, restaurants, and coffee shops will be open late in the evening. We do not want the whole university packing up at five.
Conditions for Students Living Out

Study rooms could of course be associated with other types of accommodation in the university, in the buildings of the schools of study, for example, in a central students’ union or in the library. But by arranging them with study-bedrooms as part of the same social unit, students living out will enjoy almost the same conditions as those living in. They can do most of their work in the study rooms, share the same living-room and kitchen, and take part in whatever is going on. And it may be possible for an undergraduate to live in for his first year and then, if he chooses, remain a member of the same group when he lives out. If our plans succeed we should be able to make use of a good many lodgings which would otherwise be unsuitable because of their distance from the university. A half hour’s bus ride to and from the coast every day is not perhaps the most exciting prospect, but it will matter much less to the undergraduate if he has a pied-a-terre in the university. And with only bed and breakfast to provide we hope that many more people will let their rooms to students, not least those who have sons and daughters in universities in other parts of the country. The cost of a study place should be only one-third or one-quarter the cost of a study-bedroom place, because the equivalent of a study-bedroom furnished not with a bed and a wardrobe but with chairs and desks, could provide study space for three or four. And by allowing the use of lodgings which might otherwise be unsuitable, we shall lessen a little the enormous pressure for residential places. There is plenty of room for experiment here, with the disposition of the rooms, with different shapes and sizes, and with different types of furniture, and the design will we hope be flexible enough to allow study rooms to revert if necessary to study-bedrooms. Of course, the physical arrangements are not the only problem. There is the important question of the compatibility of room mates. Here too there will have to be some flexibility, and an opportunity for reshuffling.

Each flat will be either for men or for women, not for both, although they will be so designed that they can be used by either. We propose to arrange them vertically in towers, each tower containing groups of men and of women. The problem of the sexes is a difficult one, but the segregating of men and women in separate buildings is no longer the answer. It has never assured good morals. And it is against the whole spirit of the day. We rather hope the proximity of men and women in our towers will have a civilizing effect! The towers will also have flats for married students and for members of staff who want to live in. Each tower will appoint a committee of residents, which will be responsible for good behaviour, and the committees of the different towers will be responsible through a dean of students and a students’ affairs committee to the university senate.

Integrating the University with Essex

Some members of staff will live on the site, but most of them will live in Colchester and Wivenhoe and the surrounding area. This too will help, we think, to integrate the university with Essex. But all this means that there will not be much mixing of staff and students in the residential towers. The real mixing will be in the schools and departments, and it is here, we believe, that relations between the two can be closest. They are based on common interests, and are natural and unforced. Anyway, simply to make academics live among students is no guarantee of close relations. Someone who wants to entertain students will do so wherever he lives. Someone who does not will spend probably no more time with them if he lives a stone’s throw away rather...
than several miles. On the other hand, every student must have at least one member of staff he can turn to for advice about his work or his personal problems. And this is a need of all students, not just of those who happen to live in. We propose to meet it by assigning every student to an adviser, who will usually be a member of the school in which he works. The adviser will therefore meet him in the ordinary course of his work and will be able to discuss every kind of problem. And by living away from the student, he will not be suspected of being in loco parentis.

These then are our decisions for living arrangements. They are based on two assumptions: first, that students are mature and should be given independence and responsibility; second, that a good many of them nowadays would like to live together in a flat, with the freedom and the intense social life which this involves. I have taken up most of my lecture looking behind these decisions because the problems, I believe, call for new thinking, and, as it happens, they were not studied in detail by the Robbins Committee.

I want now to consider the part which the library should play in the self-education of the student. Here we come to one of the thorniest problems of a new university. Old and new books, current and back numbers of periodicals, are a prime need for teaching and research in all subjects. But build a new laboratory, and it will be adequately if not lavishly equipped. Build a library, and it will take years, even if the books are available, to get the money to buy them. Like the other new universities Essex has received a capital grant for the purchase of books of £50,000. This will allow us to provide a basic working collection in a few subjects, but it is lamentably inadequate for building up a library for teaching and research. Back runs of indispensable periodicals often cost £10 a volume. A library is the university’s heart. Weaken it and the health of the whole university is affected. Something can be done by more co-operation among libraries, both in lending each other books and in meeting difficulties such as reproducing books that are out of print. And owners of private collections can help by making them available on temporary or permanent loan or by gift. But the real problem is money. There are books enough for all the new universities to build up first-class libraries and build them up quickly, if only there was money to pay for them. The Treasury will have to be far more generous towards libraries.

But books are not the only means of self-instruction. There are tape-recorders and films and, most recently, the different forms of programmed instruction or teaching machines. Many of these are rudimentary in the extreme, with blatant shortcomings in their methods both of teaching and programming. But already they are showing themselves capable of transmitting not just facts but also meanings and concepts. Like books, they have the advantage over formal instruction that they oblige a student to work by himself and permit him to go at his own pace. More students would in the end reach their destination if allowed to travel at their own speed. Whatever the merits and demerits of programmed instruction and other devices, we are making a bad mistake in this country if we do not investigate them. One can only deplore our tendency to dismiss out of hand any new tool as a gimmick invented by misguided tinkerers in education. The library, I believe, is the natural place to store and use not only books and periodicals but also slides, maps, records, and tapes, as well as record players and tape recorders. And teaching machines and television are logical
extensions of these services. The library of the future will be a workshop or laboratory which houses all the university’s tools for self-instruction.

I come now to the extra-curricular activities of students. We shall reserve some forty or fifty acres of the site for rugger and soccer, hockey and cricket, tennis and athletics. But we should like to encourage in particular those interests which reinforce the intellectual life of the university: drama and politics, music and the visual arts, natural history and archaeology. This we believe is more important than ever it was because so many students today are products of the current teenage culture, some of whose values are alien to those of an academic community. In most universities, facilities for student activities are concentrated in one large building which often contains the central refectory serving mid-day meals, sometimes for as many as 5,000. It is difficult to prevent this building from becoming impersonal, straggled by queues at lunchtime, empty and bleak in the evening, except on Saturdays, and providing adequately only for the noisier activities.

Essex will have no single union building. Instead of a giant restaurant it will have a few smaller ones, still large enough to be economical to run but each with its special service and, we hope, distinctive character. Coffee shops will be distributed round the university centre, to be shared by staff and students alike. Similarly student societies will be provided with sets of rooms in teaching buildings. The engineering society will use rooms in the school of engineering science, art clubs will use rooms in the future school of creative arts. There will be premises too for small shops, a bank, and a post office, and rooms for the student council and the different student officers. By associating society rooms where possible with the schools of study we hope to avoid duplicating accommodation and equipment, and by encouraging students to stay on in the university after formal teaching has ended we hope that both rooms and equipment will be fully used. The facilities ought, for this reason, to be especially generous. We are trying to provide for extra-curricular activities in such a way that the whole centre of the university is vital and alive with students and staff long into the evenings, and even on a Sunday afternoon. But all this depends a good deal upon the architect’s lay-out plan.

Some of our proposals for student life are frankly experimental, and will have to be modified in the light of our experience. But they do at least take account of the maturity and independence of students, and the fact that although in the next few decades many of them will not be able to live in, they should all be provided with good working conditions and the chance of a vigorous corporate life. For a university, we believe, is a community where the student is guided in the first stage of a life-long task of self-education, a community whose concern is not just with the pursuit of learning but with the fulfilment of lives.