



## Notes from the **Profession**

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### Why Doesn't Britain Trust its Academics?

**A** WELL-KNOWN WRITER, broadcaster and BBC Radio 4 presenter, Laurie Taylor, is also notorious, especially in academic circles, for a weekly satirical column, published in the *Times Higher*, on academic life in Great Britain. In one of these he recently conjured up a 'memo' from the Director of Corporate Affairs of the (fictional) University of Poppleton to all staff members regarding 'Staff Xmas Dinners'. New guidelines are to be introduced that require that all staff who wish to participate in any such dinner must first attend a special SDW (Staff Development Workshop) on Social Interaction; departments must henceforth submit a statement of DAO (Dining Aims and Outcomes); and all those attending dinners must complete a PDQ (a Post Dining Questionnaire) 'that includes learning outcomes and a TQA (Turkey Quality Assessment)'. If this sounds familiar – less the Turkey Quality Assessment than the Teaching Quality Assessment – you must be an academic. And do we not all know that satire only works because it is so akin to reality? Indeed such heavy-handed rules and regulations – some no less ridiculous than what Laurie Taylor has devised – characterize the reality at today's British universities. Thus, when the four of us left prominent American universities – over about the last dec-

ade, for personal and political reasons – and took up posts as professors in the UK, we were in for a shock.

We all enjoy living in Britain and we have wonderful colleagues at leading universities here. There is a great deal about academic life here that we appreciate and consider worth emulating abroad. But we are baffled by the level of monitoring, reporting, evaluating and just plain bureaucratic hassling to which academics in this country are subjected. All of us have served as heads of department here, which of course might colour our perspective. Our response is to ask: Why doesn't Britain let its academics do what they do best, teach and carry out research, without government and university administrators breathing down their necks?

Many British academics groan under the weight of administrative tasks, but they appear to think that this worsening trend is an American one – and American universities are widely held up as a model. No doubt, US universities have experienced an increase in paperwork in the last decades. But for sheer zeal for reporting and monitoring, they can't compare with their UK counterparts. We had always had the impression of the British as a common-sensical people who prize their freedom and don't put up with government intrusion or out-of-control bureaucracies. We have been rudely awakened from that notion.

Consider marking. Students (and their parents) are probably not aware

that exams and a great deal of course assignments are marked at least twice and often three times – by the lecturer who teaches the course, by a colleague, who ‘double-marks’ them, and by an ‘external’ examiner from another university. Together they arrive at what they consider collectively to be a fair mark for every student in every course. In addition, academics hold ‘scrutiny’ meetings, attended by all staff, at which they spend hours – often an entire day – discussing the appropriateness of questions in courses whose content and execution most of those present are not familiar with and quibbling over commas and grammatical points in one another’s examinations, until they are deemed presentable for external examiners.

There are apparently two rationales behind this system. First, there is a generalised fear of students suing universities for unfair marks. The multiple marking system, it is argued, can give the university a solid defence against that charge. But do (or would) students really sue over such things? A very few might (and do) appeal within the structures already present, but universities can institute structures to insure fair marking without this extremely inefficient and costly system – it is tantamount to killing a flea with an artillery barrage. For what it’s worth, American universities, which don’t have multiple marking or even ‘scrutiny’ of examinations, don’t experience lawsuits from students over marks, despite the reputed litigiousness of Americans.

The second reason is that because of external marking, Britain can have a national standard of assessment and therefore of degrees. But is that really the case? Our informal soundings tell us that employers differentiate among

applicants based primarily on the universities which they attended – and they don’t consider ‘firsts’ or ‘upper-seconds’ from all universities to be equal.

Both of these objections could be met by having a spot checking of assessments, rather than the wholesale double-marking and external examining of every course. And training lecturers in best marking practices would also go a long way to achieve standardisation.

The problem is that bureaucrats prefer to introduce monitoring and reporting in order to forestall problems that they expect – rather than dealing with the tiny number of such problems that might actually appear. The same pattern is evident in the constant reporting on all sorts of things. Instead of the central administration reacting to problems that come to their attention, they expect departments to report in mind-numbing detail on their activities – hardly any of which usually result in any action.

But there is also, more fundamentally and more worryingly, a systemic distrust of academics. If lecturers who have been trained for many years can be trusted to teach their courses, why can they not be trusted to assess the students’ performance without a host of colleagues looking over their shoulder every step of the way? In the US and most other countries, it seems to work just fine without these excessive layers of control. While it should be compulsory for lecturers in their first post to be adequately trained and mentored, it seems laughable if not demeaning to double and triple check every mark of every essay and exam of every course of every lecturer or professor right up to retirement. Even doctors of the NHS, who are hardly

unfamiliar with red tape, audits and appraisals, need no second or third opinion when they prescribe a cold medicine, even though their wrong diagnosis can have much more severe and lasting consequences than any wrong mark ever assigned in a first-year German grammar test or a final-year essay on Shakespeare.

In the US, panels appointed to interview new colleagues typically consist of three or four staff members from the hiring department. They are, after all, the experts and could certainly be trusted to make the best appointment. In Britain, such panels usually include a vice-chancellor, dean, head of another department and often a senior member of the personnel department. Potentially, then, an appointment could be made by a panel whose majority is not from the field for which a candidate is chosen. The administrators' input theoretically provides a standard because they serve on many such committees. However, the same result could be achieved by training in recruitment and selection – which academics at many institutions are already required to undergo. The present unwieldy system reinforces the notion of academics as unruly youngsters whose every step must be watched and controlled.

The business world seems to be the model for much of what goes on in academia these days, but when we describe this system to business people, they inevitably say that no business could survive with this level of monitoring and waste of resources. The victims of this overblown system – complete with five-year plans, in the Soviet

mould – are lecturers and students, and thus British society. For academic staff increasingly have precious little time for students and research, as polls have shown. If American universities are indeed as superior as some think, it is not only a matter of better funding. In our experience, American lecturers have considerably more time for their students and for research. British academics seem to be stressed out like none other (again, published reports support this view, and lecturers' unions are now starting to bring this to the attention of universities), and of course that is bound to diminish their effectiveness and reduce their levels of research output. While they continue to produce excellent research and are outstanding teachers despite their administrative overloads, they could do even better – and suffer much less stress in the process – if their talents were directed toward these areas instead of into mounds of useless paperwork. We hear that Britain is seeking more and more to attract top foreign academics to U.K. universities – but this crushing load of administration is not the way to do it. British universities cannot afford to be complacent if they wish to compete in a global academic marketplace.

What is needed is a national commission to investigate procedures at UK institutions of higher education with a view to reducing monitoring, reporting, assessment, paperwork and anything else that really doesn't have a useful role to play in what universities are, or should be, all about, namely first-class teaching and world-class research.

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