

Why I am not a Professor

Why I am Not a Professor OR The Decline and Fall of the British University

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This year, 2007, marks the marks the eighth year at which I ceased to be a tenured lecturer in the UK, what is called I think, a tenured professor in the USA. I've never worked out whether I was, in American terms, an assistant professor or an associate professor. But it really doesn't matter, because today I am neither. You see I simply walked out and quit the job. And this is my story. If there is a greater significance to it than the personal fortunes of one man, it is because my story is also the story of the decline and fall of the British university and the corruption of the academic ideal . That is why this essay carries two titles - a personal one and a social one. This is because I was privileged to be part of an historical drama. As the Chinese say, I have lived in interesting times.

Universities are extraordinary institutions. They are in fact, the last bastions of mediaevalism left in modern society outside, perhaps, the church. Like churches they attracted a certain type of person who did not share the values of the commercial world. The oldest universities date from the eleventh and twelfth centuries - hundreds of years before the invention of the printing press. In an age where books

were scarce, communication was difficult and people who could read and write were almost as rare as the books, it made sense to centralise the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. If you wanted to learn you headed towards where the books were and the people who could read them and that meant the great universities like Paris and Oxford. Poor communication, expensive reading materials and illiteracy were the foundation blocks for the universities. If today we have excellent communications, free online information and general literacy, we also have an environment in which the universities are struggling to maintain their position. That, of course, is not an accident.

My personal story is mixed in with the expansion of the university system that occurred in post-war Britain. Born 12 years after WWII, I was about six years old when the British government undertook one of the greatest and most far-reaching experiments in expanding higher-education, making it free for thousands and thousands of fairly ordinary people to go to university. This generated in turn, thousands of teaching posts. The next decade encompassed the golden years of the university; a fact I was too young to appreciate as a lecturer and oblivious to as a student. But it did.

My unique luck was to be old enough to know the system as it existed while I was a student and to experience its decline and fall while I was a lecturer. Of course the Internet might have posed a challenge to the monopoly of the universities, but really the whole thing began before the Internet got started. It began at the top from the government in a drive towards egalitarianism reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution. Like the Cultural Revolution it ended by inflicting misery and degrading everybody involved.

Just as the Cultural Revolution, the ostensible aims started out by sounding noble. Lets widen access to university and increase student choice, argued education ministers, and increase the accountability of the lecturers by introducing some form of assessment of teaching and research. The last went down very well with the general population because lecturers had never been too well regarded by the masses.

All those long vacations and idling with books at taxpayers expense sat ill with many people who felt that lecturers should be 'exposed to the real world'. I was often told that as a student, and, as far as I could work out, the 'real world' was whatever they could see from the eighth floor of the office they worked in. The real reason, I suspected, was that they didn't enjoy their jobs too well and rather than campaign for change or seek alternative employment, they rejoiced inwardly at the thought of another bunch of people being forced to work under the same miserable conditions under which they laboured. The flip side of egalitarianism is envy and there's plenty of that to go round.

But the goal of widening access to education is a noble one and very much in line with the motivations of the post-war British governments. One way of implementing it would have been to investigate why so few students went to university, and, having constructed a careful social analysis, to have increased the percentage of entrants by improving the educational qualities of the average school leaver. Of course that's the hard and genuine route and it takes a generation. An easier way is to water down the educational system to a lower standard and then peg the university income to the number of students accepted while reducing the funding per head. In that way universities are given the happy choice of losing money and enforcing redundancies or watering down their requirements. No prizes for guessing which route the government took and how the universities responded.

It was in 1993 that I experienced these changes as a newly-tenured lecturer. We were summoned to be told that the School of Computer Studies at Leeds was henceforth to adopt a buffet-style form of degree whereby students picked and mixed their degree studies rather than the table d'hote system we had used till then. This new system was called 'modularisation' and it represented the drive towards student choice desired by government.

An immediate casualty were some hard-core traditional CS modules like complexity and compiler design. Why, argued students, elect to study some damned hard subject like compiler design, when you could study something cool like

web design and get better marks? So these old hard core subjects began to drop off. Even worse, the School (following the logic of the market), having seen that these hard core subjects were not attracting a following, simply dropped them from the curriculum. So future students who were bright enough to study these areas would never get the chance to do so.

After a few years of this system, the results percolated through to my office. I could see the results in the lecture hall, but the procession of students who walked into my office and said "Dr Tarver, I need to do a final year project but I can't do any programming"... well, they are more than I can remember or even want to remember. And the thing was that the School was not in a position to fail these students because, crudely, we needed the money and if we didn't take it there were others who would. Hence failing students was frowned upon. By pre-1990 standards about 20% of the students should have been failed.

However there are lots of ways round this little problem. One of them is doctoring the marks. Except its not called 'doctoring' its called 'scaling' and its done by computer. You scale the marks until you get the nice binomial distribution of fails and firsts. You can turn a fail into a II(ii) with scaling. Probably you want to be generous because otherwise students might not elect to study your course next year and then your course will be shut down and you'll be teaching Word for Windows. Scaling was universal and nobody except the external auditors (who were lecturers who did the same thing themselves) got to see anything but the scaled marks.

Graduating computer-illiterate students who had to do a project in computer science was more of a headache. The solution was to give them some anodyne title that they could waffle or crib off other sources. It was best not to look too closely at these Frankensteinian efforts because otherwise you would see stitches where they lifted it off some text which you were never likely to find short of wiring them to the mains to get the truth. It was of course, a lie, but the cost of exposing that lie was likely to have ramifications beyond the individual case. Very few lecturers

would want to stir such a hornets nest or have the necessary adamantine quality to inflict shame upon a student whose principal failure was to be allowed to study for a degree for which he had little ability.

After seven years of the new regime, I had the opportunity to compare the class of 1999 with the class of 1992. In 1992 I set an course in Artificial Intelligence requiring students to solve six exercises, including building a Prolog interpreter. In 1999, six exercises had shrunk to one; which was a 12 line Prolog program for which eight weeks were allotted for students to write it. A special class was laid on for students to learn this and many attended, including students who had attended a course incorporating logic programming the previous term. It was a battle to get the students to do this, not least because two senior lecturers criticised the exercise as presenting too much of a challenge to the students. My Brazilian Ph.D. student who superintended some of these students, told me that the level of attainment of some of our British final year students was lower than that of the first year Brazilian students.

Now parallel with all this was an enormous paper trail of teaching audits called Teaching Quality Assessment. These audits were designed to fulfil the accountability of the lecturers by providing a visible proof that they were doing their job in the areas of teaching and (in another review) research. In view of the scenario described, you might well wonder how it is possible for such a calamitous decline in standards to go unremarked. The short answer is that, the external auditors, being lecturers, knew full well the pressures that we were facing because they were facing the same pressures. They rarely looked beyond the paperwork and the trick was to give them plenty of it. The important thing was that the paperwork had to be filled out properly and the ostensible measures had to be met. Students of the old Stalinist Russian system will know the techniques. Figures record yet a another triumphant over-fulfilment of the five-year plan while the peasants drop dead of starvation in the fields.

Teaching was not the only criterion of assessment. Research was another and, from the point of view of getting

promotion, more important. Teaching being increasingly dreadful, research was both an escape ladder away from the coal face and a means of securing a raise. The mandarins in charge of education decreed that research was to be assessed, and that meant counting things. Quite what things and how wasn't too clear, but the general answer was that the more you wrote, the better you were. So lecturers began scribbling with the frenetic intensity of battery hens on overtime, producing paper after paper, challenging increasingly harassed librarians to find the space for them. New journals and conferences blossomed and conference hopping became a means to self-promotion. Little matter if your effort was read only by you and your mates. It was there and it counted.

Today this ideology is totally dominant all over the world, including North America. You can routinely find lecturers with more than a hundred published papers and you marvel at these paradigms of human creativity. These are people, you think, who are fit to challenge Mozart who wrote a hundred pieces or more of music. And then you get puzzled that, in this modern world, there should be so many Mozarts - almost one for every department.

The more prosaic truth emerges when you scan the titles of these epics. First, the author rarely appears alone, sharing space with two or three others. Often the collaborators are Ph.D. students who are routinely doing most of the spade work on some low grant in the hope of climbing the greasy pole. Dividing the number of titles by the author's actual contribution probably reduces those hundred papers to twenty-five. Then looking at the titles themselves, you'll see that many of the titles bear a striking resemblance to each other. "Adaptive Mesh Analysis" reads one and "An Adaptive Algorithm for Mesh Analysis" reads another. Dividing the total remaining by the average number of repetitions halves the list again. Mozart disappears before your very eyes.

But the last criterion is often the hardest. Is the paper important? Is it something people will look back on and say 'That was a landmark'. Applying this last test requires historical hindsight - not an easy thing. But when it is

applied, very often the list of one hundred papers disappears altogether. Placed under the heat of forensic investigation the list finally evaporates and what you are left with is the empty set.

And this, really, is not a great surprise, because landmark papers in any discipline are few and far between. Mozarts are rare and to be valued, but the counterfeit academic Mozarts are common and a contributory cause to global warming and deforestation. The whole enterprise of counting publications as a means to evaluating research excellence is pernicious and completely absurd. If a 12 year-old were to write 'I fink that Enid Blyton iz bettern than that Emily Bronte bint cos she has written loads more books' then one could reasonably excuse the spelling as reflective of the stupidity of the mind that produced the content. What we now have in academia is a situation where intelligent men and women prostitute themselves to an ideal which no intelligent person could believe. In short they are living a lie.

It was living a lie that finally put an end to my being a professor. One day in 1999 I got up and faced the mirror and acknowledged I could not do the job any more. I quit; and from the day I quit, though things were often tough, I never experienced the sense of waste and futility that accompanied working in a British university. By stroke of fate, I am living only a few hundred yards from the institution at which I worked. Sometimes when walking past I see the people I worked with and they look old. Living a lie does that to you.

What does the future hold? More of the same I'm afraid, because there is little sign that government has recognised the damage that it has done to universities. Both students and lecturers have suffered under this new egalitarianism. The lecturers are confronted with a profession that is pressured, bureaucratic, and, at the junior end, highly insecure with low pay that improves only slowly with the years. Added to that there is the mountain of debt accumulated on the road to becoming a lecturer and the hard work needed to get there. So putting this all together

the whole profession looks deeply unattractive to anybody with a grain of sense. Since English people are, on the whole, well endowed with sense, the consequence is that the youngest and smartest of our young people are moving away from being lecturers. The fact that a staff crisis has not already in full swing is due to the fact that universities have taken on a stream of foreign immigrant academics to fill in the gaps. Though some of these people are quite able, the language skills of an immigrant are on the whole worse than those of a native speaker. So the effects on the quality of teaching can only be bad.

Which brings us to the students - the supposed beneficiaries of this new egalitarianism. For them, the new system has brought debt and degree inflation, since the new degrees are undoubtedly not equivalent to the pre-1990 degrees as measures of ability and learning. They pay more for less quality than their mothers and fathers received and they have little contact with the lecturers because the lecturers are too busy filling out forms and chasing money. This is the Cultural Revolution of the new century and it has left the same desolation behind it.