

ACADEMICS LADEN WITH MANAGERIAL BURDENS



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Now that the summer term is well and truly over I have been reflecting on what has been happening to higher education over the past year or so.

I do feel that the academic year has expanded in terms of the kinds of work entailed in administration and management. Time was when by the beginning of August I was already able to turn my attention fully to my own research and writing work, but perhaps that is a figment of my imagination. On the other hand, this may be a portent. Ten days ago I was supposed to go to a Midlands polytechnic to sit on a validation panel – at the last minute the validation was postponed because of factors beyond the control of the polytechnic. I am not sure that in “normal” circumstances validations would be taking place at the end of July.

Certainly this last year does not seem to have been normal for a whole variety of reasons. This has been the first year in which polytechnics have had corporate status and independence from the local authorities. Most polytechnics we have also gained accredited status, meaning that we could refine our own systems of course validation and review. Yet for many of us this has meant taking a punctilious approach and re-reviewing many of the courses only recently externally validated. It has also often meant using more internal academics than external academic peers who might now be operating in the same competitive market. Indeed it is the operation of such market forces that has begun to dominate the year's events and started the process of transforming the academic process.

Far from independence from local authority finances being the unmitigated good that was claimed, negotiations for resources with the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council rather than the National Advisory Body and the local authorities seem to have been far more convoluted and constraining than hitherto. Resource constraints increasingly took their toll on the academic process – further constraints on staff and non-staff resources and problems of staff pay and morale. The ripple effects of resource constraints have continued to play their part in making academic life more stressful than hitherto.

However, the prospects may not be as bleak as this retrospective seems to imply. Certainly resources for teaching in the near future will continue to be as constrained as in the past year if not more so, with relatively constant changes in the processes of negotiation with the PCFC and the like. And the introduction of top-up student loans in the next year is likely to have effects on the student population and hence the teaching environment.

But perhaps there are a few straws in the wind that not everything is as tough as this. Recently I have been involved in discussions about the future direction of social science research through my two

professional associations – the Social Policy Association and the British Sociological Association – and on behalf of the latter at a joint meeting of the Economic and Social Research Council and the Association of Learned Societies in the Social Sciences. Of course, the timing of this latter meeting, at the end of July, also indicated just how the academic year seems to have expanded.

The ESRC had invited representatives of the learned societies in the social sciences to comment on and make contributions to the pro-

cess of discussing and assigning priorities to its proposed research initiatives across the range of the social sciences. This seems to me to be an excellent innovation – and by the attendance at the meeting this view is clearly shared by many others. However, we were reminded of both how competitive the processes within and between the research councils are and how the research initiative mode constitutes about one third (or 37 per cent to be precise) of the ESRC's budget. Moreover, it was not clear how this consultation was to be used in the final processes of decision-making. The research development groups make recommendations in a two-stage process to the council and the council then has the final say from a fairly long short list about which few proposals finally to endorse after about two years of consideration.

What also was not clear was why this rather cumbersome process of consultation with the learned societies had been determined rather than what intuitively to many of us in the various professional associations and ALSISS itself would seem an easier way forward, namely the appointment to the various research development groups of representative members of the appropriate professional associations and learned societies. However, we were firmly told that

membership of the ESRC's various groups and boards is not on the basis of representation of the specific professional associations but because of the needs for particular academic specialisms at any one point in time. For example, at an earlier meeting, we had been informed that the ESRC needed an anthropologist with expertise in eastern Europe for one of its development groups. We found it difficult to fathom why such precise expertise was necessarily required – surely a sociologist or political scientist could do just as well?

And why not an alternative method of selection to short-circuit this cumbersome but fascinating process of consultation. I am sure we all enjoyed having our say – and it certainly seemed clear that everyone had spent a lot of time reading through the rather voluminous papers – but in the end I think we were left wondering whether or not our disparate ideas would aid the process of decision-making.

And one of the research developments that I found especially exciting – that on gender relations – is likely to fall by the wayside precisely because the consultation process did not include the appropriate professional group – the Women's Studies Network – and it falls between several research development groups and their specialisms. Nevertheless, I think that this kind of consultative exercise, despite all the pitfalls, is very good for getting peer involvement in thinking about priorities for resources for research at this critical juncture. Hopefully it will pave the way for more academic involvement in general decisions about priorities for resources.