

# Changes set pace for birth of business life

IT SEEMS to me that in the past few weeks we have witnessed an enormous quickening in the pace of change in higher education. From the beginning of this academic session we, at least in the polytechnics, have had to deal with newish issues or new approaches to old problems.

The first is the big rise in student numbers and all that entails in terms of trying to achieve academic quality with relatively few additional resources. Of course we are committed to widening access especially on the grounds of achieving equal opportunities in terms of class, gender, race and age. Yet the pace at which we are moving is leaving some of us rather breathless. Moreover, we had not wholly anticipated the popularity of our courses and are having also to juggle space and accommodation with some difficulty.

Many students are different from those of previous generations. Many now come from newly accredited access and foundation courses at colleges that have been franchised by us. The needs of these students may well be rather different from those of our past students, especially given that they are more likely to be mature students with experience of "life" if not academic study. This means that we have to give constant consideration to our methods of teaching and student support. We are also having to think about different modes of study and the regular timing of lectures, seminars and classes.

At the present time, systems of student support are also changing and many of our students have difficulty coping with the demands of living and study simultaneously. This then requires our regular



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vigilance and support to ensure that students do have sufficient time to give to their studies as well as to their personal and domestic maintenance.

Most important of all is the fact that we have to keep our curricula under review to ensure that they are suitable for the needs of new generations as we approach the 21st century. Such considerations are inevitably time-consuming although vital. Engaging in such full reviews, at the same time as trying to sustain academic quality for the mass of students, and without the resources for new forms of administrative support adds to the feeling of a new pace of work.

We have introduced new courses and are having to cope with the introduction of new curricula. This inevitably poses yet more responsibility. Some courses are built up from combinations of units or

modules from existing ones. But others are courses at new levels – not just the accreditation of foundation courses – but postgraduate masters and diploma courses ranging over relatively new fields of endeavour. They build upon our specialist expertise but need new kinds of concentration and specialisation.

The abolition of the binary divide is also adding to the feeling that we are having to give rapid attention to new dimensions of academic quality. In particular, we are being asked to give special thought to the balance between teaching and research. There seem to be a plethora of initiatives around funding and bidding for research support.

First, we were asked to give consideration to the PCFC's initiative to fund research in public sector institutions either as centres of excellence or as new fields of endeavour. The time-scale for this, despite some early summer warning seemed woefully short.

Second, we have been asked as institutions and through our various professional organisations to give some thought to the Universities Funding Council's new systems for its next research selectivity exercise. Including in the polytechnics is a very welcome development but in the context of rapid institutional change makes for yet more intensity of consideration of the balance between teaching and research.

Third, the research councils also seem to be spawning new ideas. For example, the Economic and Social Research Council has just invited views on new systems of support for part-time higher degree students. This again is a most encouraging development and one which should surely

be to the advantage of public sector institutions. But do we really have the time to give that also the good attention it so clearly deserves?

My own institution is also developing exciting new forms of postgraduate student support for research to which we all would wish to subscribe. Finding the time for these vital new schemes in addition to continuing with our own research and consultancy activities as before adds yet more to the intensity of academic work.

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One of the critical issues that arises out of all of these developments is the question of the management of these changes. Just how should we balance all these competing and equally vital issues to ensure the best balance between academic quality in teaching and research, and at the same time ensure that our students are satisfied?

The relatively new business-like systems of line management clearly won't suffice in this context as management seemed to be hidebound by the need to defer to untested notions about the competitive limits of the organisation they do not allow for rapid responses and

academic imagination. Systems of management based upon traditional notions of academic collegiality and co-operation with the built-in assumption that peer support and review is helpful would be far preferable. However, they do not seem to be the way in which many academic institutions are currently responding to these demands upon them.

I recently went to a conference organised by the Office of Public Management to consider ways in which women's management potential could be used to develop equal opportunities in management in the public sector on the grounds of equity if not efficiency. It seemed to me to be a great opportunity to think about what have become known as "female styles" of management which tend to be similar to traditional academic styles of collegiality in management.

However, instead, we were offered mainly examples of developments from the private sector. In these instances forms of management seemed to be even more hidebound by the need to defer to untested notions about both the market and the competitive limits of the organisation than in the public sector. This emphasised an untested concept of efficiency over equity.

At least the examples we were offered from aspects of the public sector did take as read the importance of equal opportunities on grounds of both efficiency and equity which those from the private sector did not. This left me firmly convinced that attempts to make organisations more business-like would certainly not further equal opportunities or more imaginative systems of responding to a variety of forms of change in a period of flux.