

Moving moment in a time of change

SANWICHED BETWEEN the end of term and the Christmas week my department, along with the law and government department, was involved in moving offices. This meant transferring from one building at the Elephant and Castle to another refurbished office block about five minutes walk away. Although this might sound no distance at all it actually entails a hazardous walk either through rather labyrinthine subways or a game of cat and mouse with the traffic around two roundabouts. Given this and the short space of time in which to move, the process proved rather frenetic.

Moreover, coming at the end of a term which had been very momentous in the nature and range of changes that we had had to cope with, it has left us all feeling both exhausted and yet exhilarated by the prospect of a completely new future. We have had to deal with a vast array of changes from increases in numbers of students of the order of over 60 per cent to welcoming in students and staff from another college, to management changes to bidding for research funds to major course reviews and validations.

Moving office in any event is a rather traumatic process. It must surely rank with the other major stresses in one's life such as moving house, loss or death of one's loved ones or divorce, and bankruptcy or unemployment. All of these stresses are said to have major impacts on one's personal life. However, where work is of a professional nature and deeply connected with one's



MIRIAM DAVID

personal identity as say an academic or intellectual, moving office is surely imbued with deep personal significance.

By coincidence I had had to pack up my office in the same way exactly six years ago to the week when I moved from the University of Bristol to South Bank Polytechnic. As I began the packing process I became very nostalgic and began to reflect upon the significance of the whole process both at a substantive and symbolic level.

I was somewhat shocked by some of the papers that I came across this time round: some of the neat piles of papers and lecture notes had been barely touched. I realised that I had found myself writing new lectures and course

materials, despite the apparent similarity of the courses.

More important, however, was the fact of the major change in context. Six years ago I had moved from a university to a polytechnic, to a more senior position as head of a large social sciences department. I could not then really anticipate what life on the other side of the binary divide would be like. This recent move has really brought home to me one of the major significant differences – the practice of not keeping most of one's academic books and papers at one's work. At Bristol the practice was for all of us to have offices sufficiently large to keep the bulk of one's things in it. This is certainly not the usual case at South Bank and probably not in any inner London polytechnic, although I remain an eccentric exception. One of the removal men jocularly commented on the fact that he had not appreciated that we were moving the library. He had assumed it was merely the staff offices. Another administrative colleague asked why I kept so much at work. When my husband moved offices to the LSE two years ago he was supplied with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves to fit all his paraphernalia into a tight space. Having unpacked, he sat at his desk to begin work and heard a loud creaking. He put up his arms in a Christ-like posture to prevent the books falling but was unable to. He was buried under the pile, unable to extricate himself, until rescued by a colleague coming to check on him settling in. Not content with this

the same thing happened a year later when moving to another office!

Although this move of mine only entails a shift within an institution curiously it comes at a time when there are major changes afoot for the whole institution – this time from polytechnic to university status.

I doubt that the changes planned in the Further and Higher Education Bill, taken together with all the recent changes that we have been involved in implementing, will mean that university status is anything like what it meant for the élite higher education institutions in the past. In many respects it is likely that the new system of higher education will be modelled more on that of the polytechnics than on the universities of the past.

For example, changes in resources especially through new forms of student recruitment and fees, as well as the plans for changes in the system of financing research through the new funding council, will usher in greater institutional diversity through selectivity. Added to this is the move to make higher education far more receptive and responsive to the needs of the market. This process is already well under way so that we are already planning new courses to tap hitherto untapped markets for students both in this country and abroad. In addition courses are being franchised at colleges in the broad vicinity so that recruits to higher education institutions will come from an even wider variety of walks of life rather than the more narrowly

traditional avenues of secondary education.

Changes in Europe, and the Maas-tricht settlement, albeit limited for Britain for the moment, will mean an entirely different set of labour market conditions and therefore prospects for higher education. But given the 1992 changes it is likely that our students will be more mobile and that our courses will have to suit the requirements of even wider and more diverse markets.

A felicitous prospect for us as social scientists, however, is that our kinds of knowledge and skills will be both useful and necessary to aid these complex processes of change and the policy decision-making processes. This point was made most eloquently by Professor Howard Newby, chair of the Economic and Social Research Council, in the lecture he delivered to an invited audience in the annual IBM/South Bank lecture series just before Christmas.

That apart, the future will certainly not be anything like the past, given that our old commitments to higher education, as well as general education as a public service, seem now to be reaching an impossible impasse. In the past, many of us chose academic life deliberately for the time and space it provided for careful scholarship and intellectual reflection as well as the passing on of useful knowledge rather than the life of being an entrepreneur. Now we will have to find new ways of ensuring our own support in order to enable us to remain scholars in the old tradition.