

# Paradise News parable for our times

USING ON a potential topic during the busy pre-holiday period I struck on the notion of course quality control and validations in the post-binary period. This was because I was spending quite a lot of time involved in validations – three at “home” and one in “Awayday”.

Now that we are well into the summer vacation, this topic is beginning to seem rather less relevant to the new university – or Higher Education Institution – era than it did only a month ago. There are perhaps far more pressing issues to concern us. Some emerge from the White Paper on education, albeit that it is about schools. It is the harbinger of the form of Government education policies.

I have only recently returned from holiday. Holidays contrive to put a different gloss on events, whether they are taken in faraway places, especially where one is not conversant with the language, or close to home. This year we were in the sun and almost torridity of Sicily. So a really different construction of events is bound to occur on return.

My holiday reading contributed to my feeling that course validations and quality control in the new era might be a thing of the past. In particular catching up on David Lodge's latest – *Paradise News* in a rather similar “paradise” to his Honolulu, but paid to my more serious reflections. This is yet another of his beautifully crafted and lightly entertaining academic novels, but this one bears on “traditional” university life only tangentially. Both his



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satire and his cynicism – although not centrally about questions of university life in this book – made me rethink a whole range of academic issues.

The “traditional” universities are unlikely to want to take on board the full import of the traditional binary sector or rather CNAA-influenced system of quality control through course validations. And in any event they are unlikely to have to do so given the impending changes.

Nevertheless, as a late convert to the system both to the individual institution and to the course providers, I want to give some praise to the current system. I also

want to argue against its abandonment at this rather crucial juncture.

However, the signs are that all such “systems” are likely to be abandoned with the advent of the “commercialisation” or “consumerisation” of systems of democratic control in education. And the proposals for quality assessments of research may presage the shape of quality control of teaching and courses.

The four validations that I was involved in immediately before my holiday were not all the same in either form or content, which illustrates the current flexibility of the system. But there are a number of common features, namely the emphasis on peer group discussion and evaluation and the use of a number of external as well as internal members of the validation panel.

However, what is defined as a “peer” differs from situation to situation. At South Bank we tend to consider other academics in the institution, whether or not they are in the same or a cognate discipline, and senior academic managers as suitable panel members. External members are usually drawn from the academic subject or from the relevant professions or industry. By contrast, Leeds tends to consider peers to be people drawn from the same or similar academic subject, both from within and from other institutions or relevant industries.

At South Bank the chair of the panel is always an internal senior academic manager. At Leeds, by contrast, the chair is usually an external and senior academic

manager. This inevitably leads to slightly different procedures and processes of decision-making.

For instance, in the case of our institution, there is no need to check separately on corporate strategies and support, since the chair is usually involved in those and can speak for them. The relevant dean is part of the course team and can also address this. This may mean that the process is not independent or autonomous. The chair of two of the internal validation panels in which I was involved was a very high-powered, ex-academic turned administrator. He was both an impartial and influential chair.

In the northern situation, the panel which I chaired, felt the need to meet members of the directorate and senior management to be reassured about institutional strategies for course development and resources. This, in any event, is their usual procedure. The extent to which we could influence future strategies was limited by our independence and autonomy from the institution.

This independence did mean that we could have very full and frank discussions about the course structures and content with the course teams. The northern procedures meant that we had, after an initial private panel meeting, to share all of our concerns – and even our doubts – with the course teams and their immediate managers. The final judgement was eventually made in collaboration with the course team. In our case this was fine but I was uneasy that it might have meant the

panel had to compromise.

At “home” the panel meets privately at the beginning and penultimate stage of the process. In the case of at least one of the three local validations I thought this privacy before the final judgement was important if not vital. I presume that other panel members concurred in the need for us to share privately our doubts. It certainly made for a smooth and elegant presentation by the chair to the course team, without the need to publicise our misgivings.

These variations aside, the whole process of course validations is one in which course teams collaborate over designing and justifying new courses and course developments or changes. It is one also in which course teams receive both internal and external approbation and even appreciation for their work from a small group of like-minded people, concerned about a particular issue. A great deal of time is thought goes into the presentation of a course document and its justification as panel members collaborate to try to ensure that the course is developed in the best possible context, including to ensure the adequate deployment of resources.

In the current climate, I believe it would be a pity if we moved away from the careful consideration of quality in an institutional setting. I prefer it to the more largescale, statistical and yet broad brush quality assessments that are currently in use by the UFC for research. Yet if the White Paper signals the future the UFC model is the most we can hope for.