

DO ACADEMICS STILL THINK?

Frank Furedi

1
2
3
4
5 Recently a colleague at a redbrick university asked me to provide
6 my views on the suitability of a group of applicants to an academic
7 post. The applicants had clearly done their homework. They all
8 stressed the importance of their potential contribution to department's
9 RAE. They emphasised their commitment to 'diversity', 'inclusive
10 teaching' and 'critical thinking'. They boasted of the many research
11 skills that they had acquired. They clearly talked the talk expected of
12 them. But what struck me as particularly depressing was the fact that
13 none of them attempted to present themselves as scholars or thinkers.
14 Their account of their research profile was perfunctory and technical.
15 From the information they provided it was evident that they applied
16 for grants, sometimes got one, did the research, published a couple of
17 monographs and went on to apply for a further round of grants. In the
18 story they offered of their research career there was barely a mention
19 of an idea that they thought was important nor did they transmit a
20 statement of intellectual interest. Obviously the way we present
21 ourselves on an application form tells only part of the story. And for
22 all I know everyone of these applicants was a closet thinker and
23 scholar. But they clearly did not believe that thinking is part of the job
24 description of an academic. They also understood that their
25 prospective employer was not looking for thinkers. And in this respect
26 they were right.

27
28 Of course academics still think, and fortunately world class
29 thinkers can be found in the corridors of many British universities. But
30 thinking takes place despite the powerful trends that seek to downsize
31 the academic into a teacher of further education. Increasingly thinking
32 has become a freelance activity to be pursued when we are not
33 teaching, administrating or researching. Universities still attach some
34 value to thinking but the value associated with it tends to be rhetorical
35 rather than substantive. It is difficult to disagree with the diagnosis
36 offered by Mary Evans, who describes the university as a site for
37 'battery farming of the mind'.¹

¹ Evans, M. (2005) *Killing Thinking: The Death of the Universities*, Continuum: London.

38 The Infantilisation of Academics

39

40 Academics seem to be in a constant state of list making. I don't
41 just mean designing reading lists. We are continually asked to provide
42 lists of publications, lists of teaching commitments, lists of
43 administrative duties, lists of grants etc. List making has become an
44 important by-product of the growing trend towards the formalisation
45 of university life. So the lists are not even the product of an
46 academic's imagination or thought. There is now a ready made
47 template that instructs how the list should be constructed, what
48 language should be used and what values should be promoted. Forms
49 dominate every aspect of university life and little is left to chance or
50 professional discretion. The performance of academic list making is
51 evaluated on the ability to follow instructions rather than on creative
52 thinking.

53

54 The micro-management of university life has become an
55 accomplished fact. This form of governance is achieved through the
56 homogenisation, standardisation and quantification of university life.
57 That is why there needs to be a proverbial template for every
58 dimension of the academic experience. And forms need to be filled in
59 and literally followed to the letter. As every academic can testify this
60 regulation of higher education leads to its bureaucratisation. In turn
61 bureaucratisation leads inexorably to the deprofessionalisation and
62 infantilisation of academics.

63

64 In the army, soldiers follow orders, in a bureaucracy civil servants
65 live by the rule-book, and in the university academics are forced to
66 work to a template. Academics may have their PhDs and published
67 monographs but their managers do not trust them to pursue their work
68 as mature and responsible scholars. Nor are they encouraged to think
69 for themselves. There is now growing pressure on academics –
70 particularly those who are newly appointed – to internalise the values
71 of their managers. From this perspective academics are perceived as
72 immature and unworldly employees who need to be socialised and
73 trained by experts who know a thing or two about the management of
74 higher education. Consequently academics, like precocious children,
75 are offered 'support' to realise their potential. One way that this
76 condescending view of the academic is transmitted is through the
77 mechanism of staff development.

CAN THE PRIZES STILL GLITTER?
The Future of British Universities in a Changing World

78 In recent years, many academics have discovered that attending
79 staff development courses has assumed the character of a contractual
80 obligation. Checking out how many of these courses you have
81 attended is often part of the appraisal process. Along with listing your
82 publications, grant applications and conference papers, you have to
83 provide evidence that you have been a busy staff-development course
84 attendee. And if you think that you have better things to do than spend
85 an afternoon getting whiteboard training - think again. As the
86 University of Brighton's staff development website indicates: "The
87 university has the right to expect that each member of staff as part of
88 the individual's contractual obligation will develop his/her
89 competencies and capability, which are aligned to the university's
90 strategy as it may be operationalised at faculty, departmental, school,
91 section, team or individual level." Quite a mouthful, but the message
92 is clear. Attendance will be policed. Brighton requires that "each
93 member of staff keeps a record of staff development activity, which is
94 monitored and evaluated in collaboration with the line manager".
95

96 A review of British university staff development programmes
97 indicates that their objective is to ensure that staff are fully socialised
98 into accepting the bizarre technocratic ethos that prevails on campuses.
99 "Staff development exists to maximise the potential of each individual
100 to support the university in achieving its strategic goals," declares the
101 human resource home page of Brunel University. Clearly, this is not a
102 statement celebrating the individual's potential to develop, but an
103 attempt to ensure that employees know the institution's line. The
104 University of Leicester's declaration on this subject is no less subtle:
105 "One of the main responsibilities of the university's Staff
106 Development Centre is to provide a central programme of
107 developmental activities for all categories of staff to support
108 developments and the university's institutional plan." One of the main
109 aims of staff development at the University of Sheffield is "to enable
110 the university to improve its institutional performance". It can be
111 argued that there is nothing objectionable about mobilising staff to
112 promote the corporate plans of a university. But why call it staff
113 development? Why pretend that these initiatives are for the benefit of
114 staff?
115

116 The premise of staff development is literally that academics are
117 not quite developed adults. That is why so many of the programmes
118 are oriented towards what is euphemistically characterised as

119 "personal development". At Loughborough University, personal
120 development courses deal with topics such as "assertiveness, financial
121 advice, meditation, relaxation, etc". The learning outcome of one
122 assertiveness communication course at a leading university is to gain
123 the ability to "differentiate between different types of behaviour".
124 Aside from its patronising assumption that staff cannot do this already,
125 the training course is wholly objectionable because it seeks to impose
126 an insidious form of emotional conformism. At least in the old days,
127 the military had no inhibitions about letting everyone know that
128 soldiers were not expected to think for themselves. University
129 bureaucrats prefer to hide behind the Kafkaesque language of staff
130 development when they transmit the same message to human
131 resources.

132
133 At the University of Nottingham, staff are offered a course
134 patronisingly titled "Looking after yourself". Participants are told that
135 they will have an opportunity to "recognise the importance of good
136 nutrition and exercise". They will also learn to "identify a range of
137 techniques for reducing the effects of stress and increasing self-
138 esteem". Thankfully, it will also "plan ways of improving their
139 personal image". At Cambridge University, a course "Navigator: A
140 programme for men" is "designed for those who wish to progress to
141 develop themselves", while its "Springboard: A women's development
142 programme" aims "to value what you have got going for you and build
143 on your strengths". Cambridge also runs "Assertiveness in action".
144 The objective of this course is to allow yourself "to find out how you
145 see yourself in relation to others". Or at least to see yourself through
146 the eyes of your trainer.

147

148 **Diminishing institutional integrity**

149

150 Thankfully in terms of time and effort staff development plays
151 only a marginal role in the lives of most academics. But it symbolises
152 the university's attitude towards its academics. Academics are not
153 trusted to construct their own professional culture. They need to
154 internalize a system of values cobbled together by business
155 consultants and higher education experts. Like so many dimensions of
156 university life this is certainly not the product of academic thinking.

157

CAN THE PRIZES STILL GLITTER?
The Future of British Universities in a Changing World

158 University teachers are increasingly forced to work according to
159 rules and practices that do not derive from an academic culture but
160 from a managerial one. The standardisation of evaluation procedures,
161 benchmarking, auditing and quality assurance procedures all compel
162 academics to work according to an externally imposed script.
163 University teaching needs to be consistent with bureaucratically
164 devised 'learning outcomes'. We do not yet have the equivalent of a
165 'literacy hour', but it is only a matter of time before lecturers are
166 advised to teach certain 'key skills' at a designated time in the
167 academic calendar.

168
169 Back in the nineties, the author of the *McDonaldization Thesis*
170 noted that soon the university will adopt many of the managerial
171 models and practices associated with the spread of this hamburger
172 chain. According to the American sociologist George Ritzer, new
173 forms of quality control and consumer orientation would be integrated
174 into the existing structure of the university.² My initial reaction to
175 Ritzer's thesis was that although it was a clever idea, the arrival of
176 McUniversity was far off. Today, when virtually every university
177 brochure, mission statement and web-site is indistinguishable from
178 one another, I am not so sure. Of course, we don't quite do the same
179 thing and we try to pursue our work in accordance with the demands
180 of our discipline. However the pressure towards homogenisation,
181 standardisation and quantification works towards the constant
182 diminishing of academic judgement.

183
184 The rationalisation of intellectual life in universities necessarily
185 encroaches on the process of thinking. Creative and open-ended
186 thinking invariably collides with bureaucratic norms. It is difficult to
187 quantify or audit thinking. That is why the new breed of academic
188 experts have not been able to resist the temptation of attempting to
189 devise a template for managing thinking. In the social sciences and
190 humanities, academics are encouraged to become 'reflexive' and
191 adopt 'critical thinking'. What the template demands can be best
192 described as formulaic thinking since neither genuine thought or
193 criticism can be performed by rote. In line with the prevailing
194 pedagogic ethos of higher education thinking is transformed into a
195 skill. Along with study skills, listening skills, time management skills,

² Ritzer, G (1998) *The McDonaldization Thesis: Explorations and Extensions*, Sage: London.

196 telephone conversation skills, information gathering skills, evaluating
197 skills, analyzing skills, and integrating skills, we have thinking skills.
198 The breaking down of thinking into a series of skills may assist the
199 trainer and business consultant but it is entirely alien to what
200 academics do when they seek to know and understand. It actually
201 dispossesses academics from thinking according to their own
202 inclination and in a way that is integral to the pursuit of knowledge.
203 Academic thinking evolves in a constant interaction with the problems
204 they address. It is open-ended and moves in unexpected directions.
205

206 Bureaucratically convenient practices like the skills agenda serve
207 to erode the institutional integrity of the university. These are
208 practices that others have thought up for the academic. One
209 unfortunate consequence of this development is that the predominant
210 ideas about the purpose of the university are not the product of
211 academic thinking. Academics have no right to have a monopoly on
212 defining the purpose of a university.
213

214 There is nothing wrong with society having a wide divergence of
215 opinion about the purpose of higher education. A clash of strongly
216 held views can stimulate all parties to develop important insights into
217 the role of higher education and society. But instead of reflection or
218 informed debate what we have are decrees dreamt up by invisible
219 bureaucrats and officials.
220

221 There was a time when the metaphor of living in an Ivory Tower
222 could be used to describe the behaviour of some academics. Today
223 academics live in an open plan institution and are continually forced
224 to account for themselves to officials who have no real concern with
225 the substantive content of their work. Increasingly academic life is
226 subjected to norms and values that are external to it. As Gordon
227 Graham notes, academics are 'no longer, or only rarely, formers of
228 public opinion and more usually subject to opinions and hence
229 policies formed elsewhere'.³ Academics still possess a visible profile
230 but when they speak in public they frequently talk to a script written
231 by someone outside the university.
232

³ Graham, G (2002) *Universities; The Recovery Of An Idea*, Imprint Academic: Thorverton, p 121.

CAN THE PRIZES STILL GLITTER?
The Future of British Universities in a Changing World

233 It is tempting to blame the rise of template culture on the forces
234 from without. But universities have always been subject to some form
235 of external pressure and yet did not necessarily tow the line. In recent
236 times academics have often been accomplices to the demise of the
237 integrity of their profession. Many of the regrettable trends outlined
238 above have become institutionalised without provoking much
239 opposition from academics. In recent decades academics have become
240 consummate grumblers but not very articulate foes of the
241 McDonaldization of their institution. Nor have academics sought to
242 influence the public and win support for their ideal of what a
243 university is about. Academics can demonstrate that they are still
244 thinking by taking responsibility for initiating a public debate about
245 the purpose of their work.