

For The Independent
October 2005

Truth, Standards and UK Universities

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You are in a nightmare. There is a clock. You, the hero, have just three seconds left to save the world from a Martian-induced explosion. There is just one thing -- tick, tick -- still to do. You must answer a question. Why do universities exist? (what do you mean you don't remember James Bond answering that). Well, universities are about the discovery and communication of ideas that are true. Uh-uh, four seconds, boom.

Unfortunately, the promulgation of truth looks increasingly shaky in UK universities. In assessing ourselves, we are starting to run away from it. There are two reasons: one is newspapers' desire to sell more issues and the other is successive governments' obsession with inspections.

First, take league tables. Rankings, rankings everywhere, and yet it is still so rare to find a believable one. I have been reading a league table, published in a well-known education newspaper, purporting to show that Cambridge and Oxford are the world's top universities in science. Caltech is apparently globally 9th. The University of Michigan is 41st. University College London is 65th.

Was this world league table itself produced scientifically, after a sifting of the facts, by unbiased observers, and a painstaking weighing of the key objective data? It was not. It was produced by a UK magazine asking a statistically non-representative sample of people about their opinions.

That same day I read about the new Nobel Prize in Physics. This year it has been awarded to a triumvirate from Harvard, Colorado and Munich. The newspaper ranking then sounded particularly implausible to me. Admittedly, I know little about hard science.

Therefore I went and had a look at the latest data, because I assume that, if we want to know whether the earth is flat, the best way is to take measurements rather than ask people for their intuitions.

If we look at a list of the world's most highly-cited scientists, which is available on the web from a disinterested source (the so-called Web of Science), we do not find support for this newspaper ranking. Terrific universities though they are, according to the data Oxbridge are not at the apex. Both Caltech and Michigan have far more top scientists – each with about 60 of these people compared to 40 at either of our ancient universities. Once you look at, say, Stanford it is all over. I stopped counting when I got near to 100.

What about productivity as an alternative measure of quality? Here I found useful the 2005 Academic Ranking of World Universities. This source is produced carefully and impressively by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China. If we discard their historical data on Nobel Prizes won long ago, so as to get to an up-to-date view, we find that on numbers of articles published in the most prestigious science journals our UK universities, although certainly respectable, are again a long way behind top US institutions.

Second, the next Research Assessment Exercise is visible, a large and dark shape on the horizon. Its format is new. We are now required to state which of our research articles are of a “quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour”. How is that to be defined? No guidance is given. Worse, who will choose whether UK academia has world-leading originality in, say, geology? The answer: a small group of UK academics from geology departments. The problem with this is not that these professors are dishonest but that each knows the lower they set the bar the more will cash flow to their own discipline. In this way, the government has instituted a system where people have an incentive to bend the truth. Little by little, this destroys the integrity of our universities.

Third, as I go around the country giving seminars, I grow weary of the tales I hear of lower quality. After a pint of beer, many academics now have a story about how standards on course X have been reduced in the last decade. Why? It is usually because the course will lose money if students are put off by being marked at the

standards required in earlier years. This indeed is a problem all over – Larry Summers, the president of Harvard, has been trying to reverse grade inflation in his own university.

I am concerned about UK weaknesses in research. But I worry more about the weakening of something else – the telling of the truth in and about our universities.