



Seeing red

Donald MacLeod looks at moves to reduce the bureaucratic burden on academics

Donald MacLeod
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Form-filling has a knack of driving academics berserk. Every year, they complain, the tide of forms washing across their desks and screens seems to rise, giving them less time to research, prepare lectures and mark students' work - they hate marking, too, but at least they see some point in it - and Auden's commandment to academe, "Thou shalt not answer questionnaires", grows ever more fanciful.

Their howls of outrage finally scuppered the laborious inspections of subject departments, called teaching quality assessments (TQAs), three years ago - Education Guardian's picture of sullen Warwick economists surrounded by boxes of bumf captured the mood of the time and helped to sway political opinion.

But since then, new forms have flooded in as fast as universities managed to bale out the old ones. "I haven't noticed any improvements at all," says Susan Bassnett, a professor in Warwick's Centre for Translation and Comparative Cultural Studies. "I have not noticed a reduction in form-filling and I have noticed an increase in training us to fill in forms, which is even dafter. And I hear from our administrators that their workload increases week in, week out. There hasn't been any reduction in the amount of paper that washes over my desk every week. There is a proliferation of agencies and they are all generating paperwork."

But help is at hand - or at least committees are talking about reducing the regulation burden. There are departmental committees in Whitehall and a review group under Dame Sandra Burslem, vice-chancellor of Manchester Met, looking at the way the Quality Assurance Agency (the universities' answer to Ofsted) collects its information.

A taskforce under Warwick's vice-chancellor, David VanderLinde, had some robust things to say, including upbraiding universities for being too supine in the face of demands for yet more data, and this has been succeeded by the Higher Education Regulation Review Group.

Dame Patricia Hodgson, the former head of the Independent Television Commission who chairs this mouthful, is launching it publicly on Thursday with a brisk agenda to clear out bureaucratic clutter. Universities need to be freed to get on with teaching and research, and also to stop looking to a centralised regulator all the time. "Not only can we cut the cost and time taken in administrative box-ticking, but we can make a significant difference to the psychology of the institutions," says Hodgson. A veteran of battles in the BBC as one of the senior lieutenants of the former director-general, John Birt, she is not someone to mess with.

First in her sights has been the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce), which oversees the sector on behalf of the government. Here she feels there have been some early successes, pushing the organisation in the direction it was going in anyway. Hefce has agreed to limit the number of special funding streams to six and if it or ministers come up with a new one, then one must be dropped. This "jam-jar" funding that universities have to bid for is a source of frustration among institutions because it means a lot of work for not much reward - and often none at all, if the bid fails.

The funding council has also agreed to a "single conversation" with universities and colleges - one request for data in place of the three at present, which she believes will streamline business significantly. "It's been a totally positive experience working with them," she says of her meetings with Hefce officials.

But she shakes her head at some of the "ludicrous" regulation afflicting universities on, for instance, something as simple as counting the students. "Hefce, the Teacher Training Agency and the Department of Health all require enrolment numbers at different dates around the first term of courses, and with slightly different details and formats.

"All three require confirmation of numbers who have actually completed courses at the end of the session, also in different formats and with varied specifications, with a fourth and slightly different demand from the Learning and Skills Council. Seven demands when there need surely be only two, serving all agencies."

She hopes to reach a "data concordat" with the three departments of education, health and trade to ensure universities and colleges only have to supply them with one set of forms. "Departments have been starting to work on this but they get bogged down in detail and territorial misunderstandings. They are talking about streamlining this, but I think we can give it a big kick."

She has the backing of ministers, but laughs: "On the one hand, all governments want to squeeze bureaucracy and for universities and colleges to take control of their own affairs - on the other hand, they have a good idea on Tuesday."

Last summer Alan Johnson, then higher education minister, declared that the cost of external bureaucracy to universities had fallen by 25% in real terms over the past four years, based on a study by PA Consulting of the demands of bodies such as Hefce and the QAA.

That's not how it feels in universities. Ivor Crewe, president of Universities UK, says there has been a change in the climate, but progress has been limited. "The actual reduction in the burden of regulation hasn't yet matched the genuine change of intention."

He welcomes having less "jam-jar" funding and more trust in the universities. UUK will distribute £7.5m to help universities raise endowments rather than the funding council holding competitive bids. (Mind you, universities will still have to put in "expressions of interest" so it's not quite paper free.)

But Crewe feels the burden of regulation has been lightened only marginally because the big items are still there - institutional audits by the QAA are less frequent but still require a lot of work. "New burdens keep popping up. You think you have got rid of one and another comes along." A university has to provide detailed information on the standard of postgraduate supervision, for instance, to six research councils and the arts and humanities research board, plus the funding council and the QAA. "Why can't it be looked at by one body?" complains Crewe.

In addition to government departments and quangos, professional bodies (engineers, lawyers, etc) do detailed audits of degree courses that lead to their qualifications. So a university department might be involved as a case study for a QAA institutional audit, and be audited by a research council and a professional body. If it is connected to health, there may be returns to the workforce development confederation, and an education department will be inspected by Ofsted and also have to report to the Teacher Training Agency.

"We are a very examined sector," remarks Crewe sardonically. He feels that not only is time wasted but also that the benefits of all this auditing and regulation are "nugatory".

Not so, argues Professor Robin Sibson, chief executive of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (Hesa), which exists to collect enormous quantities of data from universities (they have to provide it as a condition of government grants). Last week's ground-breaking Hefce study of participation in higher education, which cast such a stark light on the inequalities faced by young people brought up in different neighbourhoods, would not have been possible without detailed Hesa data, he points out. He admits that some of this information, such as student postcodes, was difficult for universities to provide but there was a public interest payoff and the results will also be useful to universities in trying to recruit students from a wider range of backgrounds.

TQA inspections were hated by many academics, but they were extensively used by newspapers, including the Guardian, and formed the only basis for prospective students to compare the teaching they might get at different universities. A national student survey is being mounted this year to try to fill this gap.

Many universities resisted the idea of including part-time students in the destination of leavers record but this is now yielding very interesting results, says Sibson. Hesa costs £2.5m and the costs to the universities themselves are another £10m - a small percentage of the higher education budget. He says that Hesa aims to "collect once and use many times" and collects information only where there is use for it.

Sibson welcomes the regulation review group, as does Peter Williams, head of the QAA, which has been the target of much academic ire. "I think it is an excellent opportunity for a dispassionate group to discuss the pros and cons of different regimes. We are going to be able to do business with them quite productively," he says.

Williams, who calls himself a "minimalist by inclination", argues that from this summer universities will emerge from a transitional period when regulation was being scaled down and they will begin to feel a major reduction of the burden. The Burslem group could well streamline its methods further, he says.

So why the continued complaints from academics at the coalface? "Very few will have seen sight or sound of us recently," retorts Williams. "But we remain a bete noire of certain backwoodmen who are not interested in what we actually do and why. We're a scapegoat. More reflective practitioners realise we are taking a more effective and efficient approach to the task in hand."

Recently, Williams expressed concern about moves to impose a European quality assurance framework, a thought to induce apoplexy in senior common rooms. On Friday, returning from the continent, he was confident there would be no pain for UK universities and quality assurance would remain a matter for national agencies operating to guidelines - which he has drafted. He hopes this will be adopted by education ministers meeting in Bergen in May.

This still leaves plenty for European universities and bureaucrats to debate over recognising each other's qualifications and how students could carry credits from one country to another -with plenty of attendant red tape for Dame Patricia and her group to worry about.

But at least, says Williams, "European inspectors wandering around checking up on teaching - that's not going to happen".

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