

Britain: The Disgrace of the Universities

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British universities face a crisis of the mind and spirit. For thirty years, Tory and Labour politicians, bureaucrats, and “managers” have hacked at the traditional foundations of academic life. Unless policies and practices change soon, the damage will be impossible to remedy.

As an “Occasional Student” at University College London in the early 1970s and a regular visitor to the Warburg Institute, Oxford, and Cambridge after that, I—like many American humanists—envied colleagues who taught at British universities. We had offices with linoleum; they had rooms with carpets. We worked at desks; they sat with their students on comfy chairs and gave them glasses of sherry. Above all, we felt under constant pressure to do the newest new thing, and show the world that we were doing it: to be endlessly innovative and interdisciplinary and industrious.

British humanists innovated too. Edward Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, Frances Yates and Peter Burke, and many others formulated new ways of looking at history for my generation. But British academics always admitted, as we sometimes did not, that it is vital to preserve and update our traditional disciplines and forms of knowledge: languages, precise interpretation of texts and images and objects, rigorous philosophical analysis and argument. Otherwise all the sexy interdisciplinary work will yield only a trickle of trendy blather.

There was a Slow Food feel to British university life, based on a consensus that people should take the time to make an article or a book as dense and rich as it could be. Good American universities were never exactly Fast Food Nation, but we certainly felt the pressure to produce, regularly and rapidly. By contrast, Michael Baxandall spent three years at the Warburg Institute, working in the photographic collection and not completing a dissertation, and several more as a lecturer, later on, writing only a few articles. Then, in 1971 and 1972, he produced two brilliant interdisciplinary books, which transformed the study of Renaissance humanism and art, remain standard works to this day, and were only the beginning of a great career. Gertrud Bing, E.H. Gombrich, J.B. Trapp, and A.M. Meyer, who administered the Warburg in those days, knew how to be patient. Their results speak for themselves.

From the accession of Margaret Thatcher onward, the pressure has risen. Universities have had to prove that they matter. Administrators and chairs have pushed faculty to win grants and publish and rewarded those who do so most successfully with periods of leave and other privileges that American professors can only dream of. The pace of production is high, but

the social compact among teachers is frayed. In the last couple of years, the squeeze has become tighter than ever. Budgets have shrunk, and universities have tightened their belts to fit. Now they are facing huge further cuts for three years to come—unless, as is likely, the Conservatives take over the government, in which case the knife may go even deeper.

Administrators have responded not by resisting, for the most part, but by trying to show that they can “do more with less.” To explain how they can square this circle, they issue statements in the Orwellian language of “strategic planning.” A typical planning document, from King’s College London, ex-

plains that the institution must “create financially viable academic activity by disinvesting from areas that are at sub-critical level with no realistic prospect of extra investment.”

the glories of King’s College. That is why Jeffrey Hamburger, the Harvard art historian who is one of the world’s leading experts on medieval manuscripts, has helped to organize a worldwide campaign to reverse the decision. (Similarly, the Chicago philosopher Brian Leiter has publicized the cuts in philosophy on his widely read blog, Leiter Reports.)

The cuts are not intended to stop with the first victims. All other members of the arts and humanities faculty at King’s are being forced to reapply for their jobs. When the evaluation is finished, around twenty-two of them will have been voted off the island. Even the official statements make

clear that these faculty members will be let go not because they have ceased to do basic research or teach effectively, but because their fields aren’t fashionable and don’t spin money. When criticized, the principal of Kings, Rick Trainor, complained that foreign professors don’t appreciate the financial problems that he faces. He’s wrong. All of us face drastic new financial pressures.

Universities become great by investing for the long term. You choose the best scholars and teachers you can and give them the resources and the time to think problems through. Sometimes



Oxford Fellows ‘envisaging the weather’; drawing by Max Beerbohm from Zuleika Dobson, or An Oxford Love Story, 1911

plains that these faculty members will be let go not because they have ceased to do basic research or teach effectively, but because their fields aren’t fashionable and don’t spin money. When criticized, the principal of Kings, Rick Trainor, complained that foreign professors don’t appreciate the financial problems that he faces. He’s wrong. All of us face drastic new financial pressures.

But we also appreciate a principle that seems to elude Mr. Trainor—as well as his colleagues at Sussex, who have begun similar measures, and the London administrators who seem bent on turning the Warburg Institute from a unique research center, its open stacks laden with treasures uniquely accessible to all readers, into a book depository. Universities exist to discover and transmit knowledge. Scholars and teachers provide those services. Administrators protect and nurture the scholars and teachers: give them the security, the resources, and the possibilities of camaraderie and debate that make serious work possible. Firing excellent faculty members is not a clever tactical “disinvestment,” it’s a catastrophic failure.

Are academic salaries really the main source of the pressure on the principal? Vague official documents couched in management jargon are hard to decode. The novelist and art historian Iain Pears notes that King’s has assembled in recent years an “executive

lecturer turns out to be Malcolm Bradbury’s fluent, shallow, vicious History Man; sometimes he or she turns out to be Michael Baxandall. No one knows quite why this happens. We do know, though, that turning the university into *The Office* will produce a lot more History Men than scholars such as Baxandall.

Accept the short term as your standard—support only what students want to study right now and outside agencies want to fund right now—and you lose the future. The subjects and methods that will matter most in twenty years are often the ones that nobody values very much right now. Slow scholarship—like Slow Food—is deeper and richer and more nourishing than the fast stuff. But it takes longer to make, and to do it properly, you have to employ eccentric people who insist on doing things their way. The British used to know that, but now they’ve streaked by us on the way to the other extreme.

At this point, American universities are more invested than British in the old ways. Few of us any longer envy our British colleagues. But straws show how the wind blows. The language of “impact” and “investment” is heard in the land. In Iowa, in Nevada, and in other places there’s talk of closing humanities departments. If you start hearing newspeak about “sustainable excellence clusters,” watch out. We’ll be following the British down the short road to McDonald’s.

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