

Viewpoint: End of Self-Regulation

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Introduction

The Higher Education Bill that is now before Parliament spells the end of university self-regulation in this country. This – and not the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework, the canonisation of the private and for-profit HE sectors, or even the fast-track route to degree-awarding powers and university title – is the most fundamental of all the reforms that are about to be ramrodded through the Westminster legislature.

Self-Regulation

The Bill proposes that an all-powerful Office for Students be fashioned from the ashes of the HEFCE, with powers of entry that HEFCE has never enjoyed. It proposes that this Office will not merely be able to confer degree-awarding powers and university title, but also take them away. And it proposes that in addition to inheriting HEFCE's statutory power to assess the quality of education in taxpayer-funded HEI's the OfS will take responsibility for the surveillance of academic standards in all HEI's. That is to say, the OfS – and not university senates, academic boards or even external examiners – will in future have the last word so far as the policing of these standards is concerned. What's more, the Bill mandates the OfS to introduce "a scheme to give ratings to English higher education providers regarding the quality of, and standards applied to, the higher education that they provide where they apply for such a rating." So we can confidently expect a standards-related league table to emerge.

When (through the mechanism of the 1992 Further & Higher Education Act) the polytechnics were permitted to turn themselves into universities, great care was taken that the Funding Councils established by that Act would be empowered – indeed obliged – to assess "the quality of education" provided in taxpayer-supported institutions. However, it was equally clear [clause 82] that "the arrangements" that each institution put in place for "maintaining academic standards" remained the prerogative of that institution.

It's true that the Act provided an obscure mechanism by which two or more Funding

Councils could be required to appoint "a person" to make what was termed "an assessment" of these arrangements. But this mechanism has never been used. So while the Funding Councils could assess the *quality of education* - meaning the totality of the student learning experience – academic standards – meaning (according to the Bill now before Parliament) "*the standards used by an institution to ascertain the level of achievement attained by a student undertaking a higher education course provided by it*" - were emphatically off-limits. Indeed we might remind ourselves that in its proposals to the Secretary of State in July 1995 on the development of quality assurance, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors & Principals [now UUK] declared emphatically that 'Standards are in law solely the responsibility of the institutions individually'.

Historically, this privilege - to set, apply and police its own standards – has been the cornerstone of the academic autonomy enjoyed by the British HEI sector. That past, it seems, is now dead.

Whose fault is this?

Eight years ago I delivered my inaugural professorial lecture at the University of Buckingham. Entitled "Teaching Quality Assessment, League Tables and the Decline of Academic Standards in British Higher Education," the lecture incorporated examples of the deliberate dumbing-down of academic standards at the behest of university administrations.

One such was the celebrated case of Dr Paul Buckland, who in 2007 resigned as professor of environmental archaeology at Bournemouth University. He did so in protest at the decision

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of university authorities that 13 students whom he - and a formal examinations board - had judged to have failed a course should nonetheless be deemed to have passed it. In so doing, the university authorities appear to have endorsed the view of a senior official that students should have been able to pass the course merely on the basis of lecture notes, without doing the required reading.

But I noted that the problem did not just affect the ex-polytechnics. I drew attention to the strange case of one Russell Group university where in the autumn of 2006 it emerged that at a drastic reform of the grading process had resulted in the proportion of students achieving first-class honours jumping from 7% (2005) to over 17%, and that it had apparently become possible for students to be awarded first-class honours without having actually achieved a first-class mark in any individual component of their degrees. I drew attention to another Russell Group institution which had appointed as sole external examiner of a Master's degree an individual who had no competence whatever in the crucial language component of this degree.

But even I was unprepared for the audacity of Manchester Metropolitan University, where in 2009 a quite outrageous sanction (expulsion from its Academic Board) was meted out against a teacher brave and professional enough to give damning evidence of dumbing-down to a committee of the House of Commons.

That committee recommended that a Quality & Standards Agency be established, with a remit to monitor academic standards, and that the current practice of conferring degree-awarding powers in perpetuity be brought to an end. The then UK government inexplicably rejected these recommendations. But – in broad terms – they have now been accepted.

That is what I wanted. And that is what the sector has now brought upon itself.

*This Viewpoint first appeared in Times Higher Education, link:
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/he-bill-will-sweep-away-self-regulation-standards-whose-fault>*