How the culture of UK higher education promotes poor teaching and can alienate students from working-class backgrounds – and what should be done about it

A personal response by Dr Peter Levin to the Government's strategy document *The future of higher education*

Contents **Page**

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Summary

This paper is a response to two components of the Government's proposed strategy for higher education: the proposals for 'delivering excellence' in teaching and learning, set out in the White Paper *The future of higher education* (Cm5735), and the proposals for widening participation subsequently published by the DfES in *Widening participation in higher education*.

As the title of this paper makes plain, I have come to the conclusion – based on 36 years' working experience in the academic world – that the very culture of UK higher education promotes poor teaching and is capable of alienating students from working-class backgrounds. The paper sets out the evidence and analysis on which my conclusion is based.

In Section 1, *The culture of UK higher education* (pp.3-7), I outline seven major characteristics of the academic culture: ethos; criteria for admission to the academic workforce; factors governing the status of individual academics; academic peer groups; institutional structures and social relationships within them; modes of communication within academic peer groups; and modes of communication between academics and the 'host society'.

In Section 2, *How the culture of UK higher education promotes poor teaching* (pp.8-13), I show how the various characteristics of the academic culture have created pressures on academics to treat teaching as a matter of mere 'delivery', while encouraging entry to the academic workforce of precisely those graduates who are least well equipped to teach.

In Section 3, *How the culture of UK higher education can alienate students from working-class backgrounds* (pp.13-16), I show how student experiences of teaching and reasons given for withdrawal from courses, set alongside the variety of ways in which the academic culture places people in 'higher' and 'lower' categories, demonstrate the capacity of that culture to have highly alienating effects.

In Section 4, *The Government's proposals* (pp.16-18), I make the point that while the Government's proposals are eminently praiseworthy, they do not address the deficiencies of the academic culture and could be exploited to buttress the existing culture and entrench those deficiencies even further.

In Section 5, *What should be done?* (pp.18-21), I put forward the aim of introducing mentoring and a mentoring culture into universities; show that the crucial prerequisites for change are already in place, or could readily be; and suggest ways of overcoming the obstacles that would inevitably be encountered.

In Section 6, *The mentoring model and the mentoring culture* (pp.21-24), I sketch the salient characteristics of the mentoring model as it could be applied in higher education and of the mentoring culture that it would help to promote.

In Section 7, *Recommendations* (pp.24-25), I set out five recommendations for action which the Government could take or sponsor and which would, in my view, do much to ensure that the

Government's aspirations to improve the student experience and widen participation in higher education would come to fruition.

I also append (pp.25-26) a selection of students' comments on their experiences of mentoring. These attest to their acquisition not only of practical techniques for managing their studies, etc., but also of psychological benefits, such as gains in confidence and in their ability to handle stress.

1. The culture of UK higher education

Table 1 Characteristics of the academic culture

Ethos	Elitism and individual achievement
Criteria for admission to the academic workforce	Very good degree, then production of PhD thesis
Factors governing the status of individual academics	Promotion awarded on basis of publications and funds brought in
Academic peer groups	One peer group within the institution, one extending beyond ('academic tribe')
Institutional structures and social relationships within them	Hierarchical, moderated among staff by various means
Modes of communication within academic peer groups	Telling and sharing. Special language and dedicated media
Modes of communication between academics and the 'host society'	Telling. Claim to authority. Inappropriate use of 'peer group language'

Ethos

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the ethos of the academic culture in UK universities is the elitism – recognisable by sensitivity to 'pecking order' and by various manifestations of 'academic snobbery' – to be found in it and among those who have passed through it.[1]

Of course, competition to be the best and pride in achieving that position are found everywhere. What is special about universities is that they choose to measure themselves by the criterion of 'scholarship'. Unlike criteria such as sales achieved or innovations patented, 'scholarship' can be taken to mean whatever universities want it to mean. The so-called and aspiring-to-be-called elite institutions – Oxford and Cambridge, members of the 'Russell group' – claim to be bastions of scholarship. The executive secretary of the Standing Conference of Principals, the representative body for higher education colleges, in a comment on the White Paper, stressed what she saw as 'the fundamental importance of teaching-led institutions continuing to engage in scholarship and research …'[2]

Elitism runs like a thread through the Robbins and Dearing reports. Witness the report of the

Dearing Committee on the subject of 'learning'. The Committee heard from 'prominent researchers specialising in learning in higher education' that learning at that level 'can be defined as the development of understanding and the ability to apply knowledge in a range of situations'.[3]

In the Committee's opinion:

> [Any] programme of study in higher education should have as one of its primary intentions the development of higher level intellectual skills, knowledge and understanding in its students. ... [The] development of the general powers of the mind underpins the development of many of the other generic skills so valued by employers, and of importance throughout working life.[4]

Promoting 'the general powers of the mind' was first put forward as one of four aims of higher education in the Robbins report[5] of 1963. A consultation exercise carried out in 1994 revealed continuing widespread support for these aims, another of which was 'instruction in skills for employment'.[6] Such skills were evidently seen as of a lesser status than intellectual skills, given that they required merely instruction, not education.

The ethos of UK universities is also one of individual achievement rather than cooperation. Having publications (and citations) to one's name is crucial to advancement. While exigencies of funding and equipment may dictate that you work in a 'team', it will be crucial to your career that you get *your* name on papers and books that are published. If there are no such exigencies, the tendency is for academics to operate as 'lone scholars'. The Commission on the Social Sciences has recently commented that almost all social science research is 'cottage-industry' in style.[7]

Criteria for admission to the academic workforce

To gain admission to the ranks of academics it is necessary first of all to get a very good degree and then to gain a PhD.

Concrete evidence as to what is entailed in getting a very good degree is hard to come by. The meetings of examination boards are shrouded in confidentiality. However, some seven years ago, the History Faculty Board at Cambridge, concerned that women were under-represented among those gaining first-class Honours, enterprisingly set their students a mock finals examination and then held a mock examiners' meeting on it. As a mock meeting it was not subject to the normal confidentiality restrictions, and indeed it was video-recorded and extracts from the recording were broadcast on BBC2 in November 1996.[8]

One of the questions set for the mock exam was on wars. A televised extract from the mock examiners' meeting revealed some of the criteria being used for assessment:

- [The] range of wars discussed was terribly impressive ... all sorts of wars I'd never heard of were here

- I liked some of the allusions to the literature … [such an allusion] always spices up an essay

- Bringing up the trade wars was I thought a very neat idea

- There was no mention of theories about war, and that might well be a significant failing.

On this evidence, successful students hadn't merely mastered the subject matter and remembered to bring in theories where appropriate: they found ways of impressing and surprising the examiners – with the lateral thinking they had brought to their reading, their imaginative interpretation of the question, and their skilful deployment of spicy allusions – and as a result were being taken seriously by them. They had learned to *be* historians. They had shown an ability to *think* like historians, and to apply the *expertise* of historians. They had established their credentials as historians, and were being assessed on that basis.[9]

Moreover, it is apparent that the ways of thinking and the expertise they had shown were not ones they had been consciously taught (or their examiners would have been less impressed and surprised). It follows that what gets you a first-class degree is the ability to absorb, as through a process akin to osmosis, the attitudes, the alertness, the ways of thinking and seeing the world, the 'feel' for data and intellectual constructs and for phenomena and elements of the natural and constructed worlds, that your teachers possess, *without necessarily being consciously taught them*.

A PhD is the epitome of individual achievement. To gain this qualification you must have subscribed powerfully to the ethos of individual achievement. It is necessary not only to have a capacity for original thinking but also to be single-minded, to have an impressive span of concentration, to be dedicated to pursuing a well-defined, narrow problem, and to sustain all these over three or four years or more.

PhD students have to conform to a doctrine of 'authority'. The main requirement of a PhD thesis – nowhere explicitly stated but clearly manifested in theses themselves – is that it should be perceived as authoritative. So it has to conform to a very stereotyped format: a mode of presentation that could not have been better designed to minimize attractiveness and readability; an impersonal writing style (no 'I began …'); and you're likely to be very strongly advised to make no mention of the doubts, uncertainties, backtrackings and agonizing rethinks that you experienced, although it would be enormously beneficial to future PhD students to be able to read a frank account of these. Authority takes precedence over honesty and transparency: over performing an educational role, in fact. And if, having gained your PhD, rather than pursuing an academic career you go out to look for work, you are likely to be advised to take a course in communication and teamwork – presumably to retrain you as a human being.

Factors governing the status of individual academics

Status and its achievement via the awarding of a permanent appointment and promotion come from publications and from bringing research funds to your department and university, as well as from belonging to a department that's high in the RAE league tables. If you take your eye off

these targets not only will advancement be withheld: you'll be told you're letting your department down, and pressure will be brought on you to buck up or take early retirement. If you do obtain research funds you will probably buy yourself out of teaching in order to do research. (If you were to try to 'buy' yourself out of research in order to concentrate on teaching, you would be likely to find that the price, if indeed the deal is acceptable to the powers that be, is that you are demoted to a part-time or instructor post.)

Academic peer groups

Most academics have two peer groups: (1) fellow academics within their department (and to some extent elsewhere within their university); (2) fellow specialists in their discipline or field across the university system and in specialist institutions outside the system, nowadays held to constitute their 'subject network'. The latter groups have been described as constituting 'academic tribes', each occupying an 'academic territory'.[10] There appear to be two significant consequences of this dual peer-group situation. First, academics are both colleagues and competitors in relation to one another, a situation liable to give rise to misunderstandings and concealment of motives and intentions. Second, academics possess, by virtue of their membership of their wider peer group, a claim to authority that is independent of their place in the institution that employs them. This appears to be conducive to their taking up a somewhat bloody-minded if not anarchic attitude when issues arise that threaten their autonomy.

Institutional structures and social relationships within them

Within departments or faculties, the formal structure is invariably hierarchical, although this may be modified by the existence of a professoriat of equals at the top, by the rotation of headships of departments, by the existence of research groups, by the delegation of some management functions to staff below professorial rank, and by the use of committees to undertake certain functions, both advisory and substantive. In some institutions, the effect may be that individual members of staff have far more autonomy than one would normally expect in an hierarchical structure. There is a popular jest that 'organizing academics is like herding cats', which is consistent both with the expectation of autonomy and the capacity for bloody-mindedness remarked on above.

Relationships between academics and students conform much more closely to the hierarchical model. Certainly some academics are considerate, and generous with their time and encouragement. But in general students find themselves treated by academics not as fellow, albeit more junior, learners in an institution dedicated to learning, but as a burden ('workload'), as masses to whom education is to be 'delivered' – the White Paper itself refers to 'delivering learning'[11] – and as artful dodgers at examination time.

Modes of communication within academic peer groups

The significant peer group here is the subject network. Within this peer group we find two main styles of communication: telling and sharing. (There is a parallel here with the two styles of interpersonal relationship, competitors and colleagues.) Academics *tell* one another of research findings, new theories, etc., using their special language and dedicated media: conferences, and journals and books published by specialist publishers. High-status academics use these media

to deliver opinions too, as in book reviews. And academics *share* with one another thoughts on their own and other people's work in progress and on current issues, most visibly at conferences. The special language includes not only a particular vocabulary but a variety of expressions designed to convey authority: e.g. 'we consider …' rather than 'I think …'; 'the evidence suggests …' rather than 'on the basis of this evidence I think …'.

Modes of communication between academics and the 'host society'

With the exception of social research, communication between academics and the 'host society' is mostly one way, and the telling style heavily predominates. Academics serve as pundits, broadcasting on radio and TV. The less populist academics – those not coached in punditry by media people – are given to circumlocutory language, using expressions such as 'take cognisance of' where 'notice' would have done perfectly well. This inappropriate use of 'peer group language' suggests to me an inability to put oneself in the place of one's audience, and this is corroborated by comments made to the Commission on the Social Sciences by government ministers and civil servants about some of the work they receive from academics: 'This is claimed all too often to speak naively of policy issues, demonstrates little or no awareness of current policy, is over-technical and sometimes needs drastic editing to make it more readable to key players.'[12] A recent report by the National Audit Office has come to very similar conclusions.[13]

The source of this gulf between academics and policy-makers is in fact not hard to understand if we consider their respective mindsets. Academics see the world in terms of *phenomena* if they are scientists and in terms of *themes* if they work in the social sciences or humanities. Policy-makers, however, are concerned with *issues*. Addressing issues requires a completely different mindset from that required to investigate a phenomenon or discuss a theme. The training and conditioning that academics undergo have the result that they are to all intents and purposes incapable of addressing and resolving issues.

A stunning example of this inadequacy on the part of academics has been provided within the past year by a report published by Universities UK and the Higher Education Careers Services Unit, *Enhancing Employability, Recognising Diversity*.[14] This report, ostensibly on the working of the graduate labour market, actually fails to identify the central process in that market, the process of 'matching' graduates and jobs over a period of time. It focuses on the 'employer choice' element of the process exercised as graduates enter the market and makes no mention of the subsequent 'graduate choice' element exercised as graduates find and settle on their career path in their early years after graduating.

Crucially the report fails to focus on issues and identify practical ways of tackling them. In typical social science academic style it 'explores', 'looks at', 'considers', 'summarizes' and aims to 'move the agenda forward'; and says 'employability is *about* X, Y and Z' rather than 'what we mean by "employability" *is* …'.[15]

2. How the culture of UK higher education promotes poor teaching

The present culture of UK universities fosters a form of teaching that can appropriately be described as the 'delivery' model. Dearing reported:

> Despite the changes [that have taken place] in the learning environment, teaching methods do not appear to have changed considerably. Our survey and other research suggest that lectures are still the most common form of teaching in higher education. Initial findings from research suggest that many staff still see teaching primarily in terms of transmission of information, mainly through lectures.[16]

The Government's White Paper itself demonstrates a mindset that takes it for granted that education involves 'delivery', with its references to 'delivering learning'[17] and 'delivering excellence'.[18] And the White Paper's references to 'the knowledge economy' and to 'knowledge transfer' rather than the imparting of expertise also imply an 'education equals transmission of knowledge' mindset.[19]

The same mindset is apparent in the Quality Assurance Agency's *Handbook for Academic Review*. Under the heading 'Observation of teaching', this document makes several references to 'delivery': it specifically enjoins reviewers 'to evaluate ... curricular delivery' and also to 'ascertain whether ... intellectual knowledge and skills are transmitted effectively'.[20]

Teachers who operate primarily on the delivery model essentially do little more than expound their material, which they may do with more or less clarity, skill and entertainment value. Communication is one way, as in lectures. There is minimal social interaction between teacher and student. Teachers regard it as the students' responsibility to make what they can of the material that is delivered to them and the assignments they are given. Their attitude can be summed up as 'take it or leave it'.

This behaviour towards students amounts, in my judgment, to poor teaching. To what extent can it be attributed to the characteristics of the academic culture?

Ethos

I made the point above that the ethos of higher education is one of elitism, stimulating a desire for individual achievement and recognition. Research is not the only way of gaining these – most notably in creative subjects – but beyond one's institution it far outweighs teaching, and within it the same is liable to be true. You may be a good teacher, but it is your students who get the good results and few people other than those students will be aware of and acknowledge your contribution.

Leading academics tend to be preoccupied by research, and it is they who 'set the tone' for others working in their field. Becher, when carrying out research in the 1980s for his book *Academic Tribes and Territories*, interviewed leading academics in a dozen established fields. He

wrote: 'The interviews were designed to encourage reasonably open-ended discussion about professional issues, but not specifically about the academic's role as teacher. A limited number of respondents – particularly in the more vocationally oriented disciplines – did choose to talk about undergraduate courses and students, but the large majority preferred to focus on their activities as seekers after knowledge rather than as communicators of it.'[21]

The pressure to do research, multiplied in recent years by the Research Assessment Exercise, inevitably results in preparation for teaching, and teachers' availability to see students, being squeezed into as small a time as possible. Teaching is a distraction from one's main job, research. This can only favour the delivery model of teaching: it is less time-consuming and makes far fewer demands on one's nervous energy. Requests by students for a more facilitative approach are liable to be met with the response: 'We're teachers, not trainers'. Students are made well aware of their place in the scheme of things: for example, by essays returned late and with only cursory comments, by being allowed as few as half-a-dozen contact hours with staff per week, by the difficulty of getting hold of teachers, and by the teaching of undergraduates being undertaken not by full-time academics but by PhD students.

Students are of course thoroughly socialized throughout their educational experience into the ethos of individual achievement. While degrees are inescapably awarded to individuals, some universities and departments are supposedly promoting 'teamwork' as part of their employability agenda. However, there appears to be a widespread absence of assistance to students to work creatively and effectively as members of teams, and collaboration with other students over writing tasks is treated as collusion and punished. So students get mixed messages: they are ostensibly required to work in teams, but there is no recognition that this is contrary to the individual-achievement ethos, and when they work unofficially in teams they lay themselves open to punishment.

Criteria for admission to the academic workforce

The conclusion that I draw from the Cambridge History experiment and my own discussions with students is that those who jump the 'very good degree' hurdle are likely to be people who work in a very intuitive way: it is this that enables them to pick up the expertise of their teachers without it being consciously taught to them. But the fact that they have not had to make their learning process explicit will inevitably militate against their being good teachers of the great majority of students who do not share their intuitive gift.

Taking a PhD amounts to being indoctrinated over a period of years in behaving as an authority figure. It also entails working on a subject in great depth at the expense of breadth, and for many is a highly solitary pursuit. These attributes, in any other kind of institution, would positively *disqualify* you from taking up a teaching post, because you have effectively been indoctrinated against teaching in a way that is sensitive to students' needs. At the very best you are equipped to operate as a teacher only on the delivery model: the notion of facilitating someone else's learning will be unknown to you, unless you have been extremely fortunate in your PhD supervisor.

Factors governing the status of individual academics

Status derives from belonging to a department that is high in the RAE league tables and from your own publication record. The White Paper notes: 'Promotion for academics is based largely on research excellence, rather than teaching ability.'[22] While it would have been more accurate to say that promotion is awarded on the basis of publications, one cannot disagree that teaching ability takes second place. The motivation to enhance your status combines with the research-oriented ethos to produce an even stronger pressure to concentrate on research and writing. And the more limited the time and attention that you have available for teaching, the more you are pushed towards adopting the delivery model.

Academic peer groups

Your departmental colleagues may be able to bring pressure on you to undertake your 'fair share' of teaching. But if you are to maintain and enhance your standing within your subject network peer group, this will require – in addition to a sustained research output – that you undertake 'professional' activity: occupying a secretarial post in your specialist society, organizing conferences, editing a journal, reviewing books, refereeing papers, etc. Not only does such activity constitute yet another factor distracting you from teaching: being in the uncomfortable position of being torn in several directions may well lead you to be resentful towards departmental colleagues and students who are making demands upon you.

Institutional structures and social relationships within them

As noted earlier, organizing academics has been compared to 'herding cats'. Very funny! But the implication is that academic departments have more than a passing resemblance to dysfunctional families. If we ask what the implications of *this* are for the people being taught in them – students – they are not so funny. We are entrusting a crucially important process, one which necessarily involves at least *some* social interaction, to what must be – judging by the acceptance of the cat-herding metaphor – overall one of the most socially inept occupational groups in the country. It cannot be realistic to expect many members of this group to be able and willing to teach in a way that goes beyond delivery.

I noted above that in general students find themselves treated by academics not as fellow, albeit more junior, learners but as a burden ('workload'), as masses to whom education is to be delivered, and as artful dodgers at examination time. Examinations also reveal the teacher-student relationship as a game in which the students have to work out for themselves what the rules are for winning, i.e. what the examiners' expectations are, what approach, style etc. will be rewarded and what will be penalized. The Dearing Committee's survey of students revealed that 'fewer than half … were satisfied with the feedback they got from staff about their work.'[23] This is an indication that expectations and assessment criteria are being concealed from students. Such behaviour must be adjudged far below competent even by the limited standards of the delivery model.

I come across many exam papers full of questions that comprise a proposition followed by the instruction 'Discuss'. I also come across very many students who tell me that their teachers have never said to them: 'In our field, this is how we discuss.' These students are being offered not

education but mystification. Students who nevertheless do well are those who have, like the students who did well in the Cambridge history experiment, the intuitive skills to pick up their teachers' ways of thinking etc. without necessarily being consciously taught them. Students not so gifted, the great majority, are left to do as best they can. They get a raw deal.

Modes of communication within academic peer groups and between academics and the 'host society'

The sense of belonging to a subject network peer group is naturally reinforced by demonstrating your fluency in the special language of the group: your command of both the particular vocabulary (and of course the associated mindset and concepts) and the expressions designed to convey authority. Whether telling or sharing, when acting in their professional role academics are visibly predisposed to employ this special language, and they will inevitably bring this predisposition into their teaching. If students have difficulty in understanding them, communication between teacher and student can only be one of telling, not sharing, and the teacher is thus operating on the delivery model, with the refinement that the supposed recipients of the delivery are effectively at a different address from the one to which the delivery is made.

Students are inherently members of the host society, spending specific periods of time within the university. They find themselves on the receiving end of the 'telling' style of communication with the added twist that, as observed above, peer group language may be used inappropriately (or at an inappropriate level) towards them, denoting an inability on the part of teachers to put themselves in the place of their audience, especially newcomers to the subject.[24] Their teachers may be fluent in their peer group's special language, but that does not necessarily indicate that they are good at translating into and out of it, which is what students need. And if they are not proficient at translation, again they are necessarily operating on the delivery model of teaching.

For students, the delivery model of teaching poses a further difficulty. It does not encourage teachers to make their mindsets explicit. It may indeed be the case that the great majority of academics aren't even aware that they *have* a mindset: being so thoroughly steeped in their own way of looking at the world they have lost sight of the fact that there are other ways, employed by people in other disciplines. The delivery model does not encourage a teacher to stand outside his or her discipline to gain a perspective from which the implicit assumptions, the taken-for-granteds etc. are visible, and so they are quite unable to make them explicit to students.

Moreover, academics tend to bring to their teaching – and the more so the greater their reliance on textbooks – mindsets that are very different from those that they bring to their research and professional work. For example: An historian researching into the causes of an event or development works backwards in time. But the results are delivered to students as an account going forwards in time. A physicist starts with puzzling observations and asks: Why is this the way it is? but succeeding generations of students then carry out experiments not to address the puzzle but to demonstrate the truth of the law or theory formulated to explain it. Economists present their subject to students as an analytical one, making use of graphs and equations, but

their debates among themselves reveal economics to be a subject rooted in argument, not pure analysis, and an argument conducted simultaneously in four languages at that.[25]

There's more. To medical students, anatomy is taught in lectures and textbooks as a matter of memorizing the names of parts: they are not taught to think themselves into the minds of the surgeons who did the original naming, or to do the detective work which would reveal the logic behind names. The chemistry teacher whom I heard not long ago describe his subject as a 'factual' one clearly has no notion of teaching his students how chemists think and approach problems. Law students find themselves being taught 'the law' rather than how to think like a lawyer (e.g. how to formulate a strategy for running a case in Court). A student opening a standard text on government or public/social policy will find a definition of 'policy' so general and abstract as to be quite useless for investigative purposes because it doesn't enable you to recognize a policy when you see it. A statistics teacher spends his or her time with students grinding away at formulae while their professional world is populated with delicious, intriguing puzzles and lovely data sets.

There does seem to be a common pattern of academics operating in two very different mindsets: a textbook-based teaching mindset on the one hand and a research/professional mindset on the other. And what's even more disturbing is that while the textbook mindset predominates in the formal teaching that students receive, when clever research-active academics set exam papers and mark the answers, it is the research/professional mindset that dominates. The successful students – the ones who get 2:1s and firsts – are, as the Cambridge History experiment demonstrated, those who have effectively established their credentials in the field and get themselves taken seriously by the examiners. The successful students are not the ones who have beavered away at mastering the lists of 'skills' set out in the benchmark statements drawn up by leading academics and promoted so assiduously by the QAA.

The consequences of a regime that effectively entrusts teaching to researchers are far-reaching. Students who get good results will often not comprehend what they have done and how they have done it. These are the ones who will provide the next generation of teachers who assess what they do not consciously teach. (Some, to be fair, *do* comprehend it, as their comments testify: e.g. 'It was only in my third year that I twigged what was expected of me' and 'I realized that marks were being awarded for writing something original, not for reproducing lecture notes'.)

For other undergraduates, the failure of the teaching they received to help them acquire the expertise of their teachers has miserable consequences. This is especially so for all the middling students who have ploughed through their textbooks but whose results don't do justice to the work they have put in, and who haven't the faintest idea why. These are the ones who find their university experience particularly mystifying. They usually end up with a 2:2, which in some institutions has now become stigmatized, a situation reinforced by advertisements for jobs and courses inviting applications from people with a 2:1 or better. So graduates with a 2:2 learn to regard themselves as failures. It is ironic that universities have managed to reproduce in higher education the second-order divisive effects of the old 11-plus, which allowed bright working-

class children into grammar schools only for many of them to find themselves placed in the 'bottom' forms of their year.

Does doing research make you unfit to teach?

I conclude from the foregoing not only that doing research *does* make you unfit to teach but also that the best graduates who are co-opted into the profession may be particularly unsuited to teaching because, being intuitive thinkers and taking so naturally to their subject, they are unable to appreciate the difficulties experienced by those not so gifted. These would-be academics are then socialized into ways of being, thinking and communicating that further inhibit development of the qualities required of a good teacher. At best, they can operate only in delivery mode.

The current arrangements for staffing higher education implicitly take it for granted that because someone is steeped in a subject and at the 'cutting edge' of it, they are the best person to teach it. One might equally say that if you are a published writer in the English language you are thereby supremely equipped to teach English. Both propositions are manifestly absurd.

3. How the culture of UK higher education can alienate students from working-class backgrounds

What is it like, going to university when you come from a family with no university tradition? Some clues as to the answer to this question are provided by a report on a study of student retention carried out at the University of Glasgow in 2000-01.[26] Salient findings were:

1. Just under 12% of the full-time first-year undergraduate cohort in 1999-2000 did not proceed to the second year.

2. Attrition rates appeared to be sensitive both to parents' occupational classes and to postcodes. The attrition rates for Classes IV (Partly Skilled) and V (Unskilled) were 17.2% and 26.4% respectively, and there was a 16.5% attrition rate amongst students coming from those neighbourhoods within Scotland reckoned to have the lowest participation rates in post-secondary education.

3. Among the highest withdrawal rates were those of students who entered the University with qualifications such as HNCs and HNDs (21.3%).

4. Academic self-esteem also appeared to be important. Those who tried hard and felt that they were doing well academically experienced a dropout rate of about two-thirds of the average. And feelings of alienation ('I don't really feel part of the University of Glasgow') and unfamiliarity ('Nothing I'd done before prepared me properly for university life') were among the strongest of all the in-year correlates of attrition.

5. Those students who had completed one of the University's own Access courses were 'notably

successful'. Their attrition rate (9.1%) was similar to that of the University's traditional entrants, who come straight from school.

While the report does not say to what extent the categories described in (2), (3) and (4) actually have a common membership, these findings are consistent with Archer's observation that 'it has been suggested by many academics that working-class students are disadvantaged by dominant institutional cultures that position them as Other'.[27] The better staying-on record of students who have completed an Access course may perhaps indicate that the course serves as a form of 'cultural bridge' for those students, although it may be that those students are more highly motivated and determined.

These and other findings reported by Archer certainly appear consistent with two aspects in particular of the academic culture: ethos, and mode of communication between academics and the 'host society'.

Feelings of low self-esteem among Glasgow students from working-class backgrounds would certainly be consistent with the pervasive elitism of the university ethos, further disseminated by graduates, and widely taken for granted. A student from a working-class home who reads the White Paper itself will find the derogatory expression 'the bottom three [social classes]', which happen to be skilled manual, partly skilled and unskilled.[28] 'Social class' is evidently perceived as a vertical scale, not an horizontal spectrum – and 'professionals' are at the top, no doubt put there (at some point replacing royalty and the aristocracy) and maintained there by graduates.

Such a student might note too the implied antithesis between *higher* education and *lower* social class. The very word 'higher' carries connotations of superiority, just as the word 'lower' carries connotations of inferiority. Superiority, especially when taken for granted, can all too easily give rise to arrogance, and certainly can be seen as such by those who are in effect labelled inferior.

With regard to mode of communication, Archer quotes two Black women students:

> [W]hen he's giving the lecture and he's ... talking, talking, talking, ... I said, my God, I don't know what you're saying! I'm lost ...[29]
>
> I think that's another culture shock in a sense, the language. It is a different language from being at college, from being at school, it is a totally different language.[30]

I can supply similar quotations from my own interviews with Black and working-class students. Worryingly, many academics appear unaware or unconcerned that they have effects of this kind on students.

Differences in language are likely to reflect differences in mindset. I have found that students from working-class backgrounds have a down-to-earth approach to concepts that leads them to seek concrete examples rather than higher abstractions, at least until university has knocked this out of them. Asked 'What do you understand by "learning"?', they are less likely to reply 'the

development of understanding and the ability to apply knowledge in a range of situations', like the experts cited by Dearing,[31] and more likely to talk about memorizing, discovering, developing skills, acquiring know-how or making sense. So when they get to university and start a degree course, they are aware of being in an institution where 'learning' is supposed to take place, but no-one ever tells them what they should be doing in the course of learning, and what should be going on in their minds. Implicitly, the message they get is that learning is what they are expected to supply in between receiving teaching and being examined on what they are taught, but no-one tells them how to do it. They experience university not as educating but as mystifying, and their previous successful experience of learning is devalued.

If you were a street-wise kid from a family with no university tradition, would you stand for being messed about like this? I think not, unless there were some clear reward for doing so.

Working-class students are perhaps more likely than middle-class students to have family members with practical talents and expertise. Such people are often highly gifted: creative, ingenious, and skilled at diagnosing and solving problems, and at translating ideas into action. Using their senses more fully than academics, they are quick on the uptake and good at 'sussing out' how systems work. They take pleasure in producing solutions that are elegant, functional and economical in their use of material and other resources. They learn by experiment and by experience, but that does not mean to say without intellectual skills. An important part of experiential learning is thinking about and making sense of experiences.

However, academic snobbery, and the concomitant undervaluing of any expertise that is not accompanied by 'scholarship', has resulted in British universities according technical occupations a dismally low status. (The current shortages in some employment sectors may be one result of this.) Millions of Britons in or aspiring to such occupations are regarded as requiring only 'up-skilling', not as deserving the support of the educational system in making the most of their intellectual potential.

Students from working-class backgrounds are also more likely to find themselves in newer universities taking modular degrees. Dearing uncritically quoted Robbins on this subject:

> There are unquestionably young men and women for whom study that involves penetration in depth is naturally appropriate. … Nevertheless there is another sort of mind that at the first degree stage is likely to be more at home in broader fields studied to more moderate depth.[32]

Dearing believed that students – presumably with 'the other sort of mind' – should have the opportunity to pursue a degree programme that (a) allowed them to 'construct a broad foundation of knowledge and understanding in an area where the student might like to specialise later'; or (b) constituted 'a combined degree including a small number of subject areas'; or (c) covered 'a wider range of subject areas providing a good advanced general education'.[33]

The question to ask here is: Whom are these students learning to think like? The answer is evident: they won't be learning to think like anyone in particular. The risk is that they won't be learning to think in any organized way at all. They will be exposed to a variety of mindsets with no-one in charge of helping them to comprehend this. A student is liable to find himself or herself in a completely different student group for each of the subjects they take and not belonging to any department in the university. The consequent 'bittiness' of such programmes and the absence of a social infrastructure may make them far more taxing for students with the non-specialist 'sort of mind' than those provided for specialists. They are not a soft option (unless made deliberately superficial). They are another Kafkaesque experience provided for working-class students by middle-class academics.

4. The Government's proposals

The Government's proposals for teaching and learning

The opening paragraph of Chapter 4 of the White Paper, headed 'Teaching and learning – delivering excellence', sets out principles and aspirations which I wholeheartedly endorse. I find it particularly encouraging to read 'We are committed to understanding better where and how good teaching and learning take place …' On this evidence, the Government is more committed to learning than universities are!

I agree that all students are entitled to high quality teaching and that those who teach well are entitled to have their success rewarded properly. However, we are now in the realm of buzz-words. 'Excellence', 'high quality' and 'best practice' are fine aspirations, but as elusive as the will-o'-the wisp. More importantly, it is a waste of time and resources to aim for excellence, high quality and best practice in teaching and learning within a culture which, by virtue of fostering the delivery model, inherently promotes *poor* teaching.

Because the Government's proposals for teaching and learning do not address the culture of higher education, while undoubtedly well-intentioned they can be no more than proposals to ameliorate a system which is inherently flawed. The question then arises: will they strengthen and consolidate the existing system, or will they offer opportunities for enterprising institutions and individual academics to break away from the existing authoritative research culture and the delivery model of teaching that it fosters?

Sadly, the majority of the Government's proposals will inevitably buttress the existing system and culture. This will happen because they will fall to be implemented by people with a vested interest in its continuation. I see the proposals for new national professional standards for teaching and the establishment of 'a teaching quality academy [as] a single national body … to develop and promote best practice' as potentially particularly stultifying and damaging at the present time.

Genuine reform follows on innovation. Innovation comes about when small groups or even individuals in niches within an existing system have the motivation, imagination, resources and

opportunity to initiate, to experiment, to do something different. Centralization – which is what the Government's proposals imply – will tend to eliminate such niches and lessen the scope for such initiatives. Those who run the Institute for Learning and Teaching and the Learning and Teaching Support Network are good and well-intentioned chaps (of both sexes).[34] But they are thoroughly imbued with the damaging academic culture of UK higher education today, and one would hardly say that imagination is their strong point. Implementing the Government's proposals would create not some kind of critical mass where exciting things can happen, but a dead weight. A trawl through their recent publications reveals numerous examples of the kind of thinking and writing which has incurred the criticism of the Commission on the Social Sciences and the National Audit Office.

Potentially more constructive is the Government's proposal that research degree-awarding powers should no longer be a prerequisite for an institution to become a university. I warmly welcome this proposal, but on its own it is merely a permissive provision. The question is: How will it be taken advantage of? Can we expect to see one or more new universities coming into being, pioneering a new culture centred on teaching and learning rather than research? Or will the consequence merely be that it is easier for colleges of higher education to get to call themselves universities, citing in justification that they do engage in scholarship and research?[35] And that some existing universities can be deprived of research funds while retaining their title? These outcomes would reinforce the domination of the existing culture rather than challenge it. (One would expect that universities that lost research funding would nevertheless cling on to some vestige of scholarship and research, if for no other reason than to avoid being overtaken by colleges of higher education in the academic stakes.)

To summarize, while I wholeheartedly support the Government's overall aim of improving the standard of teaching, it seems to me that the White Paper has avoided important issues to do with culture and left unanswered important questions to do with how its proposals would be given effect.

The Government's proposals for widening participation in higher education

The Government's commitment to widen participation in higher education is again one that has my wholehearted support. If anything, the target of 50 per cent participation is a modest one. But once again, it is a waste of time and resources to aim for this within a culture that is inherently liable to alienate students from working-class backgrounds.

The Government's proposals for action to widen participation in higher education fall under four headings: attainment, aspiration, application and admissions. It is 'aspiration' that raises questions of culture and cultural differences.

The Government's paper *Widening participation in higher education* talks about the need for 'doing more to raise aspirations' but does not say what is meant by this. However, the context makes it clear that 'raising aspirations' is being interpreted merely as 'encouraging potential students to apply to university'.

Raising aspirations involves selling images. These might be the image of 'me as a student', of 'me with a degree from X university', or of 'me with a degree being offered a job by an employer'. I would suggest that for potential students to buy into these images, (a) they must see the images as realistic, and (b) the 'positive' images must outweigh 'negative' ones, such as the image of 'me dropping out' or 'me failing my exams'. Archer and her colleagues, in interviews with working-class students found that '[all] respondents in our study did … feel themselves to be facing a very high risk of non-completion'.[36]

Images are unavoidably situated against a cultural background. It follows that universities seeking to encourage working-class people to apply for places must, unless they are offering university study as a means of escape from their background culture, address the mismatch between that culture and the culture of the university. The Glasgow study described above found that feelings of alienation and unfamiliarity – symptoms of cultural mismatch – were among the strongest of all the 'in-year correlates of attrition'.

I conclude that if the Government's aim of stimulating more people with working-class backgrounds and more members of Black and ethnic minorities to apply to university is to be attained, the measures that it proposes must be complemented by measures aimed at making the culture of higher education institutions more accommodating to people whose cultural background is very different.

5. What should be done?

The issue

In previous sections of this paper I have shown how the present-day culture of UK higher education promotes poor teaching and can alienate students from working-class backgrounds. It follows that there is an issue: 'something must be done' about the situation. In this section I address three questions: What should be the aim? What possibilities for action are there? What obstacles will have to be overcome if these aims are to be attained?

What should be the aim?

It is important to recognise that the present, research-dominated culture of UK higher education has produced many benefits. The aim should not be to overthrow it and replace it by another: I am not advocating some form of regime change. But it would clearly be desirable to diversify the cultures found in our universities, at the very least to complement the research culture with another that is more friendly to teaching and provides a more welcoming home to students from families with no tradition of attending university. I use the term 'mentoring' as a suitable label for such a culture.

Thus the aim should be to introduce a mentoring culture into universities. This manifestly cannot be attained overnight, but there has to be a sustained push, with targets, incentives and commitment of resources if the Government is to persuade academics and institutions that it is serious.

What possibilities for action are there?
To embark successfully on large-scale action, four prerequisites are necessary: (1) an underpinning principle or conceptual model; (2) small-scale exemplars or pilot projects; (3) resources; and (4) political support.

The principle/model that I am putting forward is that of 'mentoring'. I enlarge on this in the next section of this paper, but for the moment it is sufficient to note that this model is well established outside higher education and not unknown within it.

There already exist a number of exemplarswhich demonstrate that concrete measures are feasible, that mentoring is already embedded in long-standing traditions in some places; and that people with ideas for further innovations can be encouraged to come forward.

With regard to resources, national bodies – the DfES, the national funding councils, and the LTSN and ILTHE or a successor body – are in a position to give financial support and encouragement to enterprising institutions and to assist the dissemination of information about local developments and practices. Recent experience shows that many institutional managements will pass resources on and make additional resources available if they can see benefits resulting. And there is reason to think that there are men and women already in post within higher education, as well as final-year students and recent graduates, who can supply – given the appropriate training, which of course will also require resources – the 'mentoring manpower' that would be required. The mentoring model is a flexible one: it can accommodate teachers who teach in a mentoring style and people who take on part-time mentoring, in addition to specialist mentors.

Resources must be considered in relation to demand. My experience – and it does not appear to be atypical – is that mentees do not require constant hand-holding, a continuous input from their mentors, and that instituting mentoring would not amount to opening 'floodgates'.[37]

Experience of mentoring in various contexts has shown that it is almost without exception very warmly welcomed by mentees. I therefore anticipate that widespread political support would be forthcoming from the student population.

What obstacles will have to be overcome if these aims are to be attained?
I see four major categories of obstacle to the introduction of a mentoring culture into UK universities: (1) sceptical and hostile attitudes of many academics towards change; (2) the inability of many academics whose mindsets are centred on phenomena or themes to focus on and address *issues*; (3) existing vested interests, structures and procedures geared to the research-oriented academic culture and the delivery model of teaching; and (4) the difficulties that universities seem to have in behaving as learning organizations.

There will always be a number of academics who have sceptical and hostile attitudes towards change that will affect their personal positions, and who are extremely capable of thinking up ingenious reasons why change would be thoroughly bad and should be resisted. It is a waste of

time trying to enlist their participation, but it is important that they should not be allowed to block the participation of others.

Students who seek mentoring invariably present themselves as having issues. Thinking about issues does not come easily to academics whose mindsets are centred on phenomena or themes, so although they may volunteer themselves as mentors it will be necessary to ensure that they take the necessary training.

Existing vested interests, structures and procedures geared to the research-oriented academic culture and the delivery model of teaching constitute obstacles to the introduction of a mentoring culture because if deliberate action is not taken mentoring will fare worst in the competition for resources, will not be well-regarded as a qualification for promotion, and so on, and the feedback gained from mentoring – e.g. about student dissatisfaction with a particular course – will not be acted on. To surmount these obstacles it will be necessary to create within institutions a senior post occupied by a 'champion' of mentoring, a career structure for mentors, a ring-fenced budget for mentoring, and a reviewing and public reporting mechanism that will highlight the issues faced by students. This last would be a powerful mechanism for informing the choices made by potential students.

The final set of obstacles to the introduction of a mentoring culture comprises the difficulties that universities seem to have in behaving as learning organizations.

English universities largely ignored the industrial revolution in England. A predecessor of the White Paper, the Government's 1998 Green Paper *The Learning Age*, boasted: 'British inventors pushed forward the frontiers of technology and our manufacturers turned their inventions into wealth'[38] but universities had virtually nothing to do with this. Nor did they have much to do with the fact that 'We built the world's first calculator, jet engine, computer and television'.[39]

We are now living in another revolutionary age: an age of communication networks, of widely distributed expertise, of global competition and of rapid and unexpected change. It is also – and this is important – an age in which much learning takes place outside universities: in the workplace, at home, indeed everywhere and in all media where people encounter and interact with one another. Unfortunately the majority of universities and academics show every sign that they are going to follow tradition and remain utterly oblivious of learning that does not take place under their own auspices:[40] oblivious of the 'making sense' that people engage in as individuals in the course of their daily lives, oblivious of the team learning that takes place in every workplace, and oblivious of the learning to deal with issues that is found in every organization that inhabits the real world.

This is the great paradox of universities today: institutions ostensibly dedicated to learning appear themselves incapable of learning. This undoubtedly makes it more difficult to introduce a mentoring culture, but once a properly-designed mentoring system has been introduced in an institution, the feedback loop that will be an integral part of it will help to ensure that that system will be a learning one. And once the principle has been established, it offers the

prospect that universities themselves will at last become learning organizations.

6. The mentoring model and the mentoring culture

The mentoring model

Mentoring today exists in a variety of forms and in a variety of contexts, chiefly outside higher education. While there are many definitions of 'mentoring',[41] the essence of the mentoring model is that it entails a one-to-one relationship between mentor and mentee, and that it is 'facilitative'. The mentor usually acts in a combination of roles – typically a mixture of guide, philosopher and friend – to help the mentee deal with issues which he or she is facing. These might be issues to do with preparing for a transition of some kind (e.g. from university on to the labour market and then the workplace), to do with coping with a new and/or difficult situation, or to do with undertaking and reflecting on training or professional development.

Mentoring is not unknown to higher education, however. The traditional Oxford one-to-one tutorial system, where it still exists, can take on a mentoring form when tutor and tutee develop a relationship that is conducive to it. And the 'Ultraversity', launched in April 2003 at Anglia Polytechnic University, offering 'action-research'-based degrees for people who are already occupied full-time, is to utilize a network of dedicated mentors for its initial intake of 500 students.[42] In fact a search of the DfES website on 26/04/03 found 1,209 occurrences of 'mentoring', so the concept is evidently already well-known to the Department.

In my own experience of working as a mentor in higher education, students come to me with a wide variety of issues: How can I get better marks for my essays? How can I cope with all the reading I'm supposed to do? How can I prepare for exams? How can I cope with this guy in my project group who hasn't done the work he said he would do? As I see it, my role as a mentor is not to tell the student what to do – not being the repository of all wisdom, I cannot know – but to help the student to work out for himself or herself what course of action would be the best to try. As is evident, this is a very different approach from the take-it-or-leave-it approach embodied in the delivery model of teaching.

Having worked as a mentor with many hundreds of students on managing their studies, on preparing for examinations and on working with others on group projects, I am convinced that with a greater mentoring/ facilitative element in university education, many more students would realise their potential and derive the maximum benefit from their time at university. The feedback that I get from students has confirmed me in this view (see Appendix). There is other evidence that students particularly value one-to-one support when they encounter problems with their studies.[43]

The salient features of the mentoring model of teaching and learning as it could be applied in higher education are set out in Table 2. The contrast with the delivery model is patently clear.

The mentoring culture

In Table 3 I sketch the salient characteristics of what might be called the 'mentoring culture'. As

can be seen, they differ markedly from those of the current academic culture. It follows that for the mentoring culture to take root in UK universities, ways must be found of enabling the two cultures to coexist. In effect, academics will have to 'move over' to let in to institutions which they have hitherto dominated another culture and its adherents. They are bound to find this unpalatable, especially when mentors make it clear that they are providing a service to students and not to academics. Perhaps, however, the onus could be placed on mentors to use the social and psychological skills that they have at their command to ease the discomfort of their academic colleagues.

Mentoring and research

I would not expect mentors to do research as it is currently understood. Their mindsets are geared to issues, not to phenomena or themes. I would, however, expect them to have *enquiring* minds. You cannot be a proficient mentor if you do not reflect, review and report, and to do this you need a mind that is forever open to new experiences and is enquiring into and endeavouring to make sense of those experiences.

I would therefore expect that all mentors would engage – in some cases individually but more usually collectively – in the reflection, review and report process, and they must be given time in the working week to do this. Because such work would be oriented towards addressing issues and formulating action to resolve them, it will happily come under the heading of 'action research'. This is a label that most academics might comprehend, and its adoption would help mentors to deal with the propensity of some academics to look down on those of their colleagues who do not do research.

Table 2: The mentoring model of teaching and learning

1. Mentors positively aim to facilitate students' learning, to help students to learn from lectures and other materials and experiences.
2. Mentors are able to establish rapport with students, to put themselves in students' shoes (or minds) the better to understand the learning experience from the students' perspective, wavelength and position.
3. Mentors listen to students and actively seek feedback *from* them, to discover how well they are learning and to be able to gear teaching to building on what is there (and correcting it if necessary).
4. Mentors treat students as individuals, not as a mass audience.
5. Mentors are not judgmental of students. Their approach is a problem-solving one. They work with the student on the problem of how the student can do better.
6. Mentors help students to 'step outside' their problems and see them in their wider context, to help them to manage problem situations.
7. Mentoring is issue-oriented. Mentors address the issues that students bring to them, which are often ones that they themselves had not anticipated.
8. Teachers who are mentors see teaching and learning as an interaction, an unified process.
9. Teachers who are mentors bring a diagnostic approach to teaching and learning, especially at the beginning of a course, the better to comprehend what knowledge, past experiences and mindsets students are bringing with them.
10. Teachers who are mentors do not claim a monopoly of wisdom. Like students, they too are learners, a little further along the road.
11. Teachers who are mentors teach not only by imparting knowledge, expertise and a way of thinking but also by setting an example, so students can learn by imitation – by 'modelling' their teacher.
12. Teachers who are mentors are conscious of their own mindsets and those that characterize their discipline in general, and aware of the differences between these and the mindsets found in other disciplines, and make a point of demonstrating these to their students.
13. Teachers who are mentors provide 'formative' assessments, so that students can comprehend what is expected of them, what criteria will be applied in the 'summative' assessment, and what they have to do to improve.
14. Teachers who are mentors judge the work, not the student. And they offer students not only a critique of their work but also appreciation of its merits and of the effort that has been put in to it.
15. Teachers who are mentors encourage students to collaborate, so that they learn from one another and are also exposed at first hand to different ways of learning.
16. Teachers who are mentors use information technology not only to supply students with material but also to facilitate interaction with and among students.

Table 3: Characteristics of the mentoring culture

Ethos	Service to students; social interaction prized
Criteria for acceptance for mentoring post	Social skills and training
Factors governing the status of individual mentors	Conferred by experience and students' approbation
Peer groups	A single expertise-based peer group of fellow mentors, within and beyond the institution
Institutional structures and social relationships within them	Flat, non-hierarchical, colleagueship. Students as junior fellow-learners
Modes of communication within peer group	Sharing of experiences, minimal use of jargon in making sense of them.
Modes of communication between mentors and the 'host society'	Sharing. Use of everyday language wherever possible. No presumption of authority

7. Recommendations

Overview

I share the Government's overarching objective for teaching and learning; namely, that the student experience in UK universities can and should be considerably improved. However, for all the references in the White Paper to 'excellence', 'quality' and 'best practice', if no attempt is made to address the limitations of the delivery/take-it-or-leave-it model of teaching and learning and of the academic culture that promotes it, this objective is simply incapable of being attained. Accordingly my recommendations are directed at lessening and redressing these limitations.

I also share the Government's objective of securing wider participation in higher education. However, in the light of studies of student retention, I believe that here too the significance of the academic culture in repelling students from backgrounds where there is no tradition of university study has been overlooked. I therefore anticipate that the same set of recommendations would if implemented go a long way to enabling both objectives to be attained.

Recommendations

1. As a first step, the Secretary of State should convene a conference of bodies and individuals currently engaged in mentoring, both within and outside higher education, to consider how mentoring might be promoted to and introduced into our universities.

2. Studies should be commissioned to draw up a range of possible ways in which universities might integrate mentoring within their current activities, paying attention to the need for (a) a senior post occupied by a 'champion' of mentoring; (b) a career structure for mentors; (c) a ring-fenced budget for mentoring; and (d) a reviewing and public reporting mechanism that will

highlight issues faced by students (this being a powerful mechanism for informing the choices made by potential students).

3. Universities should be invited to draw up their own schemes for introducing and developing mentoring within their own institutions, consulting students and staff in the process, and to submit their preferred schemes for public discussion. Funds should be made available by the appropriate national funding council for piloting schemes that meet with approval.

4. Studies should be commissioned of the need for training (a) of full-time and part-time mentors, and (b) of academics who wish to teach in a mentoring style, and of how these needs for training might be met.

5. A seed-bed fund should be made available to nurture existing innovations and promote new initiatives.

Appendix: Students' comments on mentoring

How a mentor can help

The following comments are drawn from responses to a questionnaire circulated by email to students who availed themselves of one-to-one mentoring sessions provided by myself for students at the London School of Economics during the academic year 2001-02. Students were asked 'Did you find the session helpful? If so, in what ways?'

- The talks with [the mentor] were very helpful. ... In my first visits to him, he told me about the general requirements for essays and gave me a framework for reading coursework and writing essays. My visit right before the exams helped me gain confidence about my abilities to perform and made me think in a more structured way instead of letting nervousness get the better of me. I am glad to say that I believe he has helped me give my best during my course.

- As well as going away with practical advice, the talks I had with [the mentor] filled me with renewed confidence.

- It helped me to be more aware of the importance of structuring essays. It's better to spend more time thinking [through] the structure, even if that takes time for writing, because the benefits in terms of clarity and analytical value will outweigh the costs of providing a bit less information.

- It helped me to structure my thoughts in a clearer manner for writing essays.

- [The mentor] was extremely helpful. His perspective on the year and rational way of discussing problems was very beneficial. ... It would be brilliant if you could continue to provide the same service, or even expand it, since it really helped me mid-way through the

year. It's especially useful since ... there aren't that many outlets for worries or questions of a general nature.

- I found the talk useful since I was forced to identify the problems I encountered while writing my essays, and I was also encouraged to deal constructively with them. [The mentor] was understanding and gave good advice on how to proceed.

- At the time it was more a case of mind over matter. Having somebody sympathetic and willing to listen and offer helpful advice really went a long way in clearing my mind and eased the chaos I felt I was going through. He also gave me some practical advice that helped when it came to sleeping difficulties.

- I found it very useful. Coming from a country with such a different teaching method I needed somebody to explain to me what the teachers usually expect from the students in LSE. He made me feel more comfortable at a time when I was quite nervous and uncertain about how I was going to deal with the course.

- I was able to see [the mentor] six times, and we covered spelling, time management, exams, essays and reading effectively. We always referred back to my subjects ... so everything remained relevant. ... From the second session [he] gave me a copy of the notes he took. ... It was nice to have a piece of paper to file afterwards and refer back to. I did [so] during my revision when all the strategies we talked about needed to be used.

- I was spending too much time reading for my essays and hence found it difficult to get them done in time. [The mentor] devised a useful method by which I could spend my reading time more effectively ... This enabled me to organise all the relevant ideas in a clear and comprehensive way and to shorten my reading time. So [his] advice was very useful. I also wrote an email to [him] during exam time, and his reply was thorough and very helpful to me.

- It had been ten years since my last written examination and I found [the mentor's] insights very useful. He seemed very understanding of my situation and concerns. The advice and exercises he suggested I undertake were practical and useful in analysing the essay questions in the exam.

- The talk helped me to gain more confidence in my approach to exam preparation.

- I used almost all of [the mentor's] ideas on exam revision strategies and found them to be helpful in keeping me directed and focused.

- I found my talk with [the mentor] very useful. I think this was mostly because I was extremely relieved to finally meet someone who didn't immediately label me as emotional and hysterical ... I found him understanding and very dedicated to helping.

Review

As can be seen from the above comments, the benefits described by respondents cover not only practical study and exam techniques but also psychological benefits, such as gains in confidence and improved ability to handle stress. The approach employed by the mentor is intrinsically student-centred and is adaptable to the particular needs of individual students. In this case it also draws on a combination of academic experience and training in a variety of forms of mentoring, coaching, counselling etc.

Notes and references

1 Please note that I am applying the term 'elitism' to the UK higher education system to describe its ethos, not to suggest that attending university is a minority pursuit. Accordingly, I do not agree with the White Paper that 'Our system has successfully transformed itself from an elite system ... ' (p.12), notwithstanding the fact that currently around 43 per cent of people aged between 18 and 30 in England attend university.

2 P. Ambrose, 'Teaching-led is not the same as teaching-only', *The Guardian* 15 April 2003

3 Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Chairman: Sir Ron Dearing), *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (NCIHE 1997); ¶8.6

4 *Ibid*., ¶5.18

5 Committee on Higher Education (Chairman: Lord Robbins), *Higher Education: Report of the Committee* ... (HMSO 1963)

6 Dearing, ¶¶5.7, 5.8

7 The Commission on the Social Sciences, *Great Expectations: The Social Sciences in Britain* (The Commission 2003). Reported in *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 28 March 2003

8 *Firsts among Equals?*, broadcast on BBC2, 5 November 1996

9 It appeared that male students were more likely than were female students to impress and surprise the examiners: it was suggested that this could be attributed to their being more adventurous in their approach, forcefully pursuing an argument rather than presenting a balanced consideration of a range of points of view, and venturing further in their reading.

10 T. Becher, *Academic Tribes and Territories* (SRHE & Open University Press 1989); 2nd edition by T. Becher & P.R. Trowler (SRHE & Open University Press 2001)

11 *The future of higher education*, ¶1.10

12 See Note 7

13 National Audit Office, *Getting the Evidence: Using Research in Policy-Making* (NAO 2003). Reported in *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 18 April 2003. Six problems are highlighted:

- Research results that are not easily accessible;
- Research results that lack direct short-term relevance for policy;
- A poor understanding of policy questions by the researchers;

- The poor communication of the research results by the researchers;
- A poor understanding of the research results by the policy-makers;
- A lack of resources for dissemination activity.

14 Universities UK and the Higher Education Careers Services Unit, *Enhancing Employability, Recognising Diversity* (UUK/CSU, 2002)

15 These points are made in P. Levin & I. Kent, Bridging Culture Gaps: An Alternative Approach to 'Employability' and 'Diversity'. Available at www.teamwork.ac.uk/MGS_bridging_culture_gaps.PDF

16 Dearing, *op. cit.*, ¶8.14

17 *The future of higher education*, ¶1.10

18 *Ibid.*, Title of Chapter 4

19 *Ibid.*, ¶1.12, ¶¶3.1-3.7

20 Quality Assurance Agency, *Handbook for Academic Review*, Annex 1, Observation of teaching, ¶2. Available at www.qaa.ac.uk/public/acrevhbook/annexi.htm

21 Becher, *op.cit.*, p.3

22 *The future of higher education*, ¶1.18

23 Dearing, *op. cit.*, ¶8.17

24 This is consistent with the findings of the Commission on the Social Sciences. See Note 7.

25 The four languages are 'ordinary' English, economists' English, graphs and equations

26 B. Patrick, 'Student retention: who stays and who leaves', *The University of Glasgow Newsletter*, No. 227, April 2001

27 L. Archer *et al*, *Higher Education and Social Class* (RoutledgeFalmer 2003) p.133

28 It may also be thought somewhat anomalous to categorize the fourth and fifth classes out of six as 'bottom'.

29 Archer, op.cit., p.133

30 *Ibid.*

31 Dearing, *op. cit.*, ¶8.6

32 *Ibid.*, ¶9.6

33 *Ibid.*, ¶9.9

34 See the LTSN Generic Centre, *Quality Enhancment* (*sic*): 'Quality enhancement in higher education is a deliberate process of change that leads to improvement. Enhancing something is fundamentally about trying to make the world a better place and succeeding in this enterprise.' www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp?id=17105

35 Ambrose, *op.cit.*

36 Archer, op.cit., p.131

37 If perchance a flood *did* materialize, this would be a valuable warning that something was

seriously wrong with the teaching arrangements.

38 Cm 3790, *The Learning Age*, ¶3

39 *Ibid.*

40 I am irresistibly reminded of a version of a verse of H.C. Beeching's from the 'Masque of Balliol':

First come I; my name is Jowett.
There's no knowledge but I know it.
If I don't know it it isn't knowledge
I am Master of this college.

After *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (3rd edition, Oxford University Press, 1979, p.37)

41 For a list of definitions of 'mentoring', see the National Mentoring Network's website at www.nmn.org.uk/cgi-bin/page.pl?folder=8

42 For details see http://degree.ultralab.net/ and the linked article by John Crace 'Not the great escape' which first appeared in *The Guardian*, 15 April 2003

43 A study by Lawson and his colleagues of the effectiveness of mathematics support centres found that one-to-one support was prized by nearly 90 per cent of a sample of students using the centres. See http://ltsn.mathstore.ac.uk/workshops/maths-support/duncan.pdf