

## **TOWARDS SANE UK NATIONAL POLICIES: OR LEARNING FROM SOME US POLICIES**

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In the frenzied discussions of whether post 2008 current RAE procedures should be replaced or complemented by metrics, two things remain constant: the needs of students and mainstream staff to learn in a research environment are being totally ignored.

Internationally there is growing research evidence of the potential benefits of students learning through involvement in research. If the concept of a 'knowledge economy' has any validity, then the main people who need to learn to work and live in this complexity are the growing numbers of undergraduates. To an extent the UK Government has adopted these perspectives and moved away from the 2003 White Paper talk of 'teaching only' universities. Speaking at a conference on Undergraduate Research at Warwick University in October 2006, Bill Rammell stated: "We want all students to access the benefits exposure to teaching informed by research can bring. ..We believe an understanding of the research process –asking the right questions in the right way; conducting experiments; and collating and evaluating information –must be a key part of any undergraduate curriculum."

Yet the evidence is also clear that whatever the benefits the RAE might have brought to the organisation of research, research by Ian McNay and others has demonstrated the RAE resulting in institutions devaluing teaching; and structurally to a growing separation between the research worlds of the university and student learning. While staff and students in higher education have to teach and research at student staff ratios comparable to secondary education. To rephrase Burton Clark's perhaps dated critique of US higher education, increasingly UK students and the staff teaching them experience the research worlds of the university distantly as though 'through the wrong end of a telescope'. Furthermore student leaders in a number of institutions are angered by the limited contact many students have with staff who are preoccupied by RAE focussed research. Yet if many Vice Chancellors and perhaps Ministers have their way, students, their parents, and the wider society will soon pay higher fees for this degraded experience.

Recent US experience suggests ways forward for the UK with or without metrics. In 2000 the National Science Foundation stated that one of their three core funding strategies was the effective integration of teaching and research. Thus major research grants have as one of their key criteria, the effectiveness of research dissemination. Some funding streams are specifically targeted to support undergraduate students (and staff) as researchers in institutions outside the research elite. Recent funding has in part been directed to the community colleges where now some 50 % of undergraduates are educated ( with clear parallels to the UK system of HE in Further Education ) National metrics such as the National Survey of Student

Engagement now rate institutions on the extent to which undergraduates are involved in research ,including research that benefits local communities

These principles could well be adapted to post 2008 Research and teaching policies. The RAE could be modified to require departments to demonstrate how students and the wider society benefit from department research. Metrics could reward institutions and departments for teaching focussed publications –as does the University of Sydney .The 2005-7 £25 million Research Informed Teaching could receive significantly more funding post 2008 to support mainstream staff and students learning in a research environment, perhaps through funding US style institutional undergraduate research schemes. Student national survey data could be developed to measure and reward institutions and departments for bringing students into the worlds of research and for research which supports local communities. Institutions and departments could be required to evidence in part through metrics, promotion strategies that support teaching /research linkages.

So lets start thinking post 2008 by stating a set of core educational principles and values .For myself that should centrally value all students and staff learning through research : and high level research in part being directed to its dissemination to the wider society ,including undergraduates and local communities . Having established principles –and only then - is the time to discuss procedures such as metrics or modifying current RAE methodologies .At present the system is in danger of heedlessly rushing to (metric ) solutions without thinking where its needs to go .

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