

# Wags the dog

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**Abstract:** Integrity – having no part or element wanting; honesty; material wholeness (OED, 1973) – is under threat, academically and educationally, from a seemingly innocuous direction. The increasing reliance of the University sector on centralization and uniformity requires a bureaucracy to match; and as Clarke’s astronauts in *2001: A Space Odyssey* discovered to their peril, the servant can, by degrees and with the best of motives, come to control the master. When questioning why submission of written examinations is needed less than half way though a semester’s teaching is met with the admonition from the bureaucrat in charge that “the exam should be written before you start teaching and you teach to that”, one wonders who in fact is in charge of the asylum. Timelines for academic activities are increasingly set by administrators far removed from, and often with little if any experience of, the front line. One could be forgiven for thinking that the core business of the university is now to maintain an even workload for certain administrative sections, and not, as most of us who teach and administer at the coal face once thought, the full educational experience of our students. The tail is indeed wagging the dog; which dog, however, is increasingly irritated by the seemingly random directions in which it is thrust, and, to shamelessly mix metaphors, the worm must turn and bite the hand that (thinks it) feeds it. This serious situation has increasingly negative effects on a staff and student body already under external threat.

**Keywords:**

**Keywords:** academic integrity, educational integrity, values

It is, with apologies to Jane Austen, a truth universally acknowledged that an institution of learning in possession of a suite of courses must be in want of a bureaucracy.

## The partners

In any relationship it is rare indeed to find total equality of power and responsibility: only compare the comments of 2 people who share intimate moments and finances on who should – and who does – do the dishes, pick up the children and clean the toilet. The relationship of the academic and his *bête-noir*, Administration (so often spoken of only with the capital letter) in general would seem to fit this model. [And here I must crave pardon and inform the reader that as I am constitutionally unable to refer to a singular person in the plural, I will engage in the somewhat old-fashioned pursuit of alternating him and her for the second-person pronoun. It is a lesser evil than that which reduces us all us to personnel, but that is a soap-box oration for another day.]

These oft ill-matched bedfellows are the partners in a relationship which had its genesis, lest we forget, in provision of the best quality education for students in the most effective, efficient and sustainable manner. The key terms students, quality, effective, efficient and sustainable are all important ingredients in the mix, but it is my contention that certain of them assume greater importance in the minds of one or other partner.

## The dance

The academic expects [and here – as later – I am of course shamelessly generalizing] to turn up to teach, knowing the time and location of her class, confident that her students are properly enrolled (and qualified to be there) and the final grades that she submits will be both accurately recorded and transmitted to the student. He requires access to the essential (computers, class lists, coffee) and the flexibility to work in ways that maximize his research and his planning. Academics also assume that, individually and *en masse*, they will be consulted in decisions that will influence their ability to do this job. As much as we think about administration in our daily life, we note its benefits only by their absence. When probed, academics will acknowledge that without a good administration they will cease to function. Note the use of the qualifying adjective in that sentence, however.

Administration [while there are several species of this beast, I confine myself in the main to that generic label “Student Administration”] requires timely and accurate provision of information to allow it to ensure delivery of the above. In its purest sense, Administration can be compared with a computer – the quality of output is highly dependent on the quality of input, or in the language of the streets, “garbage in, garbage out”.

The idealised academic considers herself to be primarily interested in, and concerned for, the intellectual and personal development of her students. Anyone with a nodding acquaintance with the principles of assessment is aware of the fallacious nature of the mantra “teaching to the test”; Volante (2004) strongly refutes the rationale behind this questionable practice, asserting that the most important part of teaching is to promote learning in our students. It is, however, not enough for the teacher to follow such a path: Volante is adamant that administrators must also be similarly trained if there is to be effective leadership within the institution.

It pains me to acknowledge that not all academics of my acquaintance are so aware; the academe, sadly, has feet of clay. For those of us who subscribe to the maxim that how and what we assess reflects how and what we teach, and thus by implication that the student body is an important ingredient in this mix, to be told by an Administrator (capital A) that we should have the exam written before semester begins, and to teach to that exam, is evidence that administrators are often no better served in the tarsal department. To add insult to injury, this same administrator becomes by default the arbiter of our curriculum, by virtue of requiring exams to be submitted half-way through a teaching period and setting very short turn-around times for submission of results. It is well-known, of course, that the right way to assess any material is by multiple-choice questions and as these are so easy to mark, what are we whinging about? And when the stated reason is that the timelines make the workload more manageable for the administrative section, thoughts of justifiable homicide refuse to remain submerged.

Prudence precludes further expansiveness here [I enjoy my job]; but I challenge anybody who has worked in an institution of higher learning to fail to match, if not trump, this idiocy. It is instructive to note that the flippant comment above is only half in jest. No sensible person would champion an accountability-free academic climate, but the locus of control of academic standards seems increasingly removed from the coalface, by virtue of being shepherded into narrower and narrower clefts by administratively-expedient decisions. A choice of lesser evils is no choice at all. Bollinger (2005) laments the erosion of academic freedom; Kinman & Jones (2003) paint a bleak picture in their analysis of stress amongst British academics. It is not hard to see why.

It is comforting in some ways, depressing in others, to realise that we are not alone. Temple and Billing (2003), discussing the emergence of quality assurance agencies in the higher education sector in Central and Eastern Europe over the preceding decade, conclude that control rather than quality enhancement is the primary goal of such bodies. While these are external bodies fulfilling somewhat different functions, the principles of this analysis have parallels in our own system. It is perhaps pertinent to ask, as Glegg (2002) does in his report on the attempt of a certification body to increase its control over teacher education, “Who guards the guardians?”

### **The next date**

In his lengthy exploration of the schism in the field of organizational culture and educational administration, Waite (2002) discusses the genesis, role and outcomes of labeling and us/them dichotomization. Negative stereotyping, Waite argues, allows or even encourages the polarization of the characteristics of opposing groups, which clearly does not encourage cross-cultural communication and thus cooperation and compromise [here I take culture to refer to the two camps of the academic and the administrator]. The behaviour is conflated with the person; the complexity of the situational factors is overlooked, and with it, any chance for remedy. Such “binary opposition” Waite asserts, arises from overly simplistic thinking. When one believes that all academics are lazy or unreliable or disorganised [though who could deny that aspects of such characteristics do from time to time make themselves evident, even in the best-regulated of families?], or that all administrators are out to put a spoke in the academic’s wheel at every opportunity and to make extra work just because they can [again, who cares to cast the first stone?], then anyone betting on the chance of meaningful consultation and a suitable outcome is a prime candidate for the poorhouse.

Management, governance and related terms feature strongly in the current educational climate. The shrinking purse of the higher education sector, coupled with burgeoning lines of reporting and accountability, leads inexorably to Mammon taking precedence over meaning. Responsibility-Centered Management (RCM), a system for linking unit budgets with academic priorities, is designed to “make the budget process responsive to academic priorities” (Gayle *et al.*, 2003:101); this is not the reality in the universe I currently inhabit. Optimism reigns supreme, however, no matter how often it is cast down by experience – long may it be so!

This is a work-in-progress, indeed one in its infancy. It is the fond hope of its author that a safe path through the mire may be found – how easy this path is (i) to find and (ii) to follow remains to be seen. Watch this space.

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