
Undermining Academic Freedom

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In late January the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) released a policy review entitled *Pathways to Excellence*, which proposes a complete overhaul in its funding of postgraduate degrees (<http://tinyurl.com/cc7z8v>). It intends to scrap completely its current system of allocating quotas of four-year studentships to departments to support postgraduates studying for a masters and doctoral degree—the familiar ‘1+3’ or ‘2+2’ system of funding. Instead, around twenty-five ‘doctoral training centres’ (DTCs) will be established, grouping around ten academic departments, which will receive 5-50 studentship quotas annually, and around twenty-five ‘doctoral training units’ (DTUs), grouping around five departments, which can merely bid for allocations from a residual pot. Departments were given only a couple of weeks to respond to these proposals, which are effectively being imposed as a *fait accompli*. They will cement a growing hierarchy in British higher education (HE) and constitute a serious attack on academic freedom. Departments and divisions now need to seriously reconsider the costs and benefits of continued affiliation with the ESRC.

Pathways to Excellence does contain positive aspects. Responding to a two-year consultancy that elicited many criticisms of the existing funding mechanisms from directors of graduate studies, the proposals introduce much greater flexibility in the staging of research training, allow breaks in funding to allow students to pursue mid-degree work and other placements, and allow funding to be reallocated from students who drop out to other candidates. Cross-institutional training programmes are also encouraged, which could greatly improve postgraduate students’ training and yield other benefits.

However, these benefits are far outweighed by the negative implications. The first is for British HE overall. Universities not participating in DTCs will apparently lose all their quota studentships. The big losers will clearly be post-’92 institutions who lack the resources necessary to ‘bid’ for and sustain a DTC. This will further cement the growing apartheid between elite ‘research-led’ and massified institutions. No genuine egalitarian can be happy at such an outcome.

‘Elite’ institutions such as our own, however, cannot be blind to the loss of academic freedom that our increasingly coercive relationship with the ESRC implies. Successful DTC bids *must* involve the centralisation and standardisation of doctoral research training across the social sciences. While *Pathways to Excellence* graciously permits departments to offer supplementary training, it nonetheless dictates the content of the common, standardised curriculum (Annex I).

As we have come to expect from the ESRC, despite token gestures towards other approaches, this curriculum is extremely narrow, positivistic, empiricist and quantitative in orientation. It stipulates that all students must not only learn how to, but show ‘proficiency’ in, constructing data sets, analysing large-scale surveys, longitudinal, cross-sectional and experimental data; interpreting and presenting quantitative analyses, including descriptive

statistics, measures of central tendency and dispersion, exploratory statistical data analysis, statistical inference, and measures of association; and they are also ‘expected to achieve a level of competence that enables them to use, model, and interpret multivariate statistical analysis’.

Even if quantitative analysis has its place in social analysis, does it deserve the place allotted for it in this schema? For many years, departments housing those with serious doubts about this question—such as my own, Politics and International Relations—have, as the ESRC notes, “‘played safe” to guarantee recognition’, i.e., they make all students jump through only minimalistic hoops, while allowing those who wish to go further to do so. *Pathways to Excellence* deliberately eliminates this option. It is a blatant attempt to use the ESRC’s minor contribution to the funding of postgraduates—a mere £45m annually across the sector—as a lever to force *all* departments to train *all* of their students in these narrow orthodoxies to an unprecedented level.

Moreover, the ESRC plans to dictate the distribution of 75 per cent of all quota studentships in line with its ‘strategic priorities’. A guide to these priorities is that over half of all studentships in my department to 2011 have already been earmarked for students using ‘advanced quantitative methods’. Let us be in no doubt about the implications for academic freedom. Dictating the use of particular research methods limits the range of research questions that may be asked and the routes permissible for the discovery of truth. Providing such advanced training will necessitate the employment of more quantitatively-oriented scholars, thereby changing the very nature of our departments. While some such scholars retain an open-minded approach, others display monomaniacal tendencies that damage academic pluralism. One such individual is said to have declared in a ‘statistics for social scientists’ lecture that no topic was worth researching if it could not be studied quantitatively.

Those whose ruling orthodoxies closely match the ESRC’s agenda may enthusiastically embrace these developments. With many expecting cuts in HE funding in the current economic climate, and with the ESRC’s lengthy pedigree of interference in academic practice, even reluctant department heads may resign themselves to preparing a DTC bid. But they should not acquiesce so blindly, without considering the foregoing repercussions. They should at least consider their options and seriously compare the costs and benefits of compliance. While the ESRC will continue to be relied upon for faculty research grants, with careful and creative management, departments could find ways to entirely replace the ESRC’s relatively small contribution to student funding. My own department could do this by 2011, when the new system is due to come online. As we know from the LSE-led revolt against the QAA in 2001, resistance from an elite institution—being so very rare—is often sufficient to beat back the bureaucratic management of British HE. Let us at least not take this lying down.