

From the Union Newsletter, State University of New York

Thanks to Bill Simons for an invitation to contribute a second occasional bulletin from Academia-UK as we mount another defense against the neoliberal insurgency. Colleagues in the department of Sociology at the University of Birmingham face redundancy after the university administration announced the results of a recent 'review'. No meaningful consultation with faculty or students has taken place, and yet administrators have made plans to transfer responsibility for the undergraduate degree program in Media and Cultural Studies to another department (Social Policy), with only three of the current teaching complement of 17 to deliver it. All this will happen behind the breastplate of 'quality assurance' vaunted by Birmingham and every other UK university, and almost certainly without any murmur of dissent from the discredited Quality Assurance Agency.

Let me put this controversy in some context. Academia-UK is governed by league table lottery, however, this operates in unpredictable ways, a bit like snakes-and-ladders. So, despite their excellent results in terms of teaching quality, student satisfaction, etc., Sociology at Birmingham performed less well than expected in the recent Research Assessment Exercises. Birmingham is a 'Russell Group' university, equivalent to US Research tier 1 universities. Since this group seeks to dominate the research rankings, and certainly the research grants awarded on the basis of RAE performance, no slippage is tolerated by university heads. Quite simply, Birmingham Sociology is being punished pour encourager les autres. To call this short-termism would be to miss several ironies. Firstly, Birmingham is a large multi-cultural city and the university makes a claim to be diversifying its student body through its 'widening participation' agenda. Sociology would seem to provide a resource and a natural home for many of the target demographic for such a mission. Secondly, the next RAE (which will be titled the REF) will place an emphasis (and allocate funding) partially on 'impact'. Impact is widely interpreted as economic, but in the arts, humanities and social sciences, impact on social and cultural policy will be assessed. Funding is likely to be bestowed on departments which 'transfer knowledge' to social policy agencies, NGOs, local government etc., - precisely the sort of work encapsulated by the department's Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Culture. The website offers this description of its work: "It is a focus for the department's engagement with the local community (and wider policy agendas), while the community's multi-ethnic character brings the global 'home'".

The loss of Sociology at the University of Birmingham will represent a loss to the wider world of research in the field and to the local community. Perhaps an enduring loss to the university will be to its recruitment of both staff and students. Who will now take the risk of planning a career at the University of Birmingham, whether that should be as a lecturer, researcher or as an undergraduate, if the structures within which you work are not likely to endure for the extent of your ambitions?

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