# Comment: *QAA*

It's funny, or perhaps not so funny, the images people have. Anglican vicars on television are always happily grinning; Scottish Presbyterian ministers, on the other hand, are grim-faced apostles of predestined misery. The last time—the only time—I lunched in a certain Cambridge college, identified as a Catholic priest, I was immediately told by the Fellow next to me that he wasn't a 'Roman' but that he and his wife never missed watching 'Ballykissangel', a hilarious TV programme (I understand) about deranged and drunken clergy in the West of Ireland. It would be fun to unravel the presuppositions—on both sides – of that little encounter.

It was the college caricatured in fiction as Porterhouse. With wonderful novels by David Lodge, as well as vintage studies by C.P. Snow, Kingsley Amis and many others, 'Redbrick' as well as 'Oxbridge' universities have well and truly entered popular imagination as privileged resorts of wildly irresponsible and self-indulgent people, longhaired and grungily-dressed students as well as indolent and bisexually amorous dons.

No one would deny that such characters are to be found in the cloisters and corridors of academe, or in nearby 'cyber'-cafés and 'theme' pubs. Nor do you have to be a fanatical teetotaller, or a sceptic about student poverty, to wonder at the Saturday night binges to which student newspapers incite their readers. But the fact of the matter is that the pressures of the market have a sobering effect on students, and the prospect of inspection by the Quality Assurance Agency an even more intimidating and oppressive impact on the teaching staff.

The QAA is empowered to conduct an RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) as well as a TQA (Teaching Quality Assessment); if a department fails to achieve a certain grade, it will lose funding by HEFCE (pronounced 'heff-kay': the Higher Education Funding Council). 'Peer assessment' of lectures, and even of one-to-one tutorials, is on the agenda. Universities have a couple of years to prepare for inspection, principally by generating 'mission statements', 'course books', and collecting abstracts of lectures and 'hand-outs', etc., all of which have to be box-filed along with marked essays and examination scripts, etc., and any other information supposed to be relevant. As complete a picture as possible of the quantity of research undertaken, and effectiveness of teaching performed, by members of the department, thus lies open to view. In addition, universities arrange training sessions to help staff to compile the documentation, and to



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perform well on the day.

Money matters. Even institutions which might seem richly enough endowed to treat the QAA with a certain nonchalance seem eager to conform, to continue to secure public funding. Indeed, while bemoaning the mounting documentation, academics often highlight the benefits of being 'monitored' and 'audited', self-mockingly but submissively enough. Files are better kept, they say; indeed, in some departments, files at last now *exist*, containing records of an individual's progress, which ease writing references for scholarships, jobs, etc. Colleagues, after many years in the same department, now have the opportunity to discover what each has been doing. Since the department's funding partly depends on the quantity of published research, they may be more co-operative in allowing a colleague to have time to write (if not to think). Lecturers—not to mention students—now know where courses are going; they plan ahead, prescribe reading lists, stick to advertised topics, dish out summaries, etc. (Of course, in the old days, in Scottish universities anyway, students had no such problem, as they followed the—compulsory—lectures with their grandfathers' notes, correcting the manuscript here and there when the professor seemed to have changed his mind. But that must be a legend.)

Universities accept that their teaching should be 'monitored' and 'audited'. Anyone old enough to recall how a military establishment prepared for an 'inspection' would remember the smell of fresh paint—even stacks of coke on the eminent visitor's route neatly arranged and whitewashed. The imminence of inspection sharpens performance and secures long overdue repairs and improvements; but it also encourages fakery and window dressing. Such items as computers and comfortable seminar chairs are moved around, in some universities, or so they say, to trick the inspectors into believing departments are better equipped than they really are. Since QAA inspections are never unannounced, less exhibitable colleagues are quietly granted leave of absence for the week that it usually takes. Things can go badly wrong. There is at least one true story of a head of department waving an arm round his office and genially (but unwisely) telling the banker (!) and the professor from a rival university that, if they could find anything in the filing system, they would do better than he ever could.

No, being an academic these days is no joke; or anyway not the *old* joke.

F.K.



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