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Wednesday, 24 November 2010

Dear Professor Arthur,

Let me first introduce myself. I am a final year PhD student in Biology/Physics with an undergraduate degree in Physics from Imperial College London and a Masters degree in Biophysics from the Université de Paris-Sud. I hold no position of power and have never run for a position in a student's union; the impatience of youth means I still prefer doing things rather than talking about doing things. My website at www.tomforth.co.uk contains further information about me and what I get up to.

I am writing to thank you — as I did in person at the time — for agreeing to hold a question and answer session with students last night. I asked a question about how you would propose a prospective undergraduate make a decision about which University to attend given the lack of information on teaching quality that is available to them. My understanding of your response was,

- The National Student Survey (NSS) lets students assess satisfaction with courses across Universities.
- Reputation matters.
- Assessing teaching quality across institutions is extremely hard.
- Students should not equate the number of contact hours with the quality of the course.

I broadly agree with your assessment of the situation and I'd like to propose something to you. It is an idea which I believe could move the University of Leeds from a steady mid-ranking position within the Russell Group towards being the UK's top University.

Leeds scores very highly in the NSS and you are right to highlight this but I hope that you are not intending to rely on this measure to attract students in the medium-term. I'm sure you realise that the NSS is a far from perfect method of assessing the student experience since it asks students with no experience of other universities to rate their own¹.

A better system for comparing teaching quality across Universities is desperately needed² and whether the Russell Group like it or not, things like the OECD's AHELO project are coming³. Leeds already trails other UK Universities when it comes to international presence⁴ and visible examples of exceptional teaching⁵. Students — both nationally and internationally — will soon have access to information on teaching quality and we need to make sure that when this happens Leeds comes near the top. I think we can do this, starting with a trial involving the four steps below.

1. Teaching, initially in technical subjects, should be decoupled from assessment in a small non-specialised core of each subject. For example, genetics in biological sciences or electromagnetism in Physics,
2. In these core subjects, exams should be set in collaboration with similar local universities such as York, Sheffield and Manchester by people who do not teach the course being assessed. The

assessors would write a syllabus and make clear that their exams would test application to problems above simple recall.

3. The course materials, including recordings of lectures and problem sheets (with answers), would be made available publicly so that students could “study” at a combination of the participating universities.
4. Exam results for these modules would be directly comparable across the universities that took part.

It’s quite likely that your first response to this suggestion is to think I’m completely mad and certainly in the short term it is not in your interest to let students make comparisons like this.

Let me try and convince you that it is both right and in the interests of the University of Leeds to do this by highlighting just a few of the hidden advantages that will vastly outweigh the more obvious risks.

1. Departments would be keen to do well in these comparisons and would use the best teachers and most innovative techniques to do that, markedly improving the student experience.
2. The outward facing image of the University on e-learning sites like iTunes U would immediately become world-class in very widely accessed areas.
3. The reputation Leeds would immediately rise on the crest of a wave of media attention.
4. Students would for the first time have a genuine reason to work together and develop new ways of learning knowing that their exam was no longer a zero-sum game.
5. In the long term, shared teaching across multiple institutions would make these courses cheaper to run. The time and money saved could be dedicated to providing the kind of practical experiences that teachers prefer giving, students prefer receiving and employers continually tell you they are looking for in graduates.

I have no way of knowing if my idea is ingenious or idiotic and over the last decade there has been no incentive for anyone in charge to consider it. In a time of transition like this I wonder whether my idea’s time has come.

I would love to work with you or anyone else who might be interested in doing this. I am available to discuss this further anywhere and at any time.

Yours sincerely,



Thomas Forth

¹ It is as if Pepsi gave away cheap cans of cola, surveyed people’s satisfaction with their drink, and used the results of the survey to declare Pepsi better than Coke.

² The Great Brain Race: Rise of the Global Education Marketplace, Ben Wildavsky. Spoken summary provided as 21 October LSE Podcast available for free at www.lse.ac.uk/podcasts/

³ www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo

⁴ e.g. Nottingham’s satellite campus in Ningbo, China, and Imperial College’s collaborations with the National University of Singapore.

⁵ e.g. LSE’s internationally-renowned podcast series and other Universities’ considerably greater presence on iTunes U.