

Universities, free thought and peer reviewed research

Some universities are said to be in financial trouble. It has arisen because they have expanded, offering many places to overseas students, only to find that model poses difficulties at a time of retrenchment for international travel and exchange. Over reliance on Chinese students could be especially difficult. The deteriorating relations between the West and China over civil rights in mainland China, the new Hong Kong law and the intellectual property issues may put some Chinese students off coming. It would be good to hear from the university representative bodies what they think about the extent of China links, and how they respond to the current Chinese policies on human rights and intellectual property.

Universities have also entered the academic end of the leisure and entertainment business, offering informative conferences during the breaks between terms. These have stood empty for months with a substantial loss of income. They have invested in student accommodation, which has also been without tenants during the lock down period, leading to further income shortfalls.

The university establishments receive substantial research grants from governments, and some from companies for research that their sponsors wish them to carry out. The system of peer reviewing is said to be a strength, where research is assessed by other experts in the field who have the power to publish and recognise it or to mark it down and keep it out of the respected journals. Having a quality control in one sense is a good idea. There is however the danger that it encourages me too thinking, where a younger academic has to proceed around the work of a better established academic, without challenging the foundations of what the elder was doing. It can create groups of like minded people training up a new generation to think the same.

It also knocks on to governments procuring research. The senior academics are likely to influence the grant awarding and commissioning bodies in the public sector, pointing them in the way of research that bears a family resemblance to what they have already done. It can just be a case of the academics corralling around their fashionable theme or theory, seeking to prove it and extend it, whilst keeping out any serious challenge to it.

Government should look carefully at what research it is commissioning. There is no need to commission more research to extend or prove things academics claim to know. There is more need for research which pushes the boundaries and challenges some of the tired assumptions of current thinking.