

The era of McDoctorates

Don't push doctoral students too hard. They need to pass to keep your programme going, warns Simon Blackburn

If you toss a fair coin enough times, a sequence of three tails in a row will turn up. With the same inevitability, if you run a successful doctoral programme in a small arts and humanities department, sooner or later you will be blackballed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Suppose, for example, over five years students with a total of 11 AHRC awards come up to the time for four-year submission. Suppose that three of them do not come up to scratch in the prescribed time. Suppose the results for the three panned out as follows, with T for timely submission and U for untimely:

	TTT	UT	T	UTT	UT
Current year				66	50
Aggregate				66	66

In the fourth year, then, the success rate is below 70 per cent, and it is so when aggregated with the previous two years. That triggers a stern warning. It has to go back up the following year, which means that in year five it has to be 100 per cent. As the table shows, one defection in year five, and that's it.

Don't let students do challenging PhDs, get a job or a junior fellowship. These will take time

Kaput. Blackballed. So far as the AHRC is concerned, no more students for at least two years. Yet, overall, eight of the 11 students, or 73 per cent, are passing on time. Perhaps they are all getting doctorates, but that does not matter.

Challenged to defend this insane policy last year, Philip Esler, AHRC chief executive, ducked the logic, but intoned the predictable mantra: public money, accountability, duty of care to students, avoid a spiral of decline. Yes, but... With small figures, statistical fluctuations will trigger inflexible "target-driven" punishments. Every so often they will also place an extraordinary burden on some individuals. Each of my fifth-year students carries the fate of perhaps six prospective postgraduates on his or her shoulders. Larger departments, of course, will see less fluctuation, but the logic is still inexorable.

So what to do? Prudence is a familiar government watchword, and here are a number of prudent defensive strategies.

First, avoid homegrown students: you will have to fill up with overseas students when the dice fall against you, so start now. Second, don't allow students to do

challenging PhDs. Better safe than sorry. Avoid the unsolved problems, the new directions, the need to master new techniques, skills or languages. All these make dangerous demands on time.

Third, make sure that in the final year students do not get jobs. A student who is applauded in January for getting a job that starts in October may have to prepare lectures, widen his reading, design a syllabus, as well as find accommodation, sort out a move etc., all of which will distract from the run-up to the deadline. Fourth, make sure they are not good enough to get junior research fellowships. A student may easily want to use the time these afford to polish the results, expand the interest of the thesis, iron out remaining difficulties, or in many and various ways deepen the achievement. All these will take time, and time is what they cannot have.

Fifth, do not approach as examiners anyone with a reputation for insisting on high standards. Sixth, get on the phone or encrypted e-mail to more pliable colleagues. We each need the statistics. So you pass my students and... We're in this together. The time for pedantry is past: if corners are cut, the arguments shaky, the scholarship a bit thin and the grammar could have been better... well, mum's the word. There are probably better students in the pipeline, waiting for support, and they will not get it if we are too picky now. We know what the AHRC wants, so let us pull together to provide it. A fluctuation will still get you in the end, but it should take longer. Spiral of decline? Not my problem. McDoctorates must be better than none.

Can it really be as bad as this? Yes. Like the Gideonites of old, Biblical scholar Professor Esler and his men take no prisoners. There are no explanations, excuses or redemptions. You might think anyone might get a twinge of doubt at a policy that has recently blackballed law at Cambridge, and classics at Oxford, to name but two. But no: three tails in a row turned up, so the courts trod by Coke and Maitland are silent, and the libraries that sheltered Fraenkel and Dodds are closed. Can one imagine the US government stopping support for engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology or the French deciding that the Sorbonne no longer qualified to take French students?

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