



Down and dumb at the Uni

THE SHOCKING TRUTH is that students have let down their teachers yet again. Things have got so bad that even the Lib Dems have lost patience with them, calling for a cut in student numbers. The wise old man of the party, Vince Cable MP, asked last week “How much longer can we pretend that it is sensible or affordable to” have so many of ’em. Who can blame him? He knows that every autumn great shoals of teenage boys and girls crowd eagerly into the universities with new bags and new sneakers and new phones. “Where’s the library?” is not their first question, until they realise that it can be a pretty cool place to hang out and bond with their new-found classmates.

After registration and a few formalities they spend the first week drinking and partying and getting ready for the following week when they crowd into lectures to pick up course information and handouts and say “Hi” to their teachers. Following this initial burst of enthusiasm, attendance at classes will promptly drop to 50% and in subsequent weeks it will hover around one third as the students become acclimatised to intricately weaving the patterns of their newly independent social life around the demands of the minimum wage jobs they’ve taken to pay their bar bills and rent. Their work at “Uni” inevitably assumes, rather like their debts, the character of an ever present but ineffably remote

threat that will be dealt with at some unspecified time in that place called the future.

When that remote threat, the essay deadline, finally approaches, mental emotional and physical well-being go into sudden decline, strange illnesses are often contracted, distant relatives often die, and both imagination and credulity are put to the test as extensions are applied for, justified, and obtained. For the hale and hearty ones, and those unlucky enough to know nobody who is suddenly in need of a funeral, there is nothing for it but reading, writing, and late nights. A few inveterate rogues will cheat by trawling the Internet for suitable responses to the questions set by their lecturers, but larger numbers, lacking the skill to develop their own work in the desperately short time left to them, will offer précis of arguments found in recommended books and articles.

A few students will work hard and patiently, a few will duck and weave and cheat, but most will be far too dazed and confused to do either. For the most part these personable and charming young people will never grasp that they are meant to spend most of their days and nights reading and writing. For a handful attention deficit or dyslexia may be a problem, but for most students it will simply never become clear to them what they are supposed to be doing or how to do it. Their teachers will, of course, tirelessly tell them, harping on about the virtues of intellectual discipline and hard work, the dangers of Wikipedia, the need for well ordered bibliographies, peer reviewed sources, and the like, and the students will politely smile and agree to everything, just as they would if they were humouring a tiresome elderly relative.

In this dialogue of the deaf the teachers are, perhaps inevitably, struck by how standards have fallen and how needy and poorly focused the latest crop is. They will hark back to their own student days when intellectual rigour and respect reigned supreme, those long vanished days when students could spell, write a good sentence, and knew exactly what was expected of them. Today's students, on the other

hand, can't work out what they are supposed to be doing in the measureless days and long hours between lectures and seminars, and regard the idea that they should spend four or five hours every day reading with attention as just plain nuts.

So, is it any surprise that lecturers are beginning to notice that First Year students, finding it difficult to concentrate on lengthy and complicated talk, have taken to whispering and texting during lectures, and have even started making and receiving calls during classes. They are not being rude or disrespectful they are simply attending to calls from friends during classes when they are not entirely sure what is going on and remain unconvinced concerning the utility or relevance of the lecture.

Instead of reducing class size, tightening discipline and emphasising the didactic nature of their enterprise, university managements have swung between dwelling upon the fun to be had by signing up, the excellent sports facilities and social life, and the stylish and lucrative careers on offer to those who simply graduate. Instead of seminar groups of six or seven and the expectation of the delivery of at least two seminar papers, three or four essays and an exam on each course, students are offered classes of 20 or 25 people, no seminar papers, and two essays (and maybe an exam) per course, per year.

Consequently, many students drift more or less unnoticed and unchallenged. They are rarely placed in situations where their critical intelligence is required or stretched either in formal conversation with their peers and their teachers, or in closely argued written work; both teachers and their students begin to coast along at a bland pace at which neither the teacher or the taught are seriously tested. The result is not simply the so-called "dumbing down" of course materials and expectations, but also the "dumbing down" of the intellectual life of institutions in which neither students nor teachers make interesting or significant intellectual demands upon each other. A peculiar ennui reigns in

which neither side of the relationship fully comprehends what is expected of the other.

However, while university teachers appear to be as hesitant, learned, thoughtful, and badly dressed, as they have ever been, the inattention of the student is much more conspicuous. This can be attributed to the media saturated consciousness of young people, to their freer sexuality, their drunkenness, their partying, or their penchant for shopping. The truth is that they are simply being swamped and neglected.

For close on three decades Tory and Labour governments have increased student numbers by cutting grants, administrative support, and staff-student ratios, and now all parties in Parliament are dismayed and truly astounded that standards have fallen. All are agreed: something must be done! The Tories and Labour are not sure, but the Lib Dems have, as a consequence of a dazzling intellectual insight, concluded that we should simply cut student numbers! All of these shysters have always known full well exactly where to send their own kids and why, and yet they claim to be astonished and dismayed by the poor quality of our mass university system. It must be “dumbing down” they conclude. “Many students just aren’t bright enough to benefit from higher education.” Or, perhaps standards are dropping because of the venality and incompetence of the lecturers.

The truth is that if you want an effective mass higher education system you have to stop neglecting the students. If they were at Oxbridge they’d be properly looked after but at Bash Street Uni the priority is maximising the throughput and minimising the input. As the rich know only too well, if you want quality you have to pay for it, that is why they send their kids to schools with small classes and to universities with well-resourced administrations, one-to-one tutorial teaching and tiny seminar groups.