

## A sense of entitlement

*When demanding students meet reluctant lecturers.*



*Illustration by David Simonds*

A comic novel, "Lucky Jim", published by Kingsley Amis in 1954, portrayed life as a university lecturer as a grubby, tiresome slog, for all that it was shot through with humour. A somewhat drier study of university life has now found that academics no longer devote as much time to teaching as they did because of the bureaucratic burdens they are now forced to carry.

The study, by Malcolm Tight of Lancaster University, examined surveys of academic workloads since 1945. He found that university staff have worked long hours, typically 50 hours a week, since the late 1960s. Academics fiercely protect the time they spend on research. They also do more administrative work than in the past. As a result, he concludes, "the balance of the average academic's workload has changed in an undesirable way... [making] it more difficult to pay as much attention to teaching as most academics would like to do."

The finding suggests that new ideas for promoting better university teaching may be addressing only half the problem. On November 3rd Peter Mandelson, the business secretary, whose department's wide remit includes universities, came up with a series of proposals for modernising them. He wants English universities to compete for students by publishing information on a whole host of issues, including how much direct contact they can expect to have with academic staff.

The idea is that students will force up standards by demanding better value for their money. British and European Union students now pay tuition fees capped at £3,225 a year, although the cost of educating them, met mainly by the state, is far higher. The recession has increased competition to get into university, as school leavers try to postpone their search for employment and those recently laid off want to gain new skills. Although the state has increased the number of university places, demand for them is greater.

Unsurprisingly, Lord Mandelson also confirmed this week a review of tuition fees which many expect to recommend that the cap be raised. He has said before now that if students are expected to pay for more of their education, they should be entitled to receive more in exchange from universities.

All of which is perfectly right and sensible, but it may not hit the target. Although students choose the universities to which they apply, it is the universities that then select those they wish to accept. Enabling students to make well-informed choices is to be commended, but it will not improve teaching.

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