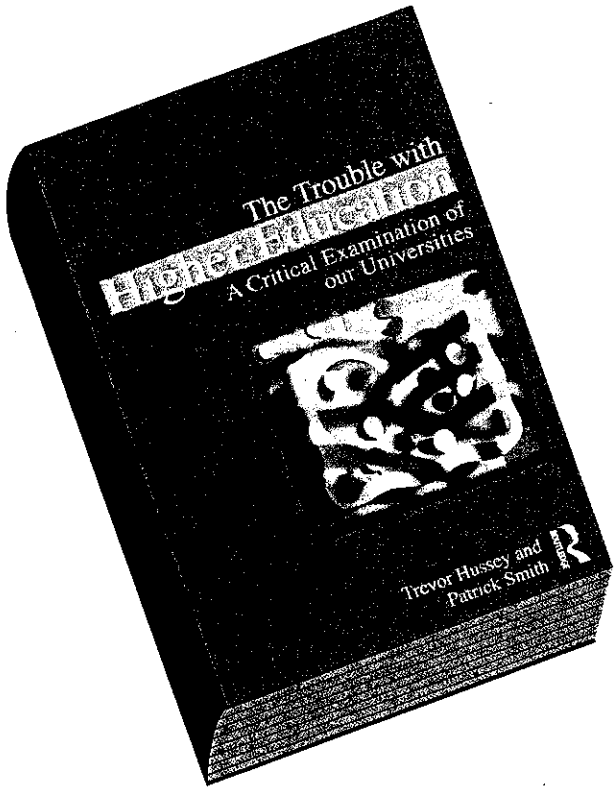
Pub economists' pint of bitter

John Coyne on an all-too-familiar campus lament: managers are bad and academics know best



The Trouble with Higher Education: A Critical Examination of our Universities
By Trevor Hussey and Patrick Smith
Routledge, 168pp, £75.00 and £19.99
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In any common room or staff bar of any university, you will find the disaffected, the detached and the opinionated. Take a seat within earshot of them and transcribe the snatches of overheard conversation. After a fortnight, take your notes of those overheard snippets and gobbets, with all their idiosyncrasies, contradictions and internal inconsistencies, and shuffle them. Send them to Routledge and there you have it – *The Trouble with Higher Education*: a compilation of disjointed ideas and personal prejudices from two authors who are clearly ill at ease in the contemporary university setting.

Trevor Hussey and Patrick Smith's book claims to have a simple structure. The first seven chapters deconstruct what the authors believe to be wrong in the current higher education system, while the final five try to make suggestions to fix it. Chapter nine is their manifesto for the sector, where they spell out the characteristics they would like to see in the university system. However, the flow is somewhat disjointed and the arguments are riddled with contradictions.

Very little escapes their attention. They are as much at ease with the sweeping generalisation on the grand design as they are with their opinions on the minutest of details. Managerialism bears the brunt of their ire. Anything that smacks of organisation, prioritisation or accountability is wrong. Academics should be accountable only to themselves because they know best. Every time an academic becomes a manager or organiser of any part of the academic process, he or she swiftly changes from an intelligent, sentient being into an interfering bureaucrat who gets in the way of those engaged in the primary task of higher education – the academics.

And the authors clearly do not like modularity or any structure to the curriculum. Indeed, structure is explained as something that was somehow forced on hapless scholars by faceless bureaucrats with the connivance of the Quality Assurance Agency (which clearly would not figure in any popularity contest for the authors). And Hussey and Smith certainly do not like learning outcomes or the notion that students should have some say in their learning.

Within their objections to managerialism, their views on the depthless evil of timetabling provides in microcosm the style of their argument. They hanker for the days when lecturers could sit down in the common room at the beginning of the year to draw up a timetable without the aid of anyone other than "a central person in charge of room allocation". This was, of course, a timetable that would enable them to "organise their time to suit their individual needs and preferences", among which, of course, was the great educational advantage of ensuring that "teaching was completed before the time they must collect children from school".

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I wonder how legitimate the authors would feel it was if, next time they attempted to get home from Oxford on the train at four in the afternoon, they discovered that the train drivers had had a sit-down and organised a timetable to ensure they were all home in time for *Blue Peter*.

Any sensible timetable surely reflects an attempt to produce the most workable solution to meet the learning needs of the students. This point may seem a minor one in the overall context of the academy, but the authors' view of it is illustrative of a general underlying philosophy in their argument that universities should be run for the benefit of academic staff. And of course, anyone who is "central" just doesn't get it.

Hussey and Smith freely admit that they are not economists, but this does not prevent them offering comments on markets, commodification, students as consumers, higher education financing and the rest. However, when it comes to fixing the system, their proposals omit any concern for the economic consequences or constraints of their prescriptions.

We have always lived in a world of constraints. Universities have always had to reflect contemporary society and react to its challenges. Many of the developments and adaptations of the current system and how it has legitimately responded to embrace a wider cross-section of students does not receive sufficient respect or appreciation in this book. The economics they do engage in here, sadly, bring to mind Nick Barr's description of "pub economics": "Something that's 'obviously' right, which everybody 'knows' is right – but in fact it's wrong!"

In a volume so full of opinions, I found a number of points of agreement. The authors rightly criticise the insensitive pursuit of "learning outcomes" as opposed to a more refined and student-centred approach, and they seek to give greater credit to, and a locus for, excellent teaching. I, too, believe in the principles of a liberal education and recognise that the personal, societal and cultural benefits of higher education go beyond the utilitarian.

However, taken in the round, I found *The Trouble with Higher Education* a wholly unsatisfactory work. I certainly can't share the authors' lament that "comprehensives, academies, faith-based schools and so on...do not have the subtle links with Oxbridge that the public schools had". We have a higher education system that is not perfect, but it maintains levels of excellence that are commendable. It is a system populated by extremely gifted and able people doing extraordinary things. It is worthy of critique and we must always strive for progress – but not, I think, by using this volume as a guide.

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