

The United Kingdom Model – A Route to Avoid

Donald C. Savage

Presentation to the OCUFA Conference

Ensuring Quality and Affordability in Ontario Universities

**Friday, January 21, 2005
Toronto, Ontario**

The United Kingdom Model - a route to avoid¹

In recent years there has been a remarkable transformation of higher education in the United Kingdom. In a short period of time under Margaret Thatcher, British universities were effectively nationalized and subjected to detailed micro-management by the cabinet ministers and a centralized national bureaucracy. This was done partly by direct action by the government. The Thatcher government, for example, amended faculty contracts by legislation which abolished traditional forms of tenure. It also in the twinkling of an eye transformed all the polytechnics into universities, thereby doubling the number of the universities. It twice tried to slip wording into an education reform bill to give the bureaucracy power to question the content of courses.² Centralization was also done in the name of accountability and efficiency. There were two main accountability devices. The first was the Quality Assessment Agency or QAA. The QAA was to review every subject in every department in every faculty in the land. The second was the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) which was designed to do the same for the research of every department. Such enterprises, when run by the government, are inherently centralizing since they substitute the authority of the bureaucracy for that of the universities. The consequence was the creation of a vast and enormously expensive bureaucratic enterprise. It was ironic that this was the creation of a hard-line market-oriented Conservative government dedicated to abolishing as much of government as possible and setting the citizens free of bureaucratic rules.

My inspiration for today comes from the *New York Times* of last December in an editorial commenting on the 2,000 individual grievances filed by Alabama school teachers protesting excessive paperwork. "Once the idea of rule-based management takes hold", the editors said, "bureaucracy grows like kudzu".³

The editors might well have been thinking of the United Kingdom. "In its heyday, the" QAA, as Prof. Alison Wolf⁴ has pointed out, imposed enormous burdens of paperwork and organization on overworked staff in underfunded institutions. It did so in pursuit of outcomes that were pointless, unrealizable or both. Neither was this exactly a secret: *The Times Higher Education Supplement* did a superb job of monitoring the apparently unstoppable accretion of directives, regulations, data requirements and glosses on how points would be awarded in inspections. The (national)press carried articles showing how completely one's success in a QAA inspection depended not on delivering good teaching but on whether one was good at paperwork and

1 This paper is based on one by William Bruneau and myself, given at the John Deutsch Institute at Queen's University in February 2004. See also William Bruneau and Donald C. Savage, *Counting out the Scholars: The Case Against Performance Indicators in Higher Education*, Lorimer, Toronto, 2002.

2 Noel Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics and Geniuses*, Harper Collins, 1999, 296.

3 *New York Times*, 3 December 2004. Kudzu is an imported vine which tends to grow out of control.

4 Professor at the Institute of Education, University of London and the Institute of Management, King's College, London.

‘submissions’ - a rather telling term”⁵. The precepts and rules of the QAA now run to ten volumes⁶.

The cost was out of sight. By 2000 the QAA cost £250 million a year and the RAE £27 million. A single subject review by the QAA cost between £40,000 and £200,000. When the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) commissioned an outside report on costs, the consultants included a dramatic picture of the wall of paperwork required for a single subject review at the University of Leeds.⁷ These funds did not purchase the hiring of a single professor, the creation of a single scholarship, or the purchase of a single computer.

The RAE suffered from other problems besides costs; the rules changed constantly. For instance, in August 2003, the HEFCE changed the rules thereby retrospectively doubling the number of six star departments⁸. Nothing could more clearly demonstrate who was in charge. The government hoped that the RAE would result in a concentration of scientific and engineering research at Oxford, Cambridge, and London which it thought would be more cost-effective. Such subterfuges bred cynicism since the RAE was supposed to measure quality, not serve political goals. It would have been better to announce such a policy of centralization up front and then debate its merits⁹.

In order to reach the government’s targets,¹⁰ the British relied on some standard indicators, particularly numbers enrolled and graduation rates with the results one might expect. At Luton University in the UK, there are “New rules to allow students to study ‘without fear of failure’” allowing them “to fail a greater number of first-year courses and be able to continue studying without needing to take re-sits...,” and giving “students the opportunity to learn how to manage their learning without fear of failure from temporary lapses of concentration” (this last quotation from the minutes of the Academic Board).¹¹ All this, of course, means Luton can meet its PIs in regard to dropouts and completions in fixed times. The Vice-Chancellor said in response to charges of dumbing-down that the regulations were merely being “adjusted in line with best practice across the sector.” He pointed out that Luton scored 14th of 121 in the *Times* league table for the quality of teaching. Perhaps Luton is a bit more honest than the rest. Sir Richard Sykes, Rector of Imperial College, London, described Luton as third-rate and the direct result of the government’s bums on seats policy.¹² At the University of Middlesex the administration set a maximum failure rate per course, reminding faculty of how financially valuable each student was in terms of government funding. The university also abolished exams for first-year students. At Sunderland the administration decided that 20% plagiarism in a paper should be tolerated and

5 *THES*, 30 May 2003.

6 *Ibid.*, 16 July 2004.

7 PA Consulting Group 2000, *Better accountability for higher education* (London: HEFC, United Kingdom, 2000); Phil Batty, “Millions go down the drain in audit fiasco,” *THES*, 2000 August 4.

8 “Rethink doubles 6* winners”, *THES*, 15 Aug 2003.

9 *Ibid.*, 15 Aug 2003.

10 The government expects that by 2008 50% of all those between 18 and 30 will either be in higher education or have had experience of it.

11 *THES*, 2003 December 12.

12 *Ibid.*, 29 Oct 2004.

should not result in a failure.¹³ “ Some university administrations obviously feared that if they held to their degree standards, they were likely to face a rush of costly dropouts’.¹⁴ At Bournemouth University, the head of Design, Engineering and Computing said that his staff was to find one or two extra marks for students just below the pass threshold and pointed out that each student brought £4, 500 for the department¹⁵.

The Times Higher Education Supplement reported in November the results of a survey of 400 UK academics in which 48% said that they had passed students whose performance did not merit a pass, 42% said that decisions to fail student had been overruled by higher authority, 20% turned a blind eye to plagiarism¹⁶.

This system of PIs went full tilt throughout the late eighties and nineties. It is remarkable that British universities tolerated it for so long. Eventually some of the more famous among them rebelled led by the London School of Economics, and it looked as if the house of cards might collapse. The Blair government gradually acknowledged the accountability burden, particularly through the Better Regulation Task Force. It began to dismantle the centralized universal assessment structure, notably the QAA although *The Times Higher Education Supplement* has speculated that the government is thinking of replacing the regulatory structure with government-appointed inspectors, perhaps the same structure as exists for the primary and secondary schools¹⁷ which would give the government total control of the curriculum of the universities.

The government moved to restructure the QAA so as to impose a “lighter touch” in its reviews, and possibly in the future to devolve assessment to the universities themselves. It also came to realize that high-quality faculty were necessary for the well-being of the country. Treating them as the enemy was unlikely to be productive. In addition the market has also been a significant force. As large numbers of faculty retire as early as possible because of the life of grunge and fewer want to take their places for the same reason, the government finds it more and more difficult to meet its announced policy of greatly increased accessibility. One of the costs of all this is stress-related sickness. The university employers association recognizes this and urges its members to put in place effective policies to deal with this problem¹⁸.

But never underestimate the staying power of the quality audit bureaucracy. The “light touch” is beginning to look just as bureaucratic as its predecessor and just as given to meaningless jargon. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has recently announced that all funding by the research councils will be subject to a new regime of performance indicators to make sure that the Treasury is getting value for money and that all research contributes to the GNP. These PIs will be on top of the RAE¹⁹. It is called the Performance Management Delivery System. This is on top of yet another agency created by the Labour government - an agency to monitor the

13 “Plagiarism edict slated”, *ibid.*, 20 Aug 2004

14 *Loc.cit.*

15 *Ibid.*, 6 Aug 2004.

16 *THES*, 19 Nov 2004.

17 *THES*, 16 July 2004.

18 “Cracks in the ivory towers”, *The Guardian*, 16 Nov 2004.

19 ‘Fury over Treasury research meddling’, *THES*, 12 Nov 2004.

accessibility of universities²⁰ and to make their ability to charge the new fees permitted by the government conditional on meeting the performance indicators of the office of Fair Access (OFFA). OFFA has the legal power to fine universities up to £500,000 for non-compliance. Its head Sir Martin Harris, says that he doubts that such powers would be used. Initially it was thought these powers would be used to force the universities to enrol more working-class students. But, in a confusing move, the Secretary announced that universities would certainly be fined if they took in more students than their quota in the hope of getting increased funds. There is also talk that the universities will be subject to the Learning and Skills Council which has a reputation of being even more bureaucratic than the QAA. As a lecturer recently suggested to *THES*, what students want to know from their prospective department is “what will I learn; how will I learn it; how am I examined; and what career prospects are there for me.”²¹ Besides, how much it will cost? It should not be impossible to set these things out in clear English on a departmental web site without the benefit of quality auditors.

The visitor from Mars might think that this vast apparatus was created because British universities were seriously corrupt. On the contrary. The HEFCE reports on fraudulent matters and keeps a web site for whistle-blowers. It concluded in its most recent report that such financial matters were trivial and usually involved fraudulent cheques of minor amounts²². Besides, British universities had over many years put in place a system of external examiners to ensure the quality of graduates, although “marketisation” of British higher education overseas has led to some academic scandals in foreign countries²³. In contrast, when central government set up a much-trumpeted system of Individual Learner Accounts in 2001, whereby students could purchase courses from the private sector or from higher education colleges, the scheme collapsed in a cloud of allegations about corruption having spent £60 million above its two-year budget of £202 million.²⁴ The government’s attempt to set up an electronic university to compete with existing institutions was equally financially disastrous²⁵ at a cost of £62 million²⁶.

Bureaucratic proliferation coincided with a dramatic decline in the support of higher education. The central government began to cut the funds in the early eighties while student numbers were increasing significantly. The unit of resource (student fees plus government grants) fell from an index of 100 in 1970 to 40 in 1990 - a triumph of efficiency in the minds of the Thatcherites. Building grants and other supports were axed. The consequences for the faculty were clear. Between 1980 and 1990 the United Kingdom was the only country in the European Union with real negative growth in university salaries. There has also been a dramatic increase in the use of casual academic labour. Other results were quite predictable. Expensive subjects such as chemistry, physics, Asian studies and modern languages were axed in university after university,

20 *THES*, 12 Nov 2004.

21 Todd Landmann, “Get out your module maps, it’s time for a light-touch look at those underlying concepts and learning outcomes,” *THES*, 2003 January 31.

22 *THES*, 2003 January 24.

23 *THES*, 2003, June 18. Most non-financial complaints in the UK involved the abuse of administrative power.

24 *THES*, 2002 December 21, 28.

25 *Ibid.*, 9, 16, May 2003, 22 July 2004. The administrators paid themselves handsome bonuses. The House of Commons Select Committee was not impressed.

26 *THES*, 9 May 2003.

so much so that there was real fear, for example, that chemistry would disappear as a university subject²⁷. Twenty-eight universities have closed their undergraduate teaching of chemistry in the last nine years. Sir Harry Kroto, 1986 Nobel-prize winner in chemistry returned his honorary degree to the University of Exeter when it closed its chemistry department. “It was”, he said “an honour from a university that at the time recognised that chemistry was one of the major subjects that all universities that can call themselves universities must have, and have a strong science faculty.”²⁸ Similar fears have been expressed about the possible death of physics where ten departments have closed in the past decade.²⁹ Another subject in serious decline is mathematics where Hull has been the most recent casualty. On another front, the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies lamented the crisis facing Islamic and Middle Eastern studies³⁰. How many physics, math and chemistry departments could have been saved with the money wasted on the Individual Learner Accounts scheme and on the aborted electronic university?

The Thatcherite ideologues also claimed they favoured the highest possible academic standards. Various events showed the hollowness of that claim. In 2001 Bradford University, as part of its business plan, closed its European Studies program even though it was the only one in the university to receive the top rank in the RAE exercise. Nothing could more clearly indicate that bums on seats and pounds in research grants were more important than quality. In 2002 Birmingham University closed its Cultural Studies program even though it received the highest marks for its teaching.³¹ The University of Gloucester closed its religion department, lauded by *The Times* as the best in the new universities to make way for more popular subjects such as photo-journalism. The Archbishop of Canterbury joined the protesters - to no avail.

The Director of the University Centre for Russian, Eurasian and Central European Studies at Leeds suggested that the new British model more and more looked like the old Soviet command economy:

Our activities take place within a rigid hierarchy that runs up through the head of the department to the school, faculty, the university as a whole, and thence to the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the functional equivalent of Gosplan, the high command of the Soviet planning system...Our task is not to generate high quality of learning and teaching but to satisfy the current demands of the inspection system, which means producing a Potemkin village, paint scarcely dry on the walls, for the week of inspection by the Quality Assurance Agency.³²

²⁷ *Ibid.*, “Half of UK chemistry may shut after RAE, *Ibid.*, 11 June 2004; see web site Royal Society of Chemistry.

²⁸ *The Guardian*, 30 Nov 2004. Exeter also gave warnings to computer science, pure math, statistics, operational research, and engineering and closed mining engineering, and music. The Vice-Chancellor said: “It’s not taking money out of science, it’s about refocusing.”

²⁹ For more information, see the web site of the UK Institute of Physics and a report on physics by a blue-ribbon committee headed by Sir Peter Williams.

³⁰ *THES*, 20 Aug 2004.

³¹ *THES*, 2001 Dec. 21, 28; 2002 July 26.

³² *THES*, 2001 March 2.

Even Margaret Thatcher had second thoughts. According to her biographer, she said she never intended to create a centralized university system beholden to the Treasury, thus threatening the autonomy and integrity of the universities and leading many academics to think of Thatcherism as philistinism incarnate³³.

The Tories had no monopoly on philistinism. Mr. Clarke, then the Labour Secretary for Education, said: “I don’t mind there being some mediaevalists around for ornamental purposes, but there is no reason for the state to pay for them. He also said he would be sad if philosophy died out but not if the study of ancient civilisations did³⁴. The government is now considering a new bureaucratic structure to deal with the problem of disappearing science departments. Lord May, President of the Royal Society, said of this: “We are moving from a light-touch system to a bureaucratically rigid system with silly goals. Government officials making judgements about what we do and do not need is lunacy.”³⁵ The Minister, of course, has his own list headed by vocationally related subjects but including some minority languages and the study of eastern Europe. The Funding Council, after some ritual protests about being told by the Minister what it should do, nevertheless let it be known to the media that it would look favourably on saving some vocationally oriented subjects such as media studies but that this would probably not include, to the joy of hard-nosed market economists, economics or education³⁶.

There was a Faustian bargain at the base of all this. The vice-chancellors were quite prepared to accept the abolition of traditional tenure arrangements by the Thatcher government despite the obvious intervention into university autonomy in return for no serious public opposition to the regulatory regime. This tenure change allowed them to hire larger and larger numbers of short-term contract academic labour with low salaries and few benefits. Some were keen to embrace the market rhetoric of the moment and saw themselves as CEOs comparable to the private sector and wished to run their university in the manner of a private business - much encouraged by the Labour government. This could and did lead to enthusiasm for the latest business fads. At University College Swansea the management announced to the academic staff that it had decided to institute a quality ethos which would be “top-down driven” whereby quality would “cascade down” to all employees- the academic version of trickle-down economics.³⁷

I should add that exactly the same type of centralization is occurring in New Zealand, another country which Mr. Rae thinks we should emulate. There the Labour government has revived a tactic of the previous conservative or National Party government. It is now claiming an “ownership interest” or “controlling interest” in every university which would give the State Services Minister control of the line budgets and the right to inquire into academic matters in

33 Simon Jenkins, “A bewildered tribe”, *THES*, 2001, Oct.19.

34 *Ibid.*, 9 May 2003.

35 *THES*, 16 July 2004.

36 *Ibid.*, 3 Dec 2004.

37 For UCS, see Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson, *The New Idea of a University*, Imprint Academic, UK, 2002, pp. 104-05. For the march of folly in this regard, see Robert Birnbaum, *Management Fads in Higher Education: Where They Come From, What They Do, Why They Fail*, Jossey-Bass, USA, 2000.

each university³⁸. The New Zealand vice-chancellors spoke of this as part of the “consistent attempt of ...(the Labour government) to erode the autonomy of universities”. The previous National Party government had only claimed that the Minister was the sole shareholder in the university enterprise and thus could, among other things, dismiss and appoint members of the boards of governors of all the universities at will and would make the universities subject to detailed ministerial directives.

The Rae Task Force notes that quality measurement in Ontario has been historically left to the universities themselves either individually or in collaboration. The Task Force, however, seems tempted in the direction of recommending a quality assurance framework similar to that in the United Kingdom - “an accountability and performance measurement framework”. It makes a point of noting its absence in Ontario. I hope that OCUFA and COU will fight any such development tooth and nail. One of the notable features of the debacle in the United Kingdom over the QAA was the failure of the vice-chancellors to speak out. This timidity cost their institutions seriously. The system only began to crumble when the Academic Board at LSE simply instructed the Director to disengage from the whole QAA system. One hopes that faculty and administrators in Ontario would be united in opposing any attempt to import the UK model and that university senates would be as forthright as the Academic Board at LSE.

Ontario faculty and administrators should realize that the UK model inevitably means that all real power will shift to the Minister and that the bureaucracy in the Department of Education will provide the coordination and governance of the higher education system. The educational bureaucracy invariably thinks it can manage the universities in detail better than the universities can manage themselves.

Not the route to follow!

Donald C. Savage
21 January 2005

³⁸ *Public Service (State Sector Management Bill)*. See *AUSNZ, Tertiary Update*, 7,46 (9 Dec 2004); NZVCC, “Universities Refute Accountability Assertion”, 2 Dec 2004, NZVCC website.