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# Defending universities

**Kim Thomas reports from the CDBU AGM**

'British universities - what's worth defending?' This was the provocative title of a speech that Mary Curnock Cook, former chief executive of UCAS, delivered to the annual general meeting of the Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU) earlier this year. It was a speech designed to challenge the audience's views of what universities are for and why we need them - and it resulted in a lively and often impassioned debate.

The AGM was held on a cold January day at the Athenaeum - the historical Pall Mall club founded as a meeting place for those who enjoy the life of the mind. Its membership past and present includes 52 Nobel Prize winners, and today most of its members are from professional backgrounds, such as law, academia and the civil service.

It was a fitting venue for an organisation that is all about defending values of academic freedom and resisting government pressure towards turning universities into businesses and students into consumers. The CDBU was founded in 2012 to resist the creeping marketisation of universities, in particular the proposed government reforms that eventually became law with the passing of the Higher Education and Research Act (2017). Its impressive list of 66 founding members include the historian Keith Thomas, biographer Claire Tomalin, and broadcaster Melvyn Bragg, as well as a number of fellows of the Royal Society.

These are hard times in which to be an academic. The attack on pensions, the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that will categorise individual courses as gold, silver or bronze, and the lack of job security as universities make greater use of staff on short-term contracts to teach a rapidly-growing student body, have led to increasing feelings of discontent. Academics, research shows, are more likely to suffer from mental health problems than other professionals.

This is the context in which Curnock Cook addressed the meeting. She was, she freely admitted, a 'self-confessed marketing animal' who had been asked to 'beard the lion in his den'. The CDBU, she added, 'sets its stall against managerialism, consumerism and outside

interference in universities'. She went on: 'Arguably I'm professionally guilty on the first two and, depending on your view of UCAS, stand here with a bit of previous on the third'.

On the other hand, Curnock Cook added: 'You'd be hard pressed to find a more active proponent of higher education than me'. Coming late to higher education herself - she left school at 16 and didn't attend university until her 40s, when she took a Master's at the London Business School - she said she was sympathetic to the criticism that academics were more concerned with research than teaching. Instead of complaining about the 'imperfections' of the TEF, she argued, universities should be 'shifting more of their intellectual muscle towards finding ways to improve and assess the efficacy of teaching'.

While at UCAS, she went on, she noticed a shift in the attitudes of students: applicants were consciously choosing courses 'with a clear link to a career'. At the same time she saw students starting to question the value they were getting for their higher fees. The new cohorts 'openly complained about lack of contact hours, lack of detail about assessments, and long turnaround times for feedback on their work'.

Students' increased expectations were less to do with the new funding regime, she argued, and more to do with the fact that nearly half of young people now go to university. This meant, she said, that higher education commanded much more public scrutiny. While CDBU members might see universities 'primarily as places for research and the creation of new knowledge', students were more likely to see them as places of teaching and learning. It was inevitable, therefore, that universities would be subjected to increased oversight, with demands for more detailed data about 'students, staff, drop-out rates, widening participation and access, success rates, career destinations and so on'. Grade inflation would also have to be dealt with, as it had been in GCSEs and A-levels.

If universities wanted to halt the negative press dogging the sector, Curnock Cook argued, they should recognise that 'universities are about

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students, first and foremost'. If higher education was to avoid the increased regulation and intervention experienced by the schools sector, universities would have to address the expectations and accountability that come with mass participation and public funding: 'The best way to defend universities is to defend higher education and to be really, really good at educating students'.

Universities needed to address issues that were important to their customers - the students. 'It would be a tragedy', she went on, 'if universities squandered their ability to shape the intellectual and social future of our nation by giving ground to the newer for-profit body shops envisaged by the Higher Education and Research Act. These new organisations may be providers of higher education, but they are not, in my view, universities'.

In a spirited response, CDBU executive committee member Dorothy Bishop, professor of developmental neuropsychology at the University of Oxford, told Curnock Cook: 'You're labouring under a terrific misapprehension if you think that people in this room don't care about students'. She went on to point out that academics are defenders of the student interest and that, even as a full-time researcher, she voluntarily taught students for the pleasure of it. The TEF, however, was a 'complete aberration which offends me by its attempt to measure something in a way that is completely inappropriate'. Academics had been put under pressure by university management to focus on research through the Research Excellence Framework (REF), because a good REF score meant the university would receive more money from government.

Once the debate was opened to the floor, the wide-ranging comments and questions covered grade inflation, the decline in part-time and mature student numbers, student finance, drop-out rates and access. One audience member pointed out that a lack of focus on teaching, and a trend towards grade inflation, was driven by vice-chancellors not academics: 'When it comes to honouring teaching, if you look at promotion criteria, grant capture has become a criterion. Quality of teaching is never a criterion. Academics didn't think that up. It's vice-chancellors who thought that up. We've created a managerial class that is not remotely in touch with the way ordinary academics are thinking . . . I have yet to meet a vice-chancellor who says, "What we really want to do is enhance the quality of our teaching"'.

Another audience member pointed to the flaws in a system of metrics that assumes 'a natural hierarchy of good via mediocre to bad, and that everything lines up in a neat line'. Instead, he argued, we should be defending 'the diversity and

the differences in education and the richness of the education that is received'.

The problem of student hardship and the abolition of maintenance grants was also raised. One member noted the higher drop-out rates at her university amongst working-class undergraduates, with Curnock Cook agreeing that the current system of finance placed particular pressure on less well-off students.

It became clear that there was a large degree of overlap between speaker and audience, with Curnock Cook taking the pragmatic view that universities had to 'get on the front foot and produce their own evidence about teaching excellence' as a way of preserving the autonomy of universities. 'I can't think of a better group than the academy to solve these problems', she said, concluding with a warning: 'Solve them, because if you don't, you're going to get regulated by the Office for Students'.

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