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Calling Academia to Account

Rights and
Responsibilities

G. R. Evans

Calling Academia to Account

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G.R. Evans

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Preface

Higher education is about to come face to face for the first time with what openness really means. The Public Interest Disclosure Act has received the Royal Assent as this book goes to the printers in the autumn of 1998. In the months while it has been in production many of the cases on which it has been based have moved towards their happy or unhappy conclusions, some in the full light of media coverage. A number of fresh public policy issues arising from the exposure of what has been happening in universities have also entered the public domain. These have raised profound questions about both the ethics and the pragmatics of confidentiality for universities as they set up codes of conduct for dealing with whistleblowing, and for members of their academic staff as they debate with themselves whether and how to raise concerns.

The whistleblower is not always a hero. Sometimes he is a damn nuisance. But he should never become a victim as a result of conscientious raising of substantive concerns. Universities should be as fearless in accepting challenge about their conduct of their affairs as it is the duty of scholars to be in teaching and research.

The Committee on Standards in Public Life in its *Second Report* called for a change of climate and public expectation. Transparency and accountability are shining words but it is painful to have muddled attempts to deal with day-to-day problems exposed even internally, let alone in the newspapers. Those running universities and academics working within them need to find the courage to be honest and to publish what they learn from rigorous examination when something goes wrong. They can only benefit in the end from thinking big about what is at stake beyond the immediate interests of individual institutions and their officers. Only in that way perhaps can they inhabit the wider world of intellectual endeavour in which I have tried to set this study and in which scholars in every century have felt at home. It has proved durable.

Abbreviations

AUT	Association of University Teachers
BBSRC	Biology and Biological Sciences Research Council
CAFAS	Council for Academic Freedom and Academic Standards
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
CVCP	Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
MRC	Medical Research Council
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Council
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
UGC	University Grants Commission

Introduction

During the 1990s in the UK two national committees have met and reported: the Nolan Committee (the Committee on Standards in Public Life) published its *Second Report* in 1996 and the Dearing Committee its own *Report* in 1997. Both Committees had a concern for the future governance of higher education, and both looked at the matter in the context of the wider public scene, considering universities and their connected colleges and institutes engaged in higher education partly or largely in terms of their place in public life.

This approach was timely. It helped to focus attention on problems with patterns of governance which were calling into question the very purpose of universities. This was not mere grumbling in the common room. Sir Richard Scott, reflecting on his experiences while conducting the Scott Inquiry, commented, 'I learned of the tenacity with which officialdom can strive to avoid publicity for manifest mis-management.'¹

In *Ex parte Forster re University of Sydney* the court put faith in: 'the good sense and wisdom of the Senate acting as a responsible body charged with an important public function, exposed to public criticism, and subject to the measure of public control'.² That does not allow for a situation where good sense and wisdom desert decision-makers who are not, in practice, easily thus accountable in the public arena. It is not even clear that there are the same duties of fairness in domestic decisions as in public ones. The problem is not lack of goodwill, lack of good intentions (as a rule) or lack of structures. Instead, there is a gap between the platform and the train, through which individuals can fall to their destruction when mistakes are made, and an institution's officers seek to cover those up or to justify their actions.

Thus, numerous complaints and disputes are arising as a result of failures of fairness under the internal rules of universities. The question where, or even whether, there is jurisdiction to deal with them is urgent. In the UK, the Education Reform Act 1988 and the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 have moved the boundaries between public and private as they relate

to universities, and have brought about changes in the legal status of universities and in their powers to run their own affairs, thus creating a minefield in the arena of accountability, 'legally speaking'.³

It is time for some stocktaking. No one, especially post-Nolan, has much trouble with the general idea that transparency and accountability are good things. However, it is by no means easy to say what that means in practice. To love such shining ideas is not a guarantee of willingness to hand over the papers or explain a decision when it is challenged.

The interest in trying to write such a book at the present time lies not only in the intrinsic importance of getting right a system of higher education within which the best minds can do their best work. The 'embarrassment potential' of the Scott Inquiry was not realized; his report is a devastating indictment, but the practices it condemns are not noticeably changed by it. Public consciousness also needs to be kept alert if that is to change. The price of freedom continues to be eternal vigilance.

The training of minds is, perhaps, the supreme distinctive task of universities. In the 'old' universities there was a culture which took it for granted that whatever happened in a university happened also in the wider community of scholarship, and that was where it ultimately mattered. It will be a main theme of this study that universities ought still, consciously, to set a duty to the universal community of scholarship over against their duty to themselves; that they ought, indeed, to understand their duty to themselves in that wider manner. It will be taken as an implication of that duty that they ought to treat those who teach and do original work in their employ 'collegially', as 'peers'.

In UK law, the freedom of speech of academic staff enjoys a special protection under the Education Reform Act 1988, in recognition that it is inseparable from their doing their job properly. Universities are unique in the kind of person who works in them, for the outcomes of education are unpredictable. To train a human mind to a high level of sophistication and competence in thinking, to show its owner where to go to find things out, to make it a sharp tool, is to let something loose in the world which it may subsequently be difficult to control. Academics have a professional responsibility to use their intellectual tools, and a further duty to create more such tools in the minds of the students they teach. Thus, inherent conflicts of interest are set up within universities and between universities and the wider world where independence meets control.

Moreover, one person's freedom to speak may be another person's incitement to racial hatred. With rights go responsibilities, and such correlation creates tensions central to the concerns of this book, for responsibility is also accountability.

This book is about calling to account. Much of the recent reflection on accountability has been concerned with accountability upwards, and especially to those who hold purse-strings. However, it is equally, if not more, important to ensure that persons in positions of authority are accountable to those over whom they have powers, that there are means by which the

weak in any organizational structure can be protected, and that the general good is looked after when someone gives the wrong steer: 'It is not discreditable to get it wrong. What is discreditable is a reluctance to explain fully what has occurred and why.'⁴

Authorities whose decisions are challenged . . . should have a common interest with the courts in ensuring that the highest standards of administration are maintained and that, if error has occurred, it should be corrected . . . When challenged they should set out fully what they did and why, so far as is necessary, fully and fairly to meet the challenge.⁵

Accountability need not, in principle, be always upwards. Indeed, it ought to be downwards too, or there will be no satisfactory check on the use of powers. But if it is to be argued that those in authority ought to be accountable to those *over* whom they exercise authority, that will have to be on a different basis, because they may have no reward they can withhold, no sanction to bring to bear.

In its recognition that a gap exists in the provision of remedies, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, in its *Second Report* (1996) places the problem squarely in frame: 'It is no longer sufficient for public bodies to take good decisions. They must be seen to do so, and be prepared to let an independent person or body review their activities if necessary.'⁶

There can be no accountability where mistakes and misbehaviours can be hidden, so this book is also about transparency: 'Just as the judges of the inferior courts when challenged on the exercise of their jurisdiction traditionally explain fully what they have done and why they have done it, but are not partisan in their own defence, so should be the public authorities.'⁷

The bodies with which we shall be chiefly concerned are the universities, but the lessons are of much wider application. The ordinary human failings of people in charge of decision-making in any context can run out of hand where the natural checks upon them are removed. The broader balancing mechanisms in a system can fail to operate or disappear altogether where there is in practice nothing to stop bureaucratic covering-up of mistakes. Even such checks as exist in principle may prove ineffective where management structures make it difficult for individuals to criticize or make suggestions for change without placing themselves in professional jeopardy.

This book is not comfortable reading. Something of the first importance is at stake, not only in catching up before they go beyond recall some of the problems which are running away with the future of higher education, but also in keeping in being something old and deep and necessary to the best in human endeavour of which the present-day university student is lucky to get a glimpse. The encounter with minds engaged in a lifetime's purposeful inquiry marks the apprentice to learning for life. This inwardness is hard to see where all that a university does is placed face up for inspection by visible measures which do not look below the surface. So it is the central paradox of this study that those engaged in the running of higher education must be accountable precisely so that those engaged in the teaching and research

which are its real 'business' may be in some measure unaccountable or, at least, accountable only to the truth and the verdict of history.

This is not, by any means, a study solely of the British scene. One must, however, begin from what one knows, and I shall take that arena as the source of many of my illustrations of the internal economy of the problems with which this book is concerned. I hope the universality of many of them will be apparent to readers struggling with them elsewhere in the world.

Part 1

Calling to Account in the Wider World

Introduction

What do universities owe by way of accountability to the wider world which is their setting? Much depends on how wide their field of work, their influence and their impact is deemed to be. A good deal of what the British Government-commissioned *Dearing Report* of 1997 has to say about accountability and responsiveness to 'external constituencies' assumes that a university is a local institution meeting local needs. In the case of the leading universities of the world, the 'relevant constituency' must include the world (15.53). That the Dearing Committee's remit was specifically restricted to the interests of the UK was an important limitation, because it discouraged the Committee from looking at the broader international, or even the European, dimensions. It turned overseas students into a source of fee income. This is in contrast to the generosity of the assumption of Shirley Williams, 20 years earlier, that Britain should welcome overseas students not for its good but for theirs. In 1978–9 there were 50,000 overseas students in the UK. At that date, the natural question to ask was whether 'the very substantial resources that are spent on overseas students . . . are spent in a way that reaches the students most in need and the countries most in need'.¹ In other words, whether Britain was serving an international need as well as it could.

There is, however, an altogether different way of understanding 'wider world', and that is to look at what academics and universities do which is of enduring, and not necessarily financial or practical, value or use. There are high themes here; themes of contribution to the human endeavour and the moving forward of the boundaries of knowledge. These things are not consistently valued at the same level over time. Twenty or 30 years ago active researchers were often hired by universities for their scholarly standing and then expected to turn almost entirely to teaching and administration, with research coming third as a 'selfish' activity. The advent of funding by research profile in UK universities has meant that the climate of expectation has

changed and active researchers have become heroes not villains. At the same time a premium is placed by governments on research with applicable outcomes. The deep purposes are easily lost sight of in such discussions on the allocation of funding. That does not mean they go away. They provide the inner drive for the labours of academics and the work of universities. However, account needs to be rendered for them, too, because unbridled inner drives to learn can lead to the making of dangerous and damaging discoveries.

In this part of the book I shall take first the inward realities, the values and inner purposes and assumptions of academic research and scholarship; and second, the issues which arise about accountability for investment to fund that work, the 'games' which can be played in the process of giving it and withholding money. It is important that these games are recognized for what they are and that everyone can see them being played. Otherwise there is no control over 'fixing' things.

1

Values and the World of Scholarship

The sharing of knowledge

One way of sharing knowledge is by teaching it to others. Another is through meeting and talking with fellow students and scholars, for example, by 'giving papers' at conferences. Another is by publishing books. Even if the originator of the ideas or the discoveries thus shared keeps the credit, this is an act of openness. The modern scholarly scene is international in this respect, and that was also true in the geographically smaller world of the mediaeval universities of Europe. What is important about this characteristic of scholarship is not the scale or distance of the exchange but its generosity. One gives account of one's work by communicating it.

In the ancient world, learning already involved a shared search, though the emphasis tended to be on the intimate personal exchanges of friends. Cicero's *Academica* is set in a country house at Cumae. Varro arrives, and the assembled friends excitedly want him to join them at once if he is not too tired after his journey.¹ Their reason is a strong sense of fellow-feeling; he is 'joined' with them in common study, which has become the foundation of friendship.² Augustine's *Cassiciacum* treatises, also placed in a setting of 'philosophical retirement' in a country house, are dialogues, recording a sustained inquiry made by a group of friends meeting in an informal seminar over a period of time, so that they can explore an intellectual problem together. In the early twelfth century, Gilbert Crispin, the scholarly Abbot of Westminster, tells of a philosophical club he used to attend. This does not mean there was not also rivalry (from the earliest period), and jealousy, and the other negative counterparts of a sense that the getting of knowledge is a shared endeavour. Still, it is plain what the common ideal was, and that it had to do with a pooling or trading or exchange of knowledge.

There must also be, inescapably, a sense of having a 'common cause' with those who have worked on a subject before.³ It is no more logical for scholars to seek to keep the results of their inquiries from their contemporaries than it would be for them to destroy all the outcomes of their work

on their deathbeds.⁴ The modern sciences still build on earlier discoveries, or challenge received assumptions which are there to be challenged only because they are taken from previous work.

There has been recent reflection on the argument that there exists a veritable 'moral obligation to convey the results of research to others, that there is an imperative of communicating that corresponds to the indicative of knowing'. 'Both the results of university research and the data on which it is based should be public',⁵ insists Jaroslav Pelikan.

This is a statement about accountability. It is not a new idea, but as we shall see, it is an increasingly thorny area in modern scientific research. Yet, arguably, the principle ought not to be different, just because financial or commercial interests are involved, from that which governs the sharing of, for example, knowledge about recipes for Byzantine 'porridge' in mediaeval Greek studies.

The conscious sense of a continuity of endeavour in a continuing community of scholarship which marks the first universities of the Middle Ages, was made possible by the continued use of books written in the Greek and Roman world. They were read as textbooks or as the subject of study in lectures, or as the starting point for disputations, but above all as 'authorities' (*auctoritates*). Their authors were seen as giants on whose shoulders later scholars stood like dwarfs.⁶ In this way, an encounter of minds continued over time as well as between contemporaries. Once printing was invented that went on in a manner less precarious as to the transmission, but with a changing and less solid respect for past authorities. It began to become possible to see them as merely fellow scholars from another age.⁷

That was, perhaps, a healthy change. A community of scholarship requires mutual respect, mutual freedom of speech and even some fear of being challenged by other scholars' opinions. And that depends upon an assumption of equality. It is essential for a scholar to be prepared to say, 'my opinion is as good as yours'.

The lesson of the past is that a university or the individual scholar has stewardship, rather than ownership, in the community of 'shared' knowledge. The stewardship is not, either at institutional or at individual level, merely a function of custodianship. It is a trust, and the current holders ought to seek to hand it on intact and with interest.

The desire for learning

Cicero asks himself why he is writing his book on 'the nature of the gods' now. He makes a list of reasons. He has the time (*otium*). Reading books and writing about problems have cheered him at a difficult time in his life.⁸ The public interest requires it. An autocratic government is holding sway, and in such circumstances he thinks it his duty (*ad decus et ad laudem civitatis*) for the good of the community to help make philosophical ideas available in Greek also accessible in Latin.⁹ Experience suggests he is being proved

right. Others are being stimulated to study and to write. These last two factors are connected in his mind with the duty to share knowledge, and also with its innately universal character.

In Cicero's mixed list of motivations a scholar of any century would find things to recognize. There is an inner drive and an inner satisfaction. There is an inhabiting of a mental space in which there is room to walk about and stretch the intellectual legs. There is a sense of contributing to the totality of the human endeavour. A modern scholar, too, might see coming out of his work benefits for himself and the public good, and an enlargement of the sphere of knowledge. Yet, he does it not solely for those reasons, but because he 'has to'; curiosity drives him on much more strongly than the carrot of promised rewards. For what other reason will a subject area first explored by new graduates in their early 20s still have the same men and women working on it eagerly in their 80s, when professional achievement has gone as far as it is going to?

There ought, also, to be an element of risk-taking. The door, says Augustine, is set wide open, so wide that it may let in error, or changes of opinion on the way, although the seeker is looking for solid ground.¹⁰ This is a means of differentiating the serious seeker after knowledge from the 'hobbyist' enthusiast who, perhaps chiefly, seeks to add to his own knowledge about the subject and not to challenge – indeed precisely not to challenge, since the instinct at play is different. A 'Jane Austen' society (to take an example) would perhaps enjoy or celebrate the novelist's work rather than criticize it. Interest in a subject does not, in itself, make a scholar. On the foundations of true scholarship can be built something more rigorous, and perhaps specific to a given discipline, involving conviction that it matters to extend knowledge about something even if the extension of knowledge has no perceptible application at any foreseeable time.

Teaching and research: the adult community

The *Dearing Report* assumed that there are generic skills which can be isolated and taught not in the process of teaching something else, but as skills in their own right. Accordingly, the *Report* recommends (R 31) that post-graduate training shall include 'in addition to understanding of a range of research methods and training in appropriate technical skills, the development of professional skills, such as communication, self-management and planning'.

None of this necessarily assists the development of scholarly habits, such as the persistence in an inquiry which may make it necessary to throw planning out of the window while a 'trail' is followed; or the ability so far to lose oneself in the work that one forgets to buy food for supper or to collect one's dry-cleaning.

In higher education 'the teacher's authority has to be won and cannot be presumed'.¹¹ Does the university have to meet the expectations of students

where they are, or is the idea that the students grow to fit the expectations the university has of them? Scholarship involves an independence of mind which starts things and persists with them even where no one else prompts. These are attributes of the adult mind, and it is of the essence of the university that it teaches adults.

The philosophy and rhetoric teachers of the ancient world rehearsed young men getting an education in things of the mind which were deemed a necessary preparation for the affairs of the world. The teacher–pupil relationship of advanced study has usually been between adults, even if between adults of greatly differing ages and levels of knowledge. That the teaching and learning involves adults remains a distinctive feature of ‘higher’ education. ‘A university is a body of *mature* scholars and scientists’ [my italics],¹² said Thorstein Veblen at the beginning of the twentieth century, and that very maturity, that adulthood, provides the natural meeting place of teaching and research.

That is something which may be difficult to remember in the real world of a late twentieth-century ‘new university’, where a lecturer may face 100 students, some with poor entrance qualifications, where the department in which he teaches is rated low for research, and where even the keenest would-be scholar has little time for his own work. Struggling to keep alive a sense of purpose in that world, a lecturer might see what has just been said as idealistic to the point of romanticism. I ask him to bear with me. This is important.

In an environment where learning has room to move, scholars reach a stage where they teach themselves, or learn from one another and no longer stand in a subordinate relationship to their supervisors or their seniors in age. As a young don in early nineteenth-century Oxford, Newman set about reading his way into the Arian controversy of the fourth century and writing a book about it. He would have been put down as an ‘active researcher’ in twentieth-century Oxford. He had to find his own way and devise his own methods. He took for granted the place of self-education within a university.¹³

Such a presumption of intellectual equality has implications for the kind of teaching a university ought to do and the attitude it ought to seek to evoke in its students, even if they are not, and do not wish to be, prospective research students. It should treat them not as dependants but as intellectual equals who happen to be beginners. The ‘mentor’ model, having its vogue in the 1990s, has its dangers if it creates leaders and followers and ‘schools’ of thought. It also tends to foster a tension between the purposes of teaching and the purposes of research to which one author points in alarm: ‘A fanatical pursuit of research and scholarship . . . amounts to a withdrawal from the university and is the bane of staff cooperation and attentive teaching.’¹⁴ At the opposite extreme is a teaching-only pattern which ‘denies expertise, turns the academic into a school teacher, and pulls him or her virtually out of the discipline and perhaps out of the overall academic profession’.¹⁵ That is why it is important that there should continue

to be a presumption, an expectation, of genuine scholarly exchange between 'adult' learners in every corner of higher education teaching.

Newman saw that not all those capable of teaching (and perhaps teaching well) at degree level are also capable of research. He went further. He thought that 'to discover and to teach are distinct functions; they are also distinct gifts, and are not commonly found united in the same person . . . the common sense of mankind has associated the search after truth with seclusion and quiet. The greatest thinkers have been too intent on their subject to admit of interruption.'¹⁶ He clearly had in mind the truly original thinker, but a good deal of research of a perfectly respectable sort requires patience and exactness rather than a high level of innovative thinking, and it is perhaps this sheer habit of work, this taking for granted that one is seeking to find out something new, to which the university teacher ought automatically to expose his students. The tasks are not separate; they have an intimate connection. 'The attitude of mind which develops in a senior scholar out of the experience of authentic scholarship, an attitude that moderates confidence in the results of study with a continuing skepticism about them, does lead to a sense of sharing in the quest, in which the senior can also learn from the junior',¹⁷ argues Pelikan. Thorstein Veblen thought in the early twentieth century that: '[It is research] scientific and scholarly inquiry [which is constitutive for a university]'.¹⁸ He even went so far as to say that 'the work of teaching properly belongs in the university only because and in so far as it incites and facilitates the university man's work of inquiry.'¹⁹

Despite what he says about the natural remoteness of the researcher, Newman was conscious of his debt to his old tutor, Whately, as the person who 'taught me to think correctly, and (strange office for an instructor) to rely upon myself . . . it has been at your kind suggestion, that I have been since led to employ myself in the consideration of several subjects . . . which I cannot doubt have been very beneficial to my mind'.²⁰ Newman and Whately well understood the law of scholarship that 'the teacher should teach students, not recruit disciples'.²¹

Newman wrote to Richard Whately when Whately's *Logic* was first published to say: 'I cannot tell you the surprise I felt on seeing you that you had thought it worth while to mention my name, as having contributed to the arrangement of its materials. Whatever I then wrote was written, I am conscious, almost as an Undergraduate's exercise, and consequently of little value, except as regards my own improvement in doing it.'²² Whately replied thus: 'What you wrote was several years ago, when you were but just a graduate . . . I let it stand as you wrote it, because I could not make it any better; but it does not follow that you could not.'²³

Whately and Newman taught each other although the relationship between them was that of tutor and student. Teachers are also learners on their own account. Whately writes to Newman about his article on Apollonius: 'I was much interested by your article . . . I shall be able to say more when I have gone over it again. I did not observe any unsound arguments; and this tho' [*sic*] a negative merit is an extremely rare one.'²⁴

We can see here the scholar's instinct to reread and reflect, to comment on and criticize, but also to use all grist coming to his mill.

All this is the more striking for the way it exemplifies the power of scholarship to flourish in an environment not well calculated to foster it. Oxford in the eighteenth century had been, in many ways, an idle place, with little care taken over the teaching of students. Newman comments wryly on the tendency of his pupils 'whenever they get a new coachman' to 'make an effort to get the reins slack'.²⁵ His own undergraduate contemporaries were no doubt much the same. But his own zeal for learning was not thereby diminished.

We are, however, left with some difficulties if we seek to apply this matrix of assumptions to a world of mass access to higher education, where not all students will find this level of independence easy to attain and not all their teachers will be experienced scholars with the habit of original work. There have been visible tensions. In the late 1990s only a relatively small proportion of academic staff formed the core of an institution's employees as its full-time staff. A great many were already on short-term contracts, primarily for research, and to do some teaching as it was needed. Such teaching was of immense value to institution and students and many courses could not run without it. Others, equally essential to the running of the system, were teaching as graduate students or research assistants. This casualization of university teaching is not a good thing, either for the often exploited casual labour, or for the students.

If teaching is of the essence of a university so are students. If students are adult learners, they have, arguably, rights to be treated in ways which fit with that. Students stood in a relationship to the mediaeval gild which has persisted into a 'membership' of the modern university. This 'membership' gives them rights which go beyond the contractual rights created by their admission to the university.²⁶ The student unrest of the 1960s demonstrated the potential power of the student body. The call was for participation and for student representation on committees, and students have been on committees ever since. However, alongside that, and increasingly so in the last decade, students have been encouraged to see themselves as 'customers' for a 'service' provided by their university. The move of the British Government in 1997 to impose a requirement that students should pay part of their own tuition fees (hitherto born by the public purse) sharpened that consciousness.²⁷

The accountability issues here are potentially complex. They are only beginning to be explored at the time of writing, for this theme of the 'adult community' has, as yet, had little airing.

Expertise and professionalism

Nineteenth-century dons were not, strictly, members of a profession. Young men of academic bent were elected to Fellowships of Oxford and Cambridge

colleges after taking their first degrees. They remained there until (in many cases) obtaining livings as clergymen. If they married they gave up their Fellowships, which placed a natural age limit on the majority. Only the Master was provided by the College with a house in which he could bring up a family. These were gentlemen amateurs. This does not mean that their scholarship was unremarkable, but it does mean that they were not concerned with questions of career structure within the academic life.

There has since come into being a 'profession', a body of persons who earn their living as academics, who think (in many cases), in terms of 'careers' in higher education and who expect their employers to maintain good practice in the way they treat them.

It is a central theme of this study that there exists a community of scholarship which is, and always has been, independent of the continuance in being of universities and certainly of any given university, and that scholars belong to it by virtue of the work they do, whether or not they are in the employment of a university. Belonging to a scholarly community does not, however, mean that these 'employment' requirements are not important, and that the academic staff of universities ought not to be fairly and decently treated.

It has been argued that knowledge confers status.²⁸ However, British society has a long-standing distaste for the 'expert'; that was evinced in the tradition of the 'amateur' who did not take money for what he did but could outperform the professional on the sports field. Similarly, the private gentleman scholar might make his contribution to learning from his own home, with his pen and his personal researches. Mr Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, though not in fact the most productive of scholars, might, in principle, have made discoveries to outrank anything achieved in a university. French universities are not always the main centres of French research. The 'professional' scholar who earns his living by teaching students has, historically, been a dim figure – poor, scruffy and not taken seriously in the world. The disinterested pursuit of knowledge is affected when value is not placed upon it. That is equally true whether what is in question is 'approval' or cash value. That does not mean that such work ceases; but it may become work done in a spirit of defiance, by persons disinclined to cooperate with the system.

The patterns of an earlier age are not of merely antiquarian interest. They are the norms of minds engaged in intellectual exploration, and they recur. When we find externally-imposed change seeking to reconstruct such ground rules for reasons which are not in themselves primarily scholarly, we are likely to see resistance, a conflict of interests at a profound level between academia and politics. The question then is who can (or should) call whom to account.