

# British universities need Grayling's shake-up

His college is a necessary disruption to complacent academics. We need more teaching and broader studies

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**L**arry Summers was President of Harvard University before being appointed Barack Obama's chief economic adviser at the height of the 2008 financial crisis. Reflecting on his career, he remarked: "I was probably the first man in history who felt he was getting away from poisonous politics by going to Washington."

Academics are famously adept at escalating minor intellectual distinctions into take-no-prisoners civil wars. Indeed, academic disputes are the classic example of what Sigmund Freud described as "the narcissism of small differences".

The latest instance of this self-indulgence is the hysterical reaction of British academics to the proposal by A. C. Grayling, a left-of-centre philosophy professor, to create the New College of the Humanities, an openly elitist private college in London, backed by a dozen distinguished Anglo-American academics, most now teaching at top US universities.

Professor Grayling wants to charge £18,000 a year for undergraduate courses, instead of the £9,000 limit mandated by the Government, in order to offer much more intense teaching

than is available at other British universities, including one-to-one tutorials of a kind not available outside Oxford and Cambridge.

A second controversial feature of the college is that all students will have to acquire some familiarity with humanities, sciences and to acquire some professional and financial skills.

Within days of his announcement, Professor Grayling was smoke-bombed by students when trying to deliver a lecture. He was denounced as odious, money-grubbing and disgustingly elitist by Terry Eagleton, another left-wing academic who teaches at the University of Notre Dame (where the annual fees are more than £20,000). There have even been discussions in the University and

## A university's main social function is to prepare a ruling elite

College Union about boycotting academics associated with the college and of banning UCU members from attending seminars where NCH staff are invited. Meanwhile, the University of London, whose International Programmes department was to administer degrees for the new college, has dissociated itself entirely.

Why this outpouring of venom? The reason most cited was that high fees would offer an unfair advantage to the privileged minority of students who could afford them. Professor Grayling

would thereby reproduce in higher education the class distinctions that mar secondary schooling in the UK, dividing rich kids, such as David Cameron and Nick Clegg, whose parents could afford Eton and Westminster, from those sent to bog-standard comprehensives.

It remains to be seen if Professor Grayling's brainchild will turn out to be a university equivalent of Eton or some overpriced commercial crammer. In either case, the effects would be minimal if the state of Britain's higher education were satisfactory today. Unfortunately, of course, British higher education is far from satisfactory. Hence the outcry from the educational establishment.

What exactly are the dysfunctions that Professor Grayling's plan has brought to light? Lack of money is arguably the least important, as the humanities are quite cheap to teach, requiring no expensive laboratories. That is why the New College could reasonably hope to cover its costs and even perhaps make a modest profit.

The real issue is that the New College, if it succeeds, will challenge two assumptions that are much more fundamental to the British university system — and which urgently need to be overturned. The first is that the ideal university education consists of a narrowly specialised course studying nothing but history, English literature or mathematics. This extreme specialisation may be well suited to preparing future academics, but is becoming absurdly inappropriate as a preparation for professional life in the

modern world, where rapidly changing conditions put a premium on adaptability and educational breadth.

Employers and students are recognising the inadequacies of the British system, in comparison with the broader education offered by the best universities in the US. As a result, a degree from Harvard or Stanford is steadily becoming more attractive to the modern world of business and employment than one from Oxbridge, where multidisciplinary courses such

## A Harvard degree is more attractive than an Oxbridge one now

as politics, philosophy and economics, far from being encouraged, are at risk of being fragmented because of the internecine rivalries between increasingly specialised academic departments.

This academic rivalry points to another assumption challenged by the New College, one that is even dearer than specialisation to British dons. This is the idea that universities exist primarily to conduct research, with teaching merely a by-product.

Academics all over the world try to minimise their commitment to teaching, partly because their promotion prospects depend on their research. But in British universities this contempt for teaching is even more pronounced than in America, because there is no serious competition to

attract students and because the uniform government-imposed "research assessment exercise" largely determines university funding. In response to this research-orientated funding, British academics now assume that they are entitled to public support to conduct research. But this is a simple category error.

The main social function of universities, since the days of Plato's Academy, has been to teach students and to prepare the elites required to manage society. In terms of the interests of society, academic research — at least outside science and engineering — is a by-product of undergraduate teaching, not the other way round. This means that universities should only be adequately funded, whether by the government or by student fees, if they perform their primary social function of undergraduate teaching.

This simple truth, disruptive to the self-indulgent complacency in British academia, seems to have been grasped by Professor Grayling and his colleagues. That is why his proposal deserves support, whether or not it proves successful in this particular institutional form.

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