

Queen Mary: nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition

Three timely Offline columns by Richard Horton¹⁻³ describe a mindless managerial rampage spreading through Queen Mary University of London, UK. Barts and The London, Queen Mary's School of Medicine and Dentistry, has declared distinguished medical researchers to be at risk of redundancy.¹ Queen Mary's School of Biological and Chemical Sciences now follows suit.^{2,3} As we write, colleagues declared to be "at risk" just 2 weeks ago are summoned individually to closed audiences with the Head of School, attended by members of the ironically named "Human Resources" (HR) department. If targeted individuals fail to appease the inquisitor, they will be sacked. Other staff members are earmarked for demotion, with replacement "Teaching and Scholarship" contracts that will oblige them to desist from independent research.

But, one might ask, is it not high time to weed out slackers? It might help if one had any way of knowing who they are. Sadly, the "restructuring" hits exactly the wrong targets in many cases, and leaves unproductive academics unscathed. The reason is simple—the Head of School and HR have neither interest in, nor understanding of, individuals' research, still less their research potential. This slaughter of the talented relies entirely on a carefully designed set of retrospective counts of the uncountable. These are labelled research "metrics".

Are we engaged in special pleading here? Actually, no.⁴ Our school has a reputation, envied worldwide, for research by individuals now for the chop. Their retrospective crimes, committed between 2008 and 2011, include too few publications as a "significant" author in high-impact journals, below-average external

funding, and failure to meet metrics for allocation of PhD studentships. Where the baseline of research income derived from the Higher Education Funding Council for England has disappeared, no-one seems to know. So, we are looking at the end of the road for unique and internationally leading-edge Queen Mary research. Among many outstanding projects we stand to lose are: sociogenomics of mole rats, the only eusocial mammals, and a model, incidentally, for the endocrinology of bullying; genetics of circadian rhythms and iron homeostasis from experiments on fruit-flies; imaging of neural activity in zebrafish—a paradigm for vertebrate development; and heterogeneous catalytic oxidation and carbon-carbon coupling in inorganic chemical synthesis. The list is long. Alas, there are no boxes to tick for advances in knowledge and understanding—no metrics for science itself.

Over in the Medical and Dental School, the grand inquisitor is identified as the Dean for Research, whose own research credentials are, naturally, unavailable for scrutiny.¹ Never mind, we now have the assurance from his colleague that "Each and every faculty member of the college was assessed in this process and from my own personal point of view it was done fairly..."⁵ Who needs evidence in the face of such assurance? "Consequently, to pick him out for criticism in this disgraceful manner is quite iniquitous".⁵ Yet the Dean managed to pick out others—for oblivion, not just criticism. And he got it wrong.¹

The same double standard follows, now, in our School of Biological and Chemical Sciences. For example, one of the "metrics" for research output at professorial level is to have published at least two papers in journals with impact factors of 7 or more. This is ludicrous, of course—a triumph of vanity as sensible as selecting athletes on the basis of their brand of track suit. But let us follow this "metric" for a moment. How does the Head of School

fair? Zero, actually. He fails. Just consult Web of Science. Take care though, the result is classified information. HR's "data" are marked Private and Confidential. Some things must be believed. To question them is heresy.

We hope to report back on our Head's one-to-one interview with himself. After all, we have his word, and that of College senior management, that the restructuring is proceeding with complete fairness and transparency. Perhaps he'll use a mirror?

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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- 3 Horton R. Offline: The bent and twisted. *Lancet* 2012; **379**: 1284.
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