



There is no easy science by which to fire professors

David Colquhoun

There are moments when the way a university runs its affairs is so boneheaded that it deserves scorn far beyond the world of academia.

Queen Mary University of London is selecting which staff to sack from its science departments in a way that I can describe only as insane.

The firings, it seems, are nothing to do with hard financial times, but are a ham-fisted attempt to raise Queen Mary's ranking in the league tables. A university's position is directly related to its government research funding. So Queen Mary's managers hope to do well in the 2014 "Research Excellence Framework" by firing staff who don't publish a paper every ten minutes.

To survive as a professor there you need to have published 11 papers during 2008 to 2011, of which at least two are "high quality". For lecturers, the target for keeping your job is five papers, of which one is "high quality". You must also have had at least one PhD student complete their thesis.

What Queen Mary defines as "high quality" is publication in "high-impact journals" (periodicals that get lots of citations). Journals such as *Nature* and *Science* get most of their citations from very few articles, so it is utterly brainless to base decisions about the quality of research from such a skewed distribution of citations. But talk of skewed distribution is, no doubt, a bit too technical for innumerate HR people to understand. Which is precisely why they should have nothing to do with assessing scientists.

I have been lucky to know well three Nobel prizewinners. None would have passed the criteria laid down for a professor by QMUL. They would have been fired and so would Peter Higgs.

More offensive still is that you can buy immunity if you have had 26 papers published in 2008-11, with six

Peter Higgs would not have passed the Queen Mary criteria

being "high quality". The encouragement to publish reams is daft. If you are publishing a paper every few weeks, you certainly are not writing them, and possibly not even reading them. Most likely you are appending your name to somebody else's work with little or no checking of the data, let alone contributing real research.

It is also deeply unethical for Queen Mary to require all staff to have a PhD student with the aim of raising the university's ranking rather than of benefitting the student.

Like so much managerialism, the rules are an active encouragement to dishonesty. The dimwitted assessment methods of Queen Mary will guarantee the creation of a generation of second-rate spiv scientists. Who in their right mind would want to work there, now that the way it treats its scientists is public knowledge?

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