

...or an imminent divorce

The website of the Association for Research Managers and Administrators says it has 1,600 individual members, but every scientist I have ever met is baffled about why they have suddenly sprung into existence.

Apparently their mission, according to the website, is “to facilitate excellence in research by identifying and establishing best practice in research management and administration”. I had to read this several times in an attempt to extract meaning from the bureaucratic prose. “Our mission is to promote excellence in research”. How can non-scientists with no experience of research possibly “promote excellence in research”? They can’t, and that’s pretty obvious when you read the second half of the sentence. They propose to improve science by promoting research management: that is themselves.

Kerridge’s article, opposite, doesn’t help me to understand. He seems to think research managers are there to make sure that scientists fulfil the “strategic aims” of the university. In other words they are there to make sure that scientists obey the orders of non-scientists (or elderly ex-scientists) who claim to know what the future holds. I can think of no better way to ruin the scientific reputation of a university and to stifle creativity.

We all appreciate good support. I worked in a department with a very helpful person (not a ‘manager’) who could advise on some of the financial intricacies. But now the function has been centralised, depersonalised and is far less efficient.

The fact of the matter seems to me to be that research managers are just one more layer of hangers-on that have been inflicted on the academic enterprise during the time New Labour was in power. They are certainly not alone. We have now have research facilitators and offshoots of human resources departments running nonsense courses in things like Brain Gym. All of these people claim they are there to support research. They do no such thing. They merely generate more paperwork and more distraction from the job in hand.

Take a simple example. At a time when there was a redundancy committee in my own faculty, in existence to decide which academics should be fired, the HR department advertised two jobs (on near-professorial salaries) for people trained in neurolinguistic programming—a well-known sort of pseudo-scientific psychobabble.

A quick look at what research managers actually do (in two research-intensive universities) shows that mostly

David Colquhoun is an honorary fellow of University College London.

they send emails that list funding agencies, and forward emails you have already had from someone else. Almost all the information can be found more conveniently by spending a couple of minutes with Google. Although they claim to reduce administrative work for scientists, it is usually quicker to do things yourself rather than to try to explain things to people who don’t understand the science. They don’t save work; they make it.

One might well ask how it is that so much money has come to be spent on pseudo-jobs such as “research managers”. I can only guess that it is part of the ever-expanding tide of administrative junk that encumbers the work of people who are trying to do good creative science. It also arises from the misapprehension, widespread among vice-chancellors, that you can ensure you get creative science by top-down management of research by people who know little about it.

I’m reminded of the words of the “unrepentant capitalist”, Luke Johnson (he was talking about HR but the words apply equally here): “HR is like many parts of modern businesses: a simple expense, and a burden on the backs of the productive workers. They don’t sell or produce: they consume. They are the amorphous support services. I have radically downsized HR in several companies I have run, and business has gone all the better for it.”

The dangers are illustrated by the report (*Times Higher Education*, 20 May) of a paper by the professor of higher education management at Royal Holloway (we already have a chair in this non-subject). It seems that, “Research ‘can no longer be left to the whims and fortunes of individual academics’”; it must be left to people who don’t do research or understand it. It’s hard to imagine any greater corruption of the academic enterprise.

Oddly enough, the dire financial situation brought about by incompetent and greedy bankers provides an opportunity for universities to shed the myriad hangers-on that have accreted round the business of research. Savings will have to be made, and they shouldn’t start with the people who do the teaching and research on which the reputation of the university depends. With luck, it may not be too late to choke off this new phenomenon before it chokes us. If you want research, spend money on people who do it, not those who talk about it.

More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

“Research managers” are just one more layer of hangers-on that have been inflicted on the academic enterprise.’