

nature

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Let's hear it for the PhD

EIGHTEEN months ago the House of Commons Expenditure Committee issued a report on Postgraduate Education (House of Commons Paper No. 96). The general thrust of the document was that growth in postgraduate education had been insufficiently controlled, that postgraduate education should be shaped less by student demand and more by the needs of the economy and society as a whole, and that there should be a major change of emphasis towards postgraduate education being for those who had already experienced the world outside university. We thought at the time that it was a poor report as far as it applied to the PhD, and now that the House of Commons has just got round to debating it, we still think it's a poor report.

Much play was made, during the short debate, of the lack of any formal response by the Department of Education and Science to the document. By way of explanation the Under-Secretary (Miss Joan Lestor) pointed out, rather apologetically, that a large number of bodies were interested and it took time to collect and consider their views. Since the report is a potential threat to the whole way of doing academic research and since the bodies with an interest all have their offices within a bus-ride of the department one wonders why the delay in standing up for the PhD—could it be that the department is in broad agreement with the report? Miss Lestor's opaque speech gave no clues.

Mercifully, at the very end of the debate, one member, Dr Jeremy Bray, was prepared to stand up and plead for more understanding of the basic purposes of postgraduate education. "We need a permeation of the attack on the problems of modern society by the robustness, objectivity, and the exposure to the test of experience, which is the characteristic of good research. Any activity which fosters that and which seeks to spread those qualities within our society should not be lightly brushed aside." An unashamedly Popperian viewpoint probably lost on the House which immediately went on to discuss police recruitment.

The PhD degree is a relatively easy target to attack because its recipients do not seem to confer on society the same sort of benefits as, say, medical doctors. More recycle into the educational system than go elsewhere (not that industry, commerce and the Civil Service wants them all that much). Many get their degree and then

seem to throw it all away by going on to do something apparently totally unrelated—an offence which is widely practised, indeed encouraged, after 16 years of education but totally unacceptable after 19. And they are alleged to be strangely unresponsive to society's needs, although they are invariably supervised and guided by more senior people.

What ought to be more widely known is that at least as far as the research student is concerned the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate work is such a change in style that few of those who drift into research for fear (as Mr Neil Marten put it) of the outside world survive long. To switch from a situation in which every problem has an answer (and preferably one that can be written down in a couple of sheets of examination paper) to a situation in which one is not even sure that the problem is worth asking, let alone whether it is answerable, is to expose oneself to a new and often icy world. And if it is done at all, it must be done young. The record of those who do come back for a research degree after several years in, say, industry does not make a compelling case for the post experience grant.

Many take the PhD degree but do not then seem to capitalise on it; this is easily seen as waste, and no doubt the Expenditure Committee could see it as that, but substantial numbers of students realistically face the fact that after three years of conducting research they are not cut out for a lifetime of it. In those three years, though, they will have learnt a whole new philosophy and methodology (and learnt by experience, not instruction). There are other places where such experience is needed than in the laboratory.

Finally, what should shape postgraduate education—the needs of the economy and society or student demand? The committee leaned to the former and there is much to be said for manpower planning in higher education. But society is generally only capable of servicing its present needs, and somewhere there has to be some very careful thinking about what the community will need thirty years hence. The future of a technological society is at least partly in the hands of the emerging student: to deny him the right to choose what sort of society he wants to work for is to try and prevent the further evolution of society—however reasonable the arguments on the other side may seem. □