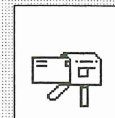


LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



From Siu Man Keung:

November is a time for asking your class to complete the course/teacher evaluation forms. While duly grateful for the work done by our colleagues at the SSRC (Social Sciences Research Centre) who have to cope with a large amount of data streaming in from all departments at this time of the year, I would still say that the present system is not half as useful as when the evaluation was administered by individual departments, despite the computerization of the process and the expense invested in making it a formal university-wide exercise.

I started my own course evaluation when I first joined the Department of Mathematics in 1975, and ever since the early 80s, the department has made it a general twice-a-year practice for all courses. Both course evaluation exercises seek feedback from students, with the first one given around November to offer an opportunity to foster student-teacher rapport. Immediately after collecting and analyzing the data I would in my next class talk with the students about their comments and demands. Since the teacher-student relationship is very different from a vendor-customer relationship, the teacher need not comply with all demands, but must explain to the students why such and such a demand cannot or should not be met. I always find this kind of exchange of views between the teacher and students very helpful and congenial.

Now, with the evaluation process institutionalized, we distribute the forms, collect the completed forms, seal them in an envelope and send them to a central unit to be processed. We do not know the results, or we know the results only much later. We may only know the statistical outcome, but what is more important are comments from individual students. Besides, even though the evaluation form is carefully designed in a professional way, it may not really suit the needs of individual departments. The vitality of a university lies in its freedom and variety, not in routineness and uniformity.

Perhaps this is only one sign, and a very minor one by itself, of a changing 'culture' of this university when she strives for efficiency, accountability and new ventures, but forsakes 'traditional' substance like learning, scholarship, intellectual commitment and student-teacher relationship. Instead we hear more and more frequently words such as 'benchmark', 'audit process', 'performance indicator' and the like. The university is gradually losing a placid frame of mind (placid is different from supine!) and is thrown into a state of agitation, all of us forever working to meet deadlines for various proposals. (This is somewhat reflected in the physical surroundings, with all the dug-up roads, the scaffolding and the noise of construction work outside our classrooms and offices!) It may do well for all of us to read the classic passage of DAXUE (Great Learning) from which the (Chinese) motto of our university is taken.