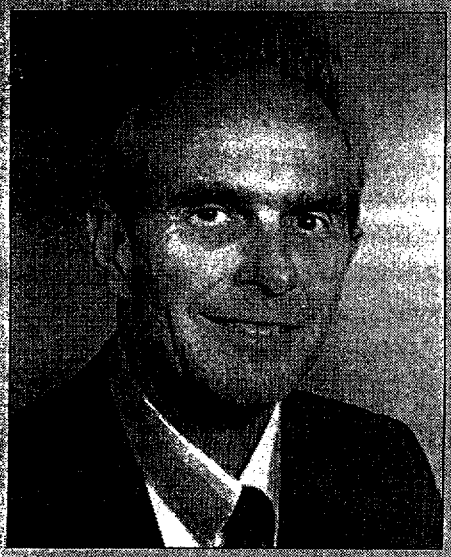
Guest Opinion

THE UNIVERSITIES, THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCE AND PUBLIC POLICY

John Raven



John Raven

John Raven's main research has been into the nature, development and assessment of competence. This has included studies of the way the personal and social consequences of different types of competence vary with the structure of organisations and society. His publications include studies of the goals of education and the barriers to their achievement.

As Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher was a master of the sound bite. Wonderful one-liners — which were simultaneously absolutely right and absolutely wrong — abounded. Among other things, we heard that, since the universities don't do anyone much good, they should be reduced in size.

At one level, an appropriate response from the universities would have been: 'We are here to advance understanding and to involve students in that process as apprentices so that they develop the high-level competencies required to do their jobs, and lead their lives, effectively. How can we demonstrate that we, collectively and individually, actually do this? And how can we do better?'

So far as I know, no one ever said anything like that.

Pascarella and Terenzini's 900-page summary of 2,600 studies of *How College Affects Students* (1991) shows why. Such a response requires some understanding of the nature, development, and assessment of competence and of how university productivity might be meaningfully assessed. Very few of those who contributed to Pascarella and Terenzini's book possessed either.

Yet, at another level, it would have been inappropriate to have responded as suggested. This is because most political policy statements are to be read backwards. In this case, the universities were to be reduced to size for undisclosed reasons. But the policy was to be legitimised by being linked to a widely held belief.

What hidden reasons might there have been for wanting to curb the universities? Possible answers, regularly articulated in political circles, include: they bred the 60s

generation, they led some people to think and they led some to want to introduce a new social and economic order.

Other, otherwise incomprehensible, 'developments' may have similar explanations.

If one makes the tenure of university staff dependent on producing more and more publications with less and less time and money, and deprives all those with government grants of the right to publish anything the government doesn't like, one gets more and more publications which say less and less. Staff have less time to think, to advance understanding or to attend to their students. Students cannot participate in their tutors' research and thereby develop the competencies required to advance understanding.

If one also — speaking of the need for 'training' (but having in mind the need to massage unemployment statistics) — doubles the number of students while halving the number of staff, one can make sure there is still less time for staff to facilitate in students the development of the competencies of the researcher. These include dangerous qualities like suspicion of authority, the ability to make acute observations, and the ability to adventure into the unknown. The manifest object of the exercise becomes more unquestionably only to convey non-knowledge from the notebooks of lecturers to the notebooks of students. The change also means that the people the universities select for influential positions are those who are most willing and able to do whatever is necessary to ingratiate themselves with their superiors, and those least willing and able to challenge conventional wisdom.

Next, one can insist that, since so much public money is being poured into the enterprise, more accountability is needed. Both contribution to student development and contribution to research will have to be assessed. Clearly, with so many 'students', the first of these will have to be determined using multiple-choice tests. Conveniently, these preclude demonstration of thinking skills. Their introduction therefore further deflects attention from the development of such skills. Contribution to advancing understanding will, with so many staff, have to be assessed from number of publications. Pressure to publish further precludes thought.

One can complete the process of obfuscation by talking about the need to nurture 'vocationally relevant' 'competencies' without initiating the research required to identify the competencies which are really needed in the workplace and society, the way in which these competencies should vary from person to person within an organisation so that climates of innovation or enterprise can be created, how multiple and alternative patterns of competence are to be nurtured, how the development of these idiosyncratic competencies is to be monitored, or how those involved in promoting the development of multiple, high-level, competencies (i.e. managers, lecturers, teachers, and parents) are to get credit for their efforts. Despite the way they are presented in current government documents, enterprise and innovation are cultural, rather than individual, characteristics. Many people have to contribute in very different ways if one is to have an enterprising organisation or culture. Pontificating about laudable goals without being able to specify how they are to be achieved or how to find out whether they have been achieved unleashes a flood of busy-work in which what is said to be happening must — as in schizophrenia — differ sharply from reality.

Few, if any, of those who join the endless working parties set up to identify the competencies which the members of different occupational groups are said to 'need' and how these competencies are to be nurtured and assessed have made any study of competence. As a result, few are in a position to do such things as draw attention to the fact that what is said to be 'vocational competence' varies with the breadth of vision of whoever undertook any job analyses which may exist. Everyone knows that the job of a bus driver is to drive a bus. Rarely is it thought to involve — as research (van Beinum, 1965; Kanter, 1985) has shown it actually does — contributing to a climate of innovation which will help to ensure the continual adaptation of the bus service to societal needs. A manager's job is to make forecasts, fix budgets, and arrange links between departments. Contrary to what research has shown, it is rarely thought to involve doing such things as thinking about, placing, and developing the idiosyncratic talents of subordinates, creating a climate of innovation, and intervening in the socio-economic-political system outside the employing organisation in order to ensure the survival of both that organisation and the society of which it forms a part (Jaques, 1989; Kanter, 1985; Deming, 1993; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

The effect of the tendency to recruit into working groups those who are least likely to raise such

questions and least likely to have, in their own jobs, thought about the distinctive talents of each of their subordinates and how to place, develop, and utilise them to create climates of innovation, is that only trivial, easily specifiable and measurable, competencies are identified in the long lists that are produced[1].

But the working parties' failure to note such problems and insist on initiating the relevant research reveals that those who sit on them lack the very vocational competencies that are most important in our society and which the universities should have tried hardest to help them to develop. It shows that they lack the abilities required to problematise, conceptualise, translate problems into researchable terms, and manage. Most importantly, it shows that they lack the confidence, motivation, and ability to go beyond their bureaucrats' brief and draw attention to developments which are essential if the targets they have been set are taken seriously.

Among other things, they should have drawn attention to (i) the fact that the people who most seriously lack the competencies needed to do their jobs effectively are the leaders and managers of our society — i.e. our politicians and public servants, and (ii) the almost complete absence of a basis in research for the enterprise to which they are supposed to be contributing and the consequent dearth of the concepts and tools required by those charged with carrying it out.

Perhaps most importantly, they should — seeing the energy and resources being squandered — have done all they could to draw attention to the need to develop better arrangements through which the goals of public policy can be clarified, progress toward them assessed, and necessary developments introduced. Developing such arrangements is the most important problem facing our society. Unless we can develop better ways of collecting and utilising information in an innovative way to run our society in the long-term public interest we are doomed. We will be unable to avoid the imminent collapse of the financial system, our society, the biosphere, and the planet as we know it.

Yet how many universities have identified this as a central research problem? How many see nurturing the competencies required to contribute to the development of the necessary understandings and arrangements as one of their central goals? One consequence of the working parties' failure to do their work properly is to perpetuate this state of affairs.

How *could* the universities be held accountable for doing what they should be doing? What steps could be taken to help them identify the barriers to doing it? What steps could be taken to help to ensure that they do do it?

Answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this article (but are further explored in Raven, 1994). Suffice it to say that it would not actually be difficult to introduce ways of finding out whether university departments are characterised by climates of dedication, innovation, and commitment to advancing understanding. Nor would it be hard to find out whether they have created developmental environments which tap the diverse motives, and harness and develop the talents, of most of their staff and students.

But a recommendation that the universities should do these things makes two assumptions which have been repeatedly challenged in this article. First, it takes the manifest functions of the universities at their face value and fails to come to terms with their latent societal — sociological — functions. Second, it assumes the goodwill of governments and their willingness to act on information in the long--term public interest. (Chomsky, 1991 and 1993; and Janicke, 1990, have documented how governments consistently fail to act in the public interest.)

There is not space here to discuss the implications of these things. (My forthcoming *New Wealth of Nations* both summarises a great deal of information on the plight of the planet and discusses the nature of the arrangements required if we are to move forward.) But one of them is that it is essential to surround politicians — and especially public servants — by more open, participative, structures of public participation which are designed to force them to act on information in an innovative way in the long-term public interest. Another is that the competency-oriented educational programmes to be offered by the universities should, above all, seek to nurture the civic competencies which are required if we are to evolve more effective ways of running society. Clearly a programme of raising consciousness about some of the issues mentioned in this paper — at the same time as leading people to attach more importance to behaving as their consciences direct — is required.

But any attempt to facilitate such a movement has serious personal implications. In the first place, it

means talking about issues the mere raising of which is sufficient to discredit the speaker. And it means encouraging people to examine the workings of society in ways which have, in the past, provoked deadly reactions from those with a vested interest in perpetuating the status quo (see Chomsky, 1993; Robinson, 1983).

So now we must strengthen our statement about the role of the University. It is not merely — in a timid kind of way — to advance understanding and nurture high-level competencies. It is to provide a cocoon within which heretical ideas can grow and an environment in which students can practise and develop high-level competencies which are of the utmost social and vocational importance but which they would have little opportunity to develop outside.

NOTES

1. It would be have been possible to note that one can learn how to make one's own observations, lead, invent, work with others, unleash the motives and talents of others in a ferment of innovation, and develop an understanding of, and intervene in, socio-political systems (Schon, 1983, 1987; Winter, McClelland and Stewart, 1981; McClelland, 1965; Spencer and Spencer, 1993, Raven, 1984). Unfortunately, most people think that nurturing competence, even in the workplace, involves mastering formal instruction or, at best, practising low-level tasks the 'performance' of which can be judged correct or incorrect. It is rarely thought to involve such things as enabling subordinates to gain insight into the, normally private, psychological processes involved in competent behaviour as a result of managers sharing their thoughts, their agonising, their prioritising, their anticipation of obstacles and thinking of ways round them, and their use of hunches to initiate experimental action followed by study of, and taking corrective action on the basis of, the effects.

   The assessment of competence is — as Brown and Knight (1994) show — thought to involve the assessment of knowledge or the ability to carry out predetermined tasks in a specified way. There is a failure to recognise that multiple choice tests and observational check lists generally lack construct validity in the sense that even the best of them fail to measure such things as scientific competence or the ability to communicate (Raven, 1991; Wolf, 1987, 1993; Atkins, Beattie and Dockrell, 1993).

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