Bonfire of the inanities

Times are hard and cuts have to be made, so let's start by putting an end to verbosity and all those mind-bogglingly long assignments, research papers and reports, writes Peter Lennox, succinctly

These are hard times. We've been living beyond our means and now we have to pay; swingeing cuts of 25, 30, even 35 per cent are on the way. We are told we all have to find ways of doing more, with less. Obviously we can't just slash and burn – that would break things and lead to more waste. Rather than simply having these cuts imposed on us from above in a recipe for social and political unrest, I propose we each pitch in and propose cost-saving measures. The rules are simple: you can't propose someone else's cuts; you have to look to something you hold dear. You have to be painfully honest about what to keep and what to get rid of – a bit like clearing out the attic.

I'll start.

I propose: words. I love words; I love the gorgeous encrustations of florid language, a pithy metaphor, the amusing anecdotes. A. A. Gill makes me laugh out loud, even when I disagree strongly. I love the phantasmagorical castles of metaphor that people build (although it's a problem when people try to live in this fantasy world), but it has to be said that words are phenomenally expensive.

This language thing we invented to efficiently transfer complex concepts ("look out, there's a snake hiding in the bushes") has grown like Topsy; it's become an end in itself. From a few elementary jottings on cave walls, we've gone on to chop down forests for printing (hah! now where is the snake going to hide?) and wire the whole world up with phones and computers and an internet so that we can support this huge traffic in words.

The energy, global warming and sheer amount of time devoted to this trade are staggering. We have to take control before this monster we've created consumes us. Would it really damage our way of life to do some judicious pruning?

This is where universities could lead the way. Universities make their living out of words; they are vast word factories, turning out theses, assignments, research papers, regulations, committee documents, course documents, reports. They suck in our young

(who should be out getting more fresh air) and disabuse them of their naive optimism by forcing them into grim word sweatshops. Every year, more word-based processes, additional regulations and specifications are introduced.

Let's make a conscious effort, set targets to cut words, and see if the world will still revolve on its axis. If we can't cut words by 20 per cent over the next 24 months, we may as well give up – none of the other cuts will work.

It's going to be hard, no doubt about it. We've all got used to writing in the relevant styles – research papers this way, reports for management that way, committee documents the other way.

The trick is to focus on the meretricious use of language and leave the good stuff behind. That doesn't mean you can't have decorative flourishes, fiction and humour; contrariwise, that's the stuff you should keep. But the stilted, leaden, humourless stuff or the language intended to conceal and deceive – get rid of it. Students and staff alike, stop trying to write up to word limits by padding stuff out with fancy-sounding but unnecessary terms. Set yearly targets for reductions in word counts; maybe performance-related bonuses?

I'll pick, as an example, an old procedural document I found on my computer. In this case, someone has actually added words to help make the document more accessible, but with the eventual aim of cutting down the whole thing:

UNIVERSITY OF SHANGRI-LA
School of Nice Clean Subjects and Oily Subjects and Monitoring

MONITORING OF THE MONITORING OF INTERNAL MODERATION
This policy covers the Internal Moderation of:
- Internal moderation of students' coursework
- Internal moderation of students' scripts from examinations
- The performance of the monitoring process
- The monitoring of that performance

- Assessment of the effectiveness of the monitoring of the performance of the monitoring process
- Nothing about teaching, really.

Description of the monitoring process

1. Programme/Subject Leaders at the beginning of each term (and having nothing better to do, since we all know about the relaxed attitudes to work of most academics, who don't know they were born) provide information to their Subject Group Manager (which is a title that can really make you hold your head up high in the pub) and the School Office about Internal Moderation for their Programme. This information should indicate which modules are running (because, apparently, no one would actually know what's happening otherwise – the information not being available anywhere else to anyone who is reasonably mobile), who the module leader is (unless he has ticked "No Publicity" for legal reasons) and who the internal moderator for that module will be (depending on how areas are managed, the Internal Moderator should be nominated either by the Programme Leader or the Subject Group Manager; failing that, names from a hat). This information should be held (in a vice-like grip) at Subject Group Level as well as at School Level (are these both on the second floor?).

2. Subject Group Managers should check, and chase up, any missing information, rather than piddle about with so-called "teaching". Be aware that chasing information is tricky, since it is actually rather intangible and incredibly fast. It can, however, sometimes become ensnared by pieces of paper and you should look for these; however, information trapped in this way has a limited shelf life and quickly becomes stale and useless.

3. Once Assessment and Internal Moderation (prior to the assessment board) has taken place (hope you're following all this), Internal Moderators (recognisable by their black armbands) should complete their Moderation Report and forward it (much more official-sounding than "walk across the corridor and give it to them") to the relevant (don't just hand it to any old one) Module Leader. Note that the liberal use Of Capitals shows just how Important some of these terms really Are.

4. The Module Leader forwards a (clean) sample of student work and the Internal Moderation Report to the External Examiner (now there's a title worth killing for).

5. The Module Leader completes the Module Report citing any relevant information about the internal moderation process (like how much fun the process can be).

6. Subject Group Managers should monitor (check from time to time) whether items 4 and 5 have been done, and report progress to the Senior Managers Group meeting. Note, however, that merely wandering around shouting "have items 4 and 5 been done?" impresses no one, and they won't actually know what you're talking about. Therefore, you must translate this instruction into English, a commonly used language throughout the school.

Key responsibilities (NB This is not like being responsible for losing your car keys. It's more like the keystone in a bridge, the removal of which will cause the bridge to lose integrity and fall down.)

- **Module Leader**

To ensure that Internal Moderation has taken place, collate (staff development sessions on collating are expected to be available in 2002) the sample of student work together with the Moderation Report for the relevant External Examiner, and to cite any relevant information about the internal moderation process within the Module Report. (Citing "relevant information" is nicely vague. What this means is that, if anything goes wrong, by definition you've failed in a Key Responsibility and so blame can be attached to you, if the university's economic situation so favours.)

- **Internal Moderator**

To ensure that Internal Moderation has taken place; to complete the Internal Moderation Form and forward this to the Module Leader (sounds like the easy job, this one).

- **Programme/Subject Leader**

To ensure (using "reasonable force") that an Internal Moderator is nominated (a bit like playing tag) for each module on the programme, to inform the Subject Group Manager about this, and to alert the Subject Group Manager of any problems (but no telling tales, at this stage). To cite any relevant information (there's that blame clause again) with regard to internal moderation in the programme's annual monitoring report (ooh! fabulous – can't wait until that comes out – surely that should have been Capitalised?).

- **Subject Group Manager**

To ensure that an Internal Moderator is nominated for each module, monitor progress and ensure compliance (a basic range of compliance tools are available through the school, although managers are encouraged to bring their own, subject to safety approval procedures). To report to SMG (you'll have to go up a few lines to remind yourself of what an SMG might be – you can tell it's different from an SGM, can't you?) any areas of good practice (deliberate or accidental) or issues (a bit open, that one) with regard to Internal Moderation.

- **SMG and SQM**

To monitor Internal Moderation School-wide via Subject Group Manager. Reports to SMG. (Hang on a bit, someone's been introducing terms without reference or definition – what on earth is an "SQM"?)

Action in the event of non-compliance

In the first instance (hereinafter referred to as the instance of the first part), this should be dealt with at local level between the Module/Programme Leader and Subject Group Manager – no unseemly brawls in the playground, please; boxing gloves in the gym, perhaps. If an individual fails to comply, this becomes a line management issue and should be dealt with by the Subject Group Manager or the Director of School (wouldn't that be novel, seeing the Director of School actually being involved in the affairs of the school in something other than a redundancy matter) depending on the severity of non-compliance. So, "non-compliance" can be graded, then? Isn't that a bit like being "slightly dead"?

Note: There will be an exam on this topic in the spring term.
Note also: After a suitable monitoring period, updated recommendations and amendments will be Implemented (by some Strategy Group or Other), making this document dangerously misleading and outdated.

And these documents are what we in universities spend our time on, are they? I'm selflessly prepared to cut by 50 per cent. Immediately. ●

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