
Notes from Ivory Flats

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Why we are all folding napkins now

Imagine there are two activities going on in your Department—buttering toast and folding napkins. Buttering toast is, in everyone's reckoning, more important than folding napkins. Buttered toast is tasty, essential for thinking and productivity, can be mixed with lots of other things according to need and taste (jam, honey, marmite), and the Department has attracted some very talented toast-butterers, and indeed has a strong international reputation for the toast-butter interface. And besides, you can always wipe your fingers and mouth on your sleeve.

However, for reasons lost in the bowels of some email, folding napkins has to be organised at a higher level, as all napkins have to be folded the same way, whereas buttering toast can be left to the butterer. So a Director of Napkin Folding is appointed in the central administration, soon to be followed by a couple of NF support staff, as it turns out to be quite complex to co-ordinate across the University, where previously triangles, rectangles, squares and those funny swan like things, have flourished. Soon directives and forms are flying around, as harmonisation of napkin folding continues apace. People have less and less time to butter the toast, as they are filling in napkin forms and learning the preferred, and then approved, way of folding. The Department's reputation for Toast Buttering Science, begins to fall and it gets squeezed into shorter and shorter periods of time. Inevitably, this is put down to the greater success and importance of napkin folding, so a few more NF staff are appointed. Even though fewer napkins are needed as no one is making toast any more, they continue to multiply.

And, as you may be wondering where this is going, this is the payoff. Any central assessment of activity in the Department can now see that Napkin Folding is more important than toast buttering, and indeed toast-buttering is entirely dependent upon napkin folding. Everybody is now feverishly creating piles of folded napkins. This in turn can be ascribed to the effectiveness of the central administration's Napkin Folding Division (promotions all round!), and so also to the success of centralising. In contrast, it could be said that toast-buttering failed because it lacked central leadership, co-ordination and proper management. Eventually, the end comes when only a few dried crumbs are left on a table heaving with napkins.

Alright, an exaggeration perhaps, but this is a process we have all seen happening, although you might want to replace buttering toast and napkin folding with something more appropriate like research or teaching on the one hand, and management on the other, perhaps. Ask virtually any academic about how they spend their time, and there will be time spent teaching, time spent doing research, but more and more there is time spent on activities that can best be described as supportive, ancillary or peripheral to research and teaching (which of those three words – supportive, ancillary or peripheral – you

prefer is likely to vary depending on where you lie in the university ecosystem). Strategic committees on research, teaching planning, student feedback, curriculum reviews, REF planning, REF post-mortems, pre-grant application assessments by various levels within the university, risk assessments, and many, many reports are where the time increasingly goes. Napkin folding is not entirely irrelevant to buttering toast, but it is not the objective itself, and the same is true of the core activities – research and teaching – and the ancillary activities. Ultimately one could eat buttered toast without a napkin, although it is better to have one, but how carefully and uniformly folded it is may not matter that much.

And here we come to the heart of what I want to say. I am not someone who believes there is a conspiracy to make lives harder for the lumpen-academic, or indeed much other than good intentions among the PTB¹, but I am interested in the processes by which 'things just happen that way'. In this case, it relates to the consequences of what I would call 'centralisability', an ugly but essential word. Some tasks either have to be more centralised, or more importantly, *can* be centralised, others cannot, or cannot without changing them irrevocably. Centralisability is a measure of how easy it is to centralise something. It is scale free – collaborators on a paper require some centralisation, university finance departments a lot. However, the centralisability of a task should not be an indication of, or proxy for, its importance to the institution, and in many cases it is exactly the reverse. Indeed, it may even be the case that there is a law, like Murphy's Law, that the easier it is to centralise something, the less important it is to the actual life of the institution. This would make some sort of sense, as to a large extent the more centralisable something is, the less specific, and so the less it connects to local mentalities and contexts, and the greater the potential for distancing – for a sense of peripheralization. It is this that I mean by the 'processes by which things happen', and, of course, have happened.

Once activities have come, for better or for worse, under more central management, they will inevitably become more important to the institution than those that have not. This is partly because they are more visible to the PTB, as the activity is closer to them, and so flows more fully and easily through the institution's bloodstream, and partly because there is now a greater administrative investment. The more the investment, the more important the activity. That is how – remember where we started – that what was generally accepted as the most important (and enjoyable!) activity, buttering toast, came to be replaced by the less important (and less enjoyable) one of folding napkins. It would probably not have been intentional (except perhaps to the occasional napkin folding fanatic), but is an almost inevitable consequence of centralisation through centralisability in a system that, by and large, has thrived and flourished on local independ-

ence – Cambridge (and Oxford) perhaps being prime examples.

These thoughts have been prompted by watching my university transform itself from a dynamic and distributed network of toast-butterers, into a less happy and less successful (although that's a bit of a napkin-folding assessment based on league tables) body of napkin folders. They were perhaps crystallised by a friend sending me an old article from 2012 by Kurt Eichewald in *Vanity Fair*, on the decline of Microsoft. Towards the end there is a comment from Steve Jobs on the failure years of Apple –

“The company starts valuing the great salesmen, because they’re the ones who can move the needle on revenues, not the product engineers and designers. So the salespeople end up running the company.... [Then] the product guys don’t matter so much, and a lot of them just turn off.”

In universities it is not the salespeople, but (and this is shared with salespeople) those most visible to the centre, the ones immediately seen to be having an effect on whatever needle is being watched, who become valued, and more peripheral people, even if they are the actual drivers

of the institution’s success, become increasingly invisible. That sense of being invisible to the people at the top of the university did not seem to exist so much when I started, but now I think is an implicit perception amongst many. And being invisible tends to lower morale unless you happen to be in a superhero film.

As in my previous notes in this series, I do not have easy solutions, but recognising the problem is a starting point. One possible improvement might be to stop the drift towards seeing the activities of academics falling into three different realms – teaching, research and administration. This implies an equivalence, but is in fact a categorical confusion between ends and means. Teaching and research are our core activities, and anything else we do – as indeed we must – should clearly be seen as a means to those ends. Toast buttering is the end (or even eating the toast), and the napkins a way of minimising the resulting mess, but they are not an end in themselves.

Perhaps napkin folding is our inevitable destiny, but I hope people still at least eat buttered toast at the weekend.

¹ Powers That Be

Not
the
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