

Research can drive AUB resurgence

by Chibli Mallat

Since the early 1990s, there has been a regular survey of higher education in Great Britain known as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This determines how much funding universities receive from central government.

For the 192 universities and colleges in Britain, the equivalent of \$1150m is devoted every year to support research. Most of this money will go to the institutions which achieved the highest rank in the country. Grading goes from 5-star, down to 5, to 4, 3a, 3b, 2 and 1. The 5-star represents universities where most of the research is of international excellence. A rating of 1 shows no excellence, even at a national level.

The system has been criticised for not giving enough attention to teaching, and for putting pressure on young academics to publish too quickly.

Departments will bicker on the criteria used, but the exercise does not come much off the mark in Britain. As expected, Oxford and Cambridge topped the list, and the former polytechnics – which have recently been baptised as universities and which have concentrated on mass teaching – are at the bottom.

Nor is there much leeway for criticism in terms of the purpose of the exercise. First, it is conducted by peers, who know with fair accuracy the quality of the publications submitted to them by the various departments.

Secondly, the search for excellence in publications is natural for higher education. Progress in hard science is directly linked to research. Even for the humanities, there is a strong correlation between good publications and strong fields, including for such different disciplines as law and the theatre.

Which brings us to AUB. The American University of Beirut has a strong research tradition, which nose-dived during the war. Some of the best academics have eventually taken the route of exile. In the field which I know better, Middle Eastern Studies, giants like Ihsan Abbas, previously in the Arabic Department, and Hanna Batatu, in political science, have relocated abroad. Those who stayed were disheartened by the absurdity of research in the midst of the country's collapse.

As the system started picking up again in 1990, a genuine recruitment effort was under way, and there is new blood across the university. Research has also picked up, but there does not seem to be enough support for the young generation, and no concentration on the tools which will free promising academics from boring administrative chores, and long teaching hours in beginners and general courses, such as Arabic 101s and so-called "cultural studies".

Such courses might be useful or needed by well-rounded socialite student, but their generality and the time needed to prepare the lectures and to correct essays which are per force superficial, are devastating for research. Research is, by nature, at the edge of specialisation.

By smothering academics with general courses, specialised seminars and lectures which feed into the teacher's research are neglected. Remember Hegel: the 20-volume collection of his far-ranging works is mostly the result of his teaching at Iena and Berlin, where he used to offer a new topic for his lectures every year.

Not all academics can be Hegel, but the point should be clear: without constant renewal and specialisation there is no groundwork for research, and no publication of international excellence. This is why the new AUB president must give utmost priority to making AUB return to excellence in research.

Research can be as varied as the needs of the country: tellurian studies for the coming earthquake, literary criticism for the appreciation of Arabic literature, clinical investigation at AUH, town planning for the reconstruction of Beirut, separation of powers in the Taif agreement, archaeological digs in the city centre and elsewhere – the list is as inexhaustible as research itself.

For such research to go forward, there are some time-honoured incentives, which an AUB president can use with dexterity and determination. An outstanding scholar at the head of the university would not be amiss. He or she would recognise good-quality research and set the example. S/he would also restore confidence to AUB's international audience.

Administrative skills are needed to promote research. Research requires well-focused

money and systematic fund-raising, and AUB enjoys unique regional goodwill. Thanks to the largesse of the alumni, the re-construction of the hall, wantonly blown up three years ago, has proceeded apace.

AUB needs a good library. The library has fallen behind dramatically in recent years, and there are specialised areas which require an investment in books to bring the collection to international standards. As an example, Middle East classical and comparative studies should be given the tools needed for advanced research, at the expense of sinology – that is, until AUB develops a Chinese or Japanese department which the rapid economic growth of our Asian cousins should encourage a visionary president to develop.

Attractive research centres must be endowed and well-funded, so that the university buzzes again with the likes of Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, Philip Khoury, and other international stars, in humanities and in science, who are attracted to AUB and would visit it regularly (and maybe spend a year or two in Beirut) if the right atmosphere is built.

AUB desperately needs to come out from its present demeaning second-class status, where the pursuit of a PhD is barred. The re-establishment of a PhD programme is a priority. No university is worth its salt without it.

If the criteria of Britain's RAE were applied to AUB today, I suspect the university would get an overall 2: "national [i.e. UK-compared] excellence in up to half the disciplines". This is probably a vast improvement over the overall 1 which it would have received in 1990.

But, for AUB, this is not nearly good enough. A successful president should achieve a rating of 4 by the year 2000, and in some departments which have a particular tradition of excellence – such as clinical medicine or history – perhaps even a 5*: "international excellence in a majority of the sub-areas within the submitting department".

I know of one such profile for a historian. AUB lost him this year to the University of Cambridge.

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