

Train to be an illiterate at a British University

A few days ago I saw a little item in the Guardian newspaper whose size belied its significance. It said that Indian students were increasingly abandoning Britain as a place to study for America: and no one could blame them for doing so.

Indeed, in one case I was responsible for this. An Indian friend of mine, and anglophile, asked me whether I thought his son should go to America or come to England to study, and I advised him to choose America. It hurt me to have to say so, but I thought that an English university would in all probability offer very poor value, in more senses than one.

I think I was right, and my opinion was only confirmed when I happened upon an English university's website designed to answer potential postgraduate students' questions. A professor, who shall be nameless (for it is my intention to lay bare a tendency, not abuse an individual), answered the question of what made for successful students. He answered:

My sense is that that they get to grips really quickly with what the course requirements are. In other words, they are the students in the group other students go to, to ask them about the programme. They've read the stuff, internalised it, they've looked at the exam criteria, the essay criteria, they understand what modules you do when. They are successful because they really understand what's required.

Neither the form nor the content of this answer gives much assurance that the professor could be anything but useless. The language is abominable and the sentiment is, if anything, worse. It is as if the whole purpose of a university – and the professor's was no minor seat of learning – was to turn out yes-men and apparatchiks.

The professor went on to give his five 'top tips' for study (which made me think of racing tipsters in newspapers directed at the less cerebral citizens of our country). Here they are:

1. When planning ahead, think in terms of long-term goals.
2. Get a clear understanding of what the exam criteria are.
3. Look at journal articles for the most up-to-date evidence.
4. Keep family and friends informed about your study commitments.
5. Have a set of questions in mind when reading your study materials.

Here are my five 'top tips':

1. When thinking ahead, think ahead.
2. When concentrating, don't get distracted.
3. Agree with everything any superior says.

4. Keep a supply of sick notes in case of exam anxiety.
5. Always write sentences whose negation conveys no different meaning.

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