

JUNE.12.2006

OPINION@gairrhydd.com

# Masters in deception

Paid-for dissertations say more about university greed than student cheats



Andrew Mickel

**S**at up here in *gair rhydd* towers putting together our final paper of the year, we've been blessed with a university that seems more than willing to give us lots of material to work with.

An enormous carnival of ineptitude seems to be slowly edging its way around campus, be it cancelled graduations, the absolute farce of exams at the medical school, or the fact you can now just buy your qualifications here without bothering to do any work.

A postgraduate friend of mine has recently been offered his dissertation to be written for him in exchange for money.

Ever felt that Cardiff University is more geared towards making money out of you than actually getting down to some education? The consumerisation of education here is not a new phenomenon, but it is certainly something that is gathering pace. And one of the easiest ways for the university to make money is through international students.

While undergraduate course costs are capped, universities can charge whatever they like for postgraduate courses - over £40,000 for the most expensive in the country. And with so many international students taken on at exorbitant rates, they unsurprisingly feel like consumers. Having paid for the privilege to study here, they expect a guaranteed qualification out of the other side of it.

This would perhaps go some way to explain why some students have paid to have their dissertations written for them.

But there is more to it than that. For many students, the language barrier is so high that they would have little choice but to find someone else to write their dissertations for them. The anecdotal evidence points to some international students relying on ghost-written dissertations and group work to pull through subjects they would otherwise fail. The department in question says that English levels are ensured by language tests in order to join the masters scheme. When a British student off the course claims that "some of the students I do group work with are shocking; I'm amazed they make it here from Heathrow," then it's time to think otherwise.

This is not a problem that the university does not know about. It is alleged that last year four students were ejected from the course as their dissertations were clearly not written by them, although the University will neither confirm nor deny this. Whilst they were written in word-perfect English, the students could barely even speak the language.

But this is clearly not enough. A current student claims that "international students go home for the summer, so they can't be



kept tabs on...maybe there are different standards. I've had work handed to me that's obviously been copied off the internet as it still has the company name on it."

Is the University willingly turning a blind eye to the problem? An incredible story has emerged from one postgraduate module earlier this year. While a lecturer was out of the room, two students ran down to the logged-in computer and opened the module's exam paper on the screen in front of 300 students. Then another student ran to the front and took a copy of the paper on disk.

Think this sounds ridiculous? It gets better. Other students unhappy with what was going on took pictures on their phones and showed them to the university. But with the student in question denying that the files copied across, all they had to do was make a half-hearted apology in front of his fellow students, and no further action was taken. The examination paper has since been replaced.

Academic staff have limits as to how much they can do, with subjects often limiting the contact time they have with students to just an hour a week. But shouldn't it be possible for a department to test students on how much they actually know on their topic, much in the same way that

Vivas are used in other subjects (effectively interviews on the year's work)?

These are incredible stories that show the depths that the university will go to keep hold of fee-paying students. To international students the problem represents a massive blemish on the reputation of the majority who not only complete qualifications here, but often do so with the handicap of not using their primary language. And for the rest of us, the reputation of gaining a qualification from a university willing to take money as a higher priority than learning is self-evident.

The risk as always here is that the University is overspending the dividend we have of being an English speaking university. As I've written before, we currently have strong interest in postgraduate courses because for foreign students there is a premium attached to Anglophonic universities, coupled with a belief that British universities are of a high standard.

As universities in foreign students' home countries improve, not to mention the various visa barriers that are being erected by the government to block international students, then they are not going to be convinced by the empty rhetoric of our standards.

The numbers of foreign students com-

ing to Cardiff has slowed over the past four years, and is now such a small increase it doesn't register a change.

Short-term money chasing does nothing but frustrate the long-term chances of the university maintaining standards in the face of international competition.

Masters degrees are already touted in emails from US institutions, for those willing to pay enough money. How long before the click-and-buy masters come to the UK?

You've probably noticed by now that we have avoided mentioning the name of the department in question. To do that would sabotage the reputation of the people that actually do the work they've paid an incredible amount of money for. But this is a warning to the department that what goes on in your grubby money-making schemes does not go unnoticed. The *gair rhydd* team will be keeping an eye on the story next year.

The short-term solution is for tightened standards in departments that currently do not monitor their international students closely.

But there's a darker, more engrained problem beneath that the university doesn't seem even remotely interested in dealing with.

However, perhaps the biggest shame in all this is the opportunity cost in terms of time to the housemates, some of whom will end up spending over 100 days in the *Big Brother* house. Just think of what could be achieved in the same timescale. They might have actually made some real progress.

Let's put the housemates aside for one moment; one assumes they knew what they were getting into when they signed up. The point is that it's not just the housemates who are effectively trapped with time not standing still: it's people outside the house as well.

Carry this train of thought forward and spend a moment thinking of everyone watching *Big Brother*, every day, across the whole country, and allowing for national versions which are increasingly commonplace, across the whole world, for over 100 days.

Days and days of individual time cumulatively wasted, even if you only watch the program at the end of the day, and collectively enough time to make some real changes to things which really matter.

When George unexpectedly left, saying that he couldn't deal with the prospect of

## SOUL less

**I**t's no secret that moral posturing is the default of the Students' Union, but the morals in question do often prove to be somewhat disposable things.

The new favourite plastered around the Union building are notes that the Union promotes responsible drinking, on the bottom of Drink The Bar Dry posters. It flies in the face of the whole point of the event: one last gloriously irresponsible chance to lose control of your self-restraint and gag reflex with your friends before the end of term.

The Union has something called the SOUL campaign, a Save Our Union Licence plan to stop students from disturbing people on their way home. It's what's behind the people handing out lollies on and off throughout the year, to try and make you keep your trap shut when you go home.

The Union also puts out a 'Unity' newsletter to its neighbours to keep them informed about what is going on.

Very commendable, but in the case of the SOUL campaign, based on flimsy half-truths.

First off, it quotes a local AM as saying that the Students' Union is the "only licensee still adhering to the voluntary agreement discouraging drinks promotions". That would be the same Union that has cheaper drinks than Meths Night down at the homeless shelter.

More impressively, it also notes that the Union "has not sought to extend opening hours beyond those previously agreed". Well, until it got its licence extended to 4am.

The Union says these weren't central tenets of the campaign, but just notes in supplement to it.

But does that really change the fact that the Union is telling neighbours one thing, before disregarding it and doing something completely different?

The Union only maintains morals on a pragmatic basis - as soon as they get in the way of some other benefit, they're shed like a snake's skin.

## Faceless

**S**o, Berliner, eh? Weeks of frantic work have paid off, but there are definitely a few problems with going *Guardian*.

Byline photos, it turns out, were created just to mock writers. I've been happily slumming in facial anonymity on these pages for six months, and now look what's happened. Yes, hello puddingface, I'm talking about you.

Be reassured that in person I look more like the offspring of Mark and Jeremy in *Peep Show*; Peter Crouch; or Hugh Grant left in a test tube too long.

So the next time you think that wall to wall colour, pin-sharp digital printing and well-designed space is a good idea, just think of all the ugly, mewling faces up on the fourth floor and reconsider.



Tom Wellingham

## Big Brother is a complete waste of everybody's time

**A**re we really a nation of people who are ready and willing to prostitute their dignity and sell out their self-respect by taking part in something they believe will move them forward further in life more than a bit of good old-fashioned hard work?

Many of us might consider ourselves relatively happy with our lots; however, even a brief look at the seasonal television train-wreckage that is *Big Brother* reveals a number of people who are desperate for something more and are using the show to achieve this.

The format of the show is not where my problems with it lie; indeed, it's well produced and diverting enough to ensure that the Carphone Warehouse are getting their (no doubt obscene) amount of sponsorship money's worth from the proceedings.

The main gripe I have is the almost total lack of ambition displayed by the housemates and the effect that this has on those choosing to watch the show.

While the show's producers, Endemol, obviously only pick housemates who will provide no shortage of good material for when the show is cut together in time for the nation's daily drip-feed of house

footage, the results never seem to be a great advert for the human race in general.

Would a house full of achievers or thinkers be any less watchable? Here in the *gair rhydd* offices, we know from personal experience that more balanced individuals definitely apply - one of our own TV editors was among them. Or is it that these people simply don't get considered?

To achieve anything worthwhile in this world it takes plenty of hard graft. Simple. The work ethic seems to have been completely erased from those in the house. There just aren't any quick fixes for success; there are very few truly successful people who don't put in the time required, and more, to earn their rewards.

The reality of reality TV shows like *Big Brother* or *Pop anything* is that they lead to the kind of success which those who have a genuine interest in the field wouldn't go near with a barge pole.

The winners of these contests would have been much better off working their way up from a grassroots level and earning the respect of their peers along the way, rather than being used as a money-making tool for boardroom executives. Will, who? Steve, what? Craig, when? Quite.

being famous, (apart from asking what on earth he thought was going to happen when he entered the house in the first place) he needn't have worried about impending fame.

Getting into the house might be relatively straight forward, but sooner or later you will also have to come out again and in two weeks no-one will remember you wasting your time anyway.

The real pity is that George's time spent in the house has just slowed the rest of us down a little bit more.



BB's NIKKI: A real pity