

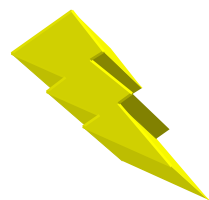
Elephants in tutus will do anything for cash

There is something embarrassing and incongruous about academics trying to make money, like those circus acts in which the elephants wear tutus. In the wings hovers the spectre of Doctor Johnson and his opinion of women preaching: "Like a dog walking on his hind legs: it is not done well, but you are surprised to see it done at all." Indeed if you supposed that a government committed to expanding higher education would at least not expect to try to combine that expansion with spending cuts then you may well be surprised.

But that is what is being attempted. I am quite prepared to believe the people who complain that if you add all the cuts and withdrawals of funding together, some universities are being asked to reduce their spending by 25 per cent. So all over Hong Kong the latest scholarly scoop has been replaced as a topic of conversation by the need to find some new means of raising money. This discussion usually proceeds along predictable lines. It starts with the most labour-saving way of raising money, which is to persuade someone to give it to you. This is apparently a popular and effective solution to the financial problem in America, but in Hong Kong it has a long way to go.

In the meantime we go on to the next resort in times of trouble: selling education. The accepted euphemism for this is "self-funding", as in "self-funding courses". The word "profit" is not mentioned, though it hovers in the background with the elephants and dogs walking on hind legs. How we must all envy the University of Oxford, which

owing to some historical quirk is allowed to give out master's degrees on the basis of the passage of time and a small sum of money.



In Hong Kong even the oldest universities have to do some teaching before they dish out the diploma. It is interesting to see, though, how time telescopes in a fast-moving city like ours. Master's degrees which take three years in other places take two here, those that take two years can be completed in one, and the one-year model can shed its dissertation and be completed in a tidy nine months.

Even so, there is a limit to how much you can do in a place this size. So the academic money-dream then turns to that unlikely Eldorado, the mainland.

This is not a solution available to everyone. Mainland students are even more ruthlessly pragmatic in their pursuit of degrees with useful career-boosting content than their local counterparts. This leads to an interestingly ambivalent approach to course planning. First degrees for local consumption are routinely presented as scholarly exercises, replete with breadth, background and humane educational ideals. Degrees to be offered in the market place, on the other hand, shamelessly flaunt their practical and professional utility. In a few years we could see local students taught almost entirely by underpaid and

underqualified part-timers, while the full-time staff on the taxpayers' books are peddling oversold educational trash on the mainland in pursuit of a fast buck.

I am sure there are plenty of economies that could be made at local universities in the

long run. No doubt the present system is in some ways rather bloated and extravagant. But it is the only system we have. Too many changes at a time will wreck it.

