

## *How to Escape Academic Life*

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There are many good reasons to escape from academic life in Britain. Most of them can be summarised in a single phrase: universities have become proletarianised. The Research Assessment Exercise is merely a symptom of a much deeper malaise affecting the British university system. Student numbers have expanded dramatically faster than have resources. Research facilities have been cut back. Salaries have fallen substantially in real terms. The incompetent and bumbling Professor Welch in Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, written half a century ago, enjoyed a life-style which placed him firmly amongst the comfortably off members of the upper middle class. Few academics in the UK can aspire to that now.

Academics are being turned from valued, independent professionals into workers in a modern factory of ideas. There is constant pressure to publish, constant pressure to raise research money, constant pressure to attract and keep students. And just as workers, say, driving the lorries of large companies are monitored constantly, so too are academics. The process of intensive form-filling, checking and monitoring is an inevitable consequence of an industry in which the workforce is being gradually de-skilled.

The shortage of resources leads some of our leading scholars to leave for the United States. More insidiously, few of our best graduates now choose university careers. And of those that do, many are attracted by exactly the kind of security that workers

in the car plants felt in the 1950s and 1960s. They appeared to have a job for life, and were paid reasonable but not exciting amounts in return for performing dull and repetitious acts.

But all is not doom and gloom. My own experience tells me that our very best young people are just as good, if not better, than those of previous generations. In the current circumstances, the best possible advice to an aspiring young academic is not to be one at all.

The outside world can seem a frightening place to academics. Most have spent their entire lives since the age of five in educational institutions. Many have become institutionalised, in much the same way as habitual criminals often prefer life in jail precisely because of the certainties which it brings compared to the unpredictable demands of civilian life. But the skills which lead to success in academia can be transferred directly into the world of business.

The ability to create an image of intellectual superiority by simply mastering a few techniques gives a decided impetus to the aspiring academic's career path. Devotees of Stephen Potters' great works such as *Gamesmanship* and *One-Upmanship* will recognise immediately the qualities which are required. The ability to create the upper hand in a seminar or conversation with only the merest of efforts, to refer confidently to concepts which others feel they ought to know, is essential. Above all, one must always be 'in play', ready to create a sense of confusion or inferiority amongst one's colleagues at any time.

These principles can be applied more generally to life in a large commercial organisation. The purpose of most meetings, for example, is to appear to make a contribution to, say, the launch of a new product, whilst ensuring that the less gifted people present do the actual work. And work on any particularly difficult or career-enhancing topics can be assigned to your brightest underlings, so that you yourself can gain the necessary superficial knowledge of them with the minimum of effort.

More seriously, the business world is far more intellectual than most people realise, in several ways. In particular, companies need to innovate all the time. This is necessary not just for success, but simply to survive. A firm which stands still is a firm which dies.

Innovation is what good academics do. They conceive of ideas, of concepts, which have not previously existed, and bring them into life. Much of the time, this type of work takes place within a given intellectual paradigm. It is not especially original, but it still involves an extension of existing knowledge. Very occasionally, someone will think of a genuinely new idea, a new way of approaching a problem.

This is exactly what goes on in business. A new brand has to be invented. A better way of organising the process of production discovered. A different advertising campaign has to be imagined. All these activities involve intellectual discovery, creating things or concepts which no-one else has ever thought of. They are no different in principle to most of the research which takes place in universities.

Yet all this may seem remote and alien to an academic. At first sight, it certainly looks very different to writing an article for an obscure journal. But do not be disheartened. For there is a lot of scope in commercial life for work which will seem much more immediately familiar.

Universities in Britain and elsewhere have long lost their monopoly of intellectual life. A great deal of original and exciting work is done within companies. Mathematicians and physicists, for example, have already learned that their skills can be employed directly in financial markets. Our practical understanding both of how such markets work in general, and how complex packages of derivatives should be priced, to give a specific example, has been advanced by what goes on in the City of London and in hedge funds.

Another example is illuminating the true internal structure of companies. Not what the formal organisational chart says is the structure, but what it is in practice, which groups are central to the organisation, which collaborate, and which are isolated. Knowledge of how social networks operate and of computer science is directly relevant to this area.

Even academic areas which may seem far removed from commercial life can find an application. A medieval historian specialising in heretical movements, say, could have valuable insights for an international security company on how to assess the intentions of terrorist networks.

Working for an established firm is all very well. But Unilever, Microsoft and Goldman Sachs already exist. True, they need people who can think intelligently, and academics with the right attitude and motivation can make the transition to them with surprising ease. Yet the ultimate prize is to create a successful company of your own. This in itself is an act of pure intellectual creation. The very purpose of the company is to persuade people to accept an idea, an offer, which is unique to you.

Successful academics are trying to do this all the time. They advertise their ideas at conferences, they write proposals to bring in money either for themselves or their research teams. But embed the idea in a company, and the scope for getting it financed is expanded enormously. You are no longer reliant on persuading a single, all powerful research council or a mere handful of grant-giving institutions to fund your intellectual concept. Instead, there is a vast range of people who can be convinced to hand over money for the value of the services or products, for the ideas which you are providing.

The benefits are not merely financial. First, a successful company based upon your own ideas ensures that these will be exposed to a much larger audience than will usually be the case in academic life. The typical journal article is, after all, read by only three other people, or is it as many as five? And sales of academic books are usually confined to their own narrow specialities, lingering almost unread on university bookshelves.

Second, the flow of profits from a successful venture is a source of conference budgets and research finance which is entirely under your own control. Once you

have the money, it is yours to do with exactly as you please, beholden to no-one. Ideas and concepts which would stand no chance of being funded by box-ticking research councils are yours to explore.

Really successful ventures, of course, can make stupendous amounts of money. Netscape and Cisco Systems, for example, were both started by academics who turned into entrepreneurs. Few, of course, succeed on this scale, in just the same way that few have the Nobel prize conferred upon them. But it is exactly the completely original idea which offers the possibility of success on this scale.

Despite all this, the flow of people from universities into the commercial world is weak. It seems to be held back by a combination of fear and a form of snobbery. Like the landed gentry of old, secure in their independent incomes, academics with taxpayer-financed salaries often despise the world of 'trade'. Their fear is just the ordinary, everyday fear of the unknown.

Both these views are mistaken. A substantial number of academics have many of the qualities required for success in the business world, especially in small or even start-up companies. Networking, creating new ideas, entrepreneurial selling of these concepts, all these are second nature to most successful academics. The only thing they have to fear is fear itself.