

Time for a radical shake-up

My father, who was a schoolteacher, used to say: "Those who can — do, and those who can't — teach." I have heard various modifications to this quip, such as adding "... and those who can't teach — manage". A more appropriate addition for the pharmaceutical industry would be "... and those who can't do — regulate".

Having spent the bulk of my working life "doing", which has been developing pharmaceutical products in the industry, I thought a return to academia would allow me to use the experience and give something back — to pass on to young minds something of what I had learnt.

Academics had other ideas. University appointments today are all about money. To secure a lectureship the important thing is to bring money with you, or show a history of successful grant applications to secure funds. There is an obsession with research assessments and ratings because they are linked to funding. Amazingly, as part of the selection process, it is still the number of academic papers published that seems to be important, not quality of achievement, such as invented, patented technologies or the introduction of "real" products on to the pharmaceutical market. An interest in, or an ability to teach the next generation also appears irrelevant. This may help to explain why what is taught is rather out of touch with the real world, a criticism of academia that must be as old as the universities themselves. It may not have mattered too much with theoretical or classical subjects, but with a practical discipline like pharmacy, which involves getting a job done, it is quite a different matter. It is simply not good enough for academics to say that it is the research that matters, which has been

the line taken for generations. When students start to pay significant top-up fees then there is going to be a greater expectation to be taught what matters and universities will have to change. The proof to society of the standard of university teaching in pharmacy is in the quality of the resultant workforce and, as the recent *Which?* report (and the one before that) suggests, there is a problem at some point. Are undergraduates taught what they need to know to be effective in the real world? Are those who teach in academia up to it, or do they simply regard the teaching element as a necessary sideline which distracts from the perceived real task of research? As things stand, those on the bottom rung of the academic ladder must beaver away at some erudite research, simply to notch up a few more papers as the first steps on a well-trodden academic career path.

All I can say to new graduates is that if they have any ambitions to go into academia, then they should do it first, because, in a few years, academics will not be interested in them, even after they have proved they can "do", at the coal face. Far better, it seems, is to attempt to teach when they have just gained their PhD and have an interest in research but no idea how to do the teaching, or experience of the world outside. Of course, this is how it has always been and the system simply perpetuates itself.

With the Government's ideal of having 50 per cent of school leavers proceeding to higher education, it is time for a radical shake up in the universities. From my recent experience, it is not before time.

— *Contributed.*