THE A.D.D STUDENT & THE VAGRANT ACADEMIC

Two throwaway lines in the recent[1, 2]issues of RSC Chemistry World have struck a deep chord; the lines are "thinking takes time and space"[1] and "the laughable idea of a job for life"[2].

Fourteen years of University teaching , have shown me the impetus to produce a rapidly changing curriculum combined with endless assessments for students have resulted in a sense of relentless stress; both enemies surely, to the quiet needed to think and develop ideas.

Thinking requires time and space. Students, constantly bombarded by the white-noise of technology in every aspect of their social and academic live, have lost the precious resource of solitude. Solitude should be savoured as a time set aside for the peaceful and deeply rewarding search for knowledge. It is now perceived as a situation to be avoided at all costs as "time alone" makes a student look like a social "loser".

The mantra now is "constant collaboration, ceaseless activity" much of it on-line, as a measure of learning and mental growth. In an attempt to be up-to-date with everything that is "out there", our students, flit & e-surf from thought to thought, search to search, until they forget what their original thought was. I very much fear we are producing a large crop of young graduates who may be afflicted with what I term "academic A.D.D".

The second point made in Sella's (Afterglow) article is that "the laughable idea of a job for life is a setback to the pursuit of interesting science". This is so true. One is now expected to have a portfolio career, moving restlessly from place to place, so that one's CV looks exciting. The impact upon the student is that the academic no-longer feels pride in the education of the student. The academic carries out teaching duties as if it were a branch of the entertainment industry, with flashy power-points and eye-catching gimmicks which are the new measures of good teaching!

It appears inconsequential that Chemistry graduates with Firsts and 2:1's may not know their seven times tables, the structure of an amide bond or how to carry out simple serial dilutions, indeed they do not understand the concept of a serial dilution! Perhaps this is because laboratory technicians & PG demonstrators have been allowed to replace academics in the labs, leaving undergraduate students obediently & mindlessly following cartoon-type laboratory practical manuals that demand very little thought.

If we add an HR strand to our analysis, the vagrant or roving academic dispenses with HR's duty-of-care. What ought to be a mutually beneficial arrangement, where student and academic are secure, with the academic set free to pursue interesting science and to do the best for the student, no longer exists. It is "every man/woman for him/herself". It is reasonable to expect that the goals of HR and the academic are not mutually exclusive. The reality, however, is that it is

difficult to find the practical intersection when implementing the modern mission statements of the academic and HR. The training that fits someone for a job in HR may well be incompatible with understanding the world of true academia. Consequently, "successful" academics are the ones who have learnt to play the "HR game".

The result of the HR concept of the "redeployment of skills" is that the academic always has one eye "on the door" rather than on interesting science, wondering when and where the next stopping point must be along the career path, instead of settling down in one place, and having ownership in the success of a particular institution. Alternately, the way "forward" is now perceived to be through "applying for promotion to HR" rather than because, high quality work recognized by "line managers", is rewarded.

The resulting vagrant mentality in the academic, coupled with overt activity that results in the production flashy presentations & meaningless curriculum changes, can be likened to an absent parent's pretensions that parental abdication of sustained and systematic paternal responsibility can somehow be replaced by 20 minutes of "quality time" with the hapless youngster. That "quality time" is measured by the entertainment value of the activity in a room in which the furniture has been re-arranged.

The combined effect of HR's policies, the vagrant academic whose first concern is "looking good" and the resulting ADD student, cannot provide a high percentage of thinking graduates because HR, academics and students all have differing goals. The salvation for this state of affairs may lie in the sheer numbers now doing degrees; with so many graduates being pitch-forked into the economy, the probability of finding graduates who can think may be a little higher. However, this is a wasteful system. The ideal purpose of a science education is ultimately for academics (protected by a cognizant HR) to lead their students by example, in the pursuit of interesting (rather than entertaining) science, and having the power to insist that all students have the time and space to develop the "art of thinking",

Angeline Kanagasooriam

1. *Opinion, Classic Kit,* Dufton's Spiral Column, " *The Winding Path to Chemical Virtue"* p. 68, Chemistry World| October 2012| www.chemistryworld.org.
2. *Opinion, Classic Kit,* Penning's Vacuum Gauge, *"Born not from the Spark of an idea but the Afterglow"* p.70 Chemistry World| November 2012| www.chemistryworld.org.