Right where it belongs

Being part of BIS means science is now at the epicentre of Whitehall and government policy, says Lord Drayson

Some in the science community have expressed concerns that responsibility for science policy now comes under the new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). They voiced their misgivings to me directly through Twitter – where this article was commissioned. The micro-blogging and social-networking site may harboor dangers for politicians, but I find it a useful source of feedback from the scientific front line.

The points made to me included the suggestion that science will have a diminished profile in BIS, that it will be subsumed to business, and that my ministerial role covering defence and by creating a dedicated Cabinet committee. Gordon Brown, Lord Mandelson and I have stated repeatedly that the ring-fenced science and research budget is secure. Far from cutting science, I have argued that my ministerial role covering defence and by creating a dedicated Cabinet committee. Gordon Brown, Lord Mandelson and I have stated repeatedly that the ring-fenced science and research budget is secure. Far from cutting science, I have argued that the Defence Industrial Strategy, and all decisions on equipment for the armed forces, were made on the basis of strong scientific evidence and capability.

I have a similar brief this time, with a particular focus on defence science and technology. Of course science is essential to the development of weaponry – it was ever thus – yet breakthroughs associated with such necessary work have also delivered considerable benefits for civilians. The ultrasonic technology first used to detect submarines now helps to identify heart defects in unborn babies.

But there is a wider objective driving both devolution to BIS and the trend towards combined ministerial duties. One of the Government’s biggest challenges is to improve co-ordination among departments. The more that can be done to address that challenge, the better. In recent months, the New Life for Science has served a vital function by building consensus across Whitehall on how to boost our national capacity in this industry. Such co-ordination is just as critical in addressing major issues such as climate change. I see my parallel role at the Ministry of Defence, where I sit on the strategic Ad-hoc Committee, as the key to ensuring that the breadth of the science agenda can be delivered.

That can only be good thing, but equally, it is one of my tasks to ensure that science does not become overly subservient to business. In this area of government, Bill Clinton’s famous slogan – “It’s the economy, stupid” – rings true.

Labour has long recognised the importance of basic research, knowledge for its own sake, public engagement and the urgency of recruiting future generations of scientific talent for the professions. My brief is the same: as an advocate for the continuation of science and engineering within BIS and across Government.

I’m happy to be judged on the extent to which British science as a whole – whether on Twitter, in the pages of Times Higher Education or before a new parliamentary committee for science – has moved forward – whether on Twitter, in the pages of Times Higher Education or before a new parliamentary committee for science.

Lord Drayson is Minister for Science. • Follow Lord Drayson on Twitter: @lord_drayson. • Follow Times Higher Education on Twitter: @timeshighered. • Follow Lord Drayson on Twitter: www.twitter.com/ldrayson

Pedagogy, Lionel Trilling once wrote, “is a depressing subject to all persons of sensibility.” So much the worse for universities. Grading, the enemy of discernment, is an issue amenable to the collective control of professors yet the one issue on which they have managed the least co-ordinated success. What is the function of grading? Why are grades so inflated? Stuart Rojstaczer, a retired Duke University professor and founder of GradeInflation.com, published the most recent large body of data in the spring. “If current trends hold,” he writes, “Grade ‘A’ will be the average in the coming decade at most of the highly selective private colleges and universities in the United States.”

Rojstaczer draws his conclusions from 200 schools with combined enrollment of more than 2 million. But the range of opinion on the matter is wider than his conclusions. Is it not the problem better graded, call it, compression, devaluation or conflation? A group of papers from a conference at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2003, published last year as Grade Inflation: Academic Standards in Higher Education, captures diversity of thinking so well that a conscientious reader may come away more confused than before. Some of the participants deny that the problem exists.

Are students getting smarter? We have no way to compare grades across disciplines and professional schools. The question, moreover, implies the ability to track smartness across time, a method discouraged by the radical historicism predominant in the humanities in the 1980s and 1990s. The postmodern academy refers the disappearing distinction between potential and performance to the inability of interpretation.

Citing untapped potential is the most common gesture in the bid to raise grades – as if learning to tap one’s potential is not the aim of education, or the meaning of achievement does not lie in limits. To be judged not on what one has done, but on what one might have done if only the context had been different! Abolishing grades might expose students to greater self-knowledge.

Higher education might return to the project of moral improvement that Trilling claimed for liberalism. “The distressing thing about our examination questions is that they are not ridiculous,” he complained, “they make perfectly good sense – such good sense that the young person who answers them can never again know the force and terror of what has been communicated to him by the works he is being examined on.”

We have taught today’s students too well and too little. The 19th-century founders of the professions organised teaching and learning around “a vertical vision”, according to Barton J. Beddroll’s The Culture of Professionalism. “The face was falling gnawed away at every climber, and this fear – abjectuous in the middle class – was often the source of a general anxiety within individuals which no amount of monetary security, public honours, personal confidence seemed to eliminate.” When students hustle for a higher grade, they are not, as some claiming teaching as a service providers in a scheme of advancement.

“The teaching of modern literature”, the essay by Trilling that I have been mentioning, portrays the university as a locus of such unresolved conflicts. Trilling himself seems diffident before the worldly demands visited upon the academic professional. In so far as the students obey his terms, they do so “with a happy vagueness, a delighted gluttony, a joyous sense of power in the use of received or receivable generalisations, a grateful wonder at how easy it is to formulate and utter, that little resistance is offered to their intentions”. The term papers come in. His heart sinks. “If that despair strikes us we are tempted to give up the usual and accredited ways of evaluating education.”

The work itself imposed its own demands on Trilling, as it did on the first, and the students second. His pedagogy entailed closing the gap from both ends. The academic profession has never agreed on the function of grades. The party of compression has known all along that another conversation was happening at the margins of our universities. Not grading and scoring, but commission policy innovation has been its manner of valuation. Let it serve as one measure of our reconstruction.

Academics can’t agree on the function of grades or stop their rise – perhaps we’d all be better off without them, says John Summers. The work itself imposed its own demands on Trilling, as it did on the first, and the students second. His pedagogy entailed closing the gap from both ends. The academic profession has never agreed on the function of grades. The party of compression has known all along that another conversation was happening at the margins of our universities. Not grading and scoring, but commission policy innovation has been its manner of valuation. Let it serve as one measure of our reconstruction.

John Summers is the author of Every Fury: The Humanities in the University. He is a visiting scholar at the Boswell Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College.