Books

What did that degree do to you?

The PhD Trap Revisited by Cude, Wilfred, Dundurn, 2001, ISBN 1-55-002-345-4, price $22.99, £11.99

Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes their Lives by Schmidt, Jeff, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, ISBN 0-8476-9364-3, price $26.95, £20.95

Credentials are at the core of higher education. A bachelor's degree or, better yet, a doctorate are valuable to their possessors, while for universities it is crucial to be able to award them. Indeed, without a government-protected monopoly over the right to award degrees, universities would virtually collapse. If any small business could grant Harvard or Oxford degrees, what would be the point of having the real thing?

This question highlights the symbolic importance of degrees. If the main value of studying at Harvard or Oxford were what was learned, then having this learning certified with a degree would be superfluous. In reality, degrees often become more important than the learning they are supposed to represent. Why would a student cheat if the only purpose of enrolment was learning? Take away the degrees and any other certification of attendance or performance and possibly nine out of ten students would quit immediately.

Having an appropriate degree is essential for obtaining certain types of jobs, most obviously in law and medicine but also in many other fields. Prospective academics are usually expected to have PhDs, and a professor without even an undergraduate degree is a rare specimen indeed, irrespective of how much learning a person might have acquired independently. Universities are at least consistent, dispensing 'meal tickets' for other occupations and expecting their own teachers to have them as well.

Marxists have analysed the role of schooling in the 'reproduction of the class structure,' namely providing a way to maintain social stratification that seems legitimate to everyone concerned. As near-universal education through high school has become the expectation in

many countries, the task of legitimating economic inequality has increasingly fallen to universities, with a first degree being expected for ever more occupations. It is not hard to develop arguments against this trend, for example that most learning in higher education is not relevant to the jobs for which it is a prerequisite, that the quest for credentials undermines the intrinsic motivation to learn, or that remaining in educational institutions for so many years produces burnt out conformist students whose sparks of independence and creativity were extinguished long ago.

Although academics are noted for their willingness to critically analyse every sphere of endeavour, scrutiny of the credential system is unusual, since it strikes at the heart of academics' status and privilege. One of the most powerful critiques is Randall Collins' *The Credential Society* (1979). Collins argued that little is learned in schools, with most learning occurring on the job. Indeed, grades are not good predictors of subsequent success in any occupation – except academia. Collins argued that education has not increased social mobility, since cultural goods, namely what it takes to succeed in school, are passed from parents to children more readily than economic and political resources. Educational stratification links together the realms of material production and cultural domination, creating a 'sinecure society.'

A few years earlier, Ronald Dore (1976) described the explosion of formal education in Third World countries, mainly due to the role of credentials in regulating entry into modern sector jobs. The enormous expansion of the education system is a response to parent and student pressures, but is highly wasteful when there are insufficient relevant jobs for graduates. In late-developing countries, Dore found wide use of educational certificates for occupational selection, massive inflation in qualifications and emphasis on examinations at the expense of genuine learning. With higher education today treated like a business with a large 'export market' (Third World students attending First World universities), Dore's critique seems just as relevant as it was a quarter of a century ago.

Whereas deschoolers such as Ivan Illich (1971) received considerable public attention in the 1970s, critics such as Collins and Dore have been largely ignored. While there has long been soul-searching within academia, for example over social irrelevance, declining standards, commercialism and managerialism, it seldom focusses on credentials. Therefore it is worthwhile looking at two recent books that zero in on this issue.

Wilfred Cude is a Canadian literary scholar who, as a result of his own unpleasant experiences while trying to obtain a PhD, turned his critical gaze on the degree. In 1987 he self-published *The PhD Trap* and, after updating and adding new material, found a commercial publisher for *The PhD Trap Revisited,* twice the size of the original. What exactly is the 'trap' to which Cude refers? For prospective PhD students, it is an incredibly long journey with no guarantee of arrival. For US science PhD students in 1995, the average elapsed time from beginning (after the previous degree) to end was 8.4 years, while for humanities the average was an astounding 12.0 years. Years enrolled and elapsed time for completed doctorates have both been steadily increasing in the past several decades. Cude wants to warn potential students that embarking on a PhD course may not be the best way to get ahead, especially as many drop out along the way. Doctoral study is hazardous intellectually as well, encouraging a narrow conformity through the dissertation topic as well as acquiescence to supervisory demands and whims. This is useful training in conformity. Why then should the PhD be the entry requirement for undertaking innovative research and for teaching undergraduates?

The PhD, for Cude, is also a trap for society as a whole, given that enormous social resources are devoted to training PhD students, with dubious returns. He argues for validation of alternative career paths, such as second master's degrees and teaching internships.

The PhD Trap Revisited ranges much more widely than its title would suggest. Cude examines the history of universities, early criticisms of the doctorate and methodological conflicts within disciplines. He tells the sad stories of research students who tried to challenge the way they were treated and offers a few success stories of scholars whose work was recognised and who obtained good academic jobs despite their lack of a doctorate.

Cude's writing is engaging throughout, and even his harshest comments are phrased elegantly. He gives special attention to the humanities, where he is especially scathing. Acknowledging that science PhD graduates from prestigious universities may have learned something and made a contribution to knowledge, he says 'A person with the PhD in most areas of the humanities or social sciences, however, especially when acquired from any of the less prestigious universities of the United States, Great Britain, or Canada, has probably demonstrated only tact, tenacity, and a high tolerance for exotic cerebral sadomasochism. Such a person will probably not make any contribution to the advancement of knowledge, and might well teach in

a manner deterring those who could.' (p 309). As Cude says, 'Very few tenured [academics] would trouble themselves over a book like this.' (p 302). Who indeed would like to contemplate the possibility that the years that they had toiled to obtain a PhD had been a wasteful and limiting process?

A different critique of credentialing is provided by Jeff Schmidt in *Disciplined Minds,* a powerful dissection of professionals, with the chief charge being that they are selected and moulded to have system-reinforcing attitudes, thereby directing their creative energies to system-specified tasks, where 'the system' is the current set of power relationships in society. Schmidt's first task is to show that professionals such as doctors, lawyers and scientists are timid personally and politically. More specifically, while they may take enlightened stands on distant social issues, they are uncritical on the job, for example being against democratisation. A key concept in *Disciplined Minds* is ideological discipline. Schmidt argues that the training of professionals serves above all to make them able and willing to operate within their employer's value system. In short, professional training is a form of ideological indoctrination.

Schmidt, a physicist, gives many examples from scientific research. He describes how scientists' curiosity is oriented in certain directions by funding and job opportunities, for example research grants from the military, yet researchers prefer not to acknowledge their service to external goals. Schmidt says that researchers have 'assignable curiosity,' namely a willingness to orient their intellectual energies in whatever direction funding might dictate. That makes them ideal intellectual tools for those groups with power and money.

How do professionals become this way? Nearly half of *Disciplined Minds* is devoted to selection of professionals. When students enter professional training, many of them are optimistic and idealistic. On leaving they are 'pressured and troubled' (p 120), willing to join occupational hierarchies. Professional training has transformed the students' attitudes – and this transformation, Schmidt argues, is training's key role. He gives special attention to examinations, with a case study of the PhD qualifying examination. (The equivalent in the British system would be the honours year.) The examination, Schmidt claims, is a social framework endorsing the status quo. He shows this by looking at the exam as a whole, at the collection of problems and at particular questions.

For example, often it's necessary to study earlier exam papers in order to learn how to answer 'trick' questions. By accepting this,

students submerge their natural curiority in the field and learn to direct their attention to problems set by teachers, however irrelevant or contrived. In this way, the exam system favours those least critical of the status quo.

While those familiar with quantum mechanics will enjoy his analysis of a trick question on a qualifying exam, *Disciplined Minds* is not at all a technical book, with examples from various professional fields and long extracts from letters he has received from reflective students.

In professional training, there are some who drop out along the way. Indeed, since professionals have high status and incomes, there are many more who aspire to join the ranks than there are positions. If all those who failed to make it became rebellious, the system of professional privilege would be unstable. Schmidt accordingly spends time describing how losers are 'cooled out,' by being led to believe that failure is their own responsibility. In this, an ideal mechanism is an exam that is biased – especially in fostering conformity – but appears nonpartisan.

Even more provocative than his analysis of professional selection is Schmidt's advice on resistance. He draws on a US military anti-brainwashing manual to give hints on resisting professional indoctrination. He concludes the book with a list of 33 suggestions for radical professionals, ranging from encouraging colleagues to connect with radical organisations to refusing self-identification as a professional.

For those seeking a radical critique of professions, *Disciplined Minds* should be added to a select list including works by Collins (1979) and Illich *et al.* (1977). In comparison with other studies, especially work in the sociology of professions, Schmidt's book is far more hands-on. He is a genuine radical insider telling what it's like and what you can do about it.

In order to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of both *The PhD Trap Revisited* and *Disciplined Minds,* it is useful to compare the books on a number of fronts. What they have in common is an acute awareness of the limitations of professional training, especially the training of academics. They each draw attention to the way that research degrees lead to conformism rather than creativity. They each point to the conservativism of successful academics, at least within the academic system. They each deplore the massive waste of talent as well as the destruction of idealism in the credentialing process.

However, the purposes of their analyses are rather different. Cude's purpose is to show the limitations of the PhD as a training mechanism, whereas Schmidt's is the broader task of revealing how professionals

become so timid politically and intellectually. Cude's goal is reform of the PhD system, whereas Schmidt seeks to encourage radical professionals to be part of a wider process of egalitarian social change. Given these divergent purposes, the commonalities in their criticisms of the credentialing process are striking.

Cude, a humanities scholar, writes in elegant essay style, drawing on classic works in a discursive fashion in order to reveal the intellectual continuities in critical perspectives on the PhD. Cude builds on earlier critiques in order not to appear too radical himself. Schmidt, a scientist, essentially has designed his own intellectual framework from first principles, rather analogously to the way a theoretical physicist would start with a set of equations (such as Maxwell's equations for electromagnetism) and derive consequences. This makes Schmidt's work much more original, but by the same token he does not situate it within the large literature on the sociology of education and the sociology of professions (e.g., Collins, 1979; Larson, 1979), as well as works on the 'new class' or professional-managerial class (e.g., Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979; Gouldner, 1979). For some readers that will be a weakness in Schmidt's book, but perhaps his independence of earlier scholarship – given that he has read into these literatures but decided that they do not add to his perspective – are part of what it takes to produce such an original analysis.

Both authors focus on the North American experience, using frameworks and examples close to their own experience. Credentials and professional training are different elsewhere, to a greater or lesser degree. Readers will need to use their judgement about how much of these critiques apply in other systems.

Both Cude and Schmidt are fascinated by dramatic expressions of frustration by disgruntled students and academics, giving examples of research students who either committed suicide or killed their supervisors, or both. Both authors look at the credentialing process from the point of the view of the student and both are attuned to the enormous waste and frustration involved, perhaps leading them to expect and notice those few cases where frustration manifested itself as violent rage. Their books, in their own ways, show why such rage is predictable. Perhaps the surprising thing is that there is relatively little violence!

Whereas Cude's personal experiences led him to write his book, with Schmidt the sequence was reversed. Employed as an editor at *Physics Today* for 19 years, he was dismissed after his employer saw *Disciplined Minds*. That's one provocative book!

It is hard to read these books without asking, 'What did doing my degrees do to me?' and becoming either defensive or self-satisfied. Both Cude and Schmidt would like readers to ask the question and be self-reflective but then to go out and do something about the problems. The credential system is enormously powerful and is not going to change quickly. But for those who want to be more aware and make a personal contribution to change, these books are good places to start.

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'Something had to be done'

Innovating in Higher Education: Teaching, Learning and Institutional Cultures by Andrew Hannan and Harold Silver, Buckingham, The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, (2000) ISBN 0 335 20537 2, £65.00 (paperback, £22.50)

This book tackles issues of central interest to higher education practitioners and managers, and on a sufficiently high theoretical and empirical plane to make it a solid contribution to the academic literature of institutional change.

The authors give a sure-footed account of the recent history of innovation in undergraduate learning and teaching. This was originally the concern of few pioneers such as Ruth Beard, Lewis Elton and the