

schools. It is peddled directly to your children by their credulous and apparently moronic teachers." And now, it seems, peddled to your researchers by your credulous and moronic HR department, along with the equally discredited psychobabble of neurolinguistic programming. In the UK, most good universities have

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stayed free of quackery. But it is creeping in. A lot of the pressure for this sort of nonsense comes from a Government obsessed with measuring the unmeasurable. Again, real management people have already worked this out. Two new government initiatives provide beautiful examples of HR mentality in action. They are Skills for Health and the newly created Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council (already dubbed Ofquack).

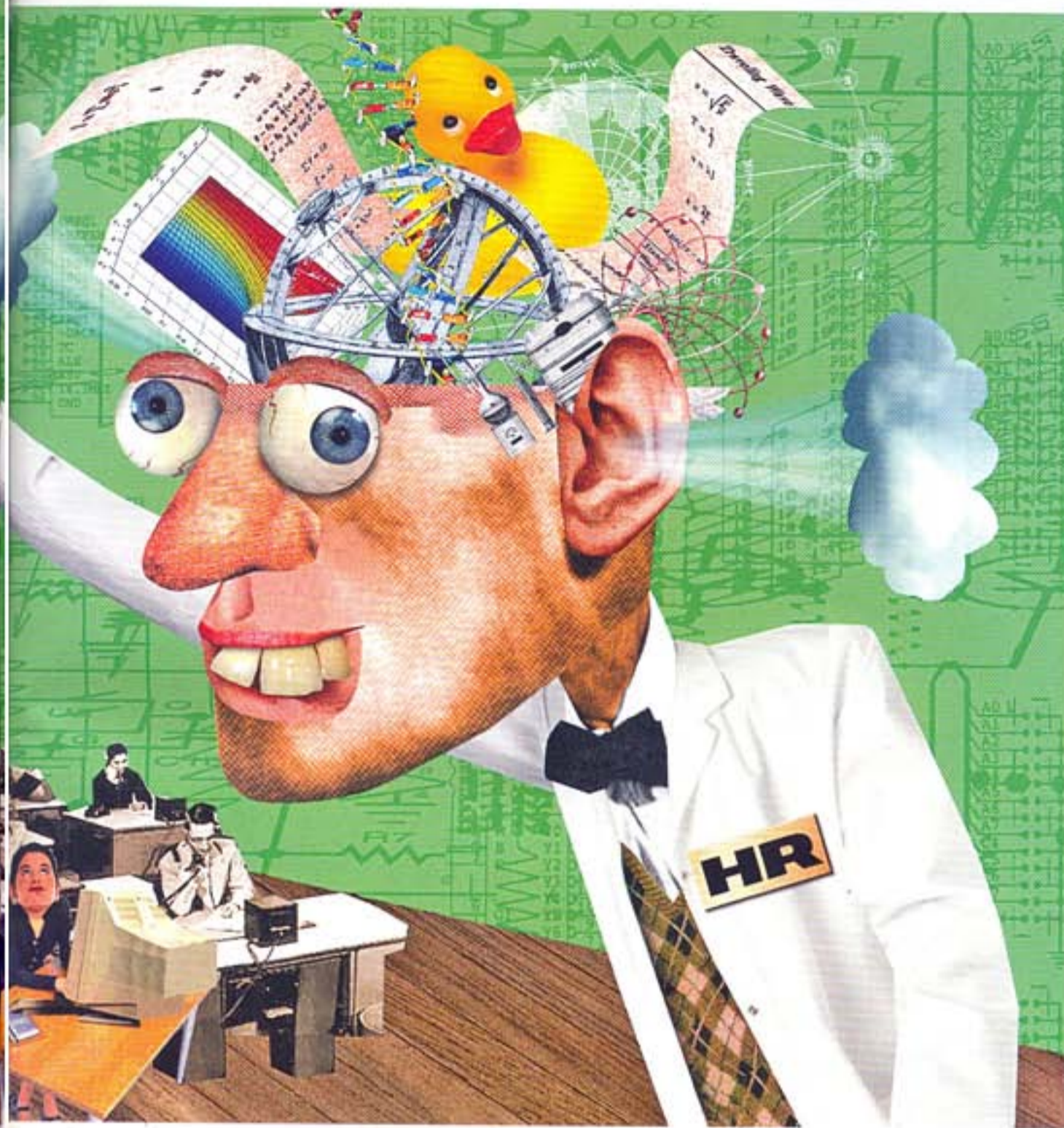
The purpose of the latter seems to be to implement a box-ticking exercise that will give a government stamp of approval to treatments that don't work. The advert for its CEO says that the main function of the new body will be to enhance public protection and confidence in the use of complementary therapists. (Shouldn't it be decreasing confidence in quacks, not increasing it?) But, disgracefully, it will pay no attention to whether the treatments work. And the ad refers you to the Prince's Foundation for Integrated Health (president HRH the Prince of Wales) for more information.

Skills for Health, with the help of that unofficial branch of government, the Prince's Foundation, has been busy "writing competences" for distant healing, with a helpful list that divides this imaginary subject into healing in the presence of the client, distant healing in contact with the client and distant healing not in contact with the client.

And it has done the same for homoeopathy and its kindred delusions. The one thing they never consider is whether they are writing "competences" in talking gobbledegook. When I phoned Skills for Health to try to find out who was writing this stuff (they wouldn't say), I made a joke about writing competences in talking to trees. The answer came back, in all seriousness, "You'd have to talk to Lantra, the land-based organisation, for that. Lantra, which is the sector council for the land-based industries, uh, sector, not with us sorry... areas such as horticulture etc." Anyone for competences in sense of humour studies?

The "unrepentant capitalist" Luke Johnson also said in the *FT*: "I have radically down-sized HR in several companies I have run, and business has gone all the better for it."

Now there's a thought. David Colquhoun is a pharmacologist at University College London. He also runs a blog at <http://dscience.net>.



# When HR gets hold of academe, quackery and gobbledegook run riot

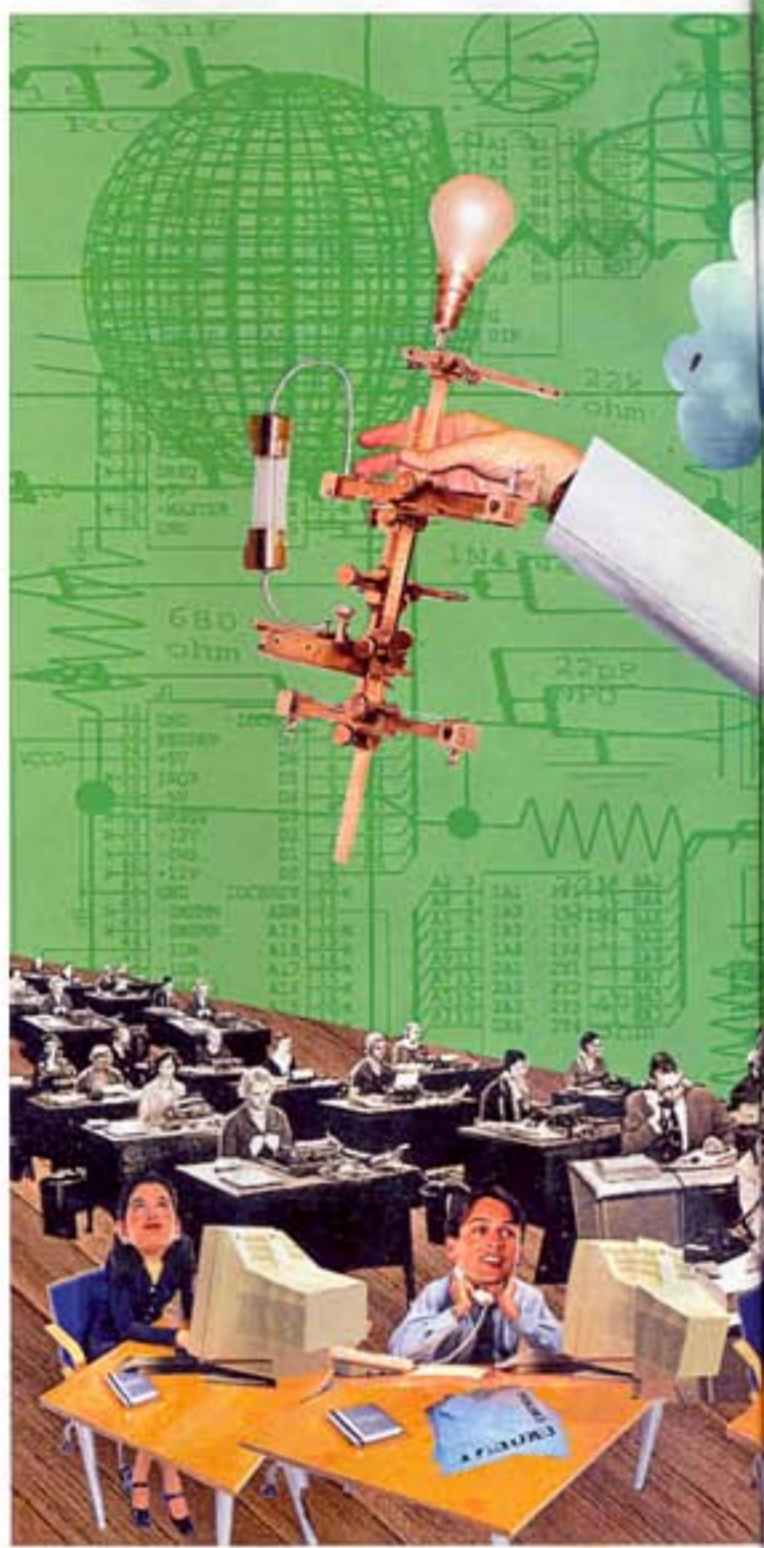
In expanding its empire, human resources damages intellectual standards and peddles nonsense, argues David Colquhoun

harassed and when they feel that they are assessed fairly. If the best people don't feel that, they just leave. That is why the culture of managerialism and audit will in the end do harm to any university that embraces it.

There was a good example this week of the damage that the HR mentality can inflict on intellectual standards. As a research assistant, I was sent the HR division's staff development and training booklet. Some courses are quite reasonable. Others amount to little more than the promotion of quackery. Here are a couple: "Self-hypnosis" and "Communication and

learning: recent theories and methodologies".

Self-hypnosis seems to be nothing more than a pretentious word for relaxation. The second course teaches the "core principles" of neurolinguistic programming, the Sedona Method ("Your key to lasting happiness, success, peace and wellbeing") and, wait for it, Brain Gym. This booklet arrived just after doctor and journalist Ben Goldacre's demolition of Brain Gym, headlined "Nonsense dressed up as neuroscience", who wrote: "This ridiculousness comes at very great cost, paid for by you, the taxpayer, in thousands of state



HR is like many parts of modern businesses: a simple expense, and a burden on the backs of the productive workers... They don't sell or produce: they consume. They are the amorphous support services." So wrote Luke Johnson recently in the *Financial Times*. He went on: "Training advisers are employed to distract everyone from doing their job with pointless courses." Mr Johnson is no woolly-minded professor. He is in *The Times* Power 100 list, he organised the acquisition of PizzaExpress before he turned 30 and now runs Channel 4.

Why has human resources acquired such a bad public image? Like most groups, those in HR are intent on expanding their power and status, hence the name change from personnel. As personnel managers, they were seen as providers of a service and even, heaven forbid, as being on the side of the employees. As HR they become part of the senior management team, and see themselves as managing people.

My concern is the effect that that change is having on science. The problem with HR people managing science is that they have no idea how it works. They think every activity can be run as though it were Wal-Mart. That idea is old fashioned even in management circles. Good employers know that people work best when they are not constantly