1. It was Rob who first proposed this particular session when Chris sent out a call for suggestions over the Summer. I think Rob had sent an email which read: ‘burning issues – the need to cut down on bureaucracy and make our processes more streamlined as per the VC’s strategy, perhaps we could all bring along a process that can be eliminated or streamlined’.

2. When Chris mentioned to me a little time ago that I had agreed to help facilitate such a session, I think I’d taken Rob’s email at face value, or at least conflated some of the metaphors, and replied to Chris ‘ah yes, the bonfire of the bureaucracies session!’ I had visions of us ceremoniously putting a light to a pyre of paperwork, but Chris did look a little perturbed at that, and whilst wanting his final day to go out in a blaze, suggested that we might frame it a bit more positively than that.

And so, hopefully we shall, there is no need for firelighters, but we are all aware that the VC’s approach as enshrined in the new strategy is to give us space to be a bit creative and to think through what we do, so that our activities are purposeful and meaningful and not simply empty box ticking exercises. Indeed, there is a concern that in terms of the University’s current Student Education positioning then processes that we have operate to date have had no advantageous impact, and indeed, could be perceived as impacting negatively in that they have detracted well needed resource away from the actual important project of research and educational delivery, and I can understand why colleagues are vexed by this.

3. I’ve been doing a presentation for a SES induction event about the role of academics in a changing academic landscape. And in that presentation I mention a book published in 1992 by someone called Halsey, which is rather eloquently titled ‘The Decline of Donnish Dominion’, and the thesis set out in the book subsequently is that from the Robbins Report of 1963 onwards, which heralded the vast expansion and massification of higher education in the late 20th century, the prestige, power and autonomy of the academic community has ebbed and eroded away, particularly by a series of policies and interventions trying to justify the economic advantage of higher education by increasingly framing governments, students and employers as the principal beneficiaries and consumers of education and research.

One manifestation of this, has been the emergence in the 1980’s and 1990’s of the ‘Quality Assurance’ industry and the rise of an audit and review regime, within the UK currently manifest in the operation and the frameworks of the Quality Assurance Agency.

4. I use this slide in my presentation. Any historians or social scientists amongst you might recognise it as a panoptican, the design for a prison envisaged by Jeremy Bentham, which holds its inmates in submissive check by ensuring they are continually observed, 24/7 big brother style. And the concept of panopticism as expounded by the philosopher Michel Foucault, is one that you will encounter in critiques of modern higher education, and the way in which terms so beloved of neo-liberal policy makers such as ‘transparency, accountability’ and the like, are actually a means of exerting a subtle and manipulative
power and control. And in this context, perhaps Quality Assurance, and in a related way, the emergence of ‘new managerialism’ in higher education, is seen to epitomise all that is irksome, and irritating and demoralising about modern higher education, and its relentless apparent panopticism that serves no real purpose other than ensuring we remain downtrodden.

But we are not passive agents, and in this respect I believe that it is possible to spin it another way. A little while ago I was reading Peter Scott, previously a Pro Vice Chancellor at Leeds, and he writes very sensitively and I think sensibly about higher education, and suggests that some of the ‘vexedness’ we feel about higher education is actually part of deeper rooted cultural and historical shifts in our society. There is no doubt that in the latter part of the 20th century there emerged what some analysts call the ‘commodification’ of higher education, and I’m not simply taking about fees in this respect but the way in which what was previously known as the ‘academic infrastructure’ and is now enshrined within the QAA Quality Code, has attempted to delineate and prescribe an academic ‘product’ in terms of concepts such as notional learning hours, learning outcomes, assessment strategies and level descriptors and the like. And whether we like this or not, there is no doubt that has become fundamentally embedded in terms of our obligations to specify, describe, catalogue and market our programmes of study, and such specifications increasingly have commercial legal ramifications in an increasingly commercial and litigious world. This is a deeply complex and philosophically fraught area, and I don’t want to dwell too much upon it here, but I do think we need to recognise this, if only to try and mitigate some of its worst ramifications.

5. And actually higher education within the UK has done reasonably well in trying to protect some fundamental principles. If we take the QAA, for example, and the whole approach we take to the assessment of education quality, this is very much rooted in the concept of externality, but within a ‘peer review’ approach. We have no OFSTED style inspectorate as many countries do, and hopefully this will continue, although HEFCE have initiated a consultation on the future of a sector wide QA regime which might throw that concept into question. In fact as a QAA Reviewer I received a letter from Anthony MacClaren only the other day, as QAA begin to lobby to try and preserve their future, and upholding the principle of a ‘peer led’ approach featured large in that communication.

The concept of peer review is very closely aligned to the idea of the ‘reflective practitioner’ and the practice of honestly and openly, but constructively and positively, reflecting on what we are doing and why we are doing it, and then, depending, either instigating minor tweaks or wholesale reengineering approaches, so that we continually evolve and adapt.

More recently, such principles have been further augmented by an increasing focus on the views of students, which now features large in terms of managing our student education. Whether we perceive this as an active and positive engagement with a fundamental stakeholder, or as succumbing to the whims of a populist consumer mentality, sector frameworks have no doubt raised the prominence of the student voice.
6. So, whilst we may have the latitude to entertain the notion of a bonfire of the bureaucracies, and indeed are being encouraged to think in this way, there are nonetheless some fundamental principles that we cannot lose sight of, these are:

- The concept of ‘peer review’ and the views of colleagues and experts who are external to the delivery of the provision whether they be external examiners or peers within other subject areas within the institution
- The importance of the student voice and responding effectively and proactively to student feedback
- Recognition that increasingly the way in which we describe our programmes has commercial, legal and contractual implications
- Whilst recognising subject differences when appropriate to do so, from an institutional perspective we need to ensure that our processes are applied systematically and consistently
- And finally, that processes should lead to enhancements both at the local level and at the broader institutional level too (which isn’t necessarily all about league table positioning and metrics)

7. So, with these principles in mind, we also need to recognise that there are a number of challenges at the institutional level that we have inherited, created, whatever, that can also hinder our aspirations to do things better.

These include rather clunky and increasingly obsolete systems, that, in an organisation of this size and complexity seem to take forever to address and update. Our programme catalogue being a case in point and whilst we have begun again to move ahead with a replacement for that we are currently stuck with our current system. We did have a situation whereby we required the catalogue entry report as the documentation to inform our programme approval process, and you will recall that we would take reams of paper, many of it irrelevant to the Faculty Committees. We have now done away with that, and have addressed our drafting forms so that they mirror that which is published on the web, so in thinking through proposals we have before us exactly that that will be presented to students in a way we previously did not. Rob has complained that this has resulted in lengthier forms than before, this has been due to the need to allocate discovery modules to themes, but at least the forms are now accurate, do not involve multiple updates of the catalogue entry as refinements are requested as part of approval process as was required previously, and generally, we have had positive feedback on this, although we recognise that there is further work to be done in the development of the new catalogue.

We are also aware that currently it is very difficult to navigate a rather labyrinth committee structure which has too many parallel structures that can come up with contradictory conclusions in some areas, and provide no forum or representation in other areas. We are addressing this and have been working on a revised deliberative structure for student education that we will be consulting on fairly soon.

We have also recognised that some of our organisational structures have been unhelpful when it has come to trying to develop more complex, innovative, and potentially cross-disciplinary developments, and in trying to address this we have come up with a very simple
innovation to be developed further, which is simply to get the right constituency of people around a table at the same time so we can have a meaningful discussion. It is not rocket science. So we have the concept of the Programme Approval Group that can be convened according to any representational requirement. Some of the preliminary feedback we’ve had on these has been very positive. In that it has promoted in depth and meaningful discussion with the programme proposer present at the deliberations, and has reduced some of the to-ing and fro-ing of paperwork we used to have, simultaneously making the approval process more rigorous but a more enriching and developmental experience for colleagues bringing forward proposals.

In relation to our review processes, we recognise that they have evolved rather piecemeal over time, and it is now appropriate to take a step back and consider how the various elements interlink and can be seen as a constructive rather than a vacuous exercise. So we have an opportunity to reflect on that, and my colleague, Lorraine, has put together some prompts to help inform smaller group discussion for twenty minutes or so. Can I also add that I am very happy to take any comments or reflections you may have after today, either via email or even better through discussion. Universities, very importantly, are built on principles of democratic deliberation and debate and it is important that we respect and uphold those principles with constructive collegiality and recognise that whilst it will be impossible to keep everyone happy in an institution of this size, and we often have to juggle very complex and sometimes contradictory challenges, we nonetheless have a collective responsibility to try and make things work in way which is supportive to one another.