Conjectural computer science history: the Middlesborough problem, by R.K. Nar*y*n

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Abstract. This paper presents folk impressions of the University of Manchester's difficulties in becoming a great university, but by means of a fiction imitating a distinguished writer from the Indian subcontinent. The impressions concern past efforts and the difficulties they faced.

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You cannot infer greatness from talent aplenty

—Is that the fallacy of M2020?

It was winter and an electric fan heater, which would soon cease to function, brought some warmth to the apartment where Uncle and his son lived. He was having a discussion with the biochemist, serious men talking about serious things. His son was in the bedroom watching a film online.

"I don't think the University of Manchester will ever become a great university."

"Why do you say that? Of course it will become great," replied Uncle.

"You read the union document."

"Yes, it said we're good and that's our level and always will be." There were now things he had to read before their meetings. He received them by e-mail. The document said, "M2020 fallacy" at the top of the first page and had some red writing. Uncle did not like the red writing, which reminded him of school, of teachers giving very critical feedback in red pen.

"I think this is about the history of the university," said the biochemist, who fancied he could easily run a history tutorial, if only he had the chance. "Once the University of Manchester

was the leader in computer science. Absolute leader. Alan Turing! Everything! And it was set to become the Stanford of UK. You couldn't mess it up."

"Stanford," repeated Uncle. "Stanford University." He nodded. What was Stanford? England had two great universities, Uncle knew, Oxford and Cambridge, but there was also Stanford, abroad. Stanford was computers. Having concluded that, Uncle suddenly provided the line the dramatic story needed. "So what happened?"

"There's only one explanation. These people came in and sent out a message: you're getting above your level. And did everything to bring you back down."

"How?"

"Like they wear Middlesborough shirts everyday, to let you know: you're middle level, no better, no worse."

"Middlesborough?"

"Then others start saying: we're Middlesborough.[1] And if you try to do anything above that level, people get irritated."

"Middlesborough football?" Uncle was a decent amateur. He pictured himself in the midfield. He was moving with the ball. Should he pass it? No, move past that opponent. The fan heater's noise level changed subtly. It would soon break. Uncle knew his fan heater, by a mysterious intuition even. But such intuition was not valued in the West.

Suddenly the son came in. He began crooning, "Paris: an evening in Paris!"

"Ignore him. It is a stage," said Uncle. "Continue."

"These people are so good at making sure you stay in your place, even with the computer science peak they halted it."

"The Middlesborough people?"

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[1] This is a thinly disguised version of some actual words I have heard. It was a different but nearby club.

"Yes, essentially them, Uncle. Some of them, when they finish the job, moved to better universities, but I bet they don't wear their Middlesborough shirts there."

"You know the history goes in the cycle, isn't?"

"Uncle: West is different from East," his son loudly said.

Reference

Berk, D. 2019. The M2020 fallacy. Can top-down management make our university great? *Document circulated amongst University of Manchester staff.*