Measuring academic research performance through audit at the expense of trust: Exploring the 21st Century University

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Abstract

British universities are experiencing a climate of fiscal austerity including severe budget cuts coupled with intensifying competition for markets have seen the emergence of audit culture which afflicts the public sector in general. This entails the risk to the integrity of university culture disappearing. This paper seeks to explore the interconnections between developing trends in universities which cause processes likely to undermine the objectivity and independence of research. We question that universities' alignment with the capitalist business sector and the dominant market economy culture. Despite arguably positive aspects, there is a danger that universities may be dominated by hegemonic sectional interest rather than narratives of openness and democratically oriented critique. We also argue that audit culture embedded in reputation management, quality control and ranking hierarchies may necessarily promote deception while diminishing a collegiate culture of trust and pursuit of truth which is replaced by destructive impersonal accountability procedures. Such transitions inevitably contain insidious implications for the nature of the academy and undermine the values of academic-intellectual life.

Keywords: Performance measurement, audit culture, collegiality, trust, British universities, RAE, REF, rankings, league table

Introduction

Measuring performance in Higher Education is a difficult and often contentious task. Hence, for example, we have seen a good deal of changes in the ways research is assessed in the UK in recent decades together with profound changes in the associated academic research culture. Thomson (2008) carried out a series of surveys among university administrators across the world and suggested that more than half was convinced with the usefulness of metrics such as number of publications and citations received. An array

of such measures is available to administrators and recruiters in higher education in the forms of rankings of journals, publishers, and publications as well as in house indicators produced by audits at department, faculty, and institution levels. Such audits are becoming increasingly common globally, and often emerge as voluntary practices (e.g. Barnabe and Riccaboni, 2007) which one may argue an aspiration (or imposition) by "advance academies" such as the US and the UK. These audits, however, we argue, are replacing the collegiate trust, which has been defined as a state of positive expectation towards others.

In our discursive and polemically slanted paper, we elaborate on the potential dangers and risks the auditing processes and procedures may imply for the nature of the academy and intellectual life regarding its openness and integrity, both defining characteristics of universities historically. For this purpose we discuss funding/sponsorship relationships, rankings and ranking methods which are parts and parcel of the Foucauldian governmentality enveloping UK higher education.

Governmentality in higher education

One of the most widely known and used output of such audits is university league tables. Professor Eastwood, the former CEO of the English Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) said "the league tables have a much wider impact… Governing bodies take an interest in them as a means of assessing institutional performance… There clearly is demand for league tables, but there are also questions about their quality, impact and possible perverse incentives" (quoted in HoC, 2009: 52). The same House of Commons report on students and universities strongly promotes the use of metrics and apparently many senior figures in the academy supports concur, such is, some would argue, the extent of the colonisation of academia by quantification as a proxy replacing networks of human trust.

Trust facilitates social and institutional life and underpins risk-taking behaviour (Coleman, 1990; Mollering, 2001; Lewis and Weigert, 1985), co-operation (Gambetta, 1988), community order (Misztal, 1996) and underlies social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995). Our focus here is on the circumstances which afflict contemporary academia, making it justifiable to claim that trust is being degraded, and conjured as irrelevant. Lewis and Weigert (1985) suggest that changes in trust alter social relationships - it is equally plausible to argue that when social relations are caused to alter trust will alter too. Nevertheless, Simmel (1990: 178) postulates that "without the general trust that people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate", and moreover that trust is "one of the most important synthetic forces within society" (Simmel, 1950: 318). The logic of that view applies to public trust in research scientists which "is based not on just their compe-

tence, but also on their perceived objectivity and openness" (Editorial, Nature, 2010: 141).

Universities, governments, funding bodies are all occupied with the task of the putative 'objective' measurement of academic performance outputs. Power held by government and industry is being channelled and administered through universities, mediated through funding and research councils in a market-driven academy. The Scottish Funding Council, for example, states that it allocates funds in support of "the Scottish government's national priorities"[1]. If therefore government is itself a dubious source of trust it follows there are grounds for caution regarding the trust we invest in the objects of its governance, institutions and individuals within its scope are necessarily affected.

Governments contract out the performance management of academic research also to the for-profit sector, private businesses[2]. One such company describes itself as "an innovative business offering a unique service analysing research performance tailored to individual client requirements"[3]. This type of outsourcing by government enhances the power of the private sector while not only seeming to foster independence from politics, but by introducing commercial logics into the heart of the culture of universities it de-legitimates the authority of universities concerning their autonomous self-monitoring of historic mission to advance knowledge for its own sake. Dangers arises from the possibility of universities falling foul of the corruptions associated with, let say, corporate lobbying (see Miller, 2009) which is arguably symptomatic of the reliance upon what Marx calls a cash-nexus.

Our anxieties are heightened in this regard when we find publicly available evidence that some existing senior officials of these funding bodies retain directorships in industry[4], have family connections with global business consultancies[5] and have spent their professional lives as senior industrialists[6]. The control exercised by these elite socio-political formations is self-evidently significant and likely to influence the capacity for freedom of thought and knowledge-sharing available to academics in the UK (Corbyn, 2010a; Thrift, 2010; Nelson, 2010). Conflict of interest has never been a source for guaranteeing impartiality.

The particular distribution of knowledge made available to society, once it has been legitimated by industry moguls through mechanisms of commer-

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[1] See, http://www.sfc.ac.uk/about_the_council/who_we_are.aspx
[2] See for example, http://www.evidence.co.uk
[3] See, http://www.science.thomsonreuters.com
[4] For Scottish examples see, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/board/, and http://www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/board/bio/melville_ross.htm
[5] See, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/board/bio/atkins.htm
[6] See, http://www.sfc.ac.uk/home/home.aspx

cialization (Wilmott, 2003; HM Treasury, 2003), may inevitably affect both knowledge and what we feel comfortable about trusting. Ties of this financial nature threaten to undermine the capacity of the academic to behave in a scientifically neutral manner. An upshot is that their knowledge production may fade in its distinctiveness from private-sector research companies.

These putative effects on the integrity and independence of knowledge that we hint at quite robustly will be inherently difficult to detect and explosive to debate publicly. Unethical business practices and the corruption in national politics have emerged as major scandals in recent years. Just as this has occurred we have witnessed the closer integration of academia with commerce. These putatively corrupt practices and conflicts of interest of these elite groups who play key roles in policy-making regarding universities lead us to confidently conjecture that decisions taken about research roles and purposes may reflect sectional interest as opposed to supporting the common good. In tandem with such a capitalist remodelling of academia the university system has become an integral part of a global, monolithic 'disciplinary regime' within which technical measures, audit, ranking hierarchies, and customer satisfaction protocols, exist to limit difference, controlling how relevance is defined (Curtis, 2010; Morgan, 2010). This is the 'knowledge economy' where it now operates and is judged in relation to its mantra of relevance. This arguably contributes to fostering a culture of academic self-promotion (Fearn, 2010), celebrity and associated cultures of reputation management (Baty, 2010a, 16). Thus the prevailing governmentality is characterised by business-like collegiality around knowledge management (OECD, 2000; Ozga, 2008), commercialization, and student employability as the defining ethos of the trajectory of the 21st century university (Akhurst, 2005; NCIHE, 1997; DfEE, 2000).

Further evidence of the trend towards a commercialized culture within the UK academy was illustrated in several recent articles: Clark (2010: 25) reported that the biggest drug company in Britain tried to intimidate independent scientists and deliberately misinterpreted medical data to rebut safety concerns over a lucrative drug treatment. Similarly, Peckham (2010: 25) pointed the loss of control by academics over knowledge and the dangers of sponsored publications. Blue skies research may be losing its foothold in the academy as funding shifts towards scientific research deemed relevant for driving economic growth (Corbyn, 2010b: 11). Close links between academia and industry (Ozga and Jones, 2006; Olssen and Peters, 2005) pose threat of sectional interest bias as the private sector outputs are typically not framed through respect for existing knowledge, criticality and peer review, but via "skill sets" (Lebrecht, 2010: 50), and pragmaticism. Hence also the authority of the *academic-as-intellectual* is marginalised intertwined by a systemic reduction in the capacity of university cultures to support a classical Enlightenment project of political, personal and intellectual emancipation for

the good of society as a whole. The arts, humanities and social sciences may, as a result, decline in popularity, being disciplines where social critique has often originated (Adller *et al.*, 2010: 30-31; Collini, 2006), and which, in not having definite vocational outcomes, these degree courses may falter as students have to fund their own studies and so they choose degrees affording them the most likelihood of employment in order to repay debts incurred (Holligan et al., 2011). The closure of certain departments (e.g. philosophy, humanities) in the UK during 2008-10 supports this argument of a shift in the student as consumer's behaviour (Newman, 2010: 17). At the same time, the higher education sector is experiencing intense prescription from central governments which act as the neo-liberal 'market state' seeking to dominate university research agendas (Ozga, 2008). Government funding allocations by rankings and the employability agenda imposed upon universities by governments are examples of this kind of dominance designed also to make what Foucault calls 'docile bodies' of academia.

Governmentality through rankings

In the current order, university league table rankings aim at the retention and consolidation of 'market share' by universities in a higher education market-place. However, the moral and political anomalies caused by these rankings and ways in which they can be manipulated are notorious: For instance, a British university "began offering hefty subsidies to attract large numbers of low-quality students from neighbouring countries so it could boost its score on one measure of internationalization" (Baty, 2010b: 5). These trends towards deception, which we associated with 'dodgy businesses' are accentuated by contemporary policy changes, but inevitably the funding for higher education is dependent on such hierarchical ranking mechanisms. The Research Evaluation Framework (REF) impact criterion of research quality is designed to re-calibrate the intellectual merit of any academic publication as viewed through the REF lens, irrespective of the status of the journal in which it appears, a process illustrative of governmental prescribed definitions of good research impacting upon the funding of university and trajectories of academic departments, as the individual's research behaviour.[7] Research which does not explicitly and demonstrably contribute (i.e. low impact) to the capitalist idea of economic and social wellbeing will be unlikely to receive financial or institutional support. Thus, the application of the controversial research impact yardstick via the REF mechanism is very likely to affect the arts and humanities more than science and engineering, since socio-economic impact is arguably intrinsically more difficult to

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[7] For the introduction of the concept of "impact" at the heart of the new REF system, see www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/about/.

evaluate in the former disciplinary fields. Thus the REF is illustrative of a system the purpose of which is primarily knowledge management and its centralized control of academia through auditing processes of quantification, systematic comparison and normative judgement (Ozga and Jones, 2006).

A similarly deep transformation is evident in the teaching role of universities: Students are increasingly referred to as 'consumers' which implies decisive economic power; they 'pick and mix' degree 'diets' (see Grenfell, 2008 and Ritzer, 2000). Thus students' satisfaction is valorised and becomes prioritised over, for instance, the ethical imperatives of engaging fully with received intellectual traditions forming the traditional canon require degree reading. For example, plagiarism, understood as a strategy to avoid engagement while appearing to engage with the academic canon has increased dramatically during the past 30 years and has become a significant issue throughout UK universities (McCabe *et al.*, 2001; Lipsett, 2008; Tennant and Duggan, 2008). Deco and Colpaert (2002) were involved with a case of intellectual copyright breach in a doctorate; and rather than challenging the student's integrity the university authorities put pressure on the examiner to suppress his discovery of the student's dishonesty. If students are challenged by ethical protocols, as the university as provider will be well aware, they may 'shop' elsewhere, transferring to another provider (McDonald, 2010) and damaging the financial base of the place they leave. Hence, student experience is the subject of intense external audits of "academic product" (e.g. modules, programmes) through student satisfaction surveys and internal university subject health reviews.

Along with academic health subject reviews, a new academic 'tribe' has emerged to assist in the production of this academic landscape characterised by the powerful RAE and REF audits. Significant numbers of professors are no longer deemed to be 'research active' as they do not publish any articles in peer reviewed scientific journals, but do nevertheless conduct research audits. These 'managerial professors' lead the *new world audit order* throughout the academy together with a managerial culture, some of whom despite an absence of doctoral qualifications are professors.

Research evaluation framework (REF)

O'Neill (2002) claims bureaucratic accountabilities result in deception, institutional 'game playing' for status and national and global league table rankings (Baty, 2010b) which arguably infects the culture and evaluations of RAE submissions. The research evaluation framework (REF) reflects a remodelling of university cultures shifting them towards a market economy. In this regard, the Bologna Process is also seen by some academics as a neoliberal standardisation project facilitating the market (Corbett, 2010: 26). Audit is constitutive of standardisation. The soft power (Nye, 2004) inherent in

this shift of values is bolstered by the hard power (economic, legal) of governments whose financial and legal sanctions can mean non-compliance to submit to its demands of audit and accountability having major financial implications for their institutions. The REF[8] will be applied in 2014 to evaluate academic research quality and departmental cultures and allocate funding across all universities in the UK using the results of competitive comparisons

Part of government's soft power and credibility resides in the 'incorporation' of selected senior academics on putative peer review research quality judging panels. Power, in his investigations of risk management argues that "the audit society" is characterised by "rituals of verification" (Power, 1997). The REF can also be seen as a ritual of verification, where notions of originality and truth are replaced by the application of a techno-science of citation metrics and impact indicators. These neoliberal measurement tools are will inevitably marginalize the particular voices of scholars in the humanities and some social sciences (Brown, 2010).

Along with verification, the REF also aims to evaluate the impact (of the academic work). The REF impact criterion is practically grounded in ties with industry. This concatenation of actors is manifested through Mode-2 knowledge co-production (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). The latter offers government and industry significant governance over the academy: mode-2 research entails multi-disciplinary, problem-focused transitory team practices addressing issues identified outside of canons of disciplinary knowledge. It is thus unsurprising to find that the concept of collegiality is significantly absent in the REF documentation. The investment of scientific capital in this Mode-2 context will be subjugated to pragmatic decisions about the usefulness of the research results to challenges faced by commerce and therefore to anything that enhances the performance of the market state. Knowledge transfer (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Stewart, 2007) is illustrative of this attachment to a contested doctrine of relevance (Fearn, 2010a: 17). That neoliberal emphasis upon relevance has implications for the wellbeing of traditions of mainstream research: 'Blue Skies' or curiosity-driven research (Mode-1 Knowledge) is under threat in a major UK university department despite its achieving excellent results in the 2008 RAE following a highly critical private management consultant's review. These business consultants argued that a culture of "academic individualism" must cease at the Institute of Education, and recommends academics must instead engage in "sufficient income-generating activity" (Newman, 2010: 17).

Another variable in this general culture change re-shaping universities involves academic staff recruitment and promotion values: A new 'tribe' of

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[8] See, www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/about/

professors and other senior academic staff are introduced into academia to help ensure commercialization, rather than academic research, succeeds. Their primary mission is to capture financial contracts as opposed to engaging in the pursuit of truth through original research (Ozga and Jones, 2006; Ozga, 1998). These managerial professors and cognate promoted 'academics' contribute to causing academia moving much closer towards commercial industrial values and away from the European Enlightenment ideal.

Contemporary discourses found in academia evidence these claims: The language used in the REF documentation (October, 2009) plots a new higher education landscape based on discourses of "economic prosperity", "allocate 1.76 billion", "benchmarked", "national wellbeing", "expert panels", "accountability", "international standards", "drive up quality", "dynamic and internationally competitive", "accountability". This is the instrumentalist landscape where the university research has been coerced. Thus the weighting given to "research impact" in awarding "overall excellence" to research, accounts for 25%, while the weighting for research publications falls from 70%[9] to 60% a change with reduces control by the academia itself of research trajectories.

This change is dramatic in terms of its wider importance for scientific research: In the conception of their research design, academics will be obliged to adapt their mind-set towards a perceived practical utility of the research they intend to undertake which they may feel bound to artificially conjure to gain support for their plans. This framing of research towards prescribed notions of relevance which will reflect the need to conform to delivering for an existing socio-economic formation is illustrated by the government's creation of a bureaucratic document, a "common template" which all research "submissions" from universities to the REF must conform, consisting of sections "resourcing", "management" and "engagement". These three "subprofiles" will homogenise research, compressing autonomous intellectual space into a partial technical scheme, demarcating what the REF revealingly dubs through the industrial term "research sector". Hence a push towards contract-type research with alleged "impact" is the real intention with 'blue skies', basic science research losing out. Overall the emphasis on university-industry links, wider impact and discourses of knowledge economy, market-driven innovation represent key milestones defining huge changes in university research and teaching cultures. Thus knowledge becomes not an end in itself, but is viewed in terms of use-value. This vector allows domination by functionalism and is very likely to cost the higher education sector its traditional, but rapidly declining autonomy. The modernist idea of university education as supportive of emancipation has been replaced by performance

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[9] See, the 2007 RAE metric, www.rae.ac.uk/aboutus/

indicators stressing employability[10] agendas (Roberts and Thompson, 2007, Harker, 1995; Cowan, 1996), which incidentally nourish deceit (O'Neill, 2002). Collegiality becomes problematical (Stewart, 2007) as the locus of the university mission moves towards the commercial sector and a new climate of inter-personal human relations whose social solidarity may be tenuous at best governed as they will be through a prism of time-limited projects for users rather than durations where deep relations are developed around fundamental ideas.

Concluding remarks

We have focused on the likely adverse effects of changes of a global capitalist nature affecting universities which are encouraged and facilitated by government and industry as joint brokers. This critical lens introduces an awareness of the many contributing factors which are likely to alter our beliefs in the integrity of knowledge and the relationship between the academy and the public good. It also affects the academic role and purposes of research. Conceiving of university culture with regard to the implied concept of social capital (trust) has the advantage that such change is not treated in isolation from those pervading wider society (Sennett, 2002; Putnam, 1995, 2000). These wider changes may cause individuals and institutions to become less favourably disposed towards trusting others, and cultures of universities will inevitably be implicated. One industry which is not in decline is the security industry and that is symptomatic of something about our lives today. Suspicion can infect many types of relationship, in the case of universities it is likely to affect negatively the authority of the academy's production of knowledge, especially in situations when the research is known to be sponsored by industry or political parties those with vested interest in obtaining particular research findings and avoiding outcomes which cause them to lose face. In view of the facts of sweeping public sector funding cuts coupled with massive university student fee increases and the corresponding pressures to achieve income streams from outside the public sector, academics will be bound to depend to a greater degree than hitherto upon private sector capital to which strings will be attached, and feel obliged to be more circumspect in their dealings with the student as consumer. The reliance of the REF upon a reputational system of metrics may also introduce a utilitarian moral outlook into university cultures, in addition to the impact of fee increases on students' outlooks about studying. That utilitarian outlook is particularly suited to life in an ethically degraded academy: It permits the moral flexibility of pragmatic decision-making and in this case

[10] Employability is one of the two priority areas in the UK Higher Education Academy, teaching development grant scheme in 2011.

really does do the job of preparing students with "life skills". Abuse of data about climate change – Climategate - (Adams, 2010, 30) highlights pressures upon academics to perform in ways consistent with a suspect pragmatic moral order, as described by Machiavelli in 'The Prince', in order to secure their personal reputation, career advancement and, ultimately, personal livelihood. According to Corbyn (2010c: 11):

"Academics at the University of East Anglia who have nothing to do with the study of climate change are being affected by the fallout from the "Climategate" scandal, as unfair questions are asked about the veracity of their work."

In her British Reith Lectures O'Neill (2002) argues that:

"…perhaps the culture of accountability that we are relentlessly building for ourselves actually damages trust rather than supporting it. Plants don't flourish when we pull them up too often to check how their roots are growing: political institutional and professional life too may not go well if we constantly uproot them to demonstrate that everything is transparent and trustworthy."

The culture of accountability she refers to performs, it can be argued, the role of a face-saving exercise, concealing to some degree the corrosive effects of corporate power upon academia. To survive the deceit of 'game playing', which has been forced upon universities by government and corporations, a technically generated trust has emerged from processes of audit. Like Sennett (2002) O'Neill (2002) suggests that because less time is available to give to interactions with other human beings:

"…everyone has to record the details of what they do and compile the evidence to protect themselves against the possibility not only of plausible, but of far-fetched complaints…the real focus is on performance indicators chosen for ease of measurement and control rather than because they measure accurately what the quality of performance is…the very technologies that spread information so easily and efficiently are every bit as good at spreading misinformation and disinformation. Some sorts of openness and transparency may be bad for trust…deception is the real enemy of trust…Transparency can encourage people to be less honest, so increasing deception and reducing reasons for trust: those who know that everything they say or write is to be made public may massage the truth…"

Or of course never write down the truth in the first place! It would be foolish and naive to assume that by removing discourses of transparency, together with their material effects, greater honesty will arise suddenly. That said systems of audit may be seen to have utility, at least for some historically marginalised 'players' in higher education: Evidence shows the metrics of bureaucratic accountabilities appear to sometimes promote greater equality: a UK post-1992 'new' university, namely Oxford Brookes, scored a higher grading for the discipline of History in the 2008 RAE compared with the University of Oxford's own Department of History, when the latter's histor-

ical prestige ('cultural capital') would normally have gained it the superior grading.

This welcome improvement over what critics of that establishment would see as representing the machinations of an old boys culture towards a more level-playing field in the university sector ought not to be translated too quickly into rosy conclusions. Instead it may simply mean competing parts of the sector have greater equality of access to resources upon which deceitful actions required to respond successfully to government audit depend. Neither of the two universities, following this logic, were in fact compared on academic merits, but over how well they could deploy audit tools to their own advantage. A bleak conclusion is that with the passage of time public confidence and trust may be caused to transfer completely to modes of academic governance around reputational metrics which, as mechanisms of control, facilitate the micro-management of university culture by state bureaucracies giving us what mere simulacra universities.

Finally, power is a key element in studies of trust behaviour: a position of dependence renders always genuine trust difficult. Some use the term 'reliance' rather than 'trust' to highlight that unequal relationality, others prefer the term 'coercion' (Coleman, 1990). Baier (1986) characterizes contexts of trust in terms of structures of social interaction where moral obligations affect each party. While these authors claim trust is essential for social institutions to function, this cannot be correct in every sense as universities manifestly continue to function despite the tight and prescriptive controls described. While it is not a more fruitful approach in the sense of its moral desirability for capturing the nature of trust in the form it is being constructed within higher education the concept of a trust metric is consistent with our discursive 'findings'.

A trust metric is a measurement of the extent to which members of a group trust each other. Metrics are associated with reputational systems whose role is to build trust among service users. Ratings and league tables supply and communicate a trust metric, being proxy measures of the extent to which ranked institutions can be 'trusted' to provide particular goods, for instance, research consultancy or the delivery of original research. Performativity is likely to become more deeply established and used to garner the reputational metric of its place of origin (a university department, a critical mass of academics) through the status of its outputs e.g. papers published in international peer reviewed journals. This style of neoliberal steering of quality assurance is another mechanism incorporated into building the trust metric linked which we found is associated with the institutional ranking of teaching quality. While trust is therefore documented via an evidence based dogma this seemingly objective procedure cannot rule out deception, which paradoxically, it may cause to grow more intensely (O'Neill, 2002) and normalize it. The underpinnings of this metric culture include technical-

scientific discourses of accountability and measurement which cleverly conceals structural inequalities involving socio-economic and political power.

The higher education system in the UK in being highly differentiated, serves various publics whose interests are unlikely to be homogenous (Williams and Filippakou, 2010). Audit culture's impregnability resides in the fact that it routinely does not have to create a dialogue of equals, it can ensure dependency upon individuals, contrary to Sennett's (2003) ideal conditions for developing trust. The professor 'dies' metaphorically because his or her personal perspectives are relegated to a comparatively lowly status by virtue of the strength of national systems of audit and risk management. Williams and Filippakou (2010) show how mass higher education has Oxbridge at the centre of concentric circles, where in the outer rings lie universities whose status is marked by being on the lowest rungs of UK league tables, typically the 'new', post-1992 sector. Scientific capital mediates power via prestige – it is associated with economic, social or cultural capital. The academic pecking order will in due course accord greater status to university staff whose symbolic capital is economic, 'research capitalists' to use Jenny Ozga's terminology, as opposed to scientific or cultural, a conjecture supported by the rise of the managerial professor and notion of the research entrepreneur. Money will count even more than historic academic merit with the passage of time. There is no reason, very regrettably, to expect any amelioration of the pessimistic concerns found in the academic literature about trust and the academy discussed in our paper. Contrary to the thrust of our main argument we hope the reader will agree with us that the following tired clique is still valid in that one can nevertheless speak truth to power.

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