



## The labour of academia

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### Introduction

Universities around the world are responding to a myriad of changes, pressures and opportunities in weird and wonderful ways, both of which require critical scrutiny and creative action. Take, for example, the University of Warwick's recent branding strategy. In 2015, alongside a visual make-over and redesigned logo, the university issued a set of guidelines laying out the 'Warwick tone of voice'. These guidelines instruct university staff how to communicate 'in a tone that's true to our brand'. The 12-page document implores employees to 'embed the language of possibility' into every aspect of their communication by adopting the rhetoric of 'what if?':

What if there were a world-leading university with the highest academic and research standards, the acumen of a business and for whom entrepreneurialism, innovation and international were a way of life, not buzzwords?  
(<http://www.dcscience.net/warwick-tone-of-voice.pdf>)

Warwick University is by no means alone in welcoming brand managers into administrative offices and lecture halls. In other Western countries, universities have embarked on their own brand journeys, complete with references to 'brand toolkits' (University of Western Australia), 'image brochures' (University of Zürich), 'visual identity assets' (University of British Columbia) and 'creation stories' (Michigan State University). These examples tell us that the nature and purpose of the contemporary university is being radically transformed by the encroachment of corporate imperatives into higher education (Beverungen, et al., 2008; Svensson, et al., 2010). They also compel us to think about possible expressions of critique and forms of action within higher education today.

There is a case to be made that the modern university is founded on principles of rationalization and bureaucratization; there has always been a close link between money, markets and higher education (Collini, 2013). But the massification of higher education in recent years, combined with reductions in state funding, has led to the university being managed in much the same way as any other large industrial organization (Morley, 2003; Deem, et al., 2007). This is particularly pronounced in an economy that privileges knowledge-based labour over other forms of productive activity, which underlines Bill Readings' (1996: 22) point that the university is not just being run *like* a corporation – it *is* a corporation. We witness this trend in the introduction of tuition fees, which turns students into consumers, universities into service-providers, and degree programmes into investment projects (Lawrence and Sharma, 2002). We also see it in the increasing prominence of mission statements, university branding and cost-benefit analysis (Bok, 2009). Universities are now in the business of selling intangible goods, not least of all the ineffable product of 'employability' (Chertkovskaya, et al., 2013).

This has inevitable consequences for managerial interventions, research and teaching audits, and funding structures. Indeed, there has been a marked intensification of academic labour in recent years, manifested in higher workloads, longer hours, precarious contracts and more invasive management control via key performance indicators (Morley and Walsh, 1996; Bryson, 2004; Archer, 2008; Bousquet, 2008). The personal and professional lives of academic staff are deeply affected by such changes in the structures of higher education, leading to increased stress, alienation, feelings of guilt and other negative emotions (Ogbonna and Harris, 2004; Clarke, et al., 2012; Gill, 2017).

The quality of scholarship can also be damaged by these changes. Recent studies suggest that academics may be more willing to 'play the publication game' at the expense of genuine critical inquiry (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012; 2014). There is a palpable sense that 'journal list fetishism' (Willmott, 2011) is coming to shape not only patterns of knowledge production in higher education but also how academics are coming to relate to themselves and their own research. These trends suggest that the Humboldtian idea of the university – which measures the value of scientific-philosophical knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) according to the degree of cultivation (*Bildung*) it produces – has been superseded by a regime based on journal rankings, citation rates, impact factors and other quantitative metrics used to assess and reward research 'output' (Lucas, 2006).

Some scholars have pointed to the possibilities for resistance to the regime of academic capitalism. Some propose to short-circuit the publishing game by asking 'inappropriate' or 'indecent' questions about the value of research

assessments at departmental meetings (Bristow, 2012: 238), or finding ways to become 'less excellent' within a system skewed towards highly ranked journals (Butler and Spoelstra, 2017). Rolfe (2013) goes further and suggests that what is required is the development of a 'rhizomatic paraversity' that operates below the surface of the neoliberal university. This would serve to reintroduce the 'non-productive labour of thought' (2013: 53) into university life, thereby emphasizing quality over quantity and critique over careerism. Efforts such as Edu-factory may also point towards fruitful directions for the future of higher education beyond corporate imperatives (Edu-factory Collective, 2009). We might also become university managers ourselves, with all the risks, tensions and paradoxes this entails (Parker, 2004), with the hope of creating change from within.

In this special issue, we aim to survey the state of the contemporary university as well as uncover potentialities for dwelling subversively and creatively within and outside it. Towards this end, this special issue explores questions about how the work of scholars is being shaped, managed and controlled under the burgeoning regime of 'academic capitalism' (Rhoades and Slaughter, 2004) and in turn to ask what might be done about it. Our editorial reflects this trajectory from critical diagnosis to reflective action by turning now to a narrative of academic work written by one of the issue editors, Martyna Śliwa. Many of the problems that confront modern universities are reflected in the concrete practices that academics face in daily life. For this reason, the narrative of one academic can help to illustrate both how these challenges emerge, but also what can be done to deal with them.

### The happy academic?

It's Friday morning, 8.25am. Gently and slowly, the teacher instructs us: '*Ad-ho-mu-ka-sva-na-sa-na*. Your *drishti*, the looking point, should be on the navel, but you can also focus your gaze between the legs. Lift your hips up towards the ceiling'. Seven middle-aged women and one man, gathered in a North London church hall that rents its space out for yoga and pilates classes, try to bend their bodies into the downward facing dog pose. The pose has numerous benefits for the physical health, and is also an exercise in cultivation of stability and spaciousness in life.

I'm one of the group and am not gazing at my navel. In fact, my gaze is not focused anywhere specific. I have a vague awareness of the appearance of the purple mat underneath my hands and feet, the wooden floor, the grey-black-white pattern printed on the fabric of my yoga leggings, and the green leaves of the tree which I can see through the church's window. At this very moment,

stability and spaciousness appear to be abstract and distant concepts. The mind is racing, the throat is tight, and there is this slightly nauseous feeling in my stomach. While the teacher reminds us to inhale and exhale, I'm mentally immersed in organising my work for the coming days. What needs to be prioritised above anything else on the 'to do' list? What am I behind with? How much will I manage to do today, on Saturday and Sunday? Can I switch off the email for a few hours today and write, or will this result in an overwhelming email traffic jam that will require to be dissipated by me over the weekend, so that Monday doesn't have to start with uncluttering the inbox? If today I concentrate on writing, then how many words, realistically, will I have written until this evening? Will this be enough? Anxiety level rises, then a calmer inner voice reassures me: 'Well, if I work flat-out today and all weekend, I'll get a lot done'. I must get a lot done because next week will be very busy, too. But the body and mind also need rest at some point. As I'm being instructed to rotate the forearms inwards so that the insides of my elbows face each other, the mental counting and list-making continues: of the hours of work I'll be able to 'put in' before a new week begins, of the matters I should be able to attend to within that time, of the sparse non-work time on Saturday and Sunday and how I might spend it. 'Find your edge', says the yoga teacher, 'make sure you are challenged but be careful not to strain or harm yourself'. This is inspiring.

What is my 'edge' then? I consider myself a happy academic. Most of the time, I genuinely like the work I do. I am lucky to have a body and mind capable of engaging in paid labour and would not like to have to earn my living in any different way. But I spend most of the time working and find it difficult to work less, because when I try, I fall 'behind' and then find myself working even more just to 'catch up'. There is always so much to do. 'Academic work', as Berg and Seeber (2016: 3) argue in their book *The slow professor: Challenging the culture of speed in the academy*, 'by its very nature is never done'. They continue:

Our responses to student papers could always be fuller; our reading of scholarly literature could always be more up-to-date; and our books could always be more exhaustive. These self-expectations are escalated by the additional external pressures of the changing academic culture. In the past two decades, our work has changed due to the rise in contractual positions, expanding class sizes, increased use of technology, downloading of clerical tasks onto faculty, and the shift to managerialism – all part of the corporatization of the university.

This is impossible to disagree with. What is more, existing critiques of the neoliberal university confront me with the idea that I might be close to tipping over my 'edge', and that – through my work ethics and professional ambition – I am complicit in this process. In Ros Gill's (2010: 241) words, 'neoliberalism found fertile ground in academics whose predispositions to "work hard" and "do

well” meshed perfectly with its demands for autonomous, self-motivating, responsabilised subjects’. I can certainly identify with the description of someone socialized from an early age into the ideals of hard work coupled with and legitimized by a wish to do well. At the same time, the critiques of the neoliberal university often follow a century-old tradition – which arguably has its roots in Veblen’s (1918) damning assessment of US university presidents of his time – of blaming university managers for the problems observed within higher education. Now, after sixteen years of employment in academia, I have accumulated extensive experience of managing and organizing in this context. What does this mean in practice though? More broadly, what is the place within the current HE system not just for me but for academics in general? What kind of organizational citizenship should we pursue?

Wherever possible, I would recommend academics to get involved in managing and organizing in their universities – be it through taking up formal management roles or through participating in initiatives where we can create something meaningful, and shape what is done, and the way things are done in our institutions. To quote Berg and Seeber (2016: ix) again: ‘Those of us in tenured positions, given the privileges we enjoy, have an obligation to try to improve in our own ways the working climate for all of us’. From the perspective of my own discipline of management and organization studies, we might want to add here: those of us aware of the origin, content and oftentimes problematic implications and consequences of management, given the knowledge we have built within our academic field, have an obligation to contribute to the running of universities.

Those of us in tenured positions, let us not be tempted to engage in a brand of critique of contemporary academia that permits us to enjoy an above-average level of job security and income while at the same time strengthening the same system of neoliberal oppression with which we claim to disagree. The risk, after all, is that we may more or less unreflexively perpetuate the problematic aspects of the corporatized university by articulating our discontent with it within the pages of commercially-oriented outlets – one highly ranked publication at a time – for the benefit of research assessment audits, publishers’ profits and our own careers. Instead of settling into self-denial about our role in this system, let us take responsibility for it. Back (2016: 11) explains that ‘to carry on with an intellectual vocation...entails the cultivation of judicious speech and crafted attentiveness’. Our own employing organizations are spaces that we can transform by putting our knowledge to good use through judicious speech and crafted attentiveness exercised in order to shape and influence decision-making.

Why is it more productive for academia if scholars *become* involved in university management rather than *fight* it? The external conditions within which universities operate these days have not been created by university management but by governments and policymakers. To change these conditions requires involvement in political action – which is a different task from managing HE institutions internally. Collini (2017) offers an insightful analysis of changes in the UK HE sector, where there are currently over 140 higher education institutions providing courses to nearly 2.5 million students. He charts the gradual withdrawal of the state from funding higher education and the introduction of tuition fees, coupled with globalization, technological change, ‘marketization’, and a range of regulations and processes aimed at measuring universities’ performance along simplistically conceived criteria centred on HEIs’ usefulness for economic growth. All these changes have turned UK universities into organizations that are forced to act like commercial businesses, in the sense of having to earn income and generate profit, in order to survive and prosper. Collini (2017) proposes a solution to this through introducing a radically different approach to university funding, relying on suitably generous resources drawn from public finances.

We would like our students to be able to study without having to pay tuition fees, to choose what they wish to study solely on the basis of their interests, to graduate without debt, and to not have to worry about whether they are going to be able to find decently paid, secure jobs upon graduation. While we might not be able to change the broader socioeconomic landscape of the countries we work in, let us consider it our responsibility to help students navigate through the world they are going to live in in the future. In this respect, there is a lot we can and should do by getting involved in managing and shaping the university organizations we work for. Is this an easy thing to do? Not always. Does this not carry the risk of further overwork, possibly bringing our academic ‘labour of love’ (Clarke et al., 2012) ever closer to the ‘edge’? Quite likely. So let’s organise, shape and manage, for our students’ and for each other’s sake, while being careful not to harm or strain ourselves.

### **What can be done?**

When we speak of ‘managing’, we mean many different ways in which we can shape, influence and change the universities we work for. Indeed, there are a myriad of roles, relationships and interactions in which we can bring more humanity into the hallowed halls. This could entail working directly – and differently – with some of the dominant discourses promulgated by branding strategists. As critical scholars, we are aware of the problematic dimensions of

these discourses. Rather than dismissing them out of hand, how can we engage with them through an exercise of judicious speech and crafted attentiveness?

Take the idea of ‘employability’. Can we afford, for example, not to broach the subject of employability with our PhD students? The great majority of them undertake doctoral study with the intention of becoming academics. The reality is that much less than half of them will end up in academic posts. Some will choose to do something else, many will want to stay in academia but will not have the resources that could allow them to wait until they are offered a ‘proper’ position as an escape route from precarious, zero-hours, fractional, temporary teaching or research assistant contracts. It is therefore our responsibility to support them in thinking throughout the PhD process about the different employment and career options, and the kinds of skills they will need in order to find a job upon graduation. Having pragmatic and supportive conversations, and developing such skills while studying for a degree, including a doctorate, has now become part of university education, and part of the responsibility that we as academics have towards our students. Let us not leave the content of these conversations and skills to careers officers. Let us define and shape them. Talking to our students about employability and skills might not be easy; not talking to them about these things is unfair.

Consider, also, the idea of ‘wellbeing’. Another buzzword, often combined with others, such as ‘mindfulness’ and ‘resilience’. We know what is wrong with corporate wellness initiatives (Cederström and Spicer, 2015). But we also know that students’ mental health problems are on the increase, and this is a serious matter. Sometimes they become ill while at university, and sometimes a tragedy happens when a life is lost to depression. Can we afford not to be concerned enough to try and do something about it? When we know, for example, that there are students we teach for whom the very idea of ‘mental health’ is a cultural taboo, can we choose to dismiss or be ignorant about the wellbeing initiatives and support our universities offer? Can we justify not being aware of what mental health ‘first aid’ consists of? If we reject the concept of a student as a ‘customer’, let us not leave the task of bringing it to life to marketing officers. Let us, academics, work out – through our organizational practices and through engagement in decision-making – a model of approaching our students (and our colleagues) as human beings who we care about and whose wellbeing means something to us.

And how about the way we relate to otherness and difference in our professional lives? We hear a lot about ‘diversity’ in HR meetings with university managers. Indeed, academic institutions *are* highly diverse – and yet disparities still exist between how women and men progress up the organizational ranks and how

much they are paid. Black and minority ethnic groups are under-represented among academics. Everyone knows someone who has experienced harassment, bullying, discrimination, victimization – or perhaps we have experienced this ourselves. As scholars, we are aware of these phenomena, both in terms of their systemic causes and micro-level dynamics, and we believe that their occurrence is unacceptable. With this knowledge, can we absolve ourselves of the responsibility to put into practice the ideals of equality and respect for individuals that we hold dear and that are integral to our scholarly ethos?

We all have the duty to point out what is problematic about contemporary academia, especially as our professional socialization adds clarity and sensitivity to our observation of everyday academic labour. Within the current system of HE, all the roles we adopt – whether as teachers, supervisors, managers, departmental colleagues, co-authors, committee members, journal editors or conference organizers – provide space for us to engage constructively, shape academia and relate to each other in accordance with an ethics of care. This points to the possibility of hope and community within a competitive institutional landscape that is increasingly governed by the diktats of cost-benefit analysis and cutthroat careerism.

## **Contributions**

In the first contribution to our special issue, Robinson, Bristow and Ratle (this issue) reflect on the implications of the increasingly uncertain and challenging conditions within academia for Early Career Academics (ECAs). They offer a fine-grained account of the different transitions that emerging Critical Management Studies (CMS) scholars go through in order to be able to practise in their academic field and negotiate their place within it. While pointing out that the experiences of this group are often painful, the authors highlight that, ultimately, ECAs consider this professional transition process and its outcomes worthwhile. The authors argue that rather than simply learning and adjusting to the already existing ‘rules of the game’, new CMS academics might also be able to develop their own rules and ways of ‘playing’ in the academic field.

Next, McGregor and Knox (this issue) challenge some of the dualisms that frame debates about academia and activism. In particular, the authors critically examine the normative valuing of speed and mobility in assemblage theory, and caution against such a stance in order to avoid oppositional orientations in social justice knowledge production and practice. Ultimately, the paper poses provocative and thoughtful questions about the complex relations between the university and political action.

Further developing this theme, Stewart and Martínez (this issue) map out the connections between political commitment and research practice. If the aim of the radical intellectual is to strive towards social change and class transformation beyond the confines of academia, how may we best accomplish this task whilst still remaining within the norms of scholarly practice? For the authors, this conundrum may be resolved by adopting an avowedly ‘partisan’ approach that makes its political allegiances clear without, however, foregoing its commitment to academic values. Such a move is much needed within a university system that erroneously views political neutrality as a by-product of methodological ‘objectivity’. The question they address is therefore: how – and with whom – do we practice radical participatory action research whilst avoiding the hierarchical division between ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’?

Turning to the effects of university governance systems, Steinhorsdottir, Heijstra and Einarsdottir (this issue) explore the way in which the discourse of ‘excellence’, combined with the application of new public management (NPM), influences gender equality. Drawing on examples from two disciplines in the Icelandic higher education context, the authors show how financial and managerial instruments result in outcomes that are more advantageous for the allocation of research and teaching resources in male-dominated fields. Driven by the pursuit of equality, Steinhorsdottir, et al. argue for the need to take gender into account when organizational decisions are made in universities.

In the final article, Brandist (this issue) offers a provocative comparison between university reforms in Britain under neoliberalism and higher education during the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union. By presenting a historical analysis of the two tertiary education systems, Brandist examines the ‘proletarianization’ of university staff in the UK since 1979 and in the USSR in the 1930s and highlights the striking similarities (as well as important differences) between them – not least the use of competition, metrics, targets, performance indicators, and funding bodies to regulate professional labour by the state. At stake for Brandist is the modes of resistance that such reforms generate: forms of micro- and macro-rebellion that play out among a workforce that has been rendered precarious by decreasing pay, short-term contracts and temporary employment positions.

Opening the note section, Spoelstra (this issue) offers an elegant, meta-level meditation on the nature and purpose of ‘special sections’ in academic journals. Seen as a space that is paradoxically both inside and outside the publishing economy, special sections provide a forum for research that falls below the threshold of a conventional peer-reviewed article yet – for this very reason – is often more interesting and creative than standard academic papers. Spoelstra

suggests that what lies at the heart of special sections is a collective shame about what journal publishing has become – that is, a sausage factory churning out scholarship that is formulaic, irrelevant and downright boring.

Ruth (this issue), meanwhile, presents a darkly poetic rumination on dead spaces in the academic office – half-empty shelves, unused filing cabinets, second-hand furniture, unplugged telephones, outdated staff directories, random boxes, torn posters, chipped paintwork, as well as those haunted souls who reside within them, hunched over desks piled high with long-forgotten paperwork, old student essays and unopened textbooks. These dead spaces – like special sections in academic journals – tell us that academia is full of holes, voids, and absences; spaces out of which something new may arise (or perhaps into which something strange may crawl and make its home).

Next, Alakavuklar (this issue) offers a very personal reflection on his progress through academia. By way of a biographical sketch, Alakavuklar charts his transition from a mainstream business school student in Turkey to a critical management studies scholar in New Zealand. In doing so, he provides an insight into the ambiguities and tensions that are keenly felt by non-Western scholars who find themselves having to acclimatize to Western research norms. To preserve his voice as a non-native English speaker, and to underscore his identity as a non-Western scholar, the editors of this special issue agreed not to copy-edit Alakavuklar's note for style or grammar (correcting only spelling errors). Such an experiment in language provides a rare opportunity to reflect upon what is usually obscured or erased in the process of Anglophonic academic publication, thus revealing – by way of photographic negative, as it were – the long shadow neo-colonialism casts across the publishing economy.

Turner, et al.'s note (this issue) reports on an experiment the authors conducted to render the neoliberal university 'playable' – thereby opening up new horizons for the role of higher education in society beyond the instrumental logic of cost-benefit analysis. While dissent to the structural transformation of HE along corporate lines is usually expressed via academic publication or public protest, the authors instead devised a series of game workshops for university staff (both academic and administrative) to stimulate discussion about what a 'liveable' university might look like. Such a playfulness stands in opposition to the serious business of neoliberal econometrics, and shows that another university is possible – one that is collectively constructed and collegially governed.

The Tim-adical Writing Collective (this issue) is a group of six international researchers committed to promoting action change through their collective writing projects that is simultaneously timid and radical ('Tim-adical'). In their

note, the collective reflect on their experiences as early-career academics with regard to navigating the pressures and tensions of contemporary university life. Through a series of honest and revealing vignettes, the collective shed a much-needed light on how individuals may unwittingly become complicit in maintaining some of the injustices and vulnerabilities that characterise some university workplaces. The authors illustrate the potential for micro acts of resistance in order to regain a sense of individual and collective agency.

In the final note, Coin (this issue) reflects on the causes of ‘quitting’ higher education – a trend she identifies as increasingly common amongst scholars who feel alienated by the working conditions and culture within the competitive and entrepreneurial neoliberal university. With specific reference to the US, and tracing the roots of changes in higher education to Reagan’s views on the need to remove certain ‘intellectual luxuries’ (such as curiosity and wonder) previously at the disposal of American scholars, Coin discusses the underlying reasons and mechanisms through which academic labour can become precarious and exploitative. She concludes with the call to take quitting seriously, as a warning sign and a step towards transforming academia into an institution where ‘collaboration is the method and the object is to change our world’ (735).

The issue closes with two book reviews. The first, written by John Mingers, provides a comprehensive summary of Derek Sayer’s book *Rank hypocrisies: The insult of the REF*. Both the review and the book speak to a number of themes evident in the special issue, notably the politics of research assessments and journal rankings in a changing HE landscape. The second review, written by Ajnesh Prasad and Paulina Segarra, centres on Thomas Docherty’s book *Universities at war*. The reviewers describe how the production of Docherty’s book coincided with his almost year-long suspension from his professorial position. In doing so, the review offers a chilling analysis about the risks and repercussions of dissent in contemporary higher education.

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