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Higher Education, Management Control and the Everyday Academic

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Abstract

This contribution to the Festschrift for Hanne Norreklit examines how the use of management controls by senior management of universities impacts on the everyday academic. This examination is rooted in two interrelated issues, being, first, what should the purpose of a university be and second, what should they look to contribute to society. To keep the analysis that follows manageable, England provides a representative setting due to these issues having been heavily debated there within recent decades. While these debates continue, market-orientated understandings have come to dominate, influencing the focus of successive governments and, in turn, the situated practices of universities. Specifically, this has changed the focus of senior managers, at universities, away from their traditional remit towards revenue generating activities. Key to their efforts is the understanding that external impressions of their university, as provided by, for example, rankings, will affect financial performance. This results in senior management increasingly managing for the rankings and other such external signifiers. In so doing, they have progressively introduced management control regimes that focus the organisation's activities onto the external signifiers. However, as senior managements' performance, and thereby rewards, has become increasingly linked to the external signifiers, their focus has narrowed only to the output metrics of the management controls they have put into place. Hence, they become wilfully ignorant of the wider impact these management controls have, and the pressure cooker situation this creates for many everyday academics. While this outcome has been well documented in the extant literature, this article adds, through the analysis of exemplars, how this is resulting in the grimmest of situations, with dire consequences. As part of noting that this could, and should, be different, speculation is raised over whether other management controls may act as release valves to this pressure cooker situation.

1 Introduction

Having the honour of contributing to this Festschrift for Hanne Norreklit presented us with somewhat of a dilemma. That is, what should we write about given that both of us are not pragmatic constructivists? To answer this question, we reflected on the regular (online) discussions that we have had with Hanne (and Gudrun Baldvinsdottir) over the past couple of years. These discussions have focused on how the ongoing marketisation seen in higher education over the past forty or so years has resulted in dramatic changes within our universities (Gebreiter et al., 2018, Deem and Brehony, 2005). Specifically, the increased marketisation has led senior managers of universities to

implement management controls to achieve aims congruent with the changing higher education landscape (Sauder and Espeland, 2009, Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). Hence, this article examines how the increased use of the types of management controls being implemented by senior university management has impacted on the everyday academic. This is, after all, an area that Hanne has published within (see for example Kure et al., 2021, Nørreklit et al., 2019, Pianezzi et al., 2020) and an area that has seen much commentary within the extant literature (see for example Du and Lapsley, 2019, Parker, 2014, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012).

This examination has as its context, and is firmly rooted within, two interrelated issues, the understanding of which ultimately guide how universities are structured, managed and financed (Broadbent et al., 2010). The first of these issues is the question of what the purpose of a university should be. The second issue, given the understanding established in respect to the first, is what a university should look to contribute to society. Traditionally, and for a long period of time, the understandings that developed over these issues were focused on ideals such as academic freedom, scholarship, and collegiality. However, in recent decades, these understandings came to be questioned, with a commonly held belief arising that the everyday academic was aloof, out of touch with the 'real world', and produced outputs that had very little benefit to society as a whole (Gebreiter and Hidayah, 2019, Jamdar, 2018, ÖZbilgin, 2009, Power, 2015). From this perspective it was believed that universities would become more efficient and responsive to the needs of society through adopting the approach of private industry, which could best be achieved through increasingly opening the sector to market forces, thereby putting universities in competition with each other (Du and Lapsley, 2019, Hopper, 2013, Dobija et al., 2019, Parker, 2011, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012).

This has certainly been the case in England, where these issues have been heavily debated within academic, political, and societal arenas in recent decades (Broadbent et al., 2010). The outcomes of these debates have been that, at least since the Thatcher era, universities in England have increasingly been turned over to market forces and expected to be managed like private sector organisations (Chandler et al., 2002, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015). Hence, the article focuses on the university sector within England as a representative setting (Gebreiter et al., 2018, Teelken, 2012). It provides a representative example not so much in the generalisable sense but rather as a case study of how things can move to the extreme with dire consequences. That is, what is presented below provides an overview of the potential issues of following a similar strategy as seen in England. Finally, it should be noted that England provides the focus due to devolution resulting in the other three UK nations having slightly different higher education systems.

Primary among the mechanisms utilised by successive governments to enforce the marketisation of English universities has been changing the way in which they are funded (Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). These changes in funding mechanisms have overtly and, at times, implicitly elevated the importance of different types of external signifiers of university performance (Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). Thus, senior managers seeking to secure the financial sustainability and prosperity of their universities have needed to be mindful of managing for these external signifiers (Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015, Moll and Hoque, 2011). However, the cacophony of external signifiers that must be managed to have required senior management to position their universities as everything, for everyone, all of the time (Gornitzka and Maassen, 2017, Nørreklit et al., 2019). This requirement, in turn, creates demands and tensions for those within the university who must deliver this situation, not least, the everyday academic (Sauder and Espeland, 2009, Diefenbach, 2009, Du and Lapsley, 2019, O'Brien and Guiney, 2018, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012).

In short, the increased marketisation, and the competition that it brings, have resulted in a change of senior management focusing their universities towards high-quality (however defined) outputs, to assist in securing revenue maximisation, while at the same time doing so at the lowest possible cost (Gebreiter et al., 2018, Parker, 2013). To achieve this, over time, senior management have typically introduced various management controls to focus those within their organisation towards achieving that aim (Argento et al., 2020, Dobija et al., 2019, Roberts, 2018). However, it has long been established that management controls do not merely act as neutral conduits of information or management intention (Burchell et al., 1980, Hopwood, 1983, Espeland and Sauder, 2007). Worse still, management controls can transform, through the information sent up the hierarchy, the everyday academic into objectified, quantified, commodified, decontextualised, abstract and, thereby, dehumanised entries in an account to be managed (Roberts, 2018, Tsoukas, 1997, Hopwood, 1994, van Houtum and van Uden, 2022). This allows senior managers the ability to justify and rationalise the decisions and actions they take whilst being wilfully ignorant of the chaos this creates for the everyday academic who is represented by these entries in the accounts (Roberts, 2018, Chandler et al., 2002, Kure et al., 2021, Hopwood, 1994).

In the examination that follows, it is outlined how this results in, at the moderate end, questionable decisions being made, and, at the extreme, unconscionable consequences for the everyday academic. Specifically the analysis of recent events at the University of Leicester, along with exemplars from other universities, will be used to illustrate how this occurs and what types of consequences this has for the everyday academic. It illustrates that this results in, at the moderate end, toxic, stress laden work environments, and, at the extreme, situations that are resulting in some academics taking their own lives. What makes this situation worse is that the analysis highlights how some academics actively engage through focusing on activities that align with what the management controls measure in order to further their own careers (Pianezzi et al., 2020, Du and Lapsley, 2019, Hopwood, 2005). While many do so overtly, other

academics speak about their abhorrence for the outcomes being produced through the use of these management controls and yet act in ways that have the aim of maximising their own opportunities (akin to the functional stupidity discussed by Alvesson and Spicer, 2012).

Above all else this article concludes that the current marketised English university model is not conducive to promoting traditional ideals, such as academic freedom, scholarship, and collegiality (Du and Lapsley, 2019). Almost all universities allude to such ideals within their mission statements, even though in practice they are being crowded out by a focus on external signifiers and the corresponding use within the organisation of related management controls (van Houtum and van Uden, 2022, Arnaboldi et al., 2015). Thus, in practice, the way in which management controls are increasingly being used has profound impacts on the everyday academic, such as creating boundaries to academic freedom, placing limits to subjects of inquiry, and driving them to focus on their individual circumstances above all else (Du and Lapsley, 2019). Without the traditional ideals in place, it is hard to see how the understandings that develop over the purpose and contributions of universities being anything other than extremely narrow (Jamdar, 2018, ÖZbilgin, 2009, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015, Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). In turn, beyond the many undesirable outcomes for the everyday academic, this will limit the type of value that universities provide to society to only the financially orientated variety, thereby crowding out so much of the important contributions' universities can and do make (Jamdar, 2018, Collini, 2012, Nørreklit et al., 2019, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012, Shaheen, 2011, van Houtum and van Uden, 2022, Sandel, 2013). Hence the article argues that it could, and perhaps should, be different (Law, 1992). Thus, it is examined whether other types of management controls have the potential to assist with alleviating the ills confronting the everyday academic, and thereby acting as release valves to the pressure cooker situation. It is, however, acknowledged that this is an empirical question, requiring what Glasser (2019) terms skilful muddling in order to assess what will mitigate the worst outcomes being seen for the everyday academic.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, an overview is provided as to what the current context is for English universities, as well as providing an understanding of how it became so. This provides the context for the subsequent section, which provides an understanding of the increasing use of management controls within universities and how this results in senior managers becoming wilfully ignorant of the chaos this causes for the everyday academic. The next section then seeks to examine what is already presented in the extant literature on the impact that this has on the everyday academic. This is followed by a section that presents the contemporary example of the University of Leicester, along with other exemplars, to outline how these impacts can have incredibly dire and grim outcomes for the everyday academic. This is followed by a discussion section in which it is explored as to whether it should and could be different, before a concluding section is offered.

2 A Brief Note on Where is Here and How We Got There

To understand the impact on the everyday academic from the use of management controls within universities in England, it is first important to understand what the current context is and how it developed. As expressed above, the operating context of English universities is one where they have been increasingly opened to market forces (Nash, 2019). This approach has developed through the ongoing questioning of the two interrelated issues of what should the purpose of a university be and what should they look to contribute to society. Traditionally the understandings of these issues focused on high ideals such as academic freedom, scholarship, and collegiality (Broadbent et al., 2010). This is not to say this was the 'right' or 'perfect' understandings, nor to paint a rosy picture of the state of universities in the past (Parker and Jary, 1995). Rather it is to note that these were the commonly held beliefs of what ideals that a university, and the everyday academic, should aim for. Over the last four decades or so, all areas of public services have increasingly been scrutinised through the lens of 'value for money', including the higher education sector (Nash, 2019, Parker, 2011, 2012, Power, 2015, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). This value for money scrutiny started to raise questions regarding the purpose and contribution of universities (Power, 2015, Broadbent et al., 2010, Butler and Spoelstra, 2014). In turn, this focused attention onto whether the everyday academic was aloof, out of touch with the 'real world', and produced outputs that had very little benefit to society (Gebreiter and Hidayah, 2019, Jamdar, 2018, ÖZbilgin, 2009). This gradually gave rise to the idea that opening universities to market forces would encourage them to embrace efficiency and become more responsive to the needs of society, thereby implementing a value for money approach (Du and Lapsley, 2019, Hopper, 2013, Dobija et al., 2019, Field, 2015).

As such, over the past few decades there has been a gradual marketisation of universities in England (Du and Lapsley, 2019). This process of marketisation has come with expectations that universities will increasingly adopt private industry approaches to running their operations (Parker, 2011, 2012, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012, Butler and Spoelstra, 2014, Czarniawska, 2020, Sandel, 2013). By doing so, a commonly held belief was that universities would provide more value for money to society than they had previously (Field, 2015, Parker, 2011, 2012). One of the ways in which successive governments implemented these changes was through modifying the mechanisms used to provide funding to universities (O'Brien and Guiney, 2018, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015). That is, rather than the government providing the financial resources directly, a series of new types of funding arrangements have been introduced and

modified over time (Nash, 2019). In terms of funding for teaching, this was through students being required to pay fees directly to the university, and, if required, taking out a government provided loan to do so (Parker, 2011). Funding for research also became more competitively driven, through such measures as research assessment exercises and the establishment of research councils to distribute grants applied for by individual or groups of academics (Nash, 2019).

Over the past decade this has been reinforced and solidified by the Conservative Party led government, who have, post 2007-08 financial crisis, sought to implement an austerity program (Du and Lapsley, 2019). Actions that have resulted from their austerity program of relevance here include a tripling of student fees, shrinking of government funding available for research, and the expectation that university research would increasingly be funded by non-governmental bodies, particularly private industry. This has resulted in the further embedding of the value for money ethos in all aspects of university activities. A prime example of this was seen in the 2022 Conservative Party leadership contest between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak, where the latter, during his candidacy, promised to phase out university degrees that were deemed to result in low-earning opportunities for their graduates (Owen, 2022).

Taken together, the changing mechanisms of university funding have elevated the importance and prominence of a plethora of external signifiers (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). This is due to these external signifiers, being directly and implicitly linked with the amount a specific university receives in funding. A prime example of a direct link between an external signifier and the amount a specific university receives is the research monitoring and measurement exercise undertaken by the UK government. These exercises have been in place since the mid-1980s, first as the Research Assessment Exercise and then subsequently the Research Excellence Framework (Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015, Nash, 2019). Over the time they have been utilised, what is monitored and measured has been expanded, with the results determining the level of bulk research funding that the university will receive until the next exercise is undertaken. Given that the time between these exercises is typically between five and eight years, universities see it as an important juncture that they need to excel at.

An important example of the implicit, and thereby indirect, link between the external signifiers and funding received is provided by the rankings undertaken by various agencies. These rankings include the Times Higher Education (THE), Financial Times, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) (Czarniawska, 2020). These rankings utilise calculative practices in relation to different sets of metrics to place universities throughout the world in a hierarchical ordering based on their definition of quality. Each will argue that the calculative practices and sets of metrics that they have selected to utilise makes their ranking the definitive ordering of university quality that should be trusted by users (Jeacle and Carter, 2011). An example of how there is an implicit and indirect link to funding here is provided by one user group, students, often using these rankings to guide their decisions as to which universities to apply for (Chandler et al., 2002). In the case of English universities this can be of specific importance given that international students, who pay the highest fees (O'Brien and Guiney, 2018, Parker, 2020, Hopper, 2013), will have less localised knowledge of the sector and, therefore, be more reliant on the information about quality (and, thereby, value for money) provided by the rankings.

The implications of these direct and indirect effects on university's financial performance are that senior management focus has increasingly turned to managing for the metrics that underpin the calculative practices of the external signifiers (Sauder and Espeland, 2009). However, senior management need to be mindful of two issues in doing so. The first is that, beyond the two examples outlined above, there are a cacophony of external signifiers vying for their attention. These include, for instance, the National Student Survey, covering final year undergraduate students, which provides yet another form of ranking that needs to be managed for. Another example is accreditation bodies, whose membership may be a perceived signal of quality for external funders and prospective students alike (Humphrey and Gendron, 2015). A well-known goal, in this respect, for business schools in England is what is known as the Triple Crown: accreditation by the three major bodies of Association of Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), Association of MBAs (AMBA), and EMFD Quality Improvement System (EQUIS). A final example are the numerous awards available for being the 'best' within a specific category, such as the Times Higher Education Awards, which are held on an annual basis.

The second, and related, issue is that these external signifiers, while seemingly separate things, are interrelated and self-reinforcing. This is due to there being many commonalities and similarities in the underlying metrics utilised within the calculative practices that underpin the external signifiers. For example, a university that achieves good outcomes in the research exercise undertaken by the UK government, will also likely do well in international rankings where the underlying metrics use similar or common measures for research quality. Both in turn will improve external signifiers that students (both domestic and international) utilise in their decisions as to which universities to apply for. Hence, this is why senior management is required to position their universities as everything, for everyone, all of the time (Gornitzka and Maassen, 2017, Nørreklit et al., 2019). Czarniawska (2020, p. 27) eloquently notes this as the senior management "following the global fashion, that is, trying to be both the same and different ("unique") from all other universities".

In summary, the implications of the marketisation of English universities, combined with the increasing importance of external signifiers for financial prosperity, is the rise of a management class within the university (Deem

and Brehony, 2005, Field, 2015, Parker, 2011, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). The role of this management class is to put into action the strategy devised by the senior management in their attempts to manage for the metrics. Of importance here is that putting the strategy into action has required an exponential increase in the associated practices of managing, measuring, and monitoring the everyday academic. This is primarily achieved using management controls (Parker, 2012, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). The next section now turns to examining how this is achieved, before turning to analysing what the implications are for the everyday academic in the era of the external signifier.

3 Managing in The Era of External Signifiers

The previous section outlined how the era of external signifiers arose from changing understandings over what should the purpose of universities be and what should they seek to contribute to society. This section turns to examining how the era of external signifiers has influenced the agenda of senior management at universities. Importantly, the outputs of the external signifiers are not directly useful for the management of a university, and yet the university becomes something to be managed for these metrics (Habersam et al., 2021, Czarniawska, 2020, Parker, 2013, Nørreklit et al., 2019, Tsoukas, 1997, Espeland and Sauder, 2007). Hence, the marketisation of universities in England has resulted in senior management focusing on the interdependence that income generation has with these external signifiers. Thus, the strategizing of senior management has increasingly revolved around managing their organisations to achieve optimal results in the external signifiers, to maximise the financial performance of the university (Parker, 2013, 2020, Kure et al., 2021, Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). This focus is further reinforced through senior management's performance being judged upon the financial sustainability of their university and its progress in relation to the external signifiers (Czarniawska, 2020, Parker, 2011, 2020, Baker, 2021). While the senior management's remuneration, especially in the case of bonuses, will benefit from good performance in these terms, as outlined below, this may not be in the best interest of the long-term outcomes of the university, the day to day lived experience of the everyday academic, or the higher education industry (Deem and Brehony, 2005, Diefenbach, 2009).

In short, there is a direct link between the marketisation of universities and the impacts resulting from senior management strategizing. Most profoundly, marketisation has resulted in expansion of certain areas of university activity and the decrease in others (Diefenbach, 2009). With senior management being more firmly focused on financial performance, they have sought to identify areas whose expansion will improve revenue generation and uneconomic areas to close (Diefenbach, 2009). The prime example of revenue expansion activities is the growth in student numbers (Parker, 2011, 2013). This is particularly the case with international students, with the high fees that can be charged making universities more global in their recruitment activities (O'Brien and Guiney, 2018, Parker, 2020, Hopper, 2013). However, the recent Covid 19 pandemic exposed how universities in many countries, including England, have become highly dependent on the financial resources that international students provide (Parker, 2020). The pandemic, therefore, provided a timely reminder of the financial risks that universities now carry because of marketisation (Parker, 2020, Baker, 2021). Nonetheless, the expansion of student numbers has made higher education in England become a mass production activity, being labelled as the McDonaldization of universities by some commentators (Parker, 2012, 2013, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015, Nash, 2019, Hopper, 2013, Argento et al., 2020, Chandler et al., 2002).

Alongside the expansion of revenue generating activities, uneconomic areas have been closed, or at least scaled back (Diefenbach, 2009). This is often achieved through utilising a broad swathe of management controls to identify the areas that are deemed to be uneconomic (Parker, 2011). The outcome of these decisions may take many forms including discontinuing academic programs, disbanding departments, or downsizing less vocationally focused areas, which attract less high fee-paying international student interest, such as areas of humanities, social sciences, and even certain subjects within the natural sciences (Parker, 2011, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015). However, there are also often constraints placed on areas that are deemed to be economically viable to ensure their continued financial performance (Pianezzi et al., 2020). This can be seen in areas that are increasingly reliant on private industry for their funding (Humphrey and Gendron, 2015). In such areas, as will become evident in the case of the University of Leicester below, critically orientated approaches (however defined by senior management) to research and teaching are no longer welcomed due to concerns over this being interpreted as 'biting the hand that feeds you' (Pianezzi et al., 2020, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015).

Beyond the expansion and contraction of university activity in line with economic viability, senior management have also altered the operating structures of their universities to ensure that the day-to-day practices of the everyday academic are in line with their strategizing. This has involved two interrelated changes. The first of these, as mentioned above, is the introduction of a management class (Field, 2015). This management class is tasked with implementing the strategizing of the senior management, a task that they typically embrace with vocational ferocity (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). As with senior management, the zeal for which this is undertaken is due to their own success, and thereby remuneration, being tied to and measured in respect to university performance against the external signifiers. Of note, is that the installing of a careerist management class, replaces the collegial modes of governance traditionally seen at universities (Parker, 2011, Arnaboldi et al., 2015, Du and Lapsley, 2019, Butler and Spoelstra, 2014, Habersam et al.,

2021). Again, this results in a move away from the ideals that traditionally underpin a university's *modus operandi* (Field, 2015, Diefenbach, 2009, van Houtum and van Uden, 2022).

The second of these changes is that senior management have, over time, increasingly become reliant on the use of management controls (Dobija et al., 2019, Parker, 2013). These management controls are developed in relation to what is of importance to the senior management: financial performance and progress in relation to the external signifiers (Nørreklit et al., 2019, Parker, 2013). Hence, the types of management controls that are used are focused on efficiency and effectiveness in relation to obtaining these outcomes (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014, Parker, 2020). That is, the management controls selected typically measure, and aim to manage, the everyday academic in terms of producing output that maximises the outcomes of external signifiers and, in turn, financial performance (van Houtum and van Uden, 2022, Parker, 2020).

An example of this type of management control is that most English universities implement their own research monitoring exercise, on an annual basis, that mimics the government's equivalent exercise (Du and Lapsley, 2019, Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). Just as with the government's version, the university will require each academic to submit a certain number of research outputs (typically journal articles, funding, and impact case studies), over a certain amount of time, which are to an expected level of quality (van Houtum and van Uden, 2022, Du and Lapsley, 2019). In terms of quality, usually the rhetoric will be around judging the individual item on its own merits. However, in practice, this is not always the case (ÖZbilgin, 2009, Willmott, 2011). For example, published articles are often discussed and measured in relation to the perceived quality of the journal they appear in (Du and Lapsley, 2019, Butler and Spoelstra, 2014, Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012, Willmott, 2011). The irony here, though, is that evidence suggests that there is no relation between how the government's research exercise assesses published articles to the perceived quality of the journal within which it was published (Pidd and Broadbent, 2015, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015). However, this management control enables the university to identify everyday academics that are deemed not to be performing and take corrective action (Humphrey and Gendron, 2015). Other examples of the type of management controls typically utilised within English universities include workload allocation models (WAM), annual performance reviews, and student evaluations of teaching (Arnaboldi et al., 2015, Parker, 2013).

The increased use of management controls has several implications. To start, the ideals that traditionally underpinned university life included trust, by senior management, that the activities of the everyday academic were in line with expected scholarly endeavours (Parker, 2011, Chandler et al., 2002). This trust has been replaced by the barrage of monitoring and surveillance enabled by the management controls (Parker, 2011, Arnaboldi et al., 2015, van Houtum and van Uden, 2022, Chandler et al., 2002). Related to this, is that the management controls typically convert the activities of the everyday academic into quantified metrics, which enable senior management to manage from a distance (Arnaboldi et al., 2015, Tsoukas, 1997, Dobija et al., 2019, Sauder and Espeland, 2009, Argento et al., 2020). This means that for senior management, any specific everyday academic is the summation of what these metrics conveys to them (van Houtum and van Uden, 2022, Argento et al., 2020). As such, senior management has no visibility over the context or working condition of that specific everyday academic (Tsoukas, 1997, Roberts, 2018). In this way, the increased transparency provided by the management controls over any specific everyday academic is limited to knowledge that aligns with the aims and goals of senior management (Roberts, 2018, Diefenbach, 2009). As the senior managements' performance is judged on financial sustainability and progress in relation to external signifiers, they can make claims to managing effectively, even if their strategizing results in chaos for the everyday academic (Deem and Brehony, 2005, Kure et al., 2021, Dobija et al., 2019). This is what Roberts (2018) refers to as the strategic function of ignorance: managing for appearance rather than the realities of the organisation. The implications of this for the everyday academic is examined in the next section.

4 The Everyday Academic

This section examines the implications for the everyday academic of senior management at English universities deploying the strategic function of ignorance (Roberts, 2018). The strategic function of ignorance allows senior management to achieve their goals and proclaim success in effectively managing their organisations, while being purposefully oblivious to the impact on the everyday academic (Roberts, 2018, Cooper and Johnston, 2012). The issue focused on here is management controls being utilised to objectify and rationalise such an approach (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). That is, the objectivity and rationalism that is constructed enables senior management the ability to label unconscionable outcomes of their strategizing as the result of the everyday academic's poor performance (Parker, 2014). To put this bluntly, it equates to blaming the victim of a system for the outcomes that they experience (Chandler et al., 2002). The typical lived experience of many everyday academics in England equates to a pressure cooker situation (Du and Lapsley, 2019).

There is already a large amount of evidence (for example see Bothwell, 2018, Inge, 2018) of the growing pressure cooker nature of the daily lived experience of the everyday academic (Nash, 2019). This results in the everyday academic feeling increasingly stressed, overworked, underpaid, and with their work-life balance increasingly

skewed towards the former at the expense of the latter (Bothwell, 2018, O'Brien and Guiney, 2018). To understand why this is the case, the starting point is to highlight how the management controls that are increasingly put into place by senior management construct the everyday academic using 'objective' numbers (Tsoukas, 1997, Du and Lapsley, 2019, Parker, 2014, Parker and Jary, 1995). This allows senior management to disassociate themselves from the impacts of their decisions through the seduction, objectification, and rationalisation, and, thereby, de-humanisation, brought about by numbers (Merry, 2016, Roberts, 2018, Tsoukas, 1997). Hence, as outlined in the previous section, in such a regime people become lines on a spreadsheet, at best, with the accounts constructed of them being partial at most (Tsoukas, 1997). This quantification of the everyday academic determines who is (un)successful from the perspective of senior management (Du and Lapsley, 2019, Dobija et al., 2019). For example, the term "four by four-star researcher" has entered the everyday lexicon of English universities. The term is a reference to an academic who is deemed to have published four articles that will be judged as the highest quality (four star) in the next government research assessment exercise. As such, the management controls implemented by the senior management reward achievements that align to the expectations of the external signifiers, thereby also placing pressure on anyone whose achievements are perceived not to meet that standard (Willmott, 2011, Du and Lapsley, 2019).

For some faculty this creates opportunity, especially, for instance, those that are deemed as four by four-star researchers by senior management (Pianezzi et al., 2020, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015). In the case of others, for example, they are fortuitous to be in an academic field that neatly aligns with the expectations of external signifiers (or, at least, internal perceptions of those expectations). This provides the opportunity for those concerned to construct themselves as high performing academics (van Houtum and van Uden, 2022, Pianezzi et al., 2020, Dobija et al., 2019). Such construction allows said faculty to obtain favourable working environment outcomes, since senior management will usually wish to avert losing them to other universities. Of note is that this can result in game playing by everyday academics to construct themselves in the perceptions of senior managers as those that are 'successful' (Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015, Roberts, 2018, Hopwood, 2005, van Houtum and van Uden, 2022, Pianezzi et al., 2020, Dobija et al., 2019).

However, most academics increasingly find themselves in a dysfunctional work environment, where numerous metrics require them to fulfil competing demands (Du and Lapsley, 2019, Gebreiter and Hidayah, 2019). In this way the management controls place pressure on an academic through presenting various quantified targets that require time, planning and, in many cases, luck to achieve (Chandler et al., 2002, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012, Butler and Spoelstra, 2014, Du and Lapsley, 2019). The consequences of not achieving these targets, however, is for the system of management controls, implemented by senior management, to identify and label the academic as underperforming (Willmott, 2011, Dobija et al., 2019, Du and Lapsley, 2019). In so doing, this then may result in a vicious cycle of prescribed measures being implemented and justified as the 'correct' procedure to assist the university and (without a hint of irony) the academic to achieve their respective goals (Du and Lapsley, 2019). The reality for the everyday academic caught in this situation is that it imposes more stringent and harsher working conditions, that increase the pressure cooker nature of their lived experience (van Houtum and van Uden, 2022, Nash, 2019, Du and Lapsley, 2019, Diefenbach, 2009).

A management control that exemplifies this is the workload allocation model (WAM). As mentioned above, the activities of the everyday academic were traditionally governed in a collegial way and administered in a localised manner (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012, Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015, Parker, 2011). This has been progressively replaced by a top-down hierarchical approach, administered through management controls such as the WAM (ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012, Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). Typically, the WAM will quantify the everyday academic's workload using standardised hours per activity, which are predetermined by the senior management. The standardisation is justified based on fairness, even though, as is the case with all such commensurations, it does not consider variations implicit within localised contexts (Espeland and Sauder, 2007). Hence, it is highly unlikely that any standardised hours will match on to the actual hours involved with performing the activity. This is important to consider when acknowledging that the massification of universities in England has resulted in more students requiring teaching (Parker, 2011). However, senior management focus on financial performance may require this to be done by the same number of academics, with only marginal extra time allocation, all justified and rationalised by WAM calculations (Field, 2015). This results in the everyday academic being required to undertake all the activities related to teaching on a larger scale, but within a relatively more confined timeframe (Parker, 2011).

This massification, and the pressure it places on the everyday academic, is not lost on the students (Parker and Jary, 1995). Having paid high levels of fees, students' expectations are still on receiving an individualised, high-quality education. This is further complicated by it becoming more commonplace for them to think of themselves as customers rather than students (Gebreiter and Hidayah, 2019, O'Brien and Guiney, 2018, Hopper, 2013). However, it is the everyday academic who teaches the students who is the public face of the increased class sizes, and all this entails. Thus, the everyday academic must also manage the expectations of larger numbers of students (customers), especially as they will feed back through student surveys their (dis)satisfaction of the service they receive (O'Brien and Guiney, 2018, Gebreiter and Hidayah, 2019). These student surveys are commonly used as a proxy for teaching quality and can

result in the everyday academic being highlighted as not performing to senior management expectation, with all the implications this involves. This, therefore, is a clear example of the chaos that befalls the everyday academics through being held responsible for decisions they had no part in making (Parker, 2011, Morrish, 2017). How this type of pressure cooker situation can result in extreme outcomes will be explored in the next section.

The above example of WAM provides a glimpse as to how management controls can create a pressure cooker situation for the everyday academic (Du and Lapsley, 2019). But the example needs to be put into the context of the everyday academic facing a barrage of such management controls, all of which construct expectations over the quality of teaching and create higher pressure to achieve regular, (perceived) high quality research outputs (Field, 2015, Du and Lapsley, 2019, Gebreiter and Hidayah, 2019, Nash, 2019). The management controls may also be utilised by senior management to constrain the type of teaching and research that is undertaken, through demarcating what will result in the everyday academic being 'successful' (Dobija et al., 2019, Gebreiter, 2022, Butler and Spoelstra, 2014, Rhodes, 2022). This is particularly the case when funding by private industry becomes a priority for senior management (Parker, 2013, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015, Willmott, 2011, Gebreiter, 2022, Rhodes, 2022). However, this can also be the result of perception by senior management of the types of activities and outputs that will maximise outcomes in relation to external signifiers (van Houtum and van Uden, 2022, Butler and Spoelstra, 2014). At its worst, an academic may find themselves in the unlucky position of being in an area that is deemed to be uneconomic, with the result being the loss of their job, with all that this entails (Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). This will be illustrated in the next section by the case of the University of Leicester.

In summary, using management controls to implement the strategic function of ignorance allows senior management to impose harsher working conditions and justify it as being in the best interest of the everyday academic (Chandler et al., 2002, Du and Lapsley, 2019). However, this is somewhat tautological in that the management controls that impose the harsher working conditions, also define what it means to be successful. As such, this justification also requires senior management to obfuscate as many negative aspects as possible (Parker, 2014). For example, negative news, such as number of staff on stress leave, number of suicides on campus, or incidents of racism on campus, are heavily redacted on the basis that such publicity would not be in the interest of the university. It is not possible, however, to obfuscate all the negative impacts on the everyday academic. For instance, it is uncommon in England to find an everyday academic that does not know of a colleague who has committed suicide or left the university with a nondisclosure agreement in place (Parker, 2014). Hence senior management will also highlight how they have implemented mentoring and support system to assist academics with their wellbeing needs (Chandler et al., 2002). However, this, at best, is the placing of an ambulance at the bottom of the proverbial cliff. It does not address the underlying causes of the situation and, therefore, is merely a token gestures that offers little real assistance to the everyday academic in dealing with the pressure cooker nature of their lived experience (Chandler et al., 2002). It is also worth noting that the situation is disproportionately tougher and inequitable for younger scholars than the professoriate that is currently in post (Du and Lapsley, 2019, Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015). That is, for the professoriate, many of whom are members of senior management, the earlier years of their career were at times when the more collegial mode of governance was in place (ÖZbilgin, 2009). Hence, it can be argued they did not experience the pressure cooker lived experience of today whilst becoming established academics. The next section turns to using exemplars to flesh out how the current system can result in the most grievous and dire outcomes, and to demonstrate how the professoriate is not immune to some of these outcomes.

5 The University of Leicester and Other Cautionary Tales

The previous section outlined how the current use of management controls within English universities are creating pressure cooker environments for the everyday academic through constructing a barrage of demands. These demands require the everyday academic to provide cutting edge education, produce world leading research, and act as a good citizen through providing administrative support for the senior management's strategizing. While this provides opportunity for a few game playing academics, for many it places increasing pressure on them to not be deemed, via outputs of the management controls, as underperforming. This section turns to scrutinising the consequences of the management control constructed pressure cooker for the everyday academic in recent cases within English universities. This will start with the examination of how the construction of a new strategy at the University of Leicester resulted in many academics being deemed as not fitting (i.e., uneconomic). This will be followed by analysis of exemplars that demonstrate that Leicester is not an isolated example and that, at the extreme, the outcomes for the everyday academic can be dire.

Like many universities, the University of Leicester's finances were in a problematic situation as a direct result of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic (McKie, 2021a, Parker, 2020). Contributing to the issue was, as a mid-tier university, the lifting of the cap on student numbers by the government in 2015 resulted in the candidates that would usually attend Leicester being selected by better ranked universities, thereby squeezing the University's finances (McKie, 2021a). Of note, is that this squeeze occurred at a time when they had already committed to increasing debt

levels to fund capital investments (McKie, 2021a). As a result, in October 2020 senior management proposed a “Shaping for Excellence” restructuring plan, designed to streamline the university, with the aim of maintaining its position in respect to the array of external signifiers utilised to judge its performance (McKie, 2021a, Huws, 2021, Rhodes, 2022). In this respect, the University of Leicester provides a contemporary example of what transpired in the case study of ‘Euro Business School’, as documented by Parker (2014).

Of note here is that the restructuring plan identified 145 academics for consideration of redundancy, within the areas of neuroscience and psychology, management studies, languages, English, and mathematics (McKie, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). Further, of importance, the announcement of the redundancies was made by senior management while the Covid-19 pandemic was still ongoing within England, and, therefore, the opportunities for obtaining another academic job were severely impacted (McKie, 2021c). As established above, many English universities are pressure cooker environments, with evidence suggesting that the University of Leicester could be included within this. That is, Jump (2013) outlined how the senior management of the University of Leicester stated that they would review all academics to ascertain which were able to be submitted to REF 2014. This would have involved the senior management undertaking an internal equivalent of the REF, with the management controls used identifying those academics deemed to be underperforming. As Jump (2013) reports, senior management stated that the prescribed outcomes for underperforming academics would be either the move on to teaching only contracts, where opportunity to do so were available, or having further performance targets imposed upon them, with the failure to achieve these resulting in dismissal procedures. This evidence suggests that, in 2021, the 145 academics selected for review and potential redundancy, were highly likely to already be under considerable stress. It can only be imagined how the announcement of their potential job loss would increase the pressure they already felt.

Commentators noted that the academics put at risk of redundancy included active members of the University and College Union (UCU) and those focused on critical management studies, or, in short, those most likely to criticise the senior management’s strategizing (McKie, 2021a, 2021b, Huws, 2021, Rhodes, 2022). It is no surprise, therefore, that the UCU undertook various measures of resistance, including grey-listing Leicester (a signal to their members, and academics in general, not to associate with the university), passing a vote of no confidence in senior management, going on strike, and implementing a marking boycott (McKie, 2021a, 2021c). It is not clear what, if any, changes this achieved in the senior management’s strategizing. Further, speculation remains as to the underlying motives of the senior management’s strategizing and what it aimed to achieve. It is of consequence that reducing the number of research active staff deemed to be underperforming assists a university in maximising their REF performance (Huws, 2021, Agyemang and Broadbent, 2015, Butler and Spoelstra, 2014). With the University of Leicester’s finance already under pressure (McKie, 2021a), and having a track record regarding REF game playing (Jump, 2013), it is plausible that protecting income received from the next REF may be among their motives. However, other actions taken points to a complex set of circumstances surrounding and motivating the senior management’s strategizing. One example relates to a tweet made on March 10, 2021, by the University’s official twitter account. This tweet promoted ground breaking research by academics within their department of neuroscience, psychology, and behaviour. However, the tweet was removed once it was pointed out that these researchers were among the 145 at risk of redundancy (McKie, 2021b).

This brings into questions the efficacy of the management controls being utilised by the senior management at the University of Leicester to identify which academics are deemed to be underperforming. The strategic function of ignorance has many benefits for senior management in avoiding responsibility for the unconscionable outcomes of the decisions they make (Roberts, 2018). However, this evidence also suggests that this wilful ignorance comes with blindness to the full costs of the decisions that are prompted by the management controls in place. That is, the deleted tweet (McKie, 2021b) perhaps is a signal that the management controls in place were prompting decisions that were detrimental to the senior management’s strategizing. After all, if the goal is to maximise performance to external signifiers, then placing international leading researchers on lists of those deemed to be underperforming would not seem to be an appropriate action to take.

But these were not the only academics within the 145 where this was the case. Sixteen research-active academics from the business school were deemed to be underperforming, largely due to focusing on critical management studies (McKie, 2021b, Huws, 2021). Among the sixteen was the highly cited, internationally renowned organisation theorist Professor Gibson Burrell. Burrell is most noted for co-authoring a book (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) that is typically read, as a rite of passage, by PhD students who are pursuing sociologically driven research in the (broadly defined) area of management. As Burrell alludes to in an email (Burrell, 2021) that he sent to the University of Leicester’s senior management, while he has a diverse career, it would be a stretch to label his research as critical management studies. Within the email he also notes that in “the first individual consultation I chose not to defend my work over a 47 year career to someone (the Acting Dean) who showed no knowledge nor interest in my research nor any inclination to learn something of it in the meeting” (Burrell, 2021). He then outlines an impressive array of metrics that demonstrate his many accomplishments. The question that the case of Professor Burrell raises, with his many accomplishments, is whether any of us are truly immune to a determined senior management, armed with a barrage of management controls that allow them to comprehensively deploy the strategic function of ignorance?

While the University of Leicester is used as an exemplar to explore the issues with the use of management controls to implement the strategic function of ignorance, it should not be seen as an isolated incident. There are many other exemplars of where the senior management has taken a similar approach. These include, in 2014, the University of Warwick having to backtrack on a decision to suspend an academic, for undermining his head of department, after he was cleared by an internal investigation (Morgan, 2014). It was notable that the academic concerned was a prominent critic of the marketisation of universities. In a similar vein, Morrish (2017) outlines how she ended up leaving her role as an academic after her university started disciplinary procedures. These procedures related to a blog post, which had also been published in *Times Higher Education*, in which she explored the mental health issues that are synonymous with the current pressure cooker nature of English higher education institutions. Of note, and in relation to senior management taking actions to obfuscate negative aspects of their strategizing, Morrish (2017) was forced to take down the blog post as part of the disciplinary procedures. Another example is provided by a prominent academic in Italian politics who lost their job of 27 years at the University of Salford for failing to apply for grant income after having financial targets imposed upon him (Anonymous, 2018). It should be noted that the context of the competition to secure funding is one where an increasing number of academics are expected to obtain grants from a relatively stagnant level of money, resulting in the success rate of applications falling (Matthews, 2016). A final example is, in the 2017-18 financial year, English universities were required to report the amount they had spent on severance pay, with 20 research-intensive universities reporting a total of £48.8 million between them (Grove, 2018). This was of course at a time when the universities were preparing for the upcoming 2021 REF. Of note though is that some of these pay-outs may be in relation to settling bullying cases, with such behaviour becoming more common within English universities. This should come as no surprise as academics are put under increasing pressure to obtain and maintain high levels of outputs at an expected level of quality (Devlin and Marsh, 2018).

What is of most importance is that the increasing pressure has had dire consequences for some academics. That is, while losing a job or facing disciplinary procedures for exercising academic freedoms is never a good outcome, being put under such pressure that it results in the academic taking their own lives is never conscionable. However, available evidence suggests that the use of management controls to implement senior management's strategizing, and the strategic function of ignorance, is resulting in precisely that. Many examples of this have been reported widely. For example, Professor Stefan Grimm, professor of toxicology at Imperial College London, committed suicide in 2014 due to being deemed to be underperforming in his professorial role (Morrish, 2017, Parr, 2014). Professor Grimm, who committed suicide in September of 2014, had in March of that year received an email detailing how he was underperforming in relation to securing funding from grants, and that the email constituted the beginning of an informal review process, with formal procedures to be implemented if his performance did not improve (Parr, 2014, Grove, 2015). The grant targets that Professor Grimm was placed under must be taken in the context discussed above of low percentage success rates and a good deal of luck being involved (Jump, 2015, Matthews, 2016).

It is not only research related targets alone that may result in this unconscionable outcome. This can be seen in the example of Dr Malcolm Anderson, an accounting lecturer at Cardiff University, who took his own life at work on 19 February 2018 (Pells, 2018a, 2018b). He left two notes in his office prior to taking his own life, one of which complained of his unmanageable workload (Pells, 2018a, 2018b). Dr Anderson had repeatedly raised concerns over unmanageable workloads, caused by increasing levels of students and cuts to staffing levels, with senior management but with little change being made (Pells, 2018a, 2018b). Just prior to him taking his own life he had been tasked with marking 418 exam scripts in a twenty-day period (Pells, 2018a, 2018b). At the time a spokesperson for the University stated that all staff had access to specialist counselling, with services being available twenty-four hours a day, all year round (Pells, 2018a). This appears to be a clear example of placing the ambulance at the bottom of the proverbial cliff rather than addressing the underlying causes of the situation (Chandler et al., 2002).

It is important to understand that the examples above are, in most likelihood, just the tip of the iceberg. While only anecdotal, most academics that we have spoken to at English Universities know of colleagues who have taken their own lives, and often mention that it is commonly known that workload pressures played some part within this. Given that most of these situations never get widely reported, one must assume that there are many more such cases that have occurred. But, also, of importance is to understand that this does not just impact academics in this way. For example, it was recently reported that the eleven students that have committed suicide at the University of Exeter in the last six years and the nineteen at the University of Bristol in the past five years are above what would statistically be expected (Merritt, 2022). The University of Exeter's figures came to light at the coroner's hearing for the third-year student Harry Armstrong Evans, who committed suicide during lockdown after failing some of his exams (Merritt, 2022). A new law (Harry's Law) is being campaigned for by Harry's parents, which would require coroners to inform a university if it is found that one of their students has committed suicide, with universities required to annually publish the number of students who take their own lives (Merritt, 2022). This would then allow universities with above normal levels of student suicides to be investigated by the Department for Education and, if necessary, be put into special measures (Merritt, 2022).

In closing this section, it is important to note that the long-term implications of the current pressure cooker nature of English universities are highly unlikely yet to even be remotely visible. Of course, there is evidence of this boiling away since the early days of English universities being opened to market forces (Parker and Jary, 1995). However, as discussed above, this situation has significantly ramped up since the Conservative Party Government implemented their austerity program since taking power in 2010 (Du and Lapsley, 2019). Focusing on stress, just one of the impacts of the pressure cooker situation, it can be seen as an important survival mechanism for humans (Lundberg, 2005). Thus, it is a natural response, and can be beneficial, in the modern workplace when things become pressurised (Chandler et al., 2002). However, it is also known that continued exposure to stress, particularly within a toxic environment such as in many English universities, can result in many undesirable long-term health issues (Lundberg, 2005). The next section now brings together the strands explored within this article to discuss what the implications are, as well as to discuss how it could be otherwise.

6 Discussion

The above sections outline how the turning over of higher education in England to market mechanisms has implications beyond the crowding out of other (more important) values that universities could (and arguably should) focus on (Sandel, 2013, Parker, 2011, 2013, Power, 2015). That is, at the extreme, the pressure cooker situation created within these universities are costing academics their lives. It was seen how management controls played a role within this through allowing senior management to deploy the strategic function of ignorance (Roberts, 2018). The numbers produced by the management controls objectify and rationalise the outcomes of senior managers decisions. In so doing, they dehumanise the everyday academic, translating them into nothing more than a line within a spreadsheet – a line to be managed, like all other lines (Tsoukas, 1997). This all occurs due to the marketisation of universities focusing senior management on financial performance and the external signifiers that assist with this. The allure of these external signifiers seduces (Merry, 2016) senior management, with the consequence being that they increasingly only manage for the metrics. However, this results in wilful ignorance of the chaos it creates for the everyday academic, who typically has found themselves increasingly in a pressure cooker situation. As Roberts (2018, p. 56) notes “we cannot manage without but we should not manage only with transparency”.

Also implicit in what is described in the sections above is that senior management must constantly work to maintain and reinforce the strategic function of ignorance they have put into place. The cases of the University of Leicester removing a tweet from their official account (McKie, 2021b) and the forced removal of the blog by Morrish (2017) illustrates how cracks can be driven into the wilful ignorance, thereby requiring senior management to act (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). In other words, senior management are required to constantly act to build and maintain the base provided by the management controls, which in turn allows the strategic function of ignorance to occur. Part of this is the recruitment of academics who senior management believe will ‘succeed’ in relation to the external signifiers. However, this also requires senior management, as was seen in the case of the University of Leicester, to sort out any resistance to their strategizing, usually through using the management controls to justify procedures of dismissal.

Such actions by senior management places more pressure on the everyday academic, given they will be aware of the brutal examples of what being deemed as underperforming can result in. In terms of responding to this pressure, there are limited options available for the everyday academic: fight, flight, or acquiesce (Parker, 2014). The opportunities for resistance (fight) are few and come with the risk of being labelled as underperforming by senior management, with all that implies (Roberts, 2018). For many academics, especially those with young families or other caring responsibilities, these risks are too high. With their responsibilities outside of work, along with other ties to where they live, for these academics there is no real opportunities for flight. As such, they are left with the only option of acquiescence (Roberts, 2018). However, this also comes with real risks, as the smallest wobble in their performance may result in the academic being deemed as underperforming. Further, if the academic succumbs to the stress put in place by the pressure cooker situation, it is hard for them to raise concerns, especially as the system is set up to place blame on the individual (Chandler et al., 2002). Hence, admitting to issue brings with it a level of stigmatisation (O’Brien and Guiney, 2018). Also, as the case of Dr Anderson at Cardiff University demonstrates (Pells, 2018a, 2018b), the strategic function of ignorance tends to sideline any concerns that are raised, sometimes with fatal consequences. Thus, for many academics they find themselves in a merry dance of playing the senior management’s game as best they can (Roberts, 2018, Hopwood, 2005, ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012). In this sense, they become willing participants in the embedding of the strategic function of ignorance, in that they perform what is required for the ignorance to occur. The goal for the everyday academic then becomes to perform their duties in a way that presents them as excelling in relation to the external signifiers (Parker and Jary, 1995). This enables them a modicum of comfort through protecting themselves from the game. Being in such a position also allows the everyday academic the opportunity to move across English universities to seek out the most favourable environment for their own personal circumstances. But these

academics are in the minority, and it needs to be asked whether they should be more accountable for how their actions create more pressure for their colleagues?¹

The constraints placed on most academics and opportunism of a minority of others raises the question of how this sits in relation to the two issues that the article started with. Senior management's focus on financial performance, and the external signifiers that assist with this, has undoubtedly resulted in a crowding out of the traditional ideals that once held sway within English universities (Sandel, 2013, Du and Lapsley, 2019). The barrage of management controls, and the quantitative demands they make, give the everyday academic little time to focus on anything else (O'Brien and Guiney, 2018). Hence, no time or space is available for the traditional ideals, such as academic freedom, scholarship, and collegiality, no matter how much they may feature within a university's mission statement (Parker, 2013). For the everyday academic to succeed requires time and space to follow curiosity, experiment, make mistakes, learn and grow. In particular, the mass production system that now underpins English universities has the flaw of not acknowledging that more does not necessarily equate to better. This can be seen through reflecting on how many of the great academics of the 20th century would be deemed to be underperforming in many contemporary English universities. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, who had a huge influence on many of the people that transformed the 20th century, only had one book and one article published while he was alive. While he had other material published after his death, he would be far from meeting the publishing targets set for the everyday academic at English universities. Similarly, Harold Garfinkel, a sociologist who has had a huge impact within and beyond that field, had a modest number of publications, most of which came later in his life. Of note, for the purposes here, is that for long spells, for example from 1970 to 1981, he did not publish anything.

Perhaps, therefore, it is time for a rebalancing of the understandings over the purpose and contributions of universities (Parker, 2014). It may be time to recognise that universities offer diverse benefits to society beyond what can be measured by quantitatively focused management controls (Shaheen, 2011, Argento et al., 2020, Collini, 2012, Sauder and Espeland, 2009). For a start, it has been widely recognised that the health of a democracy relies on having citizens with diverse sets of education (Shaheen, 2011, Collini, 2012, Czarniawska, 2020). In this context, it is worth noting that many of the traditional subjects taught and researched in a university focus on areas not so easily linked to direct, observable societal improvement or assisting private industry (Parker, 2013). However, these subjects, and the education they provide, are important for breaking the filter bubbles and echo chambers that have placed our democracies at peril over recent years (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017, Beam et al., 2018). What is, for example, the value of philosophy in teaching lawyers about logic and ethics? What is the role of sociology in creating better understanding over how society is increasingly serving the few at the expense of the majority (circa Burns and Jollands, 2020)? But perhaps that is the point. Parker and Jary (1995) note that from the 1960s right-wing pundits have portrayed academics as dangerous radicals, with the obvious intention being to discredit experts who may provide cutting critique to these commentators perspectives and consequent plans. This would certainly tie in with senior management at the University of Leicester, and other such universities, targeting critical management scholars, in attempts to appear more favourable to private industry funders (Parker, 2013, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015, Willmott, 2011, Gebreiter, 2022, Rhodes, 2022). This is reinforced, as noted above, through successive governments focusing on deriving value for money from English universities through opening them up to market forces in attempts to make them provide more tangible, economic benefits to society (Parker, 2011, Power, 2015).

This focus on the main contribution and purpose of universities being in support of economic growth, beyond the crowding out of traditional ideals, does raise important concerns (Power, 2015, Collini, 2012, Humphrey and Gendron, 2015). This is perhaps best exemplified by research collaborations between academics and large pharmaceutical companies in relation to mitigating the impacts of Covid-19, with a particular focus on the development of vaccines. While this shows what benefits universities can directly have to society, this is also not unproblematic, especially when compared to the development of the vaccine for polio. The lead scientist who developed the polio vaccine insisted that the patent should be placed in public hands as the taxpayer had ultimately paid for the research and all people of the world needed its benefit. It is no coincidence, therefore, that polio is close to being eradicated. Whereas with Covid-19 the patent for the vaccines goes into the hands of the large pharmaceutical companies, who provided funding for its development. Debate has centred on whether these patents should be made accessible to all so that less developed countries can tap into protecting their communities from this devastating disease (Jecker and Atuire, 2021). Given that the global society we live in requires global herd immunity this would seem the most valuable approach, so why don't the large pharmaceutical companies do this? The answer to this is simple: it is more profitable for these organisations not to (Jecker and Atuire, 2021). At the very least, given the excessive profits these companies have made from the vaccines, it perhaps should be questioned whether some type of profit-sharing clause should be included within funding

¹ The major feedback received from Scandinavian participants, when this paper was presented at the NTNU Business School Conference 2022, was to question why academics at English universities allow themselves to become willing participants in this situation. What is presented here demonstrates the complexities involved in the situation and illustrates that the options available to do otherwise are usually heavily constrained.

contracts that require pharmaceutical companies to provide a reasonable portion of these profits to the university or higher education sector. This may go some way towards reducing the financial focus of senior management at universities and, thereby, taking some of the pressure off the everyday academic.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that there have been government led investigations into many of the issues raised in this article. Many of these investigations acknowledge the dire impact of the pressure cooker situation on the everyday academic. One example was a report commissioned by HEFCE (Wilsdon et al., 2015) that argued for a more responsible approach to the use of metrics for measuring and assessing academic performance. Further, there have been specific schemes set up that attempt to mitigate some of the pressures experienced by the everyday academic. Prime among these is the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA). While such investigations and schemes are well meaning in their intent, they tend to be rooted in positivistic understandings of the use of metrics and management controls. Specifically, they do not acknowledge how such management controls can be utilised to manage only through transparency and, thereby, the strategic function of ignorance (Roberts, 2018). Therefore, more needs to be done to make the strategic function of ignorance visible and, in doing so, seek to make senior management more accountable for and to the everyday academic. As part of this, it could be examined whether the use of other types of management controls would result in different visibilities being created (Roberts, 2018). In line with Harry's Law (Merritt, 2022), English universities could be mandated to annually report on cases of academic suicides, along with those of students. This mandatory reporting could also cover other (holistic) aspects of senior management and university performance, good as well as bad (Shaheen, 2011), including the use of NDAs, details of staff on stress leave, incidents of bullying, incidents of racism, and other outcomes of the pressure cooker situation of the everyday academic. It is important to note that at best this may be a necessary, but certainly not sufficient, step to improving the lived experience of the everyday academic (Roberts, 2018). At the very least it may assist in prompting debate about the purpose and contributions of English universities. The next section turns to offering a short conclusion.

7 Conclusion

This contribution to Hanne Norreklit's Festschrift aimed to reflect on the impacts marketisation has had within higher education, an area that Hanne has published within (see for example Kure et al., 2021, Nørreklit et al., 2019, Pianezzi et al., 2020). Specifically, the article questioned the current state of English higher education in relation to the two issues of purpose and contribution of universities, which have come to be dominated by economic perspectives. As such, it focused on the strategizing of university senior management in relation to financial performance and the external signifiers that assist with this. It demonstrated how universities are now driven and seduced (Merry, 2016) by the quantification offered by management controls. It was shown how these management controls ultimately encode what universities will be and allow senior management the strategic function of ignorance, thereby escaping wider accountability for the impacts of their strategizing (Roberts, 2018). The impacts of senior management strategizing were shown to make the daily lived experience of the everyday academic a pressure cooker situation. Through the analysis presented, it was demonstrated how management controls used within English universities are moving from being tools to direct operations to also being, in practice, tools of oppression. At its extreme, this is resulting in academics losing their lives.

The article, therefore, raises many important questions about the current state of how English universities are being managed, and what this means in relation to their purpose and contributions. Successive UK governments have repeatedly made calls for universities in England to demonstrate they are 'value for money'. However, as discussed above, most benefits that universities have to offer cannot be quantified or captured by management controls. This is nicely expressed by Callon and Law (2005, p.724) when they note:

"I wilt when I have to account for myself. And I don't think this is because I'm a bad teacher. It is because teaching, when I do it well as I think I sometimes do, is outside any possibility of accountability. It is a labour of love. And the passion that it is carried in is dried up when I have to account for it."

Perhaps Callon and Law's statement signals the need to reassess universities relation to their traditional ideals, such as academic freedom, scholarship, and collegiality. As part of this, there may need to be a reconsidering of the phrase 'value for money'. From what is presented above it could be argued it is one of the most dangerous phrases in the modern lexicon as, within the English university setting, it is literally costing lives.

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