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# Performance Management and the Stifling of Academic Freedom and Knowledge Production

LIZ MORRISH\* AND HELEN SAUNTSON

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**Abstract** In an era of neoliberal reforms, academics in UK universities have become increasingly enmeshed in audit, particularly of research 'outputs'. Using the data of performance management and training documents, this paper analyses the role of discourse in redefining the meaning of research, and in colonizing a new kind of entrepreneurial, corporate academic. The new regime in universities is characterized by slippage between the audit and disciplinary functions of performance management. We conclude that academic freedom is unlikely to emerge from a system which demands compliance with a regime of unattainable targets and constant surveillance.

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## Introduction

In June 2015, a colleague of ours received an email demanding to know what their Research Excellence Framework (REF) scores would be in 2020. There was a particular question about how many pieces would be ranked as 3\*(internationally excellent) and 4\* (world leading) grades. If you are reading this article, you will no doubt be aware of the six-yearly cycle of research audit which dominates the higher education agenda in the UK. You will also be aware that the last REF was held in 2014, and the next audit will be held in 2020. You may be a little perplexed at how our colleague could be expected to foresee what they might publish during this interlude, or, indeed, predict how it might be ranked under the capricious and inaccurate methodology of the REF (Sayer 2014.)

In this demand for constant monitoring we recognize the preoccupations of audit culture (Strathern 2000). There is typically little value accorded to what is actually accomplished; instead there is an overly-scrupulous fixation with accountability, monitoring and reporting, and with what Power (1997) has described as "rituals of verification". Strathern observes that audit has escaped from its origins in finance and accounting to the point that we now find it sedimented into the academy as a distinct cultural artefact. In fact, there is considerable slippage between the endemic practices of audit in universities and the policies of performance management.

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Arguably this has been very successful inasmuch as the function of both has been to construct docile bodies for the corporate academy. Aspects such as workload management, appraisal, performance management, teaching and research evaluations, but particularly the anticipatory REF preparations mentioned above, have been 'weaponized' – turned over to management to function as tools of reward, but more often punishment. The Times Higher recently reported that one in six institutions now has grant capture targets for individual researchers (Jump 2015) and there have been reports of these measures being used to disempower or humiliate academics at Imperial College, Universities of Birmingham, Warwick and Wolverhampton.

This article will detail some of the hazards of this kind of crude performance management, particularly with regard to the threat it poses to academic freedom, genuine academic productivity and knowledge advancement. As a first step, it is important to set out the contextual landscape which has enabled these changes to emerge almost unopposed. We discuss the role of discourse in constructing new corporate identities which align with the priorities of academic capitalism; it is a discourse which shapes a cautious academic whose access and affiliation to academic freedom and its corollaries is contingent upon adopting a new mode of being.

### **Academic capitalism**

Academic capitalism and audit culture have been the attendants of New Public Management whose advance into universities has been rapid (Deem and Brehony 2005; Deem, Hillyard and Reed 2007), and its penetration complete. 'New managerialism' displays the following characteristics: 'emphasising the primacy of management above all other activities; monitoring employee performance (and encouraging self-monitoring too); the attainment of financial and other targets, devising means of publicly auditing quality of service delivery and the development of quasi-markets for services' (Deem and Brehony, 2005:220). It has emerged from a turn to New Public Management (NPM) which 'entails the progressive and intensifying expansion of market forces, performance measurement and control, and consumer populism into the public sphere...that gnaws away at professional autonomy and control' (Deem, Hillyard and Reed, 2007: 22). In the US and UK, these influences have manifested themselves in more formalised stratification of hierarchies in universities. In the UK particularly, it is not only hierarchies that have been formalised; those in power have been enabled to intensify the scrutiny and performance measurement of those who labour in universities. Morrissey notes that the 'science of management' brings about

“implicit surrendering to an increasingly accepted rationale for effectively governing academics in what could perhaps be best described as the ‘managerial’ or ‘bureaucratic’ university” (Morrissey 2013: 801).

It is in this context that audit and performance management have invaded academic careers over the last thirty years. They arrived among the surge of neoliberal reforms in universities in which we recognise the academic capitalism defined by Slaughter and Leslie as the imposition of markets and market-like behaviours on universities (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). This is both metaphor and reality. Morrissey astutely observes that the language by which academics are brought within the control of the managerial regime echoes the language of the economic crisis (2013: 799). In just the same way as students, and the university’s ‘products’, have been monetised and commercialised, so must the staff productivity ‘resource’ be made accountable.

Whereas, once the university was conceived of as a refuge from market values in its tolerance of venture and failure, they now reward only entrepreneurial, self-governing and competitive subjects, who are happy to function within the limits and discourse set for them by the managerial project. As we have moved forward in this vein, the idea of universities as places where scholars may take intellectual risk have been lost. Instead, we must reproduce nothing but success and certainty, with a consequent ‘impact’.

In 2014, Marina Warner left the University of Essex after ten years as a professor of creative writing in the department of literature, film and theatre studies. She wrote a strongly worded piece for the London review of Books, entitled ‘Why I Quit’, which detailed the micro-management, the accumulating duties, unattainable targets and shifting criteria for satisfactory performance and promotion. Warner had had enough. The piece went viral on Twitter, and some months later, she was moved to respond:

The correspondence reveals a deeper and more bitter scene in higher education than I had ever imagined. I had been naïve, culpably unobservant as I went about my activities at Essex. Students, lecturers, professors from one institution after another were howling in sympathy and rage; not one of them dissented or tried to justify the situation. I had thought that Essex was a monstrous manifestation, but it turns out that its rulers’ ideas are ‘the new normal’, as the Chinese government calls its present economic plan. (Warner 2015)

If Warner had thought her experience was an isolated one, we are able to draw on a vast amount of testimony, and demonstrate with the support with textual evidence, that it is not. The discourse and practices of neoliberalism are widespread in UK universities, and the purpose is to colonize a new kind of entrepreneurial, corporate academic. To elaborate, we view discourse as not merely something

which is found in texts and contexts; it also structures those contexts and constrains behaviours and identities within them. We endorse the view presented by Sealey (2014) that it is *discourse* which is central to the project of redefining subjectivities. Certainly, it would appear from the amount of writing on the subject in the social media inhabited by academe, that managerial discourse is the chief irritant. A key strategy has been an attempt to shift the discourse towards the new language of managerialism, marketization and corporatisation. The way it circulates and imposes its discipline is to disguise itself as a necessary virtue which guarantees legitimacy in the outside world, and thereby, institutional survival (Davies and Petersen 2005:78).

### Performance management

It appears that as managerial anxieties have grown with regard to performance - 'quality', league tables and KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) - the nature of performance review has evolved from mere existence in a policy to something frequent, highly monitored and whose targets are highly circumscribed. The Performance Development Review (PDR), a new and destructive variety of what was formerly known as appraisal, has become a feature of the higher education landscape. This definition is offered by Franco-Santos, Rivera and Bourne (2014), "At work, individuals are said to perform when they are able to *achieve the objectives established by management*. Organisations are thought to perform (or to be successful) when they satisfy the requirements of their stakeholders and are more effective and efficient than their competitors." [our italics]

In most iterations, PDR seeks to ensure alignment of individual and team effort with the university's strategic plan, designated competencies, and the setting of SMART Objectives. Any casual visitor to a university staff development training session will already know that this stands for:

*Specific* – Objectives need to state what specifically needs to be achieved. They need to state not only the actions you are required to undertake but also the purpose of the actions, what you are ultimately aiming to achieve. Keeping objectives simple helps to ensure that they are clear and specific.

*Measurable* – It should be clear how you will know if an objective has been achieved. Although it may not be readily apparent, every objective can be measured. Some objectives can be measured quantitatively; others must be measured qualitatively. Consideration should be given as to what information is needed to provide feedback on your progress. Measurements are subject to change and should be reviewed periodically.

**Accountable** – Accountability for performance objectives must be clear. A clear definition of what you are specifically accountable for will help reduce confusion.

**Realistic** – For an objective to be meaningful, it must be realistic and reasonable. Objectives should be challenging and encourage continuous improvement, but should not be unrealistic or unattainable. It should also be reasonably within your influence or control. One wonders, in a context where only 15% of grant applications are successful, whether a grant target would still qualify as 'realistic'.

**Time bound** – An achievable timeframe must be set for reaching the objective's goals.

[Definitions adapted from XX University's PDR policy and procedure documents, together with the 'competency framework'.]

This is the model, but the reality is different for most academics. As an example, this document was recently circulated on Twitter. It is the assessment form required to be completed during the performance review meetings at a non-aligned post 1992 university.

	Satisfactory	Problem Area
<b>Job Knowledge</b>		
Equipment	✓	
Campus	✓	
Procedures	✓	
Understanding of Job Description	✓	
<b>Quality of Work</b>	✓	
<b>Quantity and Output</b>	✓	
<b>Attitudes and Behaviour</b>		
Teamwork	✓	
Attitudes to Clients/Customers	✓	
Attitudes to Colleagues	✓	
Attitude to Supervisor/Manager	✓	
Commitment	✓	
Initiative	✓	
Appearance	✓	
<b>Attendance and Punctuality</b>		
Time-keeping	✓	
Attendance	✓	
Flexibility	✓	

It is important, as a first step to framing resistance, to recognise the presuppositions and ideologies enshrined in this document.



The most striking omission is any recognition of normative assumptions about academic work: that it involves teaching and research; that it is absorbing; that it involves high levels of knowledge, insight, imagination, networking, diligence – that it is rather indefinable in scope, and quite possibly not a good candidate for this type of one-size-fits-all pro-forma.

The scope of the job, we assume, is contained within the unexpanded categories of *Quality of Work*; *Quantity* and *Output*. The contradiction lies in the under-informing of the designation ‘satisfactory’. In a working environment where assessments are multiple (National Student Survey, Research Excellence Framework, Quality Assurance Agency audits, peer teaching reviews etc.), and ever more searching and fine-grained, what are we to take from ‘satisfactory’? It leaves open the possibility that any perceived under-performance in one category will be unbundled from the totality and offered as justification for censure. The semantic instability of the evaluative adjective ‘satisfactory’ means that staff will never be ‘performing’ perfectly. It will always be possible to claim that there are ‘areas for improvement’, leaving the appraiser exposed to capricious revisioning. On the issue of *Quality*, there are also questions of whether a manager’s expertise can always extend to appraising quality of research, particularly when the parameters for exercising judgment are far from clear.

*Quantity*, similarly, is unrevealing. The presupposition is that more is better, so how does this sit with likely institutional policies on work-life balance and stress management? And what measures are being used? Hours logged in the classroom? Or evenings spent answering students’ questions on email. Are teaching and research both considered ‘outputs’? We note an ironic choice of language in ‘quantity’ – a deliberately scalar, quantifiable, yet infinite measure for academics which can be contrasted with the non-judgemental use of ‘engagement’ that universities usually apply to student work.

*Job knowledge* might be an issue for new academics in post, and so seems superfluous beyond the probation review. Digging a little deeper, though, many of us observe that ‘procedures’ are shifting and transitory under conditions of volatility in higher education regulation. Given the secrecy and lack of consultation with which those changes are imposed, and the general regulatory ‘churn’, to require familiarity, then, is like asking appraisees to apprehend a mirage.

Perhaps the most pernicious trait desired in this forlorn framework is *attitude*. By what ‘benchmark’ are we being evaluated? I would counter that there are occasions where a negative attitude is beneficial to the academic community. Are we required to embrace ineffectual managers, or unenthusiastic students? Since appraisals are usually conducted in a top-down hierarchy, perhaps we must.

Should we tolerate abusive phone calls from parents with equanimity? In any case, how do you suggest remedying 'attitude' without seriously compromising my initiative (another category), or academic standards? Perhaps the positive power of negative thinking has been underestimated in universities, and is more 'intelligible' within this particular community of practice (Taylor 2015). In any case, it is alarming to contemplate where this might lead; according to a recent exposé (Kantor and Streitfeld 2015), Amazon employees now have access to an electronic 'anytime feedback' tool which allows coworkers to report each other to management for poor performance or bad attitude.

*Appearance* is yet another superficial and subjective judgement. Here are my prejudices: no sweat pants, no logo t-shirts, no leggings, no flip-flops. But if you ask the students, they are generally very welcoming of lecturers who mirror the informality of their 'customers'. Possibly, though, this dispensation applies much more to male lecturers than to women. So what is being evaluated here, apart from some manager's notion of gender-normed corporate dress code conformity?

*Attendance and punctuality* suggest a rigid and compliant personality, which is undermined by the desired qualities of 'initiative' and 'flexibility'. The latter, particularly, is likely to escape actual validation. Our flexibility makes itself known as work bleeds into leisure and family time. 'Punctuality' of course, refers only to ARRIVING on time, not to FINISHING work on time. The continual peeking at email, the agenda planning that invades a run, the feelings of guilt at taking a whole Sunday off during the marking season. It make itself known as we submit to absurd marking turnaround times in order to satisfy intensifying demands for more feedback. It shortens our careers.

### **Anticipatory performance management**

To return to the example of my colleague and their future REF grades discussed at the beginning of this paper, we recognise what Morrissey (2013: 806) has called anticipatory performance management practices. For example, any researcher in a university is not merely required to produce four 'outputs' over the course of the six-year REF cycle – these must be the right sort of outputs. Fallacious proxy measures of 'quality' are laid out, criteria for 'researchiness' (originality, significance, rigour etc.), potential 'impact', but also goodness of fit for the particular unit, which might itself be distorted by the desired priorities of the research funding councils. It is quite a list of boxes to tick.



In the last REF 2014, there was much discussion of research in Sociology. There appeared to be one approach to the subject which fitted very well with the government's 'impact' agenda – the kind of statistical work which government departments find useful. Another approach is more critical of inequality, differential access to power and opportunity, and which takes difference and identity as fundamental. In UK universities, it is the latter approach which has more interdisciplinary reach and influence. The sociology panel, meanwhile, delivered a harsher and more partisan verdict. Those units which reflected government priorities in their impact studies scored well; the more 'critical' areas of the subject were slammed (Holmwood 2015). We can only speculate about the sort of sociology that upcoming scholars will be encouraged (coerced?) to do. It is convenient for the current British government to silence critical voices, and this strategy also helps to deliver the new supplicant academic identities desired in the neoliberal university. Roberts (2013) offers a theologian's vision of an academy in which "the bio-unit or employee, is subject to living sacrifice; this is age of the employee as oblate" (2013: 327).

There are those such as David Willetts who would argue that distortion of academic priorities either have not occurred, or that this it is not an inevitable consequence of the REF audit. We would maintain, though, that there is an impulse towards Darwinian hierarchization of universities, and subjects, which is purely ideological – the 'right' result must emerge, and the 'right' kind of compliant academic be constructed. Some disciplines are permitted to claim 'excellence' and some are not. Butler and Spoelstra (2014) discuss the impact of 'excellence' on the discipline, claiming that the race for metrics distorts the very research which is done "because they promote instrumental and opportunistic behaviour rather than genuine academic inquiry" (Butler and Spoelstra 2014:539). Universities have now become hostile to anyone who resists this kind of competitive game-playing. Butler and Spoelstra report a convention in some departments whereby the academics who are most successful in meeting these criteria are known as 4\*4s – people who have 4\* outputs in 4\* journals. It is the kind of academic who lists their h-index (Burrows 2012) and latest publications in their email signature.

The possibility of other models of research and cooperation are erased when objective and target-focused models are presented as the only option. An alternative view is that targets and objectives close down potential valuable opportunities for real learning as they do not allow space for initiative, productive divergence or 'surprise' (see Stern, 2013 for a discussion of the value of surprise in education).

## Learning to performance manage

The project of performance management can only progress while there are obedient employees who will oversee the process. Instruction, therefore, is made available to potential managers. The following analysis is based on course documentation and attendance at both an in-house leadership course, and a training event for potential appraisers for PDR (appraisal) at a UK university. The former was delivered in three modules taught over a number of weeks at a post-1992 university ('NeoLiberal University'). The latter was a one day course at the same university. These documents have been analysed using techniques of corpus linguistics (Baker 2008; Scott 2014; Stubbs 1996, 2001; Tognini-Bonelli 2001) so that the discourse prosodies and presuppositions can be analysed, enabling useful insights to be made.

One immediate anomaly in the discourse of performance management at this particular university was the notion of academic teams, whose existence was taken to be central to daily working. Their significance lay solely as administrative units, but in all other ways, they were superfluous to the ways academics organised their actual work. Management-constructed teams would often comprise a group of people who might not necessarily identify any joint enterprise. On the other hand, there were functioning teams such as REF research units, degree courses, and research collaborations which could all cross the administratively-imposed structures. In the case of research units and collaborations, these would often be organised across disciplines, institutions and even national boundaries. In reality, teams would form organically; they might be temporary and multiple. The ostensive teams proposed by the university management were viewed by the academic staff as managerial fictions, and so the question arises, in the terms of the institution's performance review, whether imaginary entities can be assigned objectives. In the PDR procedure, academics were obliged to offer both personal and team objectives.

### Presuppositions of performance/high performance

One of the major presuppositions that underlies use of *performance/performing* (and *high performance/performing*) in the leadership course documents is that there are standard 'key indicators' of performance which are invariable. As mentioned earlier, it is presumed that management will decide what these indicators are, and that academic staff performance can be objectively measured using them. The supposed aim of PDR is to diagnose who is performing below or above standard, of merely satisfactorily. However, SMART objectives do not always satisfy their claims to be measurable, attainable or relevant. In the 'Leading High

Performing Teams' documents, the 'performance indicators' are implicit and subjective (e.g. *satisfactory*, *outstanding*, *above/below standard*) rather than being objectively measurable.

- A person who is performing below standard.
- People who are working at or above standard may develop resentment toward the leader's controlling behaviour
- These people are highly developed and can be trusted to perform the task in a responsible and outstanding fashion.
- A person whose performance is satisfactory but not outstanding.

The semantic instability of such words means that staff will never be 'performing' perfectly and it will always be possible to claim that there are 'areas for improvement'. 'Exceptional' job performance very often masquerades as 'expected job performance', because, as Davies and Petersen (2005: 89) note 'workers are compelled never to rest', and the worker becomes 'busier and busier....unable to see quite what it is that drives them' (2005: 89).

Additionally, the discourse fails to take into account the multiplying tasks assigned to academics. Inevitably, because of unattainable expectations, most will fall short of some criteria. Technology, though, has offered newly observable 'metrics' which may not coincide with actual performance or competence as an academic, but which stand as convenient proxies because of their calculability. Furthermore, when you take into account the terms by which satisfactory performance is measured – or even what is acknowledged as work at all, the colonising nature of the discourse becomes apparent. For example, to be considered to be performing research (coded as 'research active') means satisfying the arbitrary criteria laid down by the REF. As we write, the benchmarks for institutional recognition of 'research active' is ratcheting up to 3\* and 4\* 'outputs'. A scholar may be writing, researching and publishing, but if this is done without grant money, or perhaps in unfashionable journals, then this may not meet institutional criteria of research, and will be ignored. We anticipate a future where a junior scholar will no longer be allowed to cut their teeth in working papers or obscure specialist journals.

### Metaphors of performance/high performance

Performance is also often presented using metaphors related to sport. For example, *performance* co-occurs with other words and phrases including *coaching*, *teams*, *team players*, *skills*, *techniques*, *tactics*, *game*, *win-win*, *goals*, *targets* and *slip through the net*.

Such examples again contribute to a discourse of higher education as competitive and hierarchized. However, it is important to note that

in other parts of the document, collegiality and inclusivity is prioritised, therefore, to a certain extent, competing discourses are present.

- Working co-operatively with others within your area or cross faculty to optimise the collective contribution or delivery of a common goal.
- ...the emphasis will be on co-operation, teamwork and goal-setting.

Performance is also presented in economic terms. For example, performance is described in terms of 'delivering the goods'. Indeed, the rapidly accelerating use of metrics as proxies for performance means that any 'performance' must be concretized with 'deliverables'. Examples would be pressure to publish in journals with high impact factors, or to ensure timely PhD completions. These may be recorded on a convenient 'faculty dashboard' monitored daily by the dean, and justified as 'empowering' individual career planning. <http://www.academicanalytics.com/>

The achieving group are most prevalent during the performing phase: Proactivity – making it happen, breaching barriers and delivering the goods.

In this way, judgement of performance aligns with management insistence that academic work consists of delineable 'tasks', rather than an autonomous and coherent blend of research, scholarship and teaching. Preferably, these should have been sanctioned during a PDR (appraisal) meeting. Indeed, during the PDR training session, one academic was asked to name an objective for the coming year, and proposed a forthcoming book. This, the person was told, was not an objective; it was a task. And so the crowning achievement of venerated academic endeavour is discursively dismissed by the power structures of the neoliberal academy.

### 'Competency'

The term *competency* features as a key part of the PDR procedure. The term is used specifically at 'NeoLiberal University' University to denote nine behaviours split into three overarching groups: Working with Others (team work, customer focus and communicating and influencing), Delivering Results (making informed decisions, organisation and delivery, adaptability) and Focusing on the Future (entrepreneurial and commercial focus, creativity and innovation, leading and coaching). Each has a series of descriptors corresponding to supposed levels of attainment which they claim "reflect behaviour patterns which distinguish highly effective performance in a role from average or poor performance. They have been developed to support the University's objectives as outlined in its Strategic Plan". With

the possible exception of entrepreneurial and commercial focus, and with some shifts of emphasis, we might expect that these qualities could be assumed to be an incontrovertible part of the academic role and require no measurement. There are many activities which academics perform which are not measurable either qualitatively or quantitatively. Nevertheless, these competencies are designated on every person descriptor for posts at the university.

Competency, the documents tell us, must be distinguished from competence. This latter term refers to the level at which the behaviours are being performed, as indicated by the extent to which goals are achieved. A key anomaly, though, in the policy and framework, is that the policy sets out to measure the 'performance' of teams, but the 'competency' of individuals. There seems to be an assumption, therefore, that these competencies are the provenance of the individual, whereas 'performance' is more dynamic and collegial (within teams). Nevertheless, the documents presuppose that punitive measures can be taken against individuals for poor performance, particularly in the university's 'Improving Performance Policy', which is designed to be used with individuals, not teams or team leaders. Therefore, there is tension and inconsistency here – if the university aspires to have 'high performing teams', then it would logically follow that it should measure the performance of *teams*, not the performance of *individuals* within teams.

What counts as 'competence' is actually rather limited and, in many ways, non-specialised in that the same competencies could equally be applied to non-educational settings. Worryingly, many of the competencies mentioned, though measurable, have limited applicability to an educational context: *empathy for the customer; strive to exceed customer expectations; calls taken, vouchers processed; sales met; costs reduced*. These would seem to denote a retail environment.

Throughout the leadership course documents, agreeing and complying with change is seen as an indicator of competence, regardless of an individual's wisdom or acuity of judgement. Resisting change is presented as a 'negative behaviour'. Academic staff having an 'entrepreneurial and commercial' focus also appears as a competency. 'Entrepreneurial' is another lexical item with a degree of semantic instability, and, like other 'hooray words' (Whyte, 2003 cited in Cook, 2012:40) is never fully defined in terms of denoted meaning, only connoted meaning (Mautner 2005: 101). In sum, competency is presented as having nothing to do with knowledge, learning or interpersonal skills (although lip service is paid to this in that it is mentioned that they will be assessed 'elsewhere'). One wonders if the authors of this document seriously believe that the qualities of

imagination, tenacity and intellectual range that underpin research can be 'upskilled' via a 'competency tool', or indeed by 'talent management'.

### Hidden injuries

In the UK, performance review and REF submission loom large as 'drivers' of academic anxieties. Meanwhile, in the US, tenure and promotion take their toll, especially on women, who may face domestic as well as professional expectations. In a widely circulated piece, Gill (2009) brings the strategy of reflexivity to bear on her own experience of a neoliberal university as the context within which she is expected to do research. She describes the sense of overload, panic, stress, shame and guilt elicited by the incessant demands of the university, and the feelings of failure when one does not meet those demands. Another reflection is written by a female US academic about her upcoming mid-tenure review:

For some of us, it's not that we are afraid to lean in. It's that we have jumped in head first and are barely treading water even when we are considered "successful." It's not that my success has come at the expense of family or that my career advancement has been stifled by raising a family. It's that my success in academe is simply not the kind of success that I envisioned for myself. Success should feel good, make you beam with pride, feel as if all your hard work was worthy of something bigger. I envisioned, and frankly deserve, a type of success in which the next panic attack isn't just around the corner and in which supportive spouses don't feel like they must resort to ultimatums to cultivate a meaningful family life. (Sangaramoorthy, 2015)

Without wanting to appear essentialist about the particularities of the effects, it is necessary to recognize the differently gendered effects of the neoliberal concerns with competitiveness, efficiency and increasing productivity. Lynch (2010) and Evans (2005) both refer to the 'careless' university which only rewards 'care-less' employees. It is your bad luck if you have caring responsibilities which limit the time you can devote to 'productive' work. Shame on you if you wish to mentor a younger colleague, and overlook a publication deadline. And capability procedures for you, if you happen to lose the lottery of research grant 'capture'. Women, writes Evans, must be prepared to perform according to the metrics of success that have been derived according to norms of masculine lives.

### The paradox of the under-performing professor

Nor have professors in the academy been allowed to escape the disciplinary regime of performance management and review. In several UK universities, the intrusive gaze of Human Resources has recently fallen on alleged 'under-performing professors'. The one thing that



academics were permitted to retain was a system of academic esteem bestowed by promotion to professor. This was trusted to reward talent, reputation and diligence, but in recent years, even those who attain professorial rank are subject to this regime of never quite 'becoming'. It is significant that the designation 'under-performing' has now been financialized to mean a professor who does not 'capture' a target amount of grant money. It has little to do with the 'significance, originality and rigour' of their actual research or their general contribution to the intellectual life of the university. In many cases such abstract notions have been left behind – they cannot be quantified and so are unavailable to the bureaucratic mind.

In any sane university, to talk of 'under-performing professors' as a generic description, would be recognized as pure incongruity; since Human Resources decide the ever-ascending criteria for promotion to this level, they might be trusted to not betray their own judgment. There seems to be some degree of 'moral panic' among senior management teams, for example, in NeoLiberal University, as well as undergoing six-monthly performance reviews (as frequently as newly appointed probationers), professors must now meet exacting criteria for 'quality' of publications. Progression to the next professorial level must be achieved within five years, and this depends on meeting certain 'drivers', which include securing a research grant as PI every two years, producing REF 3\* and 4\* 'outputs', supervising graduate students, producing a significant impact case study, leading high-prestige international collaborations, and of course, continuing to teach (Professorial Performance Criteria documents, 'NeoLiberal University' University). Failure to meet these expectations will result in the public humiliation of the Improving Performance Procedure, and possible demotion. No accrual of reputation can be permitted; the criteria must be met every year, not just over the course of a distinguished career. In this way, any prestige associated with the rank of professor must be considered temporary, as is its tenure. Professors, then, have been made to join the expanding precariat of the academy. Knights (2013) cites Sennett (1998: 99–116) who recognizes that "a regime which instils insecurity, in which you are... 'always starting over' is inimical to the longer term processes of memory and imagination".

In many ways we see in these snapshots of academic life, the society of control outlined by Deleuze (1992). Foucauldian (sequential) disciplinary regimes give way to societies of control where citizens find that they are never finished with any process (Morrish, 2011). Just as one hurdle is surmounted, another, higher one presents itself, with the end point always at the far horizon. This analysis is consistent with our findings in the metaphor analysis of *journeys*, *milestones* and *checkpoints*. These are societies where control is

exercised on a continuous basis, and the individual never quite arrives at the promised reward. Gatekeeping measures such as the imposition of perpetual training, or multiple-staged applications for research leave must be endured, even to participate.

### Academic freedom and the risks we run

Our professional lives are dominated by the need to provide discursive evidence that we are compliant with the managerial regime of constant audit and individual assessment. Failure to enter into the discourse results in illocutionary silencing (Meyerhoff 2004: 210–211) since one has become literally unintelligible to the managerial mind. By locating critique outside the range of the sayable, our resistance is blunted (Davies and Petersen, 2005: 85). The discourse of audit, as Strathern (2000) explains, is often about ‘helping’ people to monitor themselves, and indeed, Tuchman (2009) has said that we do this as reflexively as a diabetic pricks their finger.

It is an environment where the academic is made to feel responsible for their own oppression and stress, while at the same time feeling privileged and undeserving of better. An individual academic’s value is calculated according to arbitrary criteria such as submission to the Research Excellence Framework, and exhibition of ‘competency’ in alignment with the university’s strategic plan. It is offensive for a dedicated professional to be declared ‘incompetent’ according to criteria for inclusion which are often beyond their control and only tangentially related to their own conceptions of their role. Academics are, to quote the title of a well-known blog piece by John Holmwood (2011). As Morrissey (2013: 805) identifies: ‘the fear for many is that the limits and possibilities of academic productiveness today (and, by extension, the broader values and functions of higher education) are being overly determined by primarily economic delineations of productivity, which miss out on broader civic, political and social educational values’. The discourse of productivity and ‘REF-able’ research locks the individual into a distinctively neoliberal subject formation – indeed, the ideal corporate subject. Davies (2005: 1–2) reminds us that “in speaking ourselves into existence as academics, within neoliberal discourse, we are vulnerable to it and to its indifference to us and our thought” and that to critique it requires collective work. She argues that the limiting force of neoliberal discourse is violent in its effect, “it is the language in which the auditor is king. It is a language that destroys social responsibility and critique, that invites a mindless, consumer-oriented individualism to flourish, and kills off conscience” (2005: 6).

Performance management has recently been under scrutiny by the press, academics and their trade union, the University and College

Union. The death of Stefan Grimm in September 2014 shocked the academic community. Professor Grimm held the Chair in Toxicology at Imperial College, London, and he took his own life after being threatened with performance management procedures when he was deemed not to have brought in 'prestigious' grant money. His obituary on the Imperial College website reads:

Over the past 20 years, his work to this scientific field includes 50 publications in top-ranked journals, two books, more than 3000 citations and 5 patents on innovative strategies for screening novel genes involved in cell death pathways and new anti-cancer genes. Professor Stefan Grimm chaired and co-organized international conferences and served as reviewer for research-funding organizations and many international scientific journals. Recently, Stefan was elected as fellow of the Society of Biology.

(Davis 2015) [http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/newsandeventspggrp/imperialcollege/newssummary/news\\_14-1-2015-17-40-44](http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/newsandeventspggrp/imperialcollege/newssummary/news_14-1-2015-17-40-44)

This hardly looks like the profile of an 'underperforming professor'. His crime, though, was that he prioritized science and care for human life rather than the accumulation of capital. It took seven months for Professor Alice Gast, the President of Imperial College, to make a public statement on Stefan Grimm's death. In an interview on the BBC Radio 4 Today Programme, on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2015, she had this to say about the case:

Professors are under pressures. They have a lot on their plates. Professors are really like small business owners. They have their own teaching to perform. They have their own research and they have their research funding to look after. They work with teams of post-docs and post graduate students. Then some of them work on translational work and develop entrepreneurial and new companies and spin outs. It's a very highly competitive world out there. The collaborative nature and the way in which we're moving towards highly collaborative work I think helps because one starts to recognise that you can't do it all alone. You need a team. You build a team with the very best colleagues. You have not only that interplay between the different backgrounds and disciplines but you get the new ideas that are generated by bringing diverse people together. (Carrigan 2015)

There has been a shockingly rapid move from entrepreneurship as metaphor, to a state in which it is both literal and mandatory. In this article we have shown how it now features as a 'key competency' in academic job descriptions, and there is now an expectation that professors will earn their own salaries and research expenses. In the PDR documents, reference is made on more than one occasion to 'stretching objectives' which are purported to sit in between an individual's 'comfort zone' and the 'panic zone'. 'Stretching objectives' are presented as desirable, but objectives which place individuals in their comfort or panic zones are not. It is not clear what they expect the effect to be on professors of unattainable targets, constant surveillance and audit, and the knowledge that any dip in 'performance' may see their contracts terminated.

But there is another disturbing presupposition in this discourse of comfort zones. To be asked to go beyond one's comfort zone makes the patronising assumption that one's life is normally comfortable. It certainly reveals that those charged with auditing and defining these comfort zones are privileged in this way. It is a discourse which permits no acknowledgment that the employee may find teaching or research extremely stressful, at least some of the time. Their domestic circumstances may add additional stress – illness of a child, the loss of a partner's job, death of a parent – these may all lower the threshold of discomfort at work. Indeed, researching in the paradigm of critical university studies takes us into some very uncomfortable territory in which we risk institutional censure.

If readers find this fear fanciful, then consider the case of Thomas Docherty, a professor at the University of Warwick, who was suspended from the university in 2013–14. His offense was reported to be nothing more than sighing and making ironic comments in meetings, which was interpreted as insubordination (Matthews 2014). Colleagues within the academic community suspected that it was his views on managerialism and audit culture in universities (Docherty 2011) that had attracted the rage of the university's senior management. Professor Docherty spent a distressing nine months suspended from his position, unable to use campus facilities or correspond with students and colleagues. All charges were later dismissed (Morgan 2014), and Professor Docherty returned to work. Like footballers mobbing a referee after a controversial decision, Warwick management's strategy was not intended to change a result, but to exact more cautious behaviour from him and others in future. Beware the next time you appear to be critical of your university, or even the state of higher education, especially if you cannot draw on prominent academic standing, and support from the *Times Higher*, among many others. However, significant reputational damage has been done to the Warwick 'brand'; many in the academic community now question their commitment to academic freedom, and freedom of speech.

It is important to clarify the implications of these regimes for academic freedom. Performance management constructs academics as liabilities, not as creative institutional assets. At best it sets limits on how that 'human resource' may operate, from shifting conceptions of what constitutes research, or work, at all, to limits on the kinds of compliant individuals who may be considered 'capable'.

Where there is deliberately diminished professional autonomy, the academic will feel themselves unfree in deciding what to research. The shifting priorities of the university's strategic plan, often authored under the constraints of government interventions, makes it impossible for an academic to design a coherent research program over several years. An

apparent divergence from the approved 'direction of travel' may result in exclusion of the work. There are punishments which await those who fail to deliver 'outputs' with 'impact', as some of our sociology colleagues in the UK have found. It makes it very difficult to maintain good standing in the university when one is always judged lacking.

Furthermore, nobody can do their best, unhindered research under conditions of continuous close scrutiny and surveillance. When one is forced to account for every hour in terms of the institution's definitions of productivity, every activity which does not lead to a 'deliverable' is deemed worthless. And even when those 'outputs' are published, they may often be subject to internal mini-REFs whereby one's close colleagues are obliged to deliver graded verdicts on pieces of already peer-reviewed research. It is hard to think of a more effective way to poison collegial relationships, increase personal stress as well as constrain academic freedom.

The definition of 'performance' itself is wrapped up in a semantically slippery lexicon, and judged against spurious criteria which often have no academic relevance or currency for the constituency. Morrissey (2013: 800) notes that performance indicators are all cast in the mould of neoliberal priorities and asks if there are any other ways to manifest accountability and productivity. He argues that in order to resist this distorting of academic priorities, it is vital to contest "neoliberal and bureaucratic delineations of research and educational productivity – a regime of truth, in a sense, about academic performance" (2013: 807). We might, for example, find a way to recognise those activities which are collegial and valuable, but perhaps do not meet SMART criteria. More rewarding activities might be: mentoring, non-judgmentally reading others' work, listening to colleagues' frustrations, recruiting students, emailing students, turning up at graduation and many more instances of academic homemaking. Academia 3.0 badly needs a manifesto for academic citizenship to counteract the project of corporate colonization. We need to spell out for the next generation of scholars how university life can be different, collegial and rewarding before their subjectivity is subsumed by the new hegemony of neoliberal governmentality.

Quite simply, current kinds of pressure are unsustainable and severely damaging to the health and careers of competent scholars. The managerial class, if they are troubled at all by the claims of their consciences, can at least assuage some of their discomfort with a larger salary. But perhaps they should also check their privilege and 'think outside the box' they have just casually ticked.



## The future

At this precise historical moment in UK universities, we are looking forward to a new 'tool' of audit, tentatively named the Teaching Excellence Framework. It is designed to be the twin of the REF, and to re-focus attention onto an imagined neglected teaching base. Perhaps they will be run alternately, like the winter and summer Olympics. The next specious proxy measure of teaching quality, learning gain and 'value added' may be based on graduate salaries, compared by university and degree course, as has been suggested by one university vice-chancellor (Peck 2015). This is the world of university performance management at its most unthinking. Cheerily, it is beginning to be challenged even from within. According to a recent report, even the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) would not find this appraisal 'not fit for purpose' (Franco-Santos et al. 2014). The report distinguishes between stewardship and agency approaches to performance management, and urges universities to consider a more flexible application of these. Stewardship approaches "focus on long-term outcomes through people's knowledge and values, autonomy and shared leadership within a high trust environment" (Franco-Santos et al. 2014). By contrast, "agency approaches focus on short-term results or outputs through greater monitoring and control" (Franco-Santos et al. 2014). The authors find that institutions with a mission that is focused on "long-term and highly complex goals, which are difficult or very costly to measure (e.g., research excellence, contribution to society)" are more likely to benefit from incorporating a stewardship approach to performance management. I can probably guess which model seems more familiar to most academics, for whom autonomy, shared leadership and high trust working environments reside in the folklore of a previous generation.

The LFHE may be dismissed by the more belligerent vice-chancellors as the work of 'critters' - Critical Management Studies - whose work has recently been publicized in a website. <http://www.criticalmanagement.org/node/2>. However, even within the management tier of universities there may be an appetite for the kind of reflexivity and exploration of power and control that underpin critical approaches to management. Janet Beer, the newly appointed vice-chancellor of the University of Liverpool, bemoans a masculinist narrative of heroism in the job descriptions and ethos of vice-chancellors (Morgan 2015). Given the analysis we have conducted above, showing a discourse of sports metaphors, competition and the rule of hierarchies, her complaint appears to be well founded. She accuses universities of overlooking other attributes which also sustain good leadership, such as 'consensus-building and collaborative and partnership working at all levels. Job specifications,



she continued, can often emphasise qualities that aren't necessarily about leadership in a well-balanced way'.

Janet Beer and Alice Gast may occupy different poles of a rather narrow spectrum of university leadership philosophies. If we can persuade managers to be critical, we may go some way to returning academic freedom to its rightful place in the academy. There are, though, small, meagre signs that the cult of managerial autocracy may be waning. On August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2015 one lone vice-chancellor raised the flag for academic freedom in the *Times Higher*. "Great teaching is not inconsistent with academic freedom, it depends upon it. It demands the unshackled possibility to question and seek knowledge wherever it is to be found, and to convey this to students without fear of intervention or sanction by the state. A value that is globally understood to be a prerequisite for scholarship" (Burnett 2015).

What we cannot risk is an intensification of the state of affairs we reveal in this paper. This is acanemia, where etiolated, dressage trained academics (Petersen and Davies 2010:102) shuffle round meeting their targets, brandishing their h-indices, but joyless and insecure. It is not clear what results university managers expect to emerge from a system of unattainable targets, constant surveillance and audit, and the knowledge that any dip in 'performance' may see their contracts terminated, but the death of Stefan Grimm should have brought this kind of disciplinary regime to a swift halt in any ethical institution. In some universities, professors are subject to an inversion of operant conditioning whose 'incentives' would be recognized by Milgram, not Skinner. The last word on this belongs to Stefan Grimm. "They treat us like shit", he said at the end of his last email to colleagues. And then he ended his life.

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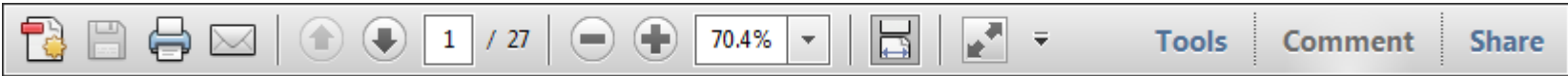
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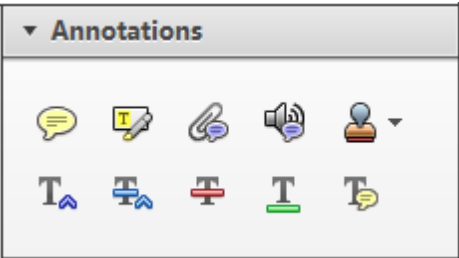
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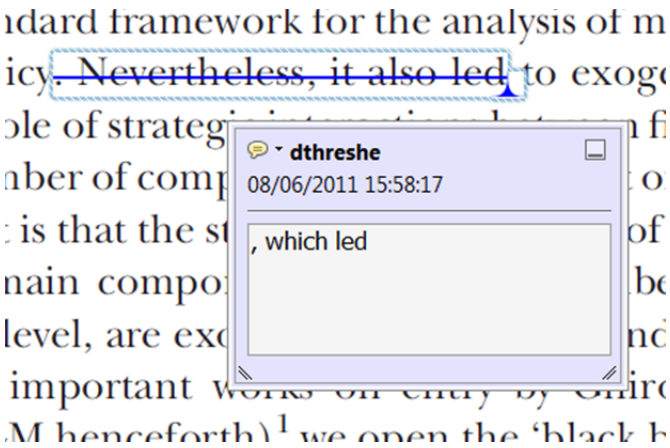
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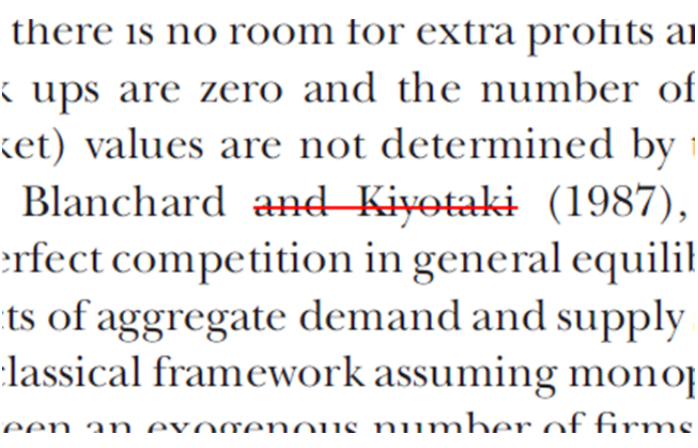
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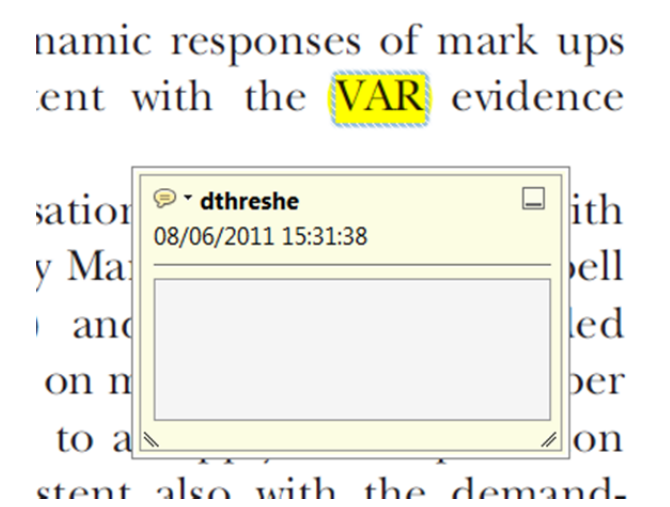
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- Click on the [Add note to text](#) icon in the Annotations section.
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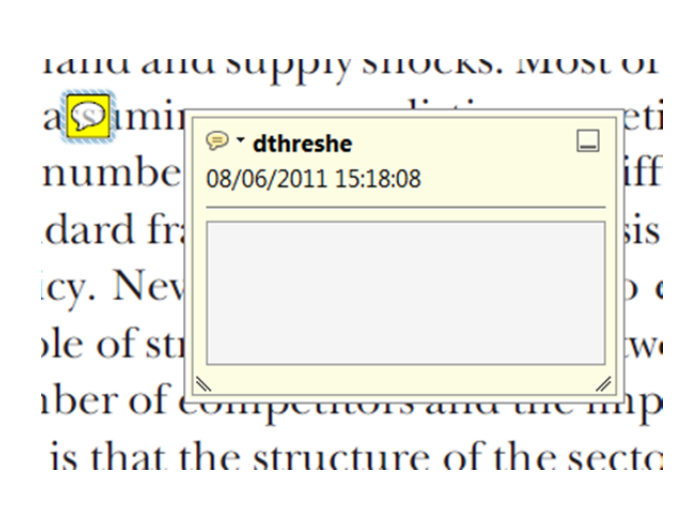
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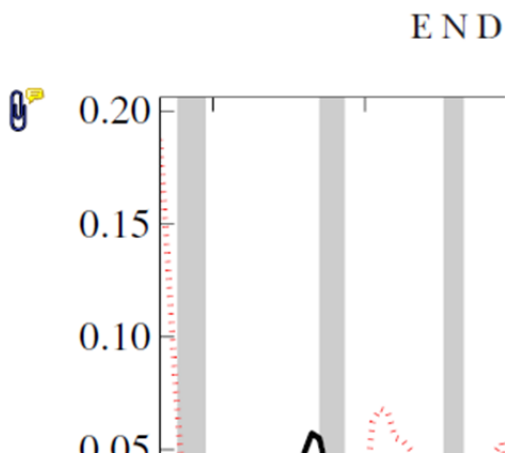


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of the business cycle, starting with the  
on perfect competition, constant returns  
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**APPROVED**

▼ Drawing Markups

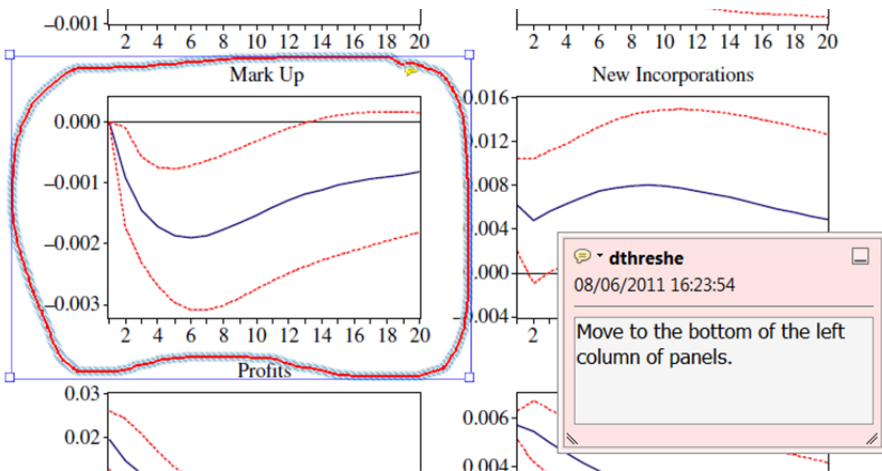


How to use it

- Click on one of the shapes in the **Drawing Markups** section.
- Click on the proof at the relevant point and draw the selected shape with the cursor.
- To add a comment to the drawn shape, move the cursor over the shape until an arrowhead appears.
- Double click on the shape and type any text in the red box that appears.

7. **Drawing Markups** Tools – for drawing shapes, lines and freeform annotations on proofs and commenting on these marks.

Allows shapes, lines and freeform annotations to be drawn on proofs and for comment to be made on these marks..



For further information on how to annotate proofs, click on the **Help** menu to reveal a list of further options:

