Northumbria Research Link

The Performative University: 'Targets', 'Terror' and 'Taking Back Freedom' in .cademia

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Abstract

This special issue assembles eight papers which provide insights into the working lives of early career to more senior academics, from several different countries. The first common theme which emerges is around the predominance

of 'Targets', enacting aspects of quantification and the ideal of perfect control and fabrication. The second theme is about the ensuing precarious evocation of 'Terror' impacting on mental well-being, albeit enacted in diverse ways. Furthermore, several papers highlight a particular type of response, beyond complicity to 'Take Freedom Back' (the third theme). This freedom is used to assert an emerging parallel form of resistance over time, from overt, planned, institutional collective representation towards more informal, post-recognition forms of collaborative, covert, counter spaces (both virtually and physically). Such resistance is underpinned by a collective care, generosity and embrace of vulnerability, whereby a reflexive collegiality is enacted. We feel that these emergent practices should encourage senior management, including vice-chancellors, to rethink performative practices. Situating the papers in the context of the current coronavirus crisis, they point towards new forms of seeing and organising which open up, rather than close down, academic freedom to unleash collaborative emancipatory power so as to contribute to the public and ecological good.

Introduction

That time
We all heard it,
Cool and clear ….
… Warning, in music-words
Devout and large,
That we are each other's
harvest:

we are each other's
business:
we are each other's
magnitude and bond.
-Paul Robeson by Gwendolyn Brooks (1971): 19

As an eclectic international and multi-disciplinary group of guest editors curating a special issue written by a set of international authors, we consider the timing of this could not be more relevant. If nothing else, the coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic crisis challenges every individual to assess their agency and responsibility, individually and collectively, at local, national and global institutional levels. From a management and organisational learning perspective, what it does offer is an opportunity and responsibility, in light of the potential of the crisis to cause untold human suffering and economic disaster (Hudecheck et al., 2020) – it represents a chance to consider our own role as business and management academics (and managers) and the way our individual and collective voice and learning are asserted, not only for the benefit of our own working lives, our colleagues, our wider universities, but also for the society as a whole. We are thereby hoping that this special issue, at this particular time (and hopefully beyond), offers a chance to raise the conversation enough to inspire academics and managers alike to develop a collective activism of solidarity, which recognises increasing structural power inequity consequentially stemming from neo-liberal marketisation and competitive pressures.

The crisis of course has highlighted the fragility, precarity and even brutality (hence the reference to the 'Terror') of managing with the unquestioned instrumental managerial approach of minimising academic labour costs (through, for

example, casualisation) and maximising income through the competitive clamour for meeting 'Targets', such as around attracting international students and being the sycophantic servants to multinational business. Our contention here is that the Coronavirus crisis could signal a shift towards new forms of organising for organisations (including universities) across the globe (Reeves et al., 2020), which unleash the collective emancipatory power of the much degraded atomised 'academic'. This will move way beyond fair pay and conditions (albeit crucial to recognise) and could offer organising which unleashes a spirit of reflexive learning for the public and ecological good. Pereira et al. (2020) highlight the criticality of taking a collaborative approach within the crisis. Some of the collective responses to the coronavirus, such as the localised and spontaneous emergence of Italian communities, that use music and song on their balconies to assert a collective care and generosity for the vulnerable in response to their governmental imposed physical distancing, provide a particularly pertinent lesson in the ways that academics could 'Take Back Freedom' ('freedom' is used here as a deliberate antonym to the use of 'control' within the 'Take Back Control' slogan of the Brexit campaign with the United Kingdom), through such collective practices as crafting not only physical but virtual counter spaces, to increase equality and fairness within universities.

The key differentiating feature of this special issue is that it opens up a conversation about academic response, beyond our complicity with the embedded 'Targets' and 'Terror' of what we argue as the global institutional *Zeitgeist* of the 'Performative University'. Moreover, we feel the special issue also portrays a realistic picture of current academic agency, with a shared concern and recognition for common

reactions of anxiety, powerlessness, mistrust and complicity within all the papers. This is particularly pertinent, when the reader considers that we received 37 papers in response to the call for papers. If most of these papers are focusing on 'Targets' and 'Terror' of the lived experience of performative practices, then this itself provides important learning insights, cautionary lessons and impetus for more systemic change.

'Taking Back Freedom' from the Performative University of 'Targets' and 'Terror'

To grasp the meaning of the 'Performative University', we need to recognise that the notion of performativity has different connotations, denoting the work of such diverse philosophers as Austin, Butler, Callon, Lyotard and Barad. Here, we approach performativity along the lines of the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) and his interpreters in management and organisation studies (e.g. Taberner, 2018), and in particular in a field closely related to management learning, that is, sociology of education (e.g. Ball, 2016). Performativity appears in the context of Lyotard's postmodern discussion of the condition and legitimation of scientific knowledge in advanced Western societies, for which three alternative legitimation criteria have emerged, namely performativity, consensus, and paralogy (Jones, 2003). Of these three, performativity has become dominant, prioritising optimal performance through maximising output and minimising input around efficiency, where science becomes a force of production and wealth (Lyotard, 1984). The same developments can be observed in education, particularly management education and learning, where the transmission of knowledge has increasingly become attuned to the needs of business and society as a form of 'mercantilization of knowledge' (Lyotard, 1984: 51).

Moreover, taking a research-as-craft gesture here, we try to use disruptive reflexivity in pinpointing the attempted separation of ethics and politics from knowledge production, which is endeavouring to seek closure, marginalising the tacit, embodied, enacted and sensuous knowledge of the powerless (Bell and Willmott, 2019). To reinforce this point, Kothiyal et al. (2018) showed how globalisation, combined with the historical legacy of colonialism, the dominance of the English language and a pressure to conform to research norms set by globally ranked journals in particular, has increased the precarious position of scholars in emerging markets.

Pertinently, Lyotard's perspective extends to the managerial and governance prerequisites for such performativity, where performativity represents a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation:

that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (…). The performances (…) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgment. The issue of who controls the field of judgment is crucial. (Ball, 2003: 216)

Ironically, if we are looking for the mechanisms to achieve such mercantile instrumentality and judgements, we could look no further than what inspired this special issue initially 3 years ago – the pre-1991 Soviet system of totalitarian control. Over six decades, the old Soviet Union maintained an economic system of central production targets for all state enterprises, combined with harsh punitive forms of

accountability for those hapless directors who did not meet targets, a system aptly characterised as 'targets and terror' (Bevan and Hood, 2006). While this system in its crude totalitarian forms went down in history with the demise of Soviet communism, some more subtle and lighter forms of 'targets and terror' surprisingly reappeared with the advent in many national settings of the neo-liberal policy doctrines of 'Reinventing Government' and 'New Public Management' (NPM). For universities, this meant that they should be more 'business-like', focusing on performance management and building accountability, often on the basis of imposed quantitative financial targets (Deem et al., 2007). Business and management schools in particular have found themselves on the 'front-line' of the resultant battles and challenges prompted by heightened managerialism and marketisation (Koris et al., 2017). This commercial push has been compounded by government cutbacks – especially within advanced economies – legitimated by a neo-liberal penchant for competition for external funds and semi-markets. This has led to an increasing commercialisation of university teaching and research, catering to 'business' interest in 'commodified' students and research (Wood, 2017).

To encapsulate the 'Performative University', Ball (2003) and other educational sociologists highlight three aspects that seem to stand out: *quantification*, the *ideal of perfect control* and *fabrication*. In terms of making sense of the content of the eight papers within this special issue, these three criteria are used to represent the different aspects of the 'performative' experience, be it in varying degrees. We feel the above classification serves as a more nuanced version of our use of 'Targets' within 'Targets & Terror'. In terms of the individual, collective and institutional impact of the

Performative University, we then represent the papers through the lens of 'Terror'. Following this, we present a significant aspect of the Performative University and that is around the response from different actors. We have specifically chosen the theme of 'Taking Back Freedom', to differentiate this response from more complicit responses, which fall within the 'Terror' theme.

'Targets' in the Performative University: quantification, the ideal of perfect control and fabrication

The first aspect pertains to *quantification*, referring to the whole of performance metrics, data and numbers that, through technical abstraction and so-called 'objective' and 'neutral' measurements, turns employees into comparable, classifiable and governable subjects (Taberner, 2018). Management 'by numbers' thus may turn into management 'by numbers only', or the wholesale reduction of humans to numbers and metrics. Where academics become auditable commodities, this also diminishes their teaching, learning and research to 'scores' in student surveys, and abstract publication 'points' in journal ranking systems (Kallio et al., 2016). Potently, much of even notionally 'free' or voluntary professional work conducted by academics, for example, journal reviewing, is now nevertheless ranked and monitored.

Quantification plays an important role in all eight papers. They all point to the importance of national and international league tables and rankings (most notoriously the UK Teaching Excellence and Research Excellence Frameworks), fuelled by internal performance metrics, benchmarks, key performance indicators and ratios that are being applied in instrumentalising and coercive ways. The paper by Wieners and Weber enquires into the interplay between neoliberalism and gender at two German universities, noting how the

qualities of young female scholars are predominantly framed in terms of an 'excellence' discourse, exclusively based on performance metrics. In their paper, Zawadzki and Jensen observe how the introduction of quantitative performance indicators coincided with the appointment of a new 'toxic' head of department who soon resorted to bullying and harassing, thus reinforcing the dehumanising effects of quantification with dehumanising behaviour. The paper by Jelonek and Mezur shows how efforts to increase the quality of research at Polish universities, through a supply-side governmental macro-policy change of tying funding almost exclusively to standardised student–staff ratios led to drastic reductions in student admissions and increased financial instability, but did not produce the desired increase in research quality.

The second aspect of performativity pertains to the *ideal of perfect control* over a system, resulting from the demise of older, more collegial forms of university administration and its replacement by authoritarian, top-down 'professional' managers who have little or no connection or affinity with academic teaching and research (e.g. Parker, 2014). Such central control: 'is supposed to improve its performance … [but] in fact lowers the performance level it claims to raise … state and socioeconomic bureaucracies … stifle the systems or subsystems they control and asphyxiate themselves in the process' (Lyotard, 1984: 55–56). Desired increases in effort and time spent on educational core tasks are off-set by increases in the effort and time that need to be devoted to accounting for task work, erecting monitoring systems, collecting performance data and managing impressions and expectations. Perfect control of activities thus ultimately may lead to their demise. Performance evaluation and

accountability, through appraisals seem to be the requisite reassurance senior managers need to allay their fears of losing control. They become more judgmental and punitive, rather than developmental and supportive, thus intensifying employee anxiety and defensiveness (Visser, 2016).

The *ideal of perfect control* appears in various guises in the papers. Drawing on Marcuse's idea of 'total administration', the paper by McCann et al. shows how 'perfect control' by university administrators and senior leadership leads to a totalising grip on employees: curbing resistance, closing down democratic channels and recasting the 'reality' of the university's nature and culture in managerialist terms. In comparable terms, but here based on Bourdieu,1 the paper by Ratle et al. describes how early career critical management studies (CMS) scholars, from multiple countries, are all but overwhelmed by the 'looming immensity' of their university environment, with a 'coterie of Vice-Chancellors' exerting a comprehensive and exacting top-down control . Similarly, the paper by Brewis et al. focuses on the United Kingdom as an extreme national case of the enactment of such central and privileged control, operating from the level of the vice-chancellor downwards.

The third aspect pertains to *fabrication*, referring to 'versions of an organisation (or person) which does not exist … they are produced purposefully in order "to be accountable"'. Truthfulness is not the point – the point is their effectiveness, both in the market or for inspection or appraisal, and in the 'work' they do 'on' and 'in' the organisation – their transformational and disciplinary impact' (Ball, 2003: 224). As such, fabrications are paradoxical, because they signify both resistance and capitulation to the surveillance inherent in performativity, and they produce opacity rather than

transparency as individuals and organisations take ever greater care in the construction and maintenance of artificial representations, crucial to their (financial) survival. Here performance takes on the qualities of a theatrical play, reinforcing the ideal of perfect control of managers, inspectors and auditors. For example, managing the process of achieving accreditations, performance measurement, quality assurance and excellence frameworks offers such front-stage performances of concealment, under the cloak of transparency and accountability (Craig et al., 2014). The effects of such a process are not only discernible in the impaired self-image and identity formation of academics (e.g. Ter Bogt and Scapens, 2012), but also in the fact that, from a certain point on, admin and managers create a 'parallel reality' or fabrication of academic life that in principle may proceed with *or without* academics (Anderson, 2008).

The most clear-cut case of *fabrication* is offered in the paper by Dean et al. in their use of the metaphor of the Academic Potemkin Village, to highlight the futility of higher education (HE) institutions, whose function *in extremis* is to curate veneers or façades to conceal the lived experience of the staff and faculty co-opted into the collective illusion. The paper frames the premise, promise and perils of contemporary universities, highlighting how they disproportionally spend their money on marketing, branding, enrolment management and luxurious campus facilities to 'look good' (rather than 'be (academically) good'), and thus hoping to attract the students with the deepest pockets. This isomorphic trend also includes creativity in influencing ranking systems, accreditation processes, which in their turn are used for further branding and marketing to a point where core research, teaching and social mission, and values are compromised and even

displaced. Such a mad dash for visible deliverables, inevitably diminishes the rigour and long-term impact of research and teaching work. This in turn promotes a gaming mentality, where staff and students prioritise metrics over substance – where journal ranking or grades are more important than learning.

Similarly, in terms of the paper by Jelonek and Mezur, Polish universities have taken decisions to 'reclassify' teaching and research-denominated colleagues in an attempt to fabricate, massage and manipulate evaluation and performance data, following the fragmented and inconsistent manner in which NPM-inspired policies have been implemented. This tokenistic 'game playing' impinges on academics' careers and work experience. Therefore, a classic fabrication dysfunctional effect in sub-systems is produced as a consequence of a macro-institutional attempt 'to pull levers' to control the machine of HE in Poland. Following Levi (1989), victims and perpetrators are blurred and systematically endemic. Thus, the paper pessimistically suggests that instrumentalism and fabrication appear to be, and indeed may be the primary devices that can be deployed by academics to counter clumsy institutional governmental policy decrees. Perhaps, the key challenge for individuals caught within, and between, the tectonic plates of such macro-changes is to work with such sub-system cultures to devise enough collective activism to counter such strategies.

Elements of fabrication also return in Butler and Spoelstra's paper around the discussion of the 'publication game' metaphor, where it explores to what extent CMS professors behave like players in the publish or perish game, but are not really playing a 'game', as conceptually defined by play theorists, such as Huizinga, Caillois and Suits. This focus on

senior CMS academics, with their identity and career being grounded in contesting performative practices through a critical ethos, offers a chance to explore how pervasive instrumental publishing really is within several countries, including the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia and the United States. The authors argue that the metaphor conceals, rather than reveals, the insight that academics are more captured by the spirit of play, away from the performative practice of publishing research towards critical enquiry, curiosity and intellectual exploration disconnected from instrumental motives. For example, respondents talked of buying one's freedom by playing the game that then allows some freedom to manoeuvre. Although, there is a melancholy about such fabrication, there is a recognition that spaces of freedom to do critical inquiry are opened up by ticking the specific requirements of topic and target publications. This fabrication appears to have eroded their critical ethos over the years, as their critical reflections and research practices are tainted by the publishing game – the game unconsciously plays the player. Clearly, playing the game to offer a counter space through a lusory attitude is a game with personal 'costs'.

The 'Terror' of the Performative University

Within our call for papers, we have used the notion of 'Terror' to stimulate a conversation about the impact of such performative practices on university actors' working lives. Recent wider literature draws attention to the basic symbolic violence and misrecognition involved in the purely quantitative assessment and quantification of academic research and teaching and in particular the effects thereof on mental well-being of academics. Respondents express feelings of shame, anger, failure, loss of self-confidence and

even clinical depression, burn-out and suicidal tendencies (Smith and Ulus, 2019). This resonates with earlier work that considers this reduction of human subjects to objects, to 'sets of quantitative measures', as 'administrative evil' (Dillard and Ruchala, 2005: 613). It has led to divisions among university staff and also to a concomitant closed, anxious and defensive working climate (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014). This anxiety has been exasperated by an increasing precariousness of university work, in which low-paid, high-stress temporary staff appointments gradually have replaced existing tenured staff positions and in which academic identities become insecure and fragile (Knights and Clarke, 2014).

This precarity is highlighted in the paper by Ratle et al., who interviewed relatively powerless early career academics (ECAs), underlining their nascent career stage and frequent employment insecurity. They point out that they are particularly vulnerable to mechanisms that induce atmospheres of terror within the 'new corporate university'. Indeed, the authors provide a reminder, and heightened sensitivity, to the way terror is generated and sustained at the micro-level as a consequence of terror promotion at the macro-level business school context. This echoes public lived experience tactics derived in response to 'state'/macro directive strategies and policies and its symbolic violence drawn from Bourdieu's modes of domination. As at the kernel of much critical perspective commentary, the analysis and response turn to how individual ECAs might turn the spotlight on their own actions and roles in auto-sustaining these processes and what forms of resistance might be discovered and galvanised. The paper makes clear that the serious implications for mental health for ECAs require greater appreciation and understanding than it has often

received. Furthermore, the paper is particularly pertinent as it draws upon a data set spanning 15 countries – it seems from this research that the phenomenon of targets and terror is extensive and spans national boundaries.

Similarly, in a 'co-authored' autoethnography, the paper by Zawadzki and Jensen provides the most evocative example of such 'terror', through a detailed, 'lived' account of early career scholars again, but within a European academic context. It focuses on the experience of workplace bullying by a 'toxic leader' and the mixed feelings of harm, fear and guilt these experiences invoked. In particular, it considers the role of the bystander in an atmosphere and culture of bullying. It examines the nature of dignity and the ways in which it might be maintained. The paper demonstrates how bullying and 'mobbing' approaches are employed to divide and rule and isolate people in academic contexts. It also illustrates the dangers of academic paternalism as a survival device or support mechanism for such environments. The paper provides a 'lived' and dramatic presentation of the effect of neo-liberal pressures applied to academic settings and their impact on freedom, dignity and the tendency to dissemble an individual's identity. The article argues that standing up to, and whistleblowing bullies, is ultimately the only way of stopping bullying occurring. This, in turn, raises the challenging issue and question of further tactics being required to deal with the probable counter-strategies and defensive moves rolled out by the bullies. The argument clearly demonstrates the importance of supportive friends and colleagues when a person is experiencing bullying. Zawadzki and Jensen embed this supportive relationship in their paper through the autoethnographic device of one of the authors playing the role of the 'conceptual encounter' – challenging

and grounding the account for the wider reading. The article, together with the other papers in the special issue, underlines a series of challenges. The bullying and its tactics – employing mobbing and other forms of coercion – are seemingly widespread in the business school domain. This is a major issue calling for structural and institutional reform. Yet, so often the experience and actions are felt at a more micro-level and the 'taking on' of the system seems a daunting and unassailable task. The authors indicate that methodologies such as autoethnography can provide some illumination and potential catharsis. The paper by Brewis et al., which uses a collective autoethnography, highlights the terror for academics not only at early career stage, but also at all levels around the intense fear of paying the price for activism at this micro-level and their unsurprising quiescent complicity. Furthermore, such academic terror surfaces not only at the faculty level, but at the institutional level and among students as well.

Finally, even though many universities exhibit the confluence towards performative practices, not all universities in all parts of the world are affected in the same way by such 'targets and terror' developments and it was this diversity which we also wanted to surface from our call for papers. The clearest example is the paper by Wieners and Weber. They explored different organisational contexts, comparing two case studies of two types of German universities ('Global Player' and 'Striving'). Through a Foucauldian perspective, they highlight the extent to which the performative 'excellence' discourse is formed, understood and used within these universities, illuminating many of the main threads found in this special issue. As the 'Striving' University opened up a voice for ECAs and was flexible in what was possible, their

context offered opportunities for heterotopical space, without difference being suppressed as it was in 'Global Player' University. The focus on both 'excellence' and 'gender' discourses suggests some interesting ways forward, both for avoiding the worst excesses of targets and terror regimes and for recreating some academic autonomy. The authors suggest that gender discourses may be valuable in enabling continued 'disturbance' of the status quo and existing power relations, as well as creating heterotopic spaces which permit autonomy.

'Taking Back Freedom' from the Performative University

Last but not least, we also wanted to hear about the various ways in which university actors responded, both individually and collectively, in the process of 'Taking Back Freedom' and the extent to which this impacted not only individually and collectively but institutionally as well. In many ways, this follows from the literature and intense debate around 'critical performativity', which is split between providing hope around the micro-emancipatory potential of engaging reflexively and critically with performative practices, and recognising the limits of academic agency, both individually, collectively and particularly institutionally to contest managerialist 'Targets and Terror'. The critical performativity discourse focuses on the various ways in which the performativity theories by Austin and Butler are supposed to play a role therein (e.g. Cabantous et al., 2016). Reflecting on this debate, which has ended largely inconclusively (Drost et al., 2017), we believe the question of whether individual and groups can make a difference, through direct and indirect contestation, to the institutional performative structures, systems and culture is crucial to explore. Given the multiple accounts of 'Terror' across the

papers in this special issue, it is vital to identify the acts, spaces, processes and mechanisms which could provide contestable narratives, responses and alternatives to the seemingly inexorable rise of managerialism, commodification and marketisation in varying national contexts (Harland et al., 2015).

As previously mentioned, the level of contestation with institutional performative practices varies over the eight papers. The papers by Wieners and Weber, Zawadzki and Jensen and by Jelonek and Mezur report on qualitative research projects, but with little evidence of any institutional contestation. Similarly, the paper by Butler and Spoelstra explores CMS professors' ambiguous use of the 'publication game' metaphor, disclosing careerist tendencies, with a complicity letting the game play them rather them playing the game. In the paper by Dean et al., the fact that the authors point out the wider negative impact to many different levels and actors of the Performative University illustrates that there could be a potential for crafting a greater collaborative spirit and infrastructure as a response. For example, they do suggest some ways forward to engage in more institutional consortia around resource, programme and opportunity sharing, to collaborate and foster more institutional relationships. Mirroring the focus on different actors in this article, they assert the importance of reimagining academic community, systemic engagement, creativity and partnerships with a variety of stakeholders.

In contrast, the paper by Ratle et al. explores how particular actors – early career CMS scholars – respond to symbolic violence by sometimes resorting to small acts of 'counter-terror', 'fighting back', often based on 'small wins' and 'local spontaneous action'. While the paper, by its own

acknowledgement, risks painting a 'bleak picture' of the often precarious predicament of ECAs and business school life, its central argument is around crafting early steps and providing some hope.

Likewise, the paper by McCann et al. provides a collective, activist, autoethnography on how they attempted to resist, countered and raised awareness about a particularly brutal, top-down and incisive 'restructuring' plan at their university. They draw an historical inspiration from the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (BFSM; by which radical students in the late 1960s responded to the autocratic university governance of their time), while also using a tempered comparison with central control of the Soviet period, within the frame of Marcuse's 'total administration'. They pose the question whether the sit-ins, teach-ins and civil disobedience from these civic rights-driven students offer examples for pertinent collective resistance within contemporary universities, involved in restructuring, redundancies and governance change, driven by instrumental rationality, productivity and efficiency, as Marcuse would assert. What is clearly evident in this sobering paper is not only that institutionalised forms of resistance, for example, through union membership and no confidence votes, were limited in impact, but even informal collective staff resistance similar to the BFSM, such as an internal staff survey circulated by business school professors, did not stop staff redundancies, albeit voluntary rather than mandatory. This lack of institutional impact compared with the relatively successful BFSM is reflected on by reminding us of the pervasive threat of disciplinary action within contemporary universities and the way contemporary democratic HE structures are closed down, ignored and 'dissidents' discredited or even punished. Although these

attempts ultimately were unsuccessful, the paper does finish in an optimistic way by drawing on Chomsky's (2017), summoning up a similar unconscious overtones of the BFSM in their call to specific actors, not to students but to critical scholars across the university to create a counter-language to contest through political activism.

Finally, in a further collective autoethnography, Brewis et al. describe how they organised a virtual space to resist a comprehensive downsizing and restructuring programme of their entire university. They draw on Hardt and Negri's idea of 'multitude', a disparate group communicating and cooperating through a lack of co-presence, to theorise about not only escaping the terror of such totalising control, but also being able to explore how such an escape could impact back into the university. In their case, they organised their collective resistance using a WhatsApp virtual group called 'the Hive' in communicative, cooperative, lateral, networked and 'swarming' ways to endeavour to oust the sitting vice-chancellor, who they viewed as instrumental to the performative practices threatening the social mission of 'their' Open University (OU). The Hive was significant, albeit appearing innocuous, as an indirect, immaterial, multi-disciplinary and virtual counter space for solidarity, based on a shared engagement with the OU founding mission. The emotional and intellectual support and power which the virtual space provided here, in contrast to a physical space, offered continuous mutual care and support for each other and even love as an act of will, that is, what they saw as a community of experts actively collaborating across different faculties and professional services staff, rather than just passively writing. And in the end resistance proved to be effective, leading to the resignation of the incumbent vice-

chancellor.

Future research challenges

From our guest editorial team perspective, what management learning are we hoping for from this special issue? We see the most significant management learning research challenge to be around 'Taking Back Freedom', which arises from some of the papers in this special issue. We also feel this represents the state of play within the wider critical HE and management learning literature. This theme is significant, as much of the contemporary literature has been focusing on the themes of 'Targets' and 'Terror' identified and rightly represented in this special issue. In many ways, we feel that the emergent response from academics around 'Taking Back Freedom' represents a significant change in the way academic resistance is evolving (Bristow et al., 2017; Mumby et al., 2017), particularly recognising the complex and dialectical relationship between control and resistance. This focuses on the change from overt planned, institutional collective representation towards more informal, post-recognition forms of spontaneous, collective, covert resistance (Fleming, 2016). Furthermore, it concentrates much more on the complex motivational process of individual and collective resistance.

With respect to the new forms of activism and collective resistance (e.g. Alvesson and Spicer, 2016), the academic actors portrayed within several papers here appear to be using the freedom and autonomy which are still prevalent within HE, albeit in a diminishing way, to craft an individualistic restorative escape (Mumby et al., 2017; Siltaloppi et al., 2019). Moreover, through the collective caring and generosity within such restorative counter spaces, a reflexive collegiality is enacted (Gherardhi and Rodeschini, 2016;

Smith and Ulus, 2019). We particularly think further research on how such counter spaces (Beyes and Michels, 2011), operating around this ethic of collective care (Noddings, 2013), could contest and change the institutionalised performative practice of universities. Drawing from the political and cultural tensions in achieving such a new collective resistance, we feel there is much scope for a processual and longitudinal lens, to explore different meandering pathways, which are drawn most crucially from the lived experience of different actors across the globe and from different levels of positional power. Even ECAs are not purely helpless, passive victims of the system, with only limited agency. They are also active resisters, who wish to make a difference in their working lives, to institutions, and society (Bristow et al., 2017). This emergent research will no doubt unmask the tensions between individual and collective restorative practice, individual agency and institutional, structural change and academic activism and complicity.

Future challenges for research and engagement with practice will have to deal with this dual nature of academic compliance and complicity versus a collective resistance, based on academic activism with practice (Callahan and Elliott, 2019). As this special issue testifies, much of the pain and disarray, as an integral part of terror of NPM and managerialism has been heaped on academics by other academics. They (we?) keep on playing a role in audits, visitations, excellence exercises, funding schemes, and so on, activities which would grind to a halt, were academics to collectively refuse to play a role in them anymore. In many respects, battling the 'Performative University' is what the American writer Walt Kelly (1953) envisioned when he set out to battle McCarthyism: ' … we shall meet the enemy, and

not only may [they] be ours, [they] may be us. Forward!'
However, the simple refusal to play complicit roles is easier said than done (as with participation in union strikes), since we need to recognise the extent of social inequality at different levels of employment in universities. We also need to account for the social inequity around not only gender, which appears in a number of papers, but also around race and ethnicity, sexuality, religion and disability. As this special issue also testifies, a particular responsibility thereby lies with more senior academics (e.g. Butler and Spoelstra, 2014), who do not suffer from the same positional and societal power inequities. We see that this responsibility and leadership is required to overcome individualisation/ divide and rule, so as to achieve some collectivist action. Such individualisation manifests itself in more successful, 'excellent' academics exiting universities (Parker, 2014), not surprisingly crafting a temporary breathing space of self-care from a sacrificial labour of love (Clarke et al., 2012), ultimately feeding back into the performative practices of universities.

On a more hopeful note, counter narratives and spaces, enacted both virtually and physically are discussed in the special issue and invariably researched within a collective autoethnographic way. These 'counter-terror' spaces offer inclusive practices, which are supportive and caring, which act as levellers to different positional power bases of the respective actors. Research is needed around how such counter spaces emerge, with wider research pointing towards the significance of counter performative spaces, relatively disconnected both politically and culturally from the university's performative practices (Jones, 2018; Vesala and Tuomivaara, 2018).

Looking further afield, other disciplines and perspectives could offer new ways of exploring this challenge. As this special issue is drawn primarily from the CMS and HE field, we were struck by the need to raise our awareness and dialogue between these fields and wider disciplines. For example, looking at the whistleblowing field, the emergent discourse around 'taking freedom back' here resonates with Alford's (2007) notion of a whistleblowing act serving as a compulsion to be free. This also mirrors the notion that whistleblowing is framed as 'not only to a dis-identification with a given organizational identity, but also to a counter-identification with alternative discourses and to the affirmation of a new identity in which notions of public interest become central' (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016: 1635). Based on Foucault's notion of parrhesia or fearless speech as a form of resistance, the construction of whistle-blower subjectivity is premised upon the freedom to disconnect from the organisation and engage in an apparent reinvention of the self (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016: 1624). However, we would like to draw attention to recent research by Kenny et al. (2018: 326) who argue, through Judith Butler that this focus on freedom does not 'disregard attachments to one's organization and how whistle-blowers conceive of themselves as defenders of professional norms'. Several of the papers in this special issue, remind us that such freedom to disconnect is always connected to the way they are 'passionately invested' in their academic profession and university subject positions, either with a restorative or a reimagining lens around their social and scholarship purpose, despite acknowledging the institutional 'terror'.

Other examples include research by Jones (2018), who draws on environmental psychology, to understand the impact of

how a group of academics across disciplines, institutions and levels are contesting academic work, by drawing on their aesthetic, temporal and spatial sensibility, within a counter performative, collective leisure activity called 'slow swimming'. The resulting institutional contestation draws on the temporal significance of slow scholarship (Berg and Seeber, 2013), which is also highlighted within this special issue. Reflecting on how temporality was brought up in the special issue, in relation to virtual counter space, we feel that this deserves more research, around the potential advantages of physical counter space compared with virtual counter space, with respect to self versus collective care and the relationship with potential contestation with performative practices. This is particularly relevant, considering the current prime focus on virtual space for such relationality within the Coronavirus crisis and poses crucial questions moving forward of any changes in the balance between virtual and physical space and time in universities. For example, Bristow et al. (2019) focus on the ways in which academics could collaborate internally in the university with fellow academics to develop their own collegial research rhythms.

What is clearly evident from these papers and wider research, is that there appears to be a shift here towards a particular form and content of research, which endeavours to make a difference, individually, collectively and institutionally, albeit with varying success. This aligns with the wider literature, around the use of autoethnography and how it has spread following an exhortation to engage in 'writing differently' (Gilmore et al., 2019). This literature urges academics to part with their customary practice of writing 'academically' (i.e. rational, impersonal and objective), to be able to express the emotions, fears and feelings they

personally experience under managerialist academic regimes (Callahan and Elliott, 2019; Ruth et al., 2018; Smith and Ulus, 2019). On one hand, such personal accounts of suffering and humiliation may shed more light on the reasons why so many academics seem to comply so seamlessly with managerialist regimes (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Butler and Spoelstra, 2014). On the other hand, the emotions associated with suffering and humiliation may be a strong source of academic resistance and activism. Alakavuklar et al. (2017) use a Lacanian perspective to show how the pleasure of contesting the suffering around managerialist, university discourse, reflexively develops into a hysteric academy. It appears that academics in fact employ a wide array of tactics to survive under managerialism and to subvert the system, ranging from open protest, avoidance (feigned ignorance, 'forgetting'), qualified compliance to quietly throwing 'sand in the (admin) machine' (Anderson, 2008; Contu, 2018; Siltaloppi et al., 2019).

Moreover, we feel the significant contribution of this special issue is around other alternative ways we as academics can come together, acknowledging and sharing vulnerability, care and generosity to impact on their institutions. If the Coronavirus crisis has taught us anything, it is that even when we feel like we have lost many of our taken for granted individual freedoms, we are compelled to search out and enact counter spaces to assert not only our personal, but our collective care and generosity not only for the vulnerable and marginalised, but, most ironically, for those public sector workers, who have been neglected and brutally treated with 'Targets and Terror'. Our hope as guest editors is to focus not just on 'Targets and Terror', but to curate an editorial which offers a way forward in research and practice, around 'Taking

Back Freedom' for academics and managers alike, to craft their institutions around a real social purpose. It seems after all that we are aligned with Chomsky (2017), as he is cited in this special issue as choosing optimism over despair.

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Note

1.References for the theories used in the articles of this special issue are to be found in the articles themselves.

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