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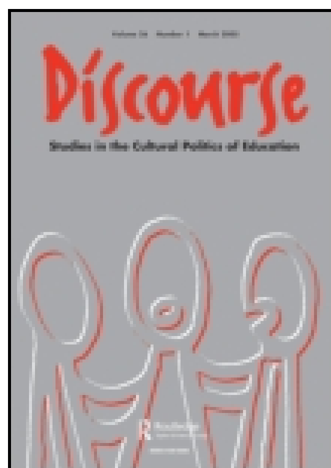

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The hollowed-out university? A critical analysis of changing institutional and academic norms in UK higher education

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This article argues that UK universities are at risk from a process of 'hollowing out' – that is, of becoming institutions with no distinctive social role and no ethical *raison d'etre* – and that this is a process which undermines the possibilities for meaningful institutional and academic identities. It begins with a condensed, and necessarily partial, review of recent UK higher education policy trends to indicate the historical context and direction of change and to highlight the growing separation of management and academic agendas and the linked rise in gloss and spin compared to academic substance. In the remainder of this article we focus on the normative dimension of these changes and unpack their implications for the nature of the university and of academic work. In so doing, we illustrate the breadth and depth of the threat posed by 'hollowed-out' universities, indicate alternative, more positive currents and call for a 're-valuation' of the UK university.

Keywords: higher education; academic identities; academic work; marketisation; commodification; values and ethics

Introduction

This article is an attempt to dig beneath the story of recent trends in UK higher education (HE) in the hope of offering a relatively simple – and in some ways deliberately simplistic – account of the changing character of the UK university. We will portray this changing character as a process of 'hollowing out', illustrate and explain what this means and discuss why it matters.

This article arises from a previous article (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2013) which used the *Times Higher*[1] as a lens to analyse HE policy trends in the 30-year period between 1979 and 2010, and which focused, in particular, on the role of the *Times Higher* in both reporting on and helping to shape these trends. In the previous article these themes were effectively our stopping point, whereas here we have chosen to treat them as a starting point and to ask some more fundamental political and philosophical questions about the values and cultures of HE and, in particular, the relationships between evolving institutional forms and the possibilities of academic work and identity. So, after briefly reviewing the policy trends, we will focus our main attention upon an exploration of changing institutional norms and academic values, and the links between them. To develop our account, we will use two analytic lenses. In the first instance, we will borrow from May's (2001) analysis of the changing nature of academic professionalism. We will then move on to consider the

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central importance that has come to be attached to impression management within the sector. Taken together, we hope the use of these two lenses will lend some credence to our suggestion that the UK university is being hollowed out – in other words, that it is becoming a domain in which the organising principle derives from surface considerations rather than considerations of academic substance, with potentially devastating consequences both for the intrinsic value of academic work and for the civic function of universities.

Thirty years of HE change: a brief review of key trends and some illustrative stories

The 30-year period (1979–2010) we reviewed in our earlier paper (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2013) began and ended with protests and marches in response to government cuts. Indeed, for those who are interested in extra-parliamentary action in support of HE, the protests of 2010 marked a welcome return to this kind of action after an extended period of relative quiescence. However, although there are some significant commonalities between the cuts and protests in the first few years of this period and those at the end, there are also some striking differences, both in terms of the substance of the policy agendas and in terms of the players and alliances involved in the protest movements. Perhaps, most notably, the protests at the start of the period embodied considerable unity of purpose across the constituencies of senior university staff, lecturers and students. Much of this unity had dissolved by 2010, by which time, for the most part, university managers and others, including students and prospective students, found themselves on opposite sides of the divide. Although the version of the intervening years presented here is necessarily very brief, it helps to indicate some of the features of the evolving landscape that shed light on these differences.

Using our sample of *Times Higher* issues, we identified broad policy trends very loosely structured by chronology and clustered into three themes – ‘retrenchment and the management of change’, ‘new faces and emphases’ and ‘gloss and spin’.[2] We should stress that the summary offered here is not only necessarily a partial one, but also clearly reflects our own interpretive concerns. Specifically, we are conscious that what we are presenting is essentially a narrative of ‘loss’ and that accounts such as this have rightly come to be contested both for relying on mythical pasts (Holden, in press) and for feeding into a ‘politics of nostalgia’ (Newman & Clarke, 2009). We will return to these contestations at the end of this article.

Retrenchment and the management of change

The cuts announced in 1979 involved significant reductions in student intake numbers and in the government subsidy for overseas students. These were accompanied by a shift in official policy discourse about public spending, which came to be presented as a threat to, rather than an investment in, national competitiveness. As already mentioned, the cuts were met by substantial opposition and protests, which united university managers, staff and students. This included cooperation in teach-ins and participation in marches to parliament. For example, in November 1981, the *Times Higher* reported on one of the ‘biggest ever’ demonstrations at which 20 university vice-chancellors were believed to have been present and to which their representative body, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and

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Principals (CVCP), sent a telegram of support expressing 'dismay and indignation' at government policies (*THES*, 1981).

These cuts were quickly followed by an acceleration of interventionism on the part of the University Grants Committee (the UGC), the quango responsible for advising the government on the allocation of funds to universities. The UGC had previously been viewed as 'a buffer' between the universities and the state but increasingly came to be seen as an 'agent of the state' (Moser, 1987). The increasing interventionism of the UGC was defended as a means of helping universities cope with expenditure cuts, through, for example, reviews of the strengths and weaknesses of individual university departments in a way that both heralded the arrival of the forthcoming research assessment exercise (RAE)[3] and, at the same time, signalled a significant loss of independence for individual universities. University leaders and supporters in Parliament warned about the ways in which the implementation of the cuts represented a dismantling of democratic currents in HE. For example, in 1981 Sir William Taylor, Director of the University of London's Institute of Education, talked about 'the undermining of collegial governance and the destruction of relationships and understandings which underpin many of the essential qualities of the academic enterprise' (Taylor, 1981).

The 'proto-RAE' of 1980 was one of many new managerial technologies introduced into HE in the 1980s, technologies which have since become a routine feature of academic life. For example, in 1985 the first RAE 'proper' was established, whilst 1986 saw the introduction of appraisal for academics. These managerial technologies, borrowed from the private sector, radically reconfigured the culture of universities by embedding the growing pre-occupation with productivity into routine practices. At about the same time, a highly influential CVCP report, the Jarratt Report, suggested that universities as institutions might usefully be seen as analogous to large corporations and called for a recasting of the role of the vice-chancellor from 'leading scholar' to 'chief executive' (Jarratt, 1985). The rise in private sector language and culture was accompanied by real elements of privatisation, including the outsourcing of campus services, such as catering, cleaning and IT support and the 'new growth industry' of management and finance consultancy in HE (*THES*, 1987a).

New faces and emphases

The change management delivered in the 1980s resulted, amongst other things, in shifting university demographies in the 1990s including a different mix of staff, students and organisational partners. The cuts of the early 1980s had in part been designed to favour science, engineering and business and were thus a relative threat to the social sciences and humanities, prompting fears, for example, of substantial closures of English and Classics departments (*THES*, 1986b, 1987b). Fortunately, the second half of the 1980s saw the beginning of a long period of expansion in the university sector, including the granting of university status to institutions in the former polytechnic sector, which offset this relative threat.[4] However, even though, during the late 1980s and 1990s, the shift away from humanities staffing towards STEM[5] staffing was not dramatic, the shift from humanities cultures towards STEM cultures was in some respects more decisively achieved. In particular, this period saw the intensification and dissemination of what might be called a science and

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technology research and development (STRD) model and especially its incorporation into the humanities and social sciences as one expression of the increasingly utilitarian conception of the function of universities advanced by successive governments. The STRD logic was (and continues to be) reflected, for example, in the growing requirement for humanities and social science scholars to demonstrate social and economic impact and in a growing technicist emphasis in HE curricula, manifested, for example, in the teaching of generic and transferable skills. The STRD logic is also reflected in the normative expectation fostered by the RAE (and its replacement, the REF[6]) of collective modes of academic working and production line approaches to publication – as opposed to the model of the 'lone scholar' digging deep in order to produce a major monograph sometimes over very many years (which, in RAE terms, is equivalent to being non-productive for long periods) (Henkel, 2000; Strathern, 2000).

The conception of the university as a large corporate organisation concerned with performance management and productivity can also be seen in processes of massification in relation to teaching activities, for example, the steady rise in students numbers and the proliferation of programmes during the late 1980s onwards. Demand for HE in the UK grew, partly because of the rise in the number of students with the necessary two A levels for entry, but also because of a growing demand from women, mature and part-time students (*THES*, 1986a). This was accompanied, and arguably fuelled by, the rehabilitation of a discourse of HE as a national social and economic investment. During the period from the late 1980s through the 1990s, some more progressive widening access policies and practices gradually gained a secure foothold in the university sector. The concern that non-traditional students, including women, people from minority ethnic groups and those with disabilities, were under-represented in HE led to the Polytechnics Central Admissions Service introducing ethnic monitoring from the 1990 admissions cycle (*THES*, 1988) and a growing number of institutions scrutinising and being self-critical about their own exclusionary practices (e.g. see Utley, 1989).

Traditional norms and boundaries around academic identity were also being challenged from a different direction, as from roughly the mid-1990s onwards an increasing number of stories in the *Times Higher* related to the expansion of HE-business links – for example, business people sponsoring research institutes, new government funding streams to support links with industry, the rise of discourses of economic exploitation and spin-off companies and the representation of business in university governance (e.g. Goddard, 1999; *THES*, 1994; Wojtas, 2001).

Since the late 1990s there has also been the emergence of, and a considerable expansion in, new professional groupings allied to university management, not only in the areas of research policy and quality assurance but also increasingly in areas like business relations, knowledge exchange, fund-raising and development. These posts have grown in number and become more specialised and have also gained more recognition and visibility as an integral part of the HE landscape (Whitchurch, 2008).

Gloss and spin

One of the new professional groupings that has grown in numbers and influence since 2000 has been that of public relations experts. This is just one aspect of what

has now become a thorough-going orientation towards corporate identity and institutional reputation. Universities are keenly aware of the need to compete in the international marketplace for students, private sector investment, prestigious international links and not least their position in various highly publicised university league tables. Under these conditions it is hardly surprising to find that there has been a substantial investment of time, attention and financial resources into the management of 'image' and that growing importance has been attached to slick marketing approaches and practices. A number of stories published in the *Times Higher* in the period raise questions about the ways in which public relations and marketing discourses risk penetrating and reconfiguring more traditional university values; for example, the reconfiguring of graduation day as a 'marketing machine' (Baty, 1999) and revelations that Universities UK (the successor to the CVCP) 'ordered sweeping cuts' to a report it had commissioned on the politically contentious issue of student debt to 'minimise negative publicity' and prevent damage to student recruitment (Baty, 2005). Stories such as these highlight the danger of universities' orientation to the celebration of human learning and achievement, and above all towards truth, being sullied by an overzealous pursuit of image and market share.

Although this is an extremely dense summary of a whole complex of changes, it might be enough to help illuminate how the policy climate and the protests surrounding the 2010 and 2011 HE reforms (BIS, 2011; Browne, 2010; Higher Education Funding Council for Wales [HEFCW], 2011), which brought about huge cuts in teaching grants to humanities and social science subjects and an explicit move to a heavily marketised system,[7] can be seen merely as steps in a direction that was long established. It also helps to explain why the considerable protests and demonstrations that greeted the accompanying hike in student fees did not achieve the levels of solidarity witnessed at the beginning of this period; for one of the dominant stories of this period is the increasing separation of the agendas of university managers from those of staff and students and parallel shifts in the normative culture of universities which meant that 'mere' academic concerns became, at least from the point of view of those running the universities, eclipsed by other interests.

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The reconfiguring of institutional and academic norms

In the remainder of this article we want to focus on this idea of normative change and its implications for the nature of the university and for the possibilities of academic work and identity. To do so we will first use conceptual resources drawn from May's (2001) account of the shifting normative terrain of US HE and then build on this account to develop the idea of the 'hollowed-out' university, the idea, that is, of a university without an 'ethical centre'. We have chosen May's taxonomy as an analytic starting point because it is suggestive of the kinds of linkages that can exist between institutional norms and academic norms – between what the university sees itself as for and what academics see themselves as for – and it therefore helps pose the question of how organisational climates defined by managerialism and spin shape the subjectivities of academics and what counts as being an effective academic. Whilst we need to be sensitive to national and temporal differences, we think that May's articulation of three 'moments' in the history of US HE, each associated with

a particular university ideal or vision, provides a helpful starting point for thinking about the normative shifts represented by the more recent UK changes we have reviewed here.

May distinguishes between the nineteenth-century liberal arts college vision, the twentieth-century positivist vision and the counter-cultural protest vision of the university that rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s. The US liberal arts college was a small and collegially oriented institution aimed at the cultivation of the well-rounded person. Values were central to the curriculum, which sought to produce questioning and discriminating students, emphasised breadth and aesthetic intelligence, prioritised respect for persons over credentials and prized 'teachers for their wisdom and insight more than specialized expertise'. Self-advertisement was frowned upon and loyalty to place, vocation, the common good and not career, were encouraged:

> ... those who held this ideal of the intelligent amateur into the 1950s viewed with some alarm the descent of degreed barbarians into modern academia: careerists, freshly armed with PhDs whose ambition gave them little sense of loyalty to the local institution which temporarily employed them. (May, 2001, p. 245)

The twentieth-century positivist university, or the large-scale research university, although accessible to many more people, was characterised by anonymity, a shedding of responsibility for students' personal and social lives and an excision of the explicit treatment of values from the classroom. The primary emphasis was on fostering technical intelligence, careerism and the production of marketable skills, grounded in the view that '[t]he university is a mechanism which develops, in young, unformed people, skills saleable to those large scale organisations which increasingly dominate the marketplace' (May, 2001, p. 251). In the twentieth-century positivist university, members were encouraged to advance careers through publication, leading to what May calls the 'miniaturisation' of knowledge, with graduate students having to pick manageable topics that would result in publications. At the same time, self-display and 'verbal hustling' were actively promoted, enabling individuals to establish an identity in their institution (May, 2001, p. 251).

May's final vision – of counter-cultural protest – was not linked directly to a type of institution but was one which some academics saw as a university mission. The aim of these academics was to nurture the critically conscious self rather than the well-rounded self of the liberal arts vision or the skilled self of the twentieth-century positivist university. This vision was based on the radical ideas of self-transformation, liberation and escape from false consciousness. The counter-cultural protest vision was oriented towards the now, as opposed to the past of the liberal humanist vision or the future of the positivist vision, and direct action and active participation in politics were encouraged:

> [b]riefly characterized, the counter-culture movement sought immediate relationships to people, power, truth and morals and rejected all mediated relations in these spheres. (May, 2001, p. 253)

We are assuming that the different perspectives inherent in May's visions, or something like them and possibly some other visions,[8] are coexisting and competing

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currents within contemporary universities. But, having said that, roughly speaking, the period we have reviewed seems to be one in which there has been a relative submergence of what May calls the counter-cultural vision, which centred on direct politics, protest and the university as a site of critical social engagement. It is also a period characterised by a series of continuous threats to the liberal arts tradition which has been reconfigured to some degree on a model drawn from science and technology. At the same time, the period has seen the relative success of the large-scale research vision including the concern with technical rationality. This has been associated with the emergence of various forms of instrumentalism[9] and what May describes as 'verbal hustling' – or the replacement of understatement by over-statement.[10]

In other words, it would appear that the university as an institution with a distinctive rationality and social purpose (what Kogan & Hanney, 2000, call its 'exceptionalism') has been replaced with the idea of the university as a generic large-scale social organisation – what we are calling a hollowed-out university – that can increasingly be seen less as a community of learners and more as a social site that can be engineered to serve any social function. The increased emphasis on marketing and corporate identity and a concern with institutional competition and success, and gloss and spin all make the university look, feel and act like countless other non-educational corporate institutions.[11]

The idea of the hollowed-out university, that is of the university as an organisation that lacks any distinctive character or ethical *raison d'etre*, is no doubt an exaggeration. But, we would suggest, it can certainly play a useful heuristic function both in interrogating the recent past and in contemplating possible futures. One way of indicating the plausibility of the hollowing-out model is to focus on the extent to which academic 'substance' has in contemporary university life been routinely transformed into organisational 'surface' or, in other words, the extent to which academic work has been subordinated to the institutional obsession with reputation and impression management. There is a serious risk here of under-estimating the extent to which impression management cultures and practices have penetrated HE and of assuming that the excesses of gloss and spin are confined to the corporate level where branding is king. This would fail to acknowledge and understand the powerful relay mechanisms which transmit and reproduce impression management technologies and habits at every level of the university, not least at the level of academic identity and subjectivity. It is not just that some academics choose to present their work and careers in ultra-packaged passages of hype and are, on occasions, seemingly comfortable to sell themselves as 'assets' and drive hard bargains in the careers marketplace. But it is also, and much more routinely, that the merits of academics are increasingly spoken of, not only by managers but by themselves, in terms which derive directly from the reputational drivers of the university – for example, that they have x grants from prestigious funders, that their publications are '4*',[12] or that they have a high 'h-index'. This is despite the fact that, as is well known, these things are at best very indirect indicators of the value of academic work and barely connect with what most people think of as the meaning of academic work. It is also, we would suggest, a dangerous mistake to imagine that these shifts in academic identity are no more than a cynical game through which academics pay homage to institutional imperatives whilst simultaneously retaining fundamentally contrary inclinations. Although there is certainly some truth to this

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picture of dissonant academic identities, we cannot understand the choices, motivations and habitual forms of framing that inform the work of academics on a day-to-day basis without acknowledging the success of these relay mechanisms and of impression management discourses.

The extent to which academic self-identity and self-definition have become colonised by institutional performance ideologies is arguably one sign of the loss of exceptionalism in the sector, with academic identities and careers seemingly becoming isomorphic with the identities and careers of those in any sector producing any kind of output. Seen from a Marxist perspective, in short, academic staff and academic work have been commodified. Indeed many of the transformations summarised here could be understood as a product of hypercapitalism (Graham, 2005), in which all transactions outside the family have become effectively market transactions with exchange value squeezing out use value, and in which what might once have been thought of as mere surface 'brands' effectively become the product or the 'good' itself – whether we are talking about institutions, individual academics or individual pieces of work – with no significant ontology beneath or beyond the brand. Analogous criticisms of the contemporary university as part of the 'triumph of spectacle' have been made by Chris Hedges (2009), who draws parallels between the contributions of universities to US public and cultural life and those of pornography and professional wrestling; that is, he treats them as ultimately superficial and meretricious and questions the possibility of such universities playing a seriously critical or subversive role in a society where what matters most, and what they are themselves fully implicated in, is the generation of successful illusions.

These linked processes of commodification and 'image-trading', which underpin the hollowing out of the university, help to make sense of the policy trends summarised above, and in particular the seeming replacement of university politics by university spin. Before concluding, however, we do think it is important to acknowledge some of the risks of what we labelled in the introduction a 'deliberately simplistic' account. We will separate out four strands of concern which might all appear under the umbrella of 'golden-ageism'. First, embedded in the brief history we have offered are some developments which would generally be regarded as very positive, most notably much greater numbers and a more diverse range of people gaining access to a university education. Second, this broadly welcome 'massification' of the university necessarily carries with it limits as to the character and nature of university life. As Tight has argued:

> The golden age experienced by authors such as Annan (1990, 1999) and Halsey (1995) was open only to a small elite (to which, in once sense, it still is). It could not be experienced by a larger group of people, whether as students or academics: the resources were simply not available, and, even if they had been, the experience would not have been the same . . . So, those of us . . . who, in our later experience of academe, caught the echoes of something that sounded better and wished that we could have experienced it, are deluding ourselves. The golden age was not meant for the likes of us: it could not have occurred with us present. So, in that sense, for us, it really is a myth. (Tight, 2010, p. 113)

Third, it has been argued that such narratives of loss are mythological in more fundamental senses, either because they are in part not true, or because they are better understood less as attempts to make valid empirical claims about history and

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more as about current projects of identity-making. For instance, Murphy (2011, p. 510) insists that 'it is difficult to separate real and imagined versions of academic history', arguing, for example, that the effects of marketisation on academic freedom may be much less marked in reality than is suggested by the felt sense of loss reported by academics; whilst Holden (in press) articulates and defends a carefully sceptical reading of the 'golden-age laments' of university scientists and draws on Ricoeur (1984) to argue that these laments are best understood as myths which are 'generative of their sense of their professional self and the value they place on their labour' and 'emergent of the present, rather than representative of the past' (Holden, in press). Fourth, the widespread desire in the sector to take 'refuge in its own past' (Murphy, 2011, p. 510) has been portrayed by some as practising a 'politics of nostalgia' (Newman & Clarke, 2009, p. 180), a form of politics which can fail to confront contemporary challenges, and indeed can represent a retreat from them.

We have cited these forms of scepticism about 'loss narratives' here because they do represent a significant counterweight to the analysis we have offered. Nonetheless, as we stressed at the start of this article, in the hollowing-out thesis we are consciously offering only a partial account of historical change in UK universities. In short, the hollowing-out thesis is not being presented as 'the whole truth', but in so far as it has any plausibility, we would suggest that it is of such considerable importance that it is worth attending to.

Conclusion

If we accept that something like the hollowing-out thesis is at least partly true, the challenge for those working in universities is whether there is still the possibility of realising some 'authentic' conception of what the university as a distinctive organisation can and should be and, related to that, of what it can and should mean to be an academic in a contemporary UK university. This seems to us a crucial question, because, unless such alternative routes are explored, it seems possible that universities without an ethical centre and *telos* could degenerate not only into sites of superficiality or emptiness but also into sites of corruption. In recent years the UK has witnessed a succession of major ethics scandals, notably in the banking sector, in relation to Parliamentary expenses, and more recently regarding the ethical standards of its newspapers and the relations between newspapers, politicians and the police. Although each of these scandals is different, they share some broad commonalities, in particular, a context of financial self-interest linked to performance-oriented cultures, on the one hand, alongside the erosion of meaningful internal systems of accountability and effective civic governance, on the other.

There is every reason to hope that universities are different and that the integrity of their staff will protect them from equivalent problems. But there are also grounds for concern, or at least reasons to be vigilant about similar threats to the moral life of the university sector. Sir Howard Davies' recent resignation as Director of the LSE in the context of questions being asked about the institution's links to the Gaddafi regime in Libya has largely been treated by the British media as an isolated and local scandal. However, a number of commentators, for example, Akpan-Imwang (2011), locate its origins in the broader socio-economic conditions of UK HE, which depends upon clawing in funding 'from wherever it can be found: tuition fees, corporate donations and evidently cheques from dictators'. It makes sense to heed

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these critical and sceptical voices, if only on the precautionary principle, because all of the other scandals referred to here have started with some examples of bad practice being labelled as exceptional, but, as they have progressed, the broader conditions that have helped produce these practices have been gradually revealed as the full extent of corruption has emerged.

Fortunately, there are alternative and much more positive currents in play in university life. And, as we have stressed, the notion of the university as completely hollowed out and ethically empty, or the linked notion of large-scale research universities as purely positivist, instrumental and technocratic machines, obviously depends upon a reductionist and totalising narrative. For a start, there are clearly many elements of both liberal arts and counter-cultural elements alive and kicking in UK HE and there are other powerful imaginative resources available from the history of the polytechnics and the more comprehensive and inclusive vision of HE that they aspired to. The fact that these potential moral resources are diverse, overlapping and to some extent competing should certainly not be seen as a problem. If anything, this kind of ethical plurality and contestation should be definitive of an academic institution. The worries being rehearsed here are that some of these voices risk being drowned out by the sheer volume of instrumentalist and market-oriented voices and, more importantly still, that the university's self-consciousness about its identity as an essentially ethico-political and civically engaged institution is being lost.

To counteract this threat, we would suggest that two things are needed. First, we need to pay attention to theorisations of the ends of HE and of academic work, for example, the recent attempts by philosophers such as Nixon to articulate and defend the virtues of university life and the role of the university as a civic space devoted to independent and rigorous critique. This includes Nixon's (2008) account of the academic virtues of respect, authenticity, courage, compassion, magnanimity, autonomy and care and his plea for a resurgence of these virtues. Similarly, working within political theory, and also drawing upon the Aristotelian tradition, Glasman (2011) has asserted the crucial civic function that can be played by universities as 'sites of de-commodified knowledge'.

Second, in order to avoid such theorisations being no more than an internal academic conversation, we need to foster organisational change that is designed to embody, model and encourage the realisation of such social and civic ends. One example of such a practical step, which owes its roots to the Chicago model of broad-based community organising, is the American Commonwealth Project which builds on the Wingspread Declaration of the Civic Mission of Research Universities (Boyte & Hollander, 1999) and is aimed at 'engaging higher education institutions as agents and architects of democracy [and] stewards of place where students and others develop empowering civic skills' (American Commonwealth Project [ACP], 2011, p. 2). A recent UK initiative that combines both a conception of the ends of HE and consideration of organisational questions is *In Defence of Higher Education* (Campaign for the Public University et al., 2011), a paper drafted by a working party of academics and students, and representing a number of HE campaigns, groups and associations and many individual signatories. This document begins by endorsing a conception of the purpose of universities as public institutions, citing the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (www.magna-charta.org) and stressing, in particular, the centrality of the social mission of universities in producing public benefits, the

amelioration of inequalities, the support of public debate and the promotion of the well-being of future generations. It then goes on to take issue with the market-based vision embedded in current policy and to set out propositions for more defensible organisational principles. Of course, these are only examples, and we are very conscious of the fact that many others are committed to the 're-valuation' of HE and that they will have their own accounts of both ideals and organisational practices designed to protect and renew the university in response to the threat of hollowness.

There is of course, the problem of how far the kinds of academic virtues and political engagement that Nixon and others advocate are possible in contemporary UK universities – or, in other words, of whether these things can really still count, and be recognised, as virtues in the hollowed-out university. Arguably, two kinds of politics thrived in the years leading up to the period we have focused on here – the often Marxist inspired counter-cultural forms of direct action and a more liberal politics which embraced pluralism, accepted conflicts of interest and sought to resolve them through democratic debate in public arenas and within universities through collegial forms of organisation. The rise of managerialism and marketisation, and the concomitant displacement of collegiality, is, therefore, about much more than different forms of governance. It is about whether the culture of scholarly disagreement, and political disagreement more broadly, can thrive outside of the classroom in the university sector or whether the demands of public relations and image disallow conflict and dissent or even actively neutralise it via processes of incorporation. There are certainly indications from our reading of the *Times Higher* over the 1979–2010 period that the latter might be the case. For example, activities that would at one stage have comprised struggles over the politics of equal access and identity appear to have increasingly been tamed and incorporated into the dominant corporate ethos, as reflected, for instance, in the *Times Higher*'s 'Widening Participation Initiative of the Year' award. It is essential to be sensitive to the losses, and not just the apparent gains, reflected in these forms of incorporation.

The rise of gloss and spin thus constitutes a more fundamental assault on the character of the university than the superficial associations of these terms might suggest. It is important not to be glib about the possibility of shifting the centre of gravity of universities, and of reasserting academic substance over surface, in a hypercapitalist environment. Nonetheless, we believe that it is essential to recognise, help foster and fully utilise the remaining spaces within universities for promoting and realising (sometimes competing) academic values and purposes, including the commitment to de-commodified knowledge, counter-cultural critique and civic engagement. Individual academics cannot disentangle themselves from the broader institutional milieu in which they work, but they can and, we suggest, should struggle to do so.

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Notes

1. The *Times Higher* is a weekly publication, initially part of the Times Newspaper Group, which has been reporting on UK HE news since 1971. Originally called the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, it was renamed *Times Higher Education* in 2008.
2. For the full account of methodology and trends see Gewirtz and Cribb (2013).
3. A national system for assessing and ranking the quality of research in HEIs by subject area, the results of which are used to determine the allocation of government research funding to institutions and departments.

4. It is notable that exactly the same threats have come to the fore as a result of the 2010 reforms which continue the same explicit emphasis on STEM subjects whilst withdrawing teaching funds from the humanities and social sciences.
5. Science, technology, engineering and mathematics.
6. Research excellence framework.
7. It should be noted that marketisation is more pronounced in England and Wales than in Scotland, where tuition fees for home students were abolished in 2000, and Northern Ireland, where the fees are lower than in England and Wales. Nevertheless, Scottish and Northern Irish students joined the 2010 protests, expressing fears about impending cuts and the possible repercussions of the English and Welsh reforms for universities and students in Scotland and Northern Ireland (Cook, 2010; *Belfast Telegraph*, 2010).
8. The most obvious omission from his list, at least in the UK context, is the heritage of the polytechnic sector.
9. For example, alongside their traditional research and teaching functions, there has been a growing expectation for universities to engage in activities relating to knowledge transfer, innovation and economic development, social inclusion, social cohesion, urban regeneration and community development.
10. As Henkel (2000, pp. 160, 187) puts it, in the contemporary university, '[a]dvancement is a matter of acquiring a public identity, sustaining it and enhancing it'.
11. This feeling is arguably reinforced by what Sabri (2010, p. 201) describes as the growing absence of the figure of the academic from HE policy discourse and the discursive remaking of academics as generic 'practitioners'.
12. That is, top-rated in the RAE/REF.

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