

‘Under attack’: Responsibility, crisis and survival anxiety amongst manager-academics in UK universities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Vik Loveday**

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Abstract

Based on a small-scale qualitative study, the article explores the perceptions of manager-academics on the state of the UK’s higher education sector. Universities have been undergoing a process of marketisation for some time now, but recent changes to the regulation and audit of their activities – as well as uncertainty engendered by broader events – arguably make this a turbulent period for the sector. Despite a growing body of critical work on academic labour in the ‘neoliberalising’ university, the management of these institutions remains an under-researched subject. The article considers perceptions of crisis and responsibility amongst a group of manager-academics who conceive the sector as being ‘under attack’, before exploring the relationship of ‘survival anxiety’ to audit, metrics and rankings. The article concludes by considering why the perceptions of senior academic managers matter for the future of universities.

Keywords

anxiety, governance, higher education, management, responsibility

Introduction

The greed of the vice-chancellors sealed their fate. Congratulating themselves on their supposed entrepreneurial success, they increased their own pay and perks as fast as they increased tuition fees, and are now ‘earning’ salaries of £275,000 on average and in some cases over £400,000. Not only students, but lecturers, look at this with disgust. (Adonis, 2017, np)

I was in the process of organising interviews with senior manager-academics in English universities when comments made by Lord Andrew Adonis sparked widespread public debate on the role and pay of university Vice-Chancellors (VCs). The project had originally been designed to explore how these managers were making sense of wider

Corresponding author:

Vik Loveday, Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW, UK.

Email: v.loveday@gold.ac.uk

changes occurring within the sector; yet, this became a significantly more controversial endeavour when Lord Adonis – the one-time Head of Policy under Tony Blair’s government and architect of a rise in tuition fees in 2004 (at that time, capped at £3000) – embarked on a very public campaign to expose what he described as ‘a morality tale of opportunism and greed’ amongst a ‘cartel’ of VCs (Adonis, 2017).

What ensued was an unusual level of public interest in the management of universities, from widespread coverage in the mainstream press to a *Dispatches* documentary (2018) exposing lavish VC expenses, the most infamous of which quickly became the claim for a ‘Pornstar Martini’. The case of the University of Bath’s VC, Dame Glynis Breakwell – who was reported to be earning £468,000, yet had still claimed for a £2 packet of biscuits – was covered extensively in a local newspaper, but enthusiastically seized upon by Adonis; the story was met with widespread incredulity, and calls for her resignation were eventually appeased after it was announced she would step down from the position of VC at the end of the 2017/18 academic year, before retiring in 2019 (see Petherick, 2017). As James – one of the project participants and a former Pro-Vice-Chancellor – noted in our interview together, universities have become ‘tainted’ in the ‘public imagination’: ‘VCs are now like bankers and estate agents’.

Shortly after I had finished conducting the interviews, it was announced that the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) had called for 14 days of strike action throughout February and March 2018 in response to proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS); what followed was a particularly rancorous period of tension between Universities UK – which counts a number of high-profile VCs on its Board – and university employees, with only some VCs prepared to speak out against the proposed changes.¹ Two further periods of extended industrial action followed in 2019–20, relating to the USS dispute and the ‘Four Fights’ campaign (on pay, workload, equality and casualisation), but at the time of writing both disputes remain unresolved and tensions see no sign of abating.

Throughout the project, I was struck by the anxiety amongst my participants about responsibility for institutional survival, so this article aims to explore manager-academics’ perceptions of crisis, and the significance of their ‘crisis talk’. I begin below by considering briefly the existing literature on university managers, before reflecting on the methodological challenges of the project. I then go on to explore participants’ perceptions of crisis and responsibility: firstly, by examining how the notion of universities as being ‘under attack’ is precipitating a type of ‘survival anxiety’ amongst management; and secondly, by arguing that the proliferation of audit, metrics and rankings in universities can be seen as a type of ‘social defence’ against these anxieties (Cummins, 2002). I conclude by considering why the perceptions of university managers matter.

Manager-academics

There is a burgeoning interest in how academic staff are navigating changes occurring in what Gill (2010) – amongst others – has termed the ‘neoliberal university’, but which might more specifically be conceptualised as the ‘*neoliberalising* university’ given that processes of change are ongoing, in flux, and oft-disputed (see Loveday, 2018b, following Cronin, 2016; Nash, 2019; Peck, 2010). Much of the existing research has explored

governmentality within a context of marketisation and increasing competition, and the concomitant subjectification and responsabilisation of academic staff (e.g. Amsler & Shore, 2017; Ball, 2012; Berg et al., 2016; Cannizzo, 2015; Davies & Bansel, 2010; Davies & Peterson, 2005; Loveday, 2018a, 2018b; Lynch, 2015; Morrissey, 2013). The analysis of resistance to and compliance with managerial edicts by academic staff has been – not surprisingly – of particular interest to academics (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Leathwood & Read, 2013), yet there is scant recent research on how manager-academics are making sense of wider changes in the sector, or how they see their own roles in delivering or standing up to these processes.

The most influential research on management in UK HE emerges from research conducted by Rosemary Deem and colleagues between 1998 and 2000 (see e.g. Deem, 1998, 2004; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Deem et al., 2003, 2007), which sought to explore the implementation of so-called ‘new managerialism’ in the sector as ‘an ideology [that] express[es] the interests of managers’ and which may ‘function in a way that advances or defends those managers’ interests’ (Deem & Brehony, 2005, p. 221).² Deem (2004) notes that many of the manager-academic respondents in this project ‘thought of changes to what was expected of university managers and leaders . . . as very recent’, despite the direction of management at that time having been borne out of cuts to university spending in the early 1980s (p. 124). It is important to note, then, that what are often perceived as recent changes to the sector have actually been in motion for some time. Shattock (2017) has reviewed 100 years of changes in British university governance, and notes that since 2000:

Perhaps the largest transformation in university governance has been the transfer of decision-making powers . . . to chief executives, SMTs [Senior Management Teams] and to ‘manager academics’ (Deem, Hillyard and Reid, 2007): inner cabinets answerable to senates have become SMTs, administrators have become managers. (p. 388)

A number of other significant developments in the landscape of English HE have occurred recently, including: the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in 2017; the establishment of the Office for Students in January 2018, which regulates universities’ activities; the Augar review of post-18 education in 2019 – the findings of which may influence the direction of government policy on how universities are funded; and uncertainty in the wake of ‘Brexit’ and the Covid-19 pandemic, which are likely to have serious and far-reaching consequences for institutions.

Winter (2009) argues that there has been an ‘identity schism’ between that of the ‘academic manager’ who has ‘internalised values and constructed goals and working patterns that reflect the imperatives of a corporate management system’, and the ‘managed academic’ who has ‘defended and promoted distinctive accounts of their own professional identity and that of the institution (p. 121). Indeed, Shore and Wright (2004, p. 111) have described university managers as ‘the apparatchiks or Nomenclature of higher education: a “New Class” that appears increasingly detached – both economically and socially – from those lower down the managerial food chain’. Yet in their research on middle managers in HE, Clegg and McAuley (2005) note that while ‘the dominant framing in recent debates about management in higher education has been around the twin discourses of managerialism and collegiality’ (p. 19), such a ‘dualism tends to position the activity

known as “management” in a negative light’ (p. 30). They favour a focus on the analysis of specific roles rather than the blanket term ‘managerialism’, and note that, ‘the shift in focus is important because one of the dangers of the collegiate/managerialism dualism is that it tends to down play some of the negative aspects associated with older collegiate forms of governance, including gender-biased practices’ (p. 31) – and, I might add, the exclusion of and bias against academics of colour (see Bhopal, 2016; Rollock, 2019).

For the purposes of this project, then – and following Deem and colleagues (e.g. Deem, 2002, 2003, 2004; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Deem et al., 2007; Johnson & Deem, 2003) – I use the term ‘manager-academic’ to describe the participants in this project in order to distinguish between academics who step into management roles in universities as opposed to ‘academic managers’ who might not have worked in academic roles prior to becoming managers.

Interviewing academic ‘experts’

The findings of this article are based on a small-scale project conducted with 15 manager-academics who had been working in institutions across England (13 of whom were still in post at the time of interview, and two of whom had stepped down from their roles). There is some variation in role titles across the sector, but Table 1 shows the participants’ positions. While Petersen and Davies (2010) note that a greater number of women are now entering management positions in universities, they also caution against assuming ‘that universities have become more inclusive’ – a mis-conception that they note is ‘often mobilised by university managers and conservative policy makers’ (p. 96). Reflecting the continued over-representation of men in senior academic leadership roles (Read & Kehm, 2016; Shepherd, 2017), nine of the participants in my own project were

Table 1. Project participants.

Role	Participant pseudonym
Vice-Chancellor (VC)	Christopher
	Diane
	Jerome
	Liam
	Paul
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC)/ Vice-Provost	Caroline
	Catherine
	Olivia
Pro-Vice Chancellor (PVC)	Giles
	James (Former PVC)
	Margaret
Dean	Adam
	Dan
	Patrick (Former Assistant Dean)
	Ruth

male; only one was an academic of colour, highlighting what Arday (2018) has described as the continuing ‘dearth’ of BAME academics in senior management positions.

Potential participants were contacted by email with details of my project, and an invitation to take part in an interview. They were chosen either based on reputation, or after recommendation by contacts from my own professional and personal networks. I received no negative responses: my requests were either ignored completely or were met with positive agreement to participate. As Liam noted in our interview: ‘I suspect that you’re, in one sense, unlucky with your timing, but maybe in another sense lucky: unlucky because nobody wants to talk at the moment; but you’re lucky that . . . everyone is actually really interested at the moment.’

Interviewing those positioned as ‘organizational elites’ (e.g. Delaney, 2007) comes with several challenges. In his research on universities, Gunasekara (2007) examines academic hierarchies and his own positioning by interviewees as both ‘novice researcher’ and ‘academic insider’ – findings that echo my own experience. While it was certainly the case that some of my participants sought to ‘parade their expert knowledge’ (McDowell, 1998, p. 2138) and ‘establish both how important their work or they themselves were and how busy they were’ (p. 2138), this pattern of behaviour did not occur across all the interviews; as Mason-Bish (2019, p. 32) suggests in her discussion of researcher reflexivity, ‘Positionality and status in the elite interview should be viewed as more porous and dynamic than the literature suggests.’

Fourteen of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and one via Skype, although arranging the interviews was complicated by the busy schedules of the managers and the need to coordinate with PAs in several cases to find suitable slots; indeed, I had had no direct contact with some of the participants prior to speaking with them at interview since ‘gatekeepers’ had accepted and then arranged the interviews on behalf of their managers. Interviews were semi-structured, and participants were asked questions relating to: their career trajectories and how they had become managers; the challenges confronting both themselves personally and the wider sector; how they viewed ‘good management’ in HE; and their future career plans. Following Krause (2014, p. 177), given their positioning as ‘experts’, ‘the experience and orientations of the respondent are not primarily placed in the context of his or her biography but are rather analyzed in the institutional context of his or her work’.

Interviews were professionally transcribed, and then thematically coded. I made the decision that all participants would subsequently be provided with copies of their transcripts to allay any fears over anonymity; they were informed they would be welcome to amend/retract any information if they had concerns, and to protect confidentiality I made the decision not to archive the transcripts in a data depository at the end of the project. Before the commencement of each interview, the participants were given a written information sheet and consent form, which they were asked to sign. Wiles et al. (2006) consider the ethical dilemmas inherent in conducting research on researchers, and explain that: ‘Unlike other research participants, researchers may be particularly sensitive to the ways that participating in research might be detrimental to them’ (p. 287). Participants were informed that they would be given pseudonyms, their institutions would not be identified, and the content of interviews would be anonymised. Interestingly, while the vast majority had only glanced briefly over the information sheet provided, it quickly

became apparent that there was some considerable anxiety amongst the sample over the content of the transcripts: this was interesting both from an ethical perspective, but also methodologically. Those participants who had spoken somewhat more carefully in the interview – for example, by not providing repeated references to details that would compromise anonymity, or by choosing more neutral phrasing in line with the types of statements they might be expected to have given publicly – appeared happy to approve the transcripts. However, many of the participants had spoken (sometimes at length) in their interviews about matters that they then subsequently decided would compromise their anonymity, even if these details were in no way compromising of their institutional positions; one participant, for example, had concerns about the ‘sensitivity’ of the content of the interview, although in our negotiations over the interview content did acknowledge what was described as the ‘legitimacy and authenticity’ of the research. Other participants made seemingly minor corrections to the transcripts, such as when it was felt that phrasing in an interview was too ‘colloquial’.

What might these small interactions mean, which appear peripheral to the main thrust of the interviewees’ narratives but nonetheless affect the type of material that can be presented here? I do not understand the interviews as realist accounts of the managers’ views, or identities; as Back (2010, p. 8) notes, ‘The error is that we mistake the socially shaped account for the authentic voice of truth.’ Instead, I see the interview as a ‘source of evidence about the constructional work’ (Hammersley, 2003, p. 120) between myself as the researcher and the participants as more senior academics, and the shifting dynamics between us. Lewis (2013, p. 214) argues that, ‘the emotional experience and meaning of the organisation . . . is a key object of inquiry since it is deemed central to capturing something of the livedness of organisational life’. The participants appeared anxious about how their words would be used, and no doubt this relates to the wider context in which the research was being conducted. Yet, seeking approval for the content of the transcripts, and then selecting which passages would form the backbone of this article, also caused some anxiety on my own part as an academic in a comparatively junior position to those interviewed. While this is only a small-scale study, far from being peripheral to the findings of the project, I want to argue that the anxiety related to the process of conducting the research (for both myself and the participants) points to much wider issues at play in the ‘emotional experience and meaning’ of management and academic work in contemporary universities, particularly in relation to responsibility and crisis – emergent themes which figured prominently in my interviews and are discussed below.

Our good friend Lord Adonis: Taking responsibility for institutional survival

Promotional materials for Advance HE’s 2019 Leadership Summit, ‘Brave Leadership – Daring to Lead’ (Parkin, 2019, np) highlight a sector in flux with ‘powerful agendas at work in and around higher education’; in the face of such challenges, managers are incited to foster a ‘fearless organisation’ and a ‘psychologically safe workplace’:

In leadership, there are three kinds of bravery. Bravery of the mind, bravery of the heart, and bravery of action. Relating this to the current context of higher education, characterised as it is

by complexity, uncertainty and growing disillusionment and unrest, it takes bravery to lead. (Parkin, 2019, np)

Such rhetoric can be situated within a prevailing ‘enterprise culture’ whereby Rose (1998, p. 154) argues organisations ‘are to be reconstructed by promoting and utilizing the enterprising capacities of each and all, encouraging them to conduct themselves with boldness and vigor [*sic*], to calculate for their own advantage, to drive themselves hard, and to accept risks in the pursuit of goals’. Christopher explains:

I think one of the things that you have to do as a Vice Chancellor is give confidence to your institution. That’s not a point about a heroic leadership, but it is a point about ensuring that the institution believes you can navigate whatever these challenging or choppy waters might be. I think Brexit, though, is a good case in point. I look around the sector and a number of my colleagues, I think, are too frenetically engaged in a process that they can only have limited influence in.

While Christopher might eschew ‘heroic leadership’, the discourse of ‘bravery’ above gestures towards the responsibilisation of university managers who are incited to claim agency for leadership, despite wider structural challenges. As Amsler and Shore (2017, p. 126) note in their work on responsibilisation and leadership in New Zealand, ‘The vocabulary of responsibilisation . . . interpellates individuals as autonomous selves with decision-making power.’

In this section, I want to explore how manager-academics perceive their responsibility for institutional survival. In contrast to the type of brave leadership proclaimed above, I argue that contemporary management of universities is now characterised by a type of ‘survival anxiety’ (Cummins, 2002) engendered by the ‘choppy waters’ described by Christopher. For Cannizzo (2018, p. 104), the notion of ‘survival’ is a ‘future oriented discourse that normalises compliance with managerial imperatives as an unavoidable externality’, but such an analysis can also be applied to those who are themselves responsible for such ‘imperatives’. I want to consider below how the ‘future oriented’ crisis narratives of university managers reveal something about the normative assumptions at work in the sector. For Roitman (2014, p. 4), ‘the term “crisis” signifies a diagnostic of the present; it implies a certain telos because it is inevitably, though most often implicitly, directed toward a norm’. The invocation of crisis acts as a ‘diagnostic of the present’ – something has gone awry; but then the response to this perceived crisis becomes future-focused – something has gone wrong, and now responsibility must be taken to avert future catastrophe. Yet Roitman (2014) emphasises that crisis is always necessarily juxtaposed to a normative state – ‘crisis compared to what?’ (p. 4) – and so a focus on the perception of crisis in universities, which is precipitating ‘survival anxiety’ amongst senior managers, helps to draw attention to the tensions inherent in managing a *neoliberalising* sector but also the conceptualisation of higher education itself.

As the research was conducted during a period of unusual public interest in and scrutiny of university management, the participants were explicitly asked about what they saw as being the major challenges to the wider sector and to themselves in their roles as manager-academics. Olivia described experiencing tensions in her position:

Well, the marketisation of education, which is a political decision. It's hard to swim against that tide without jeopardising your individual institution – but it creates a lot of knock-on consequences and questions, for example about: the meaning of education; what universities are for; what education represents for students – what their role is, the level of stress that they're under; for academic staff, the level and nature of demands which are often pitched against each other. Those things are difficult to reconcile with the vision you previously had of the whole sector and your role within it. As a member of a university's senior management, you have a responsibility to recognise the challenges that those changes bring for staff and students, and to find a balance between contesting changes and trying to shape or smooth them so that they're implemented in ways that gain the maximum benefit and the least harm.

In 2018, Sir Michael Barber, Chair of the universities regulator the Office for Students [OfS], stated: 'Should a university or other higher education provider find themselves at risk of closure, our role will be to protect students' interests, and we will not hesitate to intervene to do so. We will not step in to prop up a failing provider' (cited by OfS, 2018, np; see also Morrish, 2019). While a Higher Education Restructuring Regime (Department for Education [DfE], 2020) has now been set up in response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on universities, the government has made clear that this does not constitute a 'taxpayer-funded bail-out of the individual organisations' (Williamson cited in DfE, 2020, p. 3). Current government policy should also be seen within the context of what Davies (2020, np) has described as a wider 'cultural campaign against higher education' – a sector that is currently being framed as endangering 'free speech' (see also Hill, 2020).

Elsewhere I have written about the way in which anxiety amongst casualised academic staff is not merely a symptom of the wider processes at work in an increasingly competitive HE sector, but also a 'tactic' of governance ensuring compliance (Loveday, 2018b; see also Rose, 1992; Rose & Miller, 2008). Crucially, following Isin's work on the 'neurotic citizen' (2004), governance takes place *through* the production of anxieties, and academics are incited to take personal responsibility for the self-management of those anxieties. Existing research on HE has examined how academic staff are incited to take responsibility for their own careers, success and wellbeing (e.g. Davies & Bansel, 2010; Gill & Donaghue, 2016; Leathwood & Read, 2013; Loveday, 2018a, 2018b), but the notion of responsibility also figured prominently in my interviews with the manager-academics: while they might have 'limited influence' over the wider context in which they operate (as Christopher notes), they are nonetheless responsabilised as leaders for the success and survival of their institutions, and 'swimming against the tide' – as Olivia phrases it – is perceived as having the potential to 'jeopardise' the university.

While the use of the term has been disputed (see Peck, 2010, p. 8), a focus on the process of neoliberalisation in a public sector such as higher education helps to explain how *responsibility* has become a type of market rationality (Birch & Siemiatycki, 2016, p. 187), and so risk for market failure is accordingly transferred to the provider (pp.188–189). As Ruth explains:

The sense of urgency that needs to be transmitted through the workforce is something that I don't think anyone is used to. It's down to the fact that universities are under a huge amount of pressure, competition. Faculties are closing. Courses are closing. Universities may not survive this transition period.

Given the context in which the research was conducted, the responsibility of university management for negative press and public perceptions was acknowledged: Liam argued that, ‘We’ve made ourselves collectively targets’, while Jerome explained, ‘I’m very happy to say this on the record that not all universities have behaved sensibly’. Nonetheless, the sector was described as ‘being pummelled’ (Catherine), and as ‘getting quite a bashing at the moment’ (Giles). Christopher explained why he believes universities are being subjected to a ‘highly politicised attack’:

Government isn’t very good at dealing with success, because Government likes to present itself as the agent of change, the agent of reform, the agent of renewal. To a large extent, of course, that’s the ideological premise of a Higher Education and Research Act: so, there needed to be a way of putting universities on the back foot. What better way of putting universities on the back foot than to say their leaders are disqualified from comments, because they are mercenary, avaricious, this is the unacceptable face of capitalism. I don’t think we should be under any illusion that this is, to a significant extent, an orchestrated assault on universities. What lies behind it, as with quite a lot of the engagement of universities recently, is a determination to diminish the autonomy of universities.

Koselleck (2006, p. 397) notes that: ‘From the nineteenth century on, there has been an enormous quantitative expansion in the variety of meanings attached to the concept of crisis, but few corresponding gains in either clarity or precision.’ While the participants in my project do not specifically use the term ‘crisis’, I see the invocation of a sector in danger from an ‘orchestrated assault’ as being emblematic of a generalised atmosphere of crisis. Yet I am not seeking to diagnose crisis here, but instead – in the interpretivist tradition – to engage with the *perception* of crisis as a means of considering ‘the kinds of work the term “crisis” is or is not doing in the construction of narrative forms’ (Roitman, 2014, p. 3). In this sense, ‘crisis talk’ in the accounts of the manager-academics matters not in and of itself (particularly when crises are plain to see for those in the sector), but because the invocation of an ‘orchestrated assault’ on universities tells us something about the types of normative assumptions managers hold about universities’ autonomy, function and purpose, as well as the motivations for taking measures to protect these values.

Using similar language to Christopher’s analysis above, Liam explains:

Liam: Because the assaults that are coming now, the threats that are coming now, are enormous, enormous. I mean, of course, the whole work of our good friend Lord Adonis – and no doubt we’ll talk about him at some point –

Interviewer: I was going to mention that [Laughter]

Liam: – the whole work of our good friends like Lord Adonis is to delegitimise universities as the kind of institutions they have always been. It’s extraordinary for him to do . . . and we see lots of people trying to take advantage of it.

Given the ‘assaults’ on the sector perceived by the manager-academics, I want to turn now to the question of how the audit process – as a type of accountability – can be construed as a ‘social defence’ (Cummins, 2002) against survival anxiety.

'An Alice in Wonderland world': Audit and responsibility

In her research on the Quality Assurance (QA) process in HE, Cummins (2002) argues that: 'Accounting systems and QA regimes do not merely describe a domain, their demands help constitute it' (p. 106). As Dahler-Larsson (2013) also contends in his work on performance indicators, the emphasis on these 'constitutive effects' is important as an antidote to assumptions that the implementation of such measures merely has 'unintended consequences'. For Cummins (2002), QA is about the 'production of comfort and reassurance' in the face of 'social fears and anxieties' (p. 100), and 'anxieties engendered by the impossibility of controlling risk and . . . about coping with failed dependency, are suppressed by the audit ritual' (p. 109). Thus, in this section I want to follow Cummins (2002) in exploring audit as a type of 'social defence' in higher education institutions whereby: 'Defences are constructed as a means of coping with such anxieties, and they become embedded and enforced within the structure, rules and cultures of institutions' (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015, p. 14).

Since Cummins' article (2002) on QA was published, there have been many significant changes to the funding of universities (see, for example, McGettigan, 2013) and the auditing of their activities, as noted in the earlier part of this article; such changes have demonstrably increased the type of 'uncertainty' that Cummins argues engenders 'survival anxiety' in institutions (p. 111). In his work on nursing in the National Health Service following the findings of the 2013 Francis Report, Evans (2015, p. 137) also explores the notion of 'survival anxiety' and contends that: 'The primary purpose of targets has been subverted from the improvement of patient care to the survival of the hospital or clinical unit' (p. 137). Parallels can easily be drawn between Evans' argument and the investment in and justification of audit culture. I asked Adam to describe his role:

Adam: I have to achieve a whole range of targets, but often feel I have no ability to influence whether we actually get them or not, but yet will be held to account if I don't.

[Lists specific responsibilities].

So, a whole vast number of things, and you are the one responsible for all of it. Everyone comes to you to ask what to do. . . .

Interviewer: Okay, and how does it feel, in a sense, being given responsibility for things that you don't have that much control over?

Adam: It's hard, because often you feel manipulated. I think that is one thing you do feel is quite manipulated.

There is by now an established critique of the proliferation of audit, rankings and metrics in HE (e.g. Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Burrows, 2012; Lynch, 2015; Morrish, 2019; Morrish & Sauntson, 2019; Shore & Wright, 2004; Strathern, 2000). Exploring accountability in universities, Olssen (2016, p. 130) describes the shift from 'public good models of governance' to 'individualised incentives and performance targets'; in this shift, audit has arguably become a 'cornerstone of managerial practice' (Lynch, 2015, p. 194) and 'the principle mechanism for securing accountability' (Shore & Wright, 2004, p. 103) in meeting targets. Not surprisingly, then, such concerns featured prominently in my interviews:

I remember a time when a Vice Chancellor was saying, ‘We just try to be excellent at what we do, and the metrics take care of themselves.’ You would never hear that now; the metrics have replaced the mission. . . . I would confirm that your worst nightmares are correct. . . . So, for an institution that’s supposed to be about reason and learning, it often feels like you’re in a kind of Alice in Wonderland world, where things just don’t make any sense. (Adam)

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is an interesting case in point. Inaugurated by the Government White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BiS], 2016) and positioned as an exercise to measure and ensure the quality of teaching in universities, the TEF joins the UK’s more established Research Excellence Framework. Yet the TEF has proved controversial amongst academics since teaching itself is not measured by the exercise; ‘providers’ are rated by Gold, Silver and Bronze awards and ‘excellence’ is established via a range of core proxy metrics, including: the results of the National Student Survey on graduating students’ perceptions of teaching, assessment and academic support; data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency on continuation; and responses taken from the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education Survey, which captures graduate employment/further study. Morrish (2019) argues that Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data – one of the TEF supplementary metrics – can be seen as ‘ideological’ since it is possible to surmise from the White Paper that ‘government may seek to pressure universities to close courses which do not deliver the right “outcomes”, i.e. graduates who are able to earn back enough to pay back the cost of their student loan’ (p. 357); those universities who do not sufficiently engage with the employability agenda are thus positioned as failing their students, falling below the bar of ‘excellence’, and risking the survival of degree programmes. Morrish (2019, p. 364) continues:

The whole assemblage of data has been invested with credibility . . . by discursive choices which align with neoliberal principles, such as competition and choice. In this way, the ideological purpose of the legislation and the audit is realized: the imposition of institutional and personal responsibility for structural inequality has been achieved.

Many of the manager-academics I interviewed did not endorse the metrics used or the exercise itself, but attitudes were interesting in terms of the discordant views on responsibility for the implementation of the TEF. Dan asserted that the common argument amongst academic staff of, “‘Why don’t the Vice Chancellors get together and refuse to do it?’” is a way of disowning responsibility for actions that either unions or staff could take that you can’t expect from management.’ Yet, Margaret directly contradicted this point: ‘Why did they [the VCs] accept the TEF? I just don’t understand why they accepted the TEF. It’s a mess. If they all said, “We’re not doing it”, that would have been the end of it. . . . They don’t want to do it, but they all think that if they got Gold [the top ranking] it has market advantage.’

For Esposito and Stark (2019), ratings and rankings are linked to uncertainty. They note and endorse the common critiques that rankings are ‘simplistic, obscurantist, inaccurate, and subjective’ (p. 10), but argue that the nature of the problem should be reframed to consider instead how rankings ‘shift the reference from the world to observers – i.e. from first-order observation to second-order observation’ (p. 12). To return to the issue of the TEF, what is being assessed here is not a ‘first-order observation’ of the so-called

‘excellence’ of the teaching itself, or indeed the ‘excellence’ of the metrics that have been instituted as proxy measures of teaching quality; if instead the perspective is flipped, then the significant process here becomes the ‘second-order observation’ of the ranking itself – the observation by potential ‘consumers’ and competitors of the ‘Gold’, ‘Silver’ or ‘Bronze’ rating: as Esposito and Stark comment, ‘I need not trust in the reliability of the ranking to have reasonable confidence that others have consulted it. The ranking is an opinion; but not just any old opinion. It is one that I pay attention to because others pay attention to it’ (2019, p. 12).

I asked Paul whether the TEF is a concern: ‘Well, no Vice-Chancellor is concerned when they do well in a league table or an exercise. So, having secured Gold, we’re very pleased. Whether it’s actually a good set of proxy measures for teaching excellence, I rather doubt.’ Giles explained: ‘one of the things that I would try to do is to say, let’s accept that these proxies aren’t good measures for teaching excellence but if it’s the only game in town, let’s get good at it, but also let’s take a collective responsibility’. As Butler and Spoelstra (2014) note in their work on critical management scholars and the notion of ‘excellence’, there is a ‘tension between playing and being played’ (p. 899), and such a ‘double-bind’ is also noted in Morrissey’s research (2013) on senior managers’ views at NUI Galway, who acknowledged the ‘flawed nature of the rankings system’ but found there was ‘no choice but to engage with them’ (p. 802). I want to finish by arguing, then, that audit becomes a type of ‘defence’ against the ‘survival anxiety’ (Cummins, 2002) inherent in a sector perceived as being in a state of crisis. The invocation of an atmosphere of crisis by the managers interviewed here is significant, because it helps to explain why certain decisions might have been taken – such as compliance with the TEF – even if their effects are dysfunctional. As Armstrong and Rustin (2015, p.14) note in their psychoanalytically-informed analysis of institutions, ‘While social defences are unlikely to be helpful to an institution or to its members in achieving their primary goal or outputs, they may nevertheless perversely contribute to their psychic survival.’

I have been arguing that audit can be understood as a technique of governmentality, but also as an attempt by senior managers to wrest back control of institutions’ reputations in a sector perceived as being under threat – an exercise in accountability that is about ‘avoiding criticism and maintaining the power and privilege of delegated self-regulation’ (Canning & O’Dwyer, 2001 cited by Neyland, 2007, p. 501). Perversely, in attempts to validate HE’s worth to the market – e.g. by providing ‘value for money’ – the implementation of multiple forms of audit as a type of ‘marketising bureaucracy’ (Nash, 2019 following Power, 1997) has resulted in sustained critique from rank-and-file university staff, so I want to conclude here by considering why the perspectives of senior managers matter, even if they are contested.

Conclusion: Who cares?

The article has explored perceptions of crisis amongst manager-academics in a sector that is undergoing fundamental change. I have not sought to attribute responsibility for institutional survival, but to explore responsabilisation as a kind of ‘technique’ of governmentality (see Rose, 1992; Rose & Miller, 2010) during a period in which universities are perceived as being ‘under attack’. The atmosphere of ‘crisis’ underscores how the

managers in this project have described the state of the neoliberalising sector, and I have argued that a focus on crisis talk is significant because it helps to illuminate how universities are managed, but also the types of ‘defences’ that have been constructed in response to fears about institutional survival.

To return to Koselleck’s (2006) theorisation of crisis, the notion itself has several possible meanings: an acute episode leading to a ‘culminating, decisive point where action is required’; a ‘final point, after which the quality of history is changed forever’ akin to the Last Judgement; an ongoing, chronic state; or a ‘historically immanent transitional phase’ (pp. 371–372). I would argue that the precise nature of HE’s perceived crisis is still yet to be determined: ‘crisis’ here need not be a continuous malaise, or an *apocalyptic* end-point; as Roitman (2014, p. 6) has observed, it should also not be assumed that crisis has the capacity to precipitate ‘radical change’. Competition underpins the neoliberalisation of the sector, and managers might find problematic the various forms of audit, ranking and metrics that have facilitated the opening up of HE to the market; nonetheless, anxieties about institutional survival have arguably meant that whilst processes such as the TEF are critiqued, participation in such exercises and endorsement of rankings and league tables have played into the logic of competition and legitimise such market rationalities (see, for example, Cronin, 2016); this inevitably means that there will be winners at the expense of those that lose such a game.

To come back to the wider context outlined in the introduction of this article, confidence in university management has been eroded in the past few years. Why, then, should academic staff care about the perceptions of university managers? Given the wider context in which universities are now operating, managers’ so-called survival anxiety is not necessarily misplaced – even if in some cases recourse to ‘institutional failure’ can be weaponised to quell critique or reform; yet the effects of such anxieties on staff, students and institutions have not been adequately acknowledged. As Evans (2015, p. 137) notes when writing about the NHS, when managers’ survival anxiety is transferred onto ‘front-line staff’ this can result in them ‘feeling blamed, overwhelmed, and unsupported’, whilst ‘misunderstanding abounds as management filled with their own anxieties about survival’ fail to hear the ‘concerns’ of their staff.

A ‘perfect storm’ of external events might mean that the ‘culminating, decisive point’ described by Koselleck (2006) has now been reached: if the sector wants to avoid implosion, then management would do well to consider how those measures that have been imposed in the pursuit of accountability and as a means of defence against their own survival anxieties are conversely contributing to the overall decline in health of relationships with staff and students, and the very notion of HE as a public good. If we accept that managers’ survival anxieties are well-founded, then the question becomes how best to contain and defend against these. While Shattock (2017, p. 392) notes ‘variegated’ patterns in university governance, he nonetheless argues that competition and marketisation have ‘strengthen[ed] the role of the executive vis-à-vis the governing body on the one hand and the academic staff on the other’; the concentration of decision-making powers with Senior Management Teams also means that responsibility for defending against external ‘attacks’ to ensure institutional survival sits with a small executive team. It is also significant that Shattock (2017, p. 393) claims that ‘the balance of internal authority [in universities] seems to have mirrored the steps by which the state has chosen

to manage the system'. If senior managers now perceive universities as being 'under attack' by government, then perhaps it is also time to reflect on what steps can be taken to democratise governance in universities and counter the assaults that have been described in this article.³ If we accept that universities' autonomy has by now been compromised (Shattock, 2017, p. 385) and university managers have very little sway with government, then rather than endorsing the mechanisms that have enabled the neoliberalisation of the sector – and paradoxically attempting to use rankings, league table positions, student satisfaction surveys and recruitment figures to defend against 'attacks' – then institutional survival might best be ensured through a reappraisal of governance structures and a dispersal of responsibility for the functioning of institutions.

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Notes

1. See Holmwood and Bhambra (2018) for an exploration of the links between the dispute and the marketisation of HE.
2. See Ward (2011) for an overview of the implementation of New Public Management throughout the public sector.
3. For an example of an alternative vision of a 'public university', see *The Gold Paper* – a grassroots endeavour authored by a collective of staff and students at Goldsmiths, University of London (Goldsmiths UCU, 2018).

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