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Authority lost and gained: the changing coordination and control of academic work

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Introduction

1. Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you this morning. My title is ‘Authority Lost and Gained: the changing coordination and control of academic work’. What it attempts to express is a sense of balance. There have been gains as well as losses in terms of academic authority – a necessary corrective, I believe, to the standard discourse of decline-and-fall, of the irresistible rise of managerial power in modern higher education systems and the inevitable, and corresponding, erosion of the authority and autonomy of individual teachers and researchers. My sub-title is equally important: although there have indeed been important changes (and shifts) in how academic work is managed and controlled, these changes reflect deeper changes in the constitution of knowledge and of the situation of mass higher education systems in modern society rather than one-dimensional discourse of ‘loss’. So – although I am not a supporter of managerial (and corporate) power in universities and I am (I hope) an unqualified advocate of academic freedom, I propose to offer a more nuanced account of what has been happening to academic authority.
2. Or that is where I would like to end up, because I have decided the best way eventually to arrive at a more nuanced account is to follow the ‘adversarial’ system that is at the heart of the English legal system. In other words I plan:
 - First, to make the case for the ‘prosecution’ – and marshal the evidence that supports that discourse of ‘loss’ about which I have just expressed some reservations, namely that the rise of managerial power and of the corporate university in an increasingly market-like environment (nationally and globally) and the erosion of academic authority (and autonomy) are a zero-sum game;
 - Then I want to switch over and offer the case for the ‘defence’, and marshal all the evidence that supports the contention that the great changes we have observed in the constitution of modern higher education systems have not (necessarily) restricted but have transformed the parameters of academic authority;
 - Finally I hope in my conclusion to move from being a prosecutor or lawyer for the defence and act as the judge – and to be able to offer you that more balanced and nuanced account I promised you a moment ago.
3. Of course, I recognise that the alternative ‘inquisitorial’ system of seeking to arrive at the truth, which prevails in most other European legal systems, is closer in its method to

academic inquiry than the somewhat crude ‘adversarial’ system that I have chosen to adopt. My justification is that, when you are confronted with ideologically driven and polemically expressed viewpoints (as I believe we are in this case) the ‘adversarial’ system has some advantages.

The case for the ‘prosecution’

4. So let me start with the case for the ‘prosecution’. This I believe can be divided into four parts. The first part is the growing subordination of the academic workforce, and the increasing constraints under which individual teachers and researchers now have to operate. The second is the shift from regarding the university curriculum as a kind of ‘secret garden’ and learning and teaching as essentially ‘private’ exchanges between teachers and their students towards regarding the curriculum as a corporate ‘product’ and learning and teaching as open to managerial surveillance. The third is the twin advances of research assessment and of research relevance (or impact). Both are connected with the idea of a knowledge society in which not only research outputs but knowledge ‘services’ of all kinds have become primary sources of wealth. The fourth is the impact of neo-liberal ideology, and the quasi-market policies and processes legitimised by this ideology, on higher education institutions, and whole systems. The cumulative effect of all four has been to transform – and to degrade – academic authority and intellectual freedom. I would now like to examine each in a little more detail.

Subordination of the academic workforce

5. The first part of the case for the ‘prosecution’, therefore, is the subordination of the academic workforce. This has several strands:
 - One is the erosion of academic tenure in a narrow legal sense as the protected status of the established academic has been eroded – and, more generally, the reducing proportion of academic staff who have permanent contracts of employment. This has been accompanied by a rise in casualization in universities, which has spread from researchers employed on time-limited and externally funded research contracts to teachers on part-time contracts. Although the latter has always been common in some professional fields where practitioners have also been teachers (and vice versa), casualization of the teaching force has increasingly spread into core academic and scientific disciplines;
 - A second strand is the fragmentation of the academic workforce, and a consequent reduction in professional solidarity (which, it has been argued, is an essential component on academic authority). One reason for this fragmentation has been the increasing specialisation of academic tasks. Once again, this has always been well established among researchers many of whom had only limited teaching responsibilities – although the intensity of this separation has increased as the research enterprise has boomed under knowledge society conditions. Nearly all professors are now ‘research professors’ rather than broader advocates for their disciplines or public intellectuals. But this fragmentation has been extended into more specialist teaching, academic support and quasi-managers careers (In many European countries it is possible to observe the ‘irresistible rise’ of an academic management ‘class’ – which both erodes and strengthens academic authority – or, perhaps, more accurately – authority in the hands of academics). Another reason for this fragmentation, of course, has the extension of higher education systems to non-university institutions with much more vocationally oriented missions. The result has been that the academic with a balanced teaching and research portfolio is becoming an endangered species;

- The third strand is the intensification of managerial controls over the performance of the academic workforce. As student numbers have increased (faster than resources) and as new and more specialist roles have proliferated, the perceived need to manage this workforce has increased. As a result appraisals, with objectives and targets, have become standard; transparent academic workload models are not routine (and sometimes are reproduced at national level in terms of aggregate statistics on the division of academic ‘time’); line-management hierarchies have been established. As a result a whole new vocabulary has introduced into higher education, imported largely from the private sector. But the loss has not just been felt in terms of the reduced freedom of the individual teacher or researcher. Collegial decision-making has been displaced by management direction (even if such direction is only given after extensive consultation).

Managing the curriculum and learning and teaching

6. The second part of the case for the ‘prosecution’ is that the university curriculum and learning and teaching are both now ‘managed’ in a manner and with a degree of detail that are difficult to reconcile with traditional ideas about academic authority:
 - In the case of the curriculum courses are now longer developed largely in terms of the ‘inner’ dynamics of disciplinary knowledge and through a process of collegial decision-making. Instead ‘external’ factors are given increasing weight. An example of an ‘external’ factor is their attractiveness to students, in terms both of successful marketing before students join and of levels of satisfaction while they are on their courses. Another example is the emphasis on employability, as demonstrated by the success of graduates in getting worthwhile jobs. As a result more combined-subject and interdisciplinary courses are now offered, with academic coherence becoming a secondary consideration. In many cases teachers have to be cajoled by managers to offer such courses, against their instincts and inclinations (a process that tends to undermine academic authority);
 - In the case of learning and teaching similar processes have been at work. Teachers can no longer apply traditional ideas of privacy and intimacy to their relations with their students. First, their individual ‘performance’ is measured, often with reference to formal systems of student feedback. Once such systems were regarded as a peculiarly American phenomenon, but they have now pervasive in many European countries. Quality assurance, although not formally implicated in this shift, does provided much of the data and many of the tools that allow performance to be measured, especially when the focus is on auditing rather than enhancing quality. Secondly, collective ‘performance’ is also measured – in terms of inputs such as the entry standards of new students or the cost-effectiveness of particular courses; and also in terms of outcomes such as dropout or employment rates.

Research assessment and impact

7. The third part of the case for the ‘prosecution’ is the increasing surveillance of research performance. This, I believe, takes at least four forms:
 - i) The first, and most obvious, is the growth of formal systems of research assessment, usually designed to determine funding for individual institutions. The highest-profile example is the UK Research Assessment Exercise that began in the 1980s and is undertaken at approximately five-year intervals. So far there have been five RAEs; the sixth, the results of which will be announced towards the end of 2014, has been re-labelled the Research Excellence Framework. Once the rhythm of life for UK universities was set by five-year ‘quinquennial’ grants from the former University Grants Committee (in other words arm’s-length block grants to universities provided

by the State and guaranteed for five years – unimaginable today), now it is set by the cycle of RAEs – a change that says a lot about the shift from institutional autonomy to intrusive audit. Although the UK example is perhaps the best known, other forms of research assessment have been developed in other countries – although usually on less elaborate terms;

- ii) The second form is the development of initiatives that seek to identify the universities that have the greatest potential in terms of research (based, of course, on their past performance) and concentrate funding accordingly. The best example perhaps is the *Excellenz* initiative in Germany, although the designation of *pôles* in France has a similar intention. Many other countries are edging their way cautiously to formally identifying, and labelling, ‘research universities’. In Romania a tri-partite division of universities is being developed, with only a small number in the ‘top’, i.e. research-intensive, category. Inevitably these policies require the development of more elaborate systems of research assessment – at institutional and Faculty (or Departmental) levels;
- iii) The third form is the increasing focus on measuring the ‘impact’ of research. This is now a formal requirement in the forthcoming UK Research Excellence Framework. As a result the focus has begun to shift from peer review as the primary method for determining the comparative quality of research to new forms of ‘user review’. Another consequence is a shift from assessing inputs, such as the value of research grants, to measuring outputs (perhaps using citation indices and other metrics). Closely linked to this emphasis on ‘impact’ is the long-standing trend towards the formal identification by research councils (and other funding agencies) of research priorities (of, at the very least, themes) that is aligned with perceived R&D needs. ‘Innovation’ has become a key test;
- iv) The final form that the intensified surveillance of research performance takes is the growing popularity of university league tables, both in a national and especially an international context. The construction of such league tables, of course, has been made possible by the development of more formal and sophisticated forms of research assessment (teaching assessments rarely carry the same weight). But they are a cause as well as a consequence of this increased surveillance. Not only is institutional success now often calibrated in terms of league-table performance, but the same motivation is also often at the root of national ‘excellence’ initiatives. How often nowadays do we hear the refrain that country X cannot afford more than Y number of ‘truly world-class’ research universities (which, inevitably, is less than the current number of universities)?

Ideology and markets

8. This brings me to the fourth part of the case for the prosecution – the impact of neo-liberal ideology on the value structures of modern higher education systems (at all levels – national, institutional, Faculty / Departmental / research group, and individual). The growing popularity of this ideology, of course, has been operationalized through the introduction of ‘market’ policies in many national higher education systems. Again I would highlight the decision in my own country (or part of it, England) to cut State funding for higher education and allow institutions to charge students much higher fees – although, I hasten to add, not in the belief that other European countries should emulate it. However, my concern today is not to argue the case for (and against) higher fees, but to concentrate on the role that neo-liberal ideology has played in normalising national and institutional policies – policies that have transformed (many would say, undermined) traditional notions of authority rooted in academic expertise and professional obligations and expressed through collegial norms.

9. To simplify – this shift in values can be expressed in terms of the shift from the idea of a university as an essentially educational institution (a belief once as common on the right, or among academic elitists, as on the left, or those who emphasised the ‘social dimension’ of higher education) to the new idea of the university as an ‘entrepreneurial’ institution. In the eyes of some the idea of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ is regarded as an ideologically neutral and technocratic formulation. This is true to the extent that Governments of the left have been as enthusiastic to promote it as Governments of the right. Others have regarded it as an exaggerated, or overblown, label in the sense that the record of most universities in promoting commercial enterprise, in terms of patents or spin-off companies, has been patchy at best. So maybe we should not worry too much.
10. But that underestimates the indirect impact of neo-liberal ideology in legitimating policies, practices and behaviours. For example, a new (and perhaps alien) vocabulary has developed emphasising notions of ‘customer satisfaction’ and ‘delivery’, ideas imported from the private sector that previously had little resonance in universities. These new ideas have a radical impact on how authority is normatively constituted. In brief it provides the context (maybe the cover) in which the more explicit management of the academic workforce, the growing surveillance of learning and teaching and the intrusive advance of research assessment can be accepted and justified.

The case for the ‘defence’

11. So much for the case for the ‘prosecution’. Let me now turn to the case for the ‘defence’. The most important part of that defence is simply to recognise the greatly changed social, economic, cultural (and even academic or scientific) positioning of 21st-century higher education systems compared with the traditional university systems of the past. Usually this change is summed up in a single (and rather ugly) word – massification. But, in fact, there are a number of different strands:
 - i) The first is the straightforward quantitative expansion of student numbers. Most European higher education systems now enrol student populations that would qualify to be described not simply as ‘mass’ systems but as ‘universal’ systems (according to the classic taxonomy developed by the late Martin Trow in the 1970s). Participation rates are generally around 40 per cent of the relevant age group, and in several countries participation in higher education is now a majority (not a minority) experience. At such extended participation levels experience of higher education now plays a key, and direct, role in social stratification, displacing to some degree older determinants such as social class, gender and ethnicity;
 - ii) A second strand is the diversity of contemporary higher education systems. This goes far beyond the conventional demarcation between ‘classical’ universities and other, mainly higher professional institutions. In some countries this distinction has been abolished; in other retained. But there are many other, arguably more important, dimensions of diversity – for example, between divergent disciplinary cultures or between Faculties (or Departments) in the same institution or between individual members of academic staff (for example, between research ‘stars’ and rank-and-file teachers);
 - iii) A third strand is that, within this diversity, there has been a pronounced lean towards the ‘vocational’. This has not simply come about simply because of the incorporation of non-university institutions into wider higher education systems. Equally, or more, significant has been the advance of vocationalism within traditional universities – whether in terms of the expansion of more vocational disciplines (business and management are the best example), or of the increasing emphasis on skills within traditional arts and science disciplines (life skills, transferable skills, employability skills and so on);

- iv) Closely linked to this is a fourth strand, the increasing attention paid to the potential contribution higher education can make to the building not simply of a globally competitive knowledge economy (usually defined in terms of advanced technologies) but of a more holistic ‘knowledge society’ (defined in broader cultural terms). Conventionally the rise of a ‘knowledge economy / society’ discourse is seen as emphasising the instrumentalism of higher education. But more generous and less deterministic accounts are also possible;
 - v) Finally, a fifth strand is changing conceptions of how knowledge is produced in advanced societies. Inter (even trans) disciplinary forms are now recognised as playing a key role. Knowledge is now seen as developing in a socially distributed environment rather than being generated solely within special-purpose institutions. The impact of such thinking can be observed in a number of different ways – in the emphasis on measuring ‘impact’ I mentioned a moment ago; in action-based and practitioner-led research; in the trend towards open-source publication.
12. So ‘massification’ is much more than simply the rapid growth in student numbers, in the size of institutions and participation rates – important as these characteristics are. I would argue that, just as I suggested a moment ago that neo-liberal ideology has been used to explain and to justify many of the changes I identified in making the case for the ‘prosecution’, so ‘massification’ (in its widest sense) offers an explanatory framework in which to consider the case for the ‘defence’. How we conceive, and put into effect, authority under conditions of mass higher education is bound to be radically different from how we conceived, and put it into effect, in the past when the social reach of higher education was more limited and its intellectual and scientific horizons were more constrained.
 13. Let me consider the case for the ‘defence’ under the same three headings as I did the case for the ‘prosecution’ – the changing conditions of academic work; the control of the curriculum and learning and teaching; and the growth of research assessment. I have already discussed the fourth, the normative or ideological context.

Changing conditions of academic work

14. The shape and structure of the academic profession have both been substantially modified as a result of the transition to a mass system:
 - First, as student numbers have grown, some form of intensification of academic labour was inevitable. But whether this has taken the form of longer working hours is less clear; contact hours with students have tended to decline in some European countries (as other forms of ‘non-contact’ learning have been developed). Nor is it clear that this intensification of the labour process has led to an erosion of academic authority;
 - Secondly, the greater differentiation of institutional missions – and, more crucially perhaps, of tasks – are reflected in an increasing specialisation of roles. The days of the generalist (dare I say, amateur!) are over. Arguably authority has been enhanced by this process of specialisation;
 - Thirdly, the effect of the shift towards a more vocational (or more socially engaged) curriculum has been to create a web of multiple accountabilities. While it is true that the university curriculum is no longer overwhelmingly defined by reference to disciplinary expertise, academics are now perhaps in a better position to shape professional structures – not least through the extension of credentialisation into new areas. At times traditional professionals have resented, or even resisted, what they have interpreted as a creeping ‘academisation’;
 - Fourthly, more transparent forms of performance management may actually be fairer and more ‘objective’ than the kind of informal (and consequently unchallengeable)

assessments of achievements that prevailed in the past. While the apparatus of performance management – academic workload models, annual appraisals and the rest – may be resented by more senior professors, it may not be viewed in such a negative light by more junior members of the academic profession.

So a simple balance sheet of gains and losses is difficult to draw up.

Managing the curriculum and learning and teaching.

15. The development of mass higher education systems has produced a number of effects in terms of the curriculum and the culture of learning and teaching. These include the extension of the university curriculum into new subject areas (which can reasonably be seen as leading to an extension of academic authority into these new areas); the vocational shift within the traditional arts and sciences (which, as I have already said, has led to a regime of multiple accountabilities – and so multiple sources of authority); and the growth of more specialist learning and teaching roles (which, although they may be seen as compromising the authority of traditional academics, may have enhanced the collective authority of higher education because of the professionalization of these roles).
16. Once again – and a similar point applies to the advance of research assessment – it is important to recognise the wider context. We are now living in a so-called ‘audit society’ in which assessment and evaluation have become routine. It is also worth noting that the idea of ‘audit society’ is closely linked to the apparently opposite idea of ‘risk society’, the idea that risks are proliferating but at the same time can be successfully managed (and, in any case, risks are also potentialities). So higher education is simply being swept up in a much wider movement. At the same time, of course, the growing sophistication of management systems (crucially dependent on information and communication technologies) has created a capacity for surveillance that simply did not exist before. Again, nothing special about higher education.

Research assessment and impact

17. Finally there is the advance of research assessment – and, closely linked, the explicit identification of research priorities and themes and attempts to measure the impact of research. I believe there are a number of arguments that can be advanced by the ‘defence’:
 - i) First, in relation to research assessment, it may simply be a question of making explicit (and so transparent) comparative judgments about the worth of research that previously were made in a tacit (and so uncontested) form. There was once a wonderfully English phrase that summed up how things used to work – ‘informed prejudice’. It is an illusion to postulate some kind of prelapsarian (‘before the Fall’) utopia in which comparative judgments were never made:
 - ii) Secondly, there is no doubt that more formal systems of research assessment have substituted evidence-based for taken-for-granted reputations, challenging those who were automatically assumed to be excellent and offering an avenue for others to have their achievements recognised. For example, in the United Kingdom the real story of successive Research Assessment Exercises is not that all high-quality research is clustered in a small number of elite universities but just how distributed such research is, in the sense that three-out-of-four universities have at least one top-rated department (indeed eight-out-of-ten have some 4* rated research, the very highest grade).

So there is a strong case for arguing that far from undermining academic authority formal systems of research assessment, exclusively or largely based on peer review, strengthen and entrench such authority by making it fairer and more transparent.

18. Of course, it can be argued that attempts to predetermine research priorities and to measure research impact have the opposite effect, because (potentially) they substitute political and managerial judgments for purely academic or scientific judgments. Again I would argue that research funding has always been determined by a subtle balance between ‘timeliness’, in terms of wider social and political priorities, and ‘promise’, in terms of the advance of science. In the much smaller university systems of the past with more ‘closed’ systems of scientific production, and also in societies in which political, social and academic elites comingled collusively and which were characterised by high degrees of political consensus and social solidarity, this process was better hidden. But it was still there. So much less has changed in substance than on the surface. At the same time the development of much more ‘open’ systems of knowledge production – and, more contestably, the strengthening of democratic cultures – have stretched the definition of ‘peers’ and ‘experts’. But that is not the same as the erosion of academic, or scientific, authority.

Conclusion

19. So ends the case for the ‘defence’, the argument that we should be beware of accepting uncritically a single-path decline-and-fall account of the inevitable (but deplorable) erosion of academic authority. Let me now move to some kind of conclusion (although, having set out both sides of the case according in the best traditions of the Anglo-Saxon adversarial system of law, it is really for you – the jury – to reach a verdict). So I will confine myself to a few remarks:
- First, I believe we must accept that there is a widespread perception of ‘loss’. Many members of the academic profession do believe, passionately, that their authority (which they often associate closely with their independence and professional autonomy) has been eroded. That is a fact that national policy makers and institutional leaders must accept – and, if possible, mitigate;
 - Secondly, as I have emphasised on a number of occasions, it is important not to fall into the trap of believing in prelapsarian utopias. Control and coordination may have taken different forms in the past but they have always existed;
 - Thirdly (and finally, from me) the context in which higher education systems have to operate frames many of the detailed policies and practices that prevail within these systems. Universities are not, and never have been, islands; they are part of the continent of larger political evolutions, social movements and cultural (and ideological) change. So, just as at one level neo-liberal ideologies, and the advance of ‘markets’, has added legitimacy to some of the new systems of control and coordination, so the development of mass higher education systems have established the structural conditions in which institutions operate and individuals pursue their careers. And, attempting to be neutral, it is important to recognise that both frameworks, neo-liberal ideology and ‘massification’, have the potential to restrict but also to energise.
20. So, my last word, what is my verdict on the choice in my title – Authority: Lost and Gained? The key, I believe, is on that little word ‘and’ (which might instead have been an ‘or’). It is not possible to draw up a simple balance sheet, and produce either a surplus or a deficit. Some forms of authority have been eroded, especially those that were aligned with institutional autonomy and professional freedom. But other forms of authority – for example, those linked with the advance of higher education as part of a wider social (and also intellectual) project – have been strengthened. Thank you for listening – and I look forward to your questions, comments and contradictions.