

**Negative Capability, Leadership and Trust in a Recession in UK Higher Education (0218)**

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**Abstract**

In the current recession, profound challenges to leadership in UK higher education (HE) have resulted from new government policies. Managed accountability to fees and performance targets, vigorously debated in neo-managerialist critiques, is altering UK HE, bolstering elite academic management, while eroding the autonomy and values of Humboldtian scholarly and collegial understandings of the role of universities. This paper considers research findings on values-based leadership, trust and organisational cultures in to argue that strong leadership characterised by 'negative capability' is needed for academic leaders to maintain their role in shaping the purposes of universities. Multiple uncertainties about the future of HE may lead to an erosion of trust in the values, collegiality and civic role of universities. It is necessary to challenge performative managerial cultures that lessen self-organising egalitarian potentials within HE for excellent scholarship and to argue that academic leadership should be trusted to fulfil the higher purposes of universities.

**Introduction**

This paper considers recent research findings from higher education, trust and leadership research to debate the extent to which, in the current pessimistic UK economic downturn, the role and purposes of universities are increasingly being challenged by a combination of circumstances that are gradually eroding trust in the values, collegiality and civic purposes of academic leadership in higher education.

Government policy drivers for increases in student fees, the management of student numbers, increased external accountability, marketisation and industrial and economic responsiveness are radically changing the environment in which universities operate. The question of managed accountability to performance targets has been vigorously debated within critiques of New Public Management and neo-managerialism (Deem and Brehony, 2005). An elite set of new academic managers has arisen, while the power-base, autonomy and values of traditional Humboldtian scholarly and collegial understandings of the role of the university have declined (Elton, 2008; McNay, 2005, 2007). In the public sector generally, similar trends are noted in the rise of new public management forms of governance, an increasing audit culture and concerns about a lack of trust (Tomasini and Vassilev, 2010). Challenges to higher education in the form of significant student fee increases, combined with

cuts in funding for teaching provision, increased competitiveness in research funding and greater emphasis on employability and accountability have led to significant uncertainties about the future sustainability of higher education in its current form. At this time, therefore, there is, arguably, a need for leaders in HE to practise 'negative capability' in order to effectively lead and manage the uncertainties of the current situation.

## **Discussion**

As discussed by Simpson, French and Harvey (2002) 'negative capability' was first described by John Keats in 1817 in terms of the capability of a poet to exist in a state of "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason". (Keats, 1970: 43, cited in Simpson et al., 2002). Applied to leadership, Simpson et al., citing Handy (1989) note that the concept includes the "capacity to sustain *reflective inaction* ... to create an intermediate space that enables one to continue to think in difficult situations.. to create the conditions for fresh insight" (ibid: 1210-1211).

This paper argues that, given the current crisis of multiple uncertainties regarding the future of HE in the UK, the capacity to maintain a state of 'negative capability' is, arguably, necessary to allow the space for large scale creative invention and to foster trust and effective leadership of HE provision at a time when there are significant gaps in information about the future resourcing of universities. When both future provision for students and staffing is in doubt, the capability to generate trust and cautious optimism for the future, despite uncertainty and rapid change, is a key leadership attribute.

As a relational psychological state of significant importance in the formation and maintenance of public sector institutions, trust involves relative levels of positive willingness to act with faith and confidence in others despite uncertainties of future outcome, vulnerability and risk. The organisational role of trust has been extensively researched in leadership and management literature (Dirks and Ferrin, 2001; Grudzewski, Hejduk, Sankowska and Wańtuchowicz, 2008; Jameson and Andrews, 2008; Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995; Zand, 1997). Kouzes and Posner (1993) are amongst those who emphasise that the trust and credibility of managers is built on values-oriented leadership characterized by integrity, honesty, high standards of moral conduct and emotional intelligence, while O'Neill (2002) and Grudzewski et al. (2008) emphasise the essential role of trust in all aspects of organisational operations. However, during past decades, a relative erosion of trust in authorities and in the public sector has been highlighted in the UK. This is despite an escalation in monitoring and external accountability of and by public sector leadership and institutions. Ironically, despite higher levels of scrutiny and supposed openness and transparency in the public sector, including higher education, suspicion is on the increase (O'Neill, 2002).

Analysing UK Ipsus MORI social demographic and organisational trends data for 2004-05 in comparison with 1979, Page (2006) reported a rise both in scepticism and in scrutiny of the credibility of authorities in the UK, noting that 'Polysensuality is [the] fastest growing British trend. [There is g]reater trust in a nonrational approach to make sense of the world'. This trend towards the non-rational is also accompanied by a UK rise in anxiety, high consumer expectation and autonomy, an relative increase in mass university participation, a widening rich-poor gap, erosion in government credibility and increased feelings of remoteness from central institutions (Page, 2006:19). In the 'bear market' of massive public sector cuts, UK government and media scandals and a general cynicism about leadership and trust in public life, such issues are increasingly important regarding the extent to which academic leadership in universities is trusted, or not, to perform freely.

In 2002, in the BBC Reith Lectures Series on *A Question of Trust*, Baroness Onora O'Neill expressed concerns regarding excessive increases in reductive performance monitoring, unintelligent accountability and scrutiny of public sector professionals in the UK, saying:

I have argued in previous lectures that we need more intelligent forms of accountability, and that we need to focus less on grandiose ideals of transparency and rather more on limiting deception. Do we really gain from heavy-handed forms of accountability? Do we really benefit from indiscriminate demands for transparency? I am unconvinced. I think we may undermine professional performance and standards in public life by excessive regulation, and that we may condone and even encourage deception in our zeal for transparency.

(O'Neill, 2002)

The paper argues that a state of watchful but reflective inaction is an appropriate response at a time of 'excessive regulation' in the public sector. In the current UK recessionary era, with public sector spending and student numbers undergoing significant cuts, multiple uncertainties about the future of HE may lead to an erosion of trust in the values, collegiality and civic role of universities. It is necessary to challenge performative managerial cultures that lessen the self-organising egalitarian potentials within HE for excellent scholarship and to argue that academic leadership should be trusted to fulfil the higher purposes of universities.

The paper cites selected findings from recent semi-structured research interviews (n= 20) with leaders and other staff at a range of levels in UK HEIs, utilising a critical theory action research approach built up from many years of research into leadership and management, to query the extent to which a growing audit culture has eroded the values, collegiality and civic purposes of universities. Has performativity to state-monitored targets increased distrust, lessening the self-organising potential of universities to develop excellent scholarship in an environment still enriched by academic freedom? Or, by contrast, are such concerns about academic freedom and the autonomy of scholars overblown? Is academic leadership still trusted and trustworthy in fulfilling the higher purposes of universities? Is the maintenance of

a state of *'negative capability'* in leadership the best response for UK higher education leadership at this time?

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