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## The same as any other office workers? How to Respect Academics in Five Easy Steps

Category: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures

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### Outline

The drive to run universities like businesses is nothing new (Cuthbert 1996, Trow 1994). Mirroring wider trends across the public sector, marketisation and managerialism in higher education have their roots in the rise of neoliberalism and the public sector funding cuts that began in the 1980s (Callinicos 2006, Harvey 2005, Mooney and Law 2007). The shift from an elite to a mass system has increased pressure on public funds, while demands for accountability have shifted allocation of those funds towards increasingly competitive processes (Law and Work 2007). Large-scale bureaucracies and complex management structures have developed around a perceived need for 'efficiency,' with managers ever more distant from the 'coalface' of research and teaching work (Deem *et al.* 2007).

While neither academics nor managers have much control over the long-term policy decisions necessary to make universities more sustainable, there are practical steps that can be taken by managers to improve the day-to-day working lives of academics (Gersick *et al.* 2000, Staw *et al.* 1994, Thorsen 1996). The 'five easy steps' outlined below build on existing research on marketisation and managerialism. They are the result of 36 interviews with academics about their experiences and motivations, along with the experience of working in a department arbitrarily selected for closure. The poster is a lighthearted treatment of a serious topic, intended to emphasise positive ways that managers can begin to re-gain the trust of academics who have been frequently misunderstood, exploited, and even betrayed.

#### *Step 1: Try to Understand Our Jobs*

- ♦ Academic work is complex, creative, and difficult to quantify. It changes daily and throughout the year.
- ♦ It requires flexibility and a broad range of skills, from synthesising ideas to calming stressed students.
- ♦ Sometimes we need quiet spaces to read and think.
- ♦ Each discipline is different, with unique practices, perspectives and priorities. Embrace diversity.

#### *Step 2: Think Outside the Balance Sheet*

- ♦ Profit is only one measure of value. Most academic work will not be profitable.
- ♦ Many academics aren't motivated by profit. Why else would we work in higher education, not business?
- ♦ In staffing, be realistic. 'Bare minimum' is not enough.
- ♦ Question short-term 'efficiency.' Workers in secure employment are more productive – and happier!

#### *Step 3: Recognise the Human Element*

- ♦ Basic courtesy goes a long way. Nobody likes being treated like a number on a spreadsheet.
- ♦ Technology is great, but fundamentally, teaching and learning are about relationships.
- ♦ Students value committed teachers. Management should take note.

*Step 4: Reconsider Accountability*

- ♦ Metrics don't tell the whole story.
- ♦ Academics want to be accountable, in ways relevant to our work – not meaningless abstractions.
- ♦ We're hard-working professionals. Please don't treat us like we're wasting public money.

*Step 5: Take a Long View*

- ♦ Universities provide long-term benefits to society: critical citizens, new ideas, social innovation and more.
- ♦ Much of our 'impact' is impossible to measure.
- ♦ Learn to appreciate basic and 'blue sky' research: it's the foundation of innovation, and valuable on its own.

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