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Trust and Leadership in Higher Education in the Downturn (0269)

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In the global economic downturn, challenges to the role and purposes of higher education include the extent to which universities are changing in response to government policy drivers for mass participation, accountability, marketisation and economic responsiveness. Managed accountability to performance targets, variously debated in New Public Management and neo-managerialist critiques, has arguably altered HE, spawning elite academic managers while eroding the power-base, autonomy and values of traditional Humboldtian scholarly and collegial understandings of the role of universities. This symposium extrapolates from HE, trust and healthcare research findings to debate whether, in the 'bear market' of a global downturn, academic leadership is trusted to govern and shape the purposes of universities. Has an audit culture eroded trust in the values, collegiality and civic role of universities? Has performativity increased distrust, lessening self-organising potentials within HE for excellent scholarship? Or is academic leadership still trusted and trustworthy in fulfilling the higher purposes?

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Trust and Leadership in Higher Education in the Downturn

Introduction

This symposium considers recent research findings from higher education, trust and healthcare research to debate the extent to which, in the pessimistic 'bear market' of the global 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 mass participation, increased external accountability in the public sector, marketisation and industrial and economic responsiveness are, arguably, changing the environment in which universities operate. Managed accountability to performance targets have been variously 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, and in healthcare, 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 in the NHS (Pilgrim, Tomasini and Vassilev, 2010).

Discussion

As a relational psychological state of key 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; 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 current 'bear market' of global economic uncertainty, UK government 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 symposium debates that sense of 'excessive regulation' of the public sector, with particular reference to the question of whether, in the global economic downturn, with both public sector spending and student numbers under threat, academic leadership is still trusted and trustworthy to govern and shape the purposes of universities. The individual papers in the symposium cite findings from higher education research and extrapolate data from trust in healthcare investigations 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?

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