

The autoimmunity of the modern university: How its managerialism is self-harming what it claims to protect

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Abstract

What we critically ascertain in this essay is how the modern university is increasingly drifting away from the key ambitions of its own mission statement, and largely by its own doing. Although the typical university in its mission statement claims to aspire outstanding quality, academic freedom, and to contribute to society, in its daily organization, the modern university has normalized and internalized a neoliberal metrical governmentality, in which quality, freedom, and societal benefit risk being exchanged for quantity, managerial control, and status benefit. In this essay, we stand up against this worrying self-harming protection strategy, what we term—following Jacques Derrida—the autoimmunity of the university. To structure our argument, we will discern the main worrying autoimmune paradoxes of this university policy in the hope to further the debate and potentially remedy the university of this self-inflicted harm.

Keywords

Autoimmunity, managerialism, metrics, neoliberalism, university

Introduction

“Our university is an organization committed to striving for innovative research and education for the benefit of society, in the spirit of liberty, diversity, equality, responsibility, and academic freedom. The university endorses a climate of free and open discussion and encourages critical

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thinking and defends the autonomy of both students and researchers as necessary foundations of a creative, innovative, and knowledge-based society. It provides a unique forum for the development of the cultural, political, and social dialogues that are the lifeblood of a mature democracy."

The above mission statement is constructed out of mission statements of various random public universities around the world.¹ It does not require much imagination to replace the word "our" with the name of the university we ourselves are working at. A quick scan of the multiple mission statements of universities around the world learns that three discursive clusters of terms keep popping up. A first cluster includes terms like "*creative*," "*innovative*," and "*quality*," the second focuses on "*open*," "*autonomous*," "*critical*," and "*free*," and the third cluster holds terms like "*responsibility*" and "*society*." With these dominant discursive frames in mind, one would assume that a typical university would do everything in its power to structure and organize the daily work in such a way that its own hopeful and brightening mission statement is indeed realized. In other words, to make sure that it *immunizes* itself from any influences that would endanger the *freedom* that enables researchers and educators to *openly* and *autonomously* embark on a journey that allows for the endless *critical* exploration of knowledge on various innovative, untraveled terrains, which in the end would benefit the *society* as a whole.

This is no marginal matter. In entrusting the organizing principle of a university, society at large frees a considerable amount of money to a specific part of the population, who devote their life to develop new research ideas and teach the new generation, all with the aim to ensure the continuous development and advancement of that society. It is precisely this honorable and interesting journey that attracted us, both academically trained researchers and lecturers, in working for and at the university. And we still recognize the continuing intrinsic great value of the work done at universities. But we are worried. Analyzing its current managerial practices, we feel that our precious and beloved institution of the university is increasingly floating away from its own outspoken and admirable mission.

Clearly, we are not alone in raising the alarms. There is a longer standing and growing concern about the state of the modern university. Much of the critical debate has pointed to the principle financing model of the modern university. The money flow of universities is dominantly based on three sources: on a small, and in many cases decreasing primary funds from the own government, on Darwinian-like research funds competitions acquired from external (non-)governmental and commercial sources, and on the financial rewarding of the number of student diplomas that is delivered (Lagendijk, 2017; Jones et al., 2020). It is convincingly argued in the debate that this shift in the financing model towards more competition over external money and the acquisition of (international) students and PhD students has cannibalized the critical independence and autonomy of the university (Jones et al., 2020; Lorenz, 2014). What is more, the various cut-backs in the primary governments funds in combination with the significant rise of the number of students over the years without compensation has engendered a rise of working overtime, burn-outs, and (mental) fatigues (see e.g. Beroepseer, 2020; Bod et al., 2020; Holly, 2018). The growing dissatisfaction with the financing of the modern university has led to all kinds of actions, demonstrations, and strikes in various countries. In the UK for instance, academics of over 70 universities striked for 14-days to ask for better working conditions (UCUK, 2020). In the Netherlands, there have been similar actions and protests, including mass demonstrations (see e.g. the actions of "De Nieuwe Universiteit," WOinActie, and Science in Transition). Likewise, in France, the situation at universities was hotly debated within various news articles and strikes, collective resignations and other actions are still expected (see e.g. Huneman, 2020). Earlier, also in other places, academics have raised their voices and/or demonstrated such as in Brazil, Japan, Hungary, and Australia to name a few (see e.g. Halffman and Radder, 2017).

While recognizing the damaging influence of the financial pressure a modern university is facing, various critical scholars have added however, that also the organizational make-up and

co-constituent practices of the modern university itself that have been developed to deal with these pressures—and especially the shift towards neoliberal *corporatization*, including the rise of managerialism, commodification, and marketization—is having a counterproductive effect on the high quality and autonomy in research and education that it is missioned to protect (see e.g. Berg and Seeber, 2016; Bod et al, 2020; Boomkens, 2008; Bowes-Catton et al., 2020; Brown, 2015; Butler and Spoelstra, 2012; Castree and Sparke, 2000; Collini, 2012; de Haan and Robeyns, 2018; Erickson et al., 2020; Ginsberg, 2013; Halffman and Radder, 2015, 2017; Jones et al., 2020; Lorenz, 2012, 2014; Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015; Mingers and Willmott, 2012; Readings, 1996; Runia, 2019; Schinkel, 2018; Smith, 2000; Verbrugge and Baardewijk, 2014; Willmott, 2011). In this speaking out essay, elaborating on these key insights in the debate, we will zoom in on especially these self-harming tendencies, and speak out against what we see as the key counterproductive organizational practices of the typical modern university. To this end, expanding on the critical metaphor of *corporatization* (a derivative from the Latin word “corpus”: body), we will be employing the allegoric notion of organizational *autoimmunity* of philosopher Jacques Derrida to depict and structure our critique. Autoimmunity for Derrida is that strange, illogical behavior where an organization, “in quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its ‘own’ immunity” (Derrida, 2003: 94). It is an immunization reaction gone awry, in which the immunization system, set up as a response to protect an entity, a *corpus*, becomes inimical to that entity itself (Johnson, 2020; van Uden and van Houtum, 2020). It implies that the discerned harmful forces should not (only) be looked for *outside*, but rather *within* the immunization reactions of the own entity, and as such is blurring the postulated, binary dichotomies of foe versus friend and non-self versus self. Typically, for Derrida (2003), such an autoimmune organizational disorder is symptomized by (a) *reflex of power*, and the *reflection* it produces, that (b) aspires to prevent the repetition of events or practices in the past that are envisioned as deficient or even *traumatic* and, (c) believes to be in an unavoidable, at times religious-like contest with a *pervasive, (inter)national threat or competition* and, (d) feels the need to *respond to prevent, albeit without full comprehension of its own response*, a not fully *comprehended*, yet imaginatively *apocalyptic* future should nothing be done, together making a double incomprehension, and (e) in doing so, *internalizes* and mimics the *inimical logic* in its own reactionary response and thereby produces itself what it aims to reduce or avoid: a cannibalizing repression, insecurity, and anxiety (Derrida, 2003; van Houtum and Bueno Lacy, 2020). Looking through this conceptual prism of autoimmunity we aim to cast a sharper light on the main *counterproductive* immunizing practices that the typical university itself has created as a *reflection on and reflex to* an allegedly deficient past and pervasive competitive pressures. In doing so, we will discuss how the three core, self-declared mission statement values that the modern university aims to safeguard, in Derridean terms to immunize, namely (1) quality, (2) freedom, and (3) societal contribution, are in practice paradoxically hollowed out through the modern “techno-sociopolitical machine” (Derrida, 2003: 86) of its own organizational apparatus. We will conclude by briefly discussing new hopeful developments that could help reconcile the modern organization of the university with its own highly esteemed mission.

Mission one: quality

Paradox: Excellent, out-of-the-box quality is programmed in standardized excel-boxed quantities

The first Derridean self-harming paradox concerns the way how the mission to *create high-quality and innovative* research has been organized. To clarify this, it is worthwhile to cast a Derridean light on the framing that came before the actual organizational response. The first frame, the desire to prevent a repetition of a *traumatic* past, is, in the case of the university, arguably the

often used imaginary of nonproductive self-rule and irresponsible unaccountability of the 1970s, the time when staff members, so it is framed, would not publish enough. While the number of publications may indeed be much lower then, the argument of lack of productivity seems rather anachronistic as well as unnecessarily pointing to an assumed behavioral deficit of academics at the time. There simply was no publication industry and (hence) no publication culture in the same massive way as we know it now. It is only in the late 1970s that commercial publishers began to emerge. Thus, while publishing was first just one of the possible ways to disseminate knowledge, next to say tutorials, conversations, and lectures, over time publishing has become the main standard, the regime of truth (Foucault, 1982) that delegitimized other forms of dissemination and on which careers literally started to depend. The desire to prevent the assumed lack of productivity, especially in a time, and that is the other Derridean frame, of an unavoidable, pervasive, and existential (inter)national *competition* for money and prestige, led to the rise of new public management in universities. The market would be the invisible hand needed to safeguard the mission of innovative quality, and the necessary antidote to a potential reemergence of that traumatic past and the pertinent response to a perceived threatening competition. Given this second frame of a relentless international competition and its inherent vested power interests, critique on this constructed managerial apparatus is usually considered as old-fashioned at best and damaging, irresponsible, and/or betraying the common cause at worst: for the mantra is publish or perish. Consequently, the responsive *reflex of power*, over the last decade or so, has dominantly been one and the same, namely more focus on behavioral incentives to compete with fellow colleagues and universities and more emphasis on management and control of everyday academic practices (Lorenz, 2012). This turn to (ac)countability has been accompanied by an internalization and normalization of a discourse of output, money flows, targets, performance, metrics, matrix, products, strategy, excellence, and the like. The emergence of this reductionistic corporatization of the university has already been extensively and convincingly criticised by various scholars in the debate (see e.g. Butler and Spoelstra, 2012; Castree and Sparke, 2000; Readings, 1996). What matters for us here, is the autoimmune disposition of this mimicking strategy in terms of its own mission statement. For, in the attempt to preserve the own core value of *quality*, paradoxically, in “a quasi-suicidal fashion” (Derrida, 2003: 94) we have seen a progressive rise of *quantitative* programming and *standardization* of scholarly work, expressed in a new quantitative discourse, with terms like citation-scores, impact-scores, eigenfactors, H-indices, rankings, teaching evaluation scores, and so on and so forth (Ferraro et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2020). An imperative, if not repressive (McCann et al., 2020) micromanaging measurement and impact system has become the norm in many modern universities, something what Muller (2018) recently powerfully described as a tyranny of metrics. Individual scholars employed by the university, often illustratively framed as human resources or human capital, are typically put together as objects in one big managerial excel-sheet, to enable quick comparisons of their output and money-inputs (Dillard and Ruchala, 2005; Willmott, 1995). Quality in this competitive, dehumanized environment is a number, a score in a managerial matrix. What counts is what is countable. The rest is a “story,” which may or may not be listened to, but which, in any case, is not included in the internal ranking and personal numerical index. So, although the etymology of excellence refers to the fostering of what is *exceptional*, the outstanding *non-fit*, the *out-of-the-box*, the university of today has organized the serendipity of this “excellence” in exactly the opposite way, namely as a yearly accountable score *inside* the cells of an *excel-sheet*. The autoimmune result of such a score-system as a proxy of quality is the rise of anxious, number-abiding researchers who rather than being stimulated to walk into untraveled terrains are spurred to breed on their secure and fast lane publication and acquisition scores (Baum, 2011; Burrows, 2012; Gill, 2014; Power, 2015). What will be researched then is what will be lucratively financeable and/or fairly quickly publishable, which is

disturbingly at odds with what the managerial metrical regime was, following its own mission statement, allegedly introduced for, namely to ensure innovative quality.

What is more, the scores of an academic, expressed in the new language of H-index and other numerically expressed “track records,” are communicated like biopolitical ear tags that can be read, tracked and monitored by anyone anywhere, wherever he or she might be located, travel to or apply. This metrical tracking and tracing of academics implies, following philosopher Deleuze (1990), that the new university control mechanism is rapidly extending the boundaries of the organization. Put differently, the consequence of the *bodily incorporation* of the new *corporate* logic is that it is blurring the difference between the internal and external borders of the organization, between private and work, between work and one’s network, and between free time and work time. This has constituted an extra autoimmune effect, namely the distressing feeling that, because of the repressive and omni-readable personal score, one always could or should do more, resulting in a high percentage of self-exploitation, stress-symptoms, and burn-outs among academics (Erickson et al., 2020; Holly, 2018).

Mission two: freedom

Paradox: Academic freedom is aimed for with carrots and sticks

The second autoimmune paradox of the modern university we see concerns the micro-managerial control to ensure the self-declared mission statement value of academic freedom. To yearly stir the production of high numbers of publications, new external lucrative acquisitions, and high student evaluation-scores, the typical modern university is increasingly employing a personnel management that principally drives on a remarkably simplistic carrot-and-stick model. This is a model that is known to be devoid of a more nuanced, scientifically rich and contingent understanding of human behavior, and of the recognition of values like intercollegial cooperation and solidarity without compensation. The intermittent conditioning by carrots come in all forms and shapes, like tenure-tracks, financial bonuses, extra research time, promotions, awards (for best teacher, best researcher, best whatever), and in-house tv-screens mentioning the latest prizes and acquisitions. The sticks commonly come down to devaluing or even ignoring other achievements than the ones praised, or the downright taking away of research time or ending of contracts if employees fall behind in the self-defined treadmill. To stir up the scores of the colleagues in the department, in some departments, the personal publication and impact scores or indexes are not only input for the yearly appraisal talks but are also input for a ranking list that is put on a departmental clipboard and sent around via email. In so doing, what was meant to be an internal drive, to think, to investigate, to explore, and to disseminate, risks becoming a metrical, competitive stratagem with the bonus of appraisal and applause or promotion for the “winners,” at the expense of other co-workers who are supposed to be jealousy provoked (Berg and Seeber, 2016; McCann et al., 2020; Willmott, 2011; Legendijk, 2017).

This managerial disciplinatio n has some major autoimmune consequences on academic freedom. To begin with, the activities that are not included in the measurement or are given less points are done less or not at all any more, limiting the freedom to choose for other paths than the one that is organizationally rewarded. For the points system in which we ourselves are working it means that writing in Dutch, our mother tongue, or giving public keynotes, appearing in the media, or writing a popular book for a wider public, are all seen as nice extras, as societal “service”, but is given less points and in most cases not given any points at all. And activities that are essential in creating collegial cooperation and a community, such as participating in staff meetings, committee memberships, supervision, and intervision, risk to be *de facto* seen as a nuisance in the gaining of

points. Also the PhD system, originally established to help starting researchers finding their own voice and crafting their own path towards full academic independence and critical autonomy, risks becoming grinded in this rat race for articles and its impact scores. According to Ratle *et al.* (2020), what we see happening is a precarious subjection and personal appropriation of young, academic talents - executing prescribed research projects - which can be at odds with their own personal development and academic freedom.

Secondly, and arguably one of the most painful autoimmune consequences of this metrical system is that education, a key if not foundational activity of the university is seen as a “task load,” a “burden” that people just need to carry out, yet is given no points and is not seen as pivotal in building an international academic reputation. Hence, the university’s mission to preserve academic freedom, which would include the freedom to choose for (more) teaching as a significant way of knowledge transfer, is severely hollowed out by the narrow focus of what is seen as valuable, read: scorable, and hence countable publications. Worse even, in some departments, teaching has become one of the aforementioned punitive sticks, the forced labor that academics have to do more when they are not successful enough according to the dominantly applied yardstick of journal publications and scores. In this regard it is telling that gaining extra teaching hours or having given a new course is not celebrated whereas gaining more research time and publishing a new article is communicated and branded as a success. In fact, paradoxically, a considerable part of the current research time (and thus university and thereby tax money) is spent on staff who are busy writing research proposals, which are largely again funded by taxes. At the same time, it is clear that there are ever slimmer chances of getting these extra funds, as all academics are more or less expected to chase after the same limited external resources. This has turned what originally was meant to be a meritocratic prize fight (which was already problematic, given its high opportunity costs for the researchers and the university, and the one-sided focus on competition), into a lottery. And when indeed successful in getting a research grant, it is teaching that can and often will be bought off for which one is then congratulated and met with some jealousy for it. According to Brown (2015: 197), as a result, dedicated lecturers with less research time are seen by their peers as benign anachronisms at best, and losers at worst. Although in society the perception might still overwhelmingly be that professors are primarily teachers, internally, in the organization, teaching thus has become part of a reductionist carrot-and-stick model, a secondary unrewarding task, which is preferably contracted out to assistants or extra temporary staff.

This strategy becomes perhaps even more inconceivable and paradoxical when realized that at the same time most public universities receive funding according to the number of delivered university degrees to students. As a result, a competitive game has emerged between universities to attract the highest number of students, and as a result, a large amount of tax money is spent on the making of glossy flyers, stylish videos, and equally slick, corporate-style university buildings (e.g. Minton, 2017). And once they are inside, students are generally pushed to follow the smoothest and fastest route to their graduation, aiming to make them ready for the job market (Fotiadou, 2018). This has the perverse effect that universities are provoked to maximize the number of degrees, potentially eroding the quality that a university degree should stand for, only furthering paradox one (see above). Moreover, this corporate-like acquisition of students and the branding of education as a return on investment in one’s own personal career erodes the very academic liberty and plurality that is aimed for (Boden and Nedeva, 2010; Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015), which, in turn, is necessary for a well-functioning democracy (Brown, 2015).

A third self-harming effect of the bonus culture we mention here is its intrinsic provocation of unfair play. In a climate where the *reflex of power* is primarily based on comparison and an imaginatively omnipresent and threatening (internal) *competition* (Derrida, 2003), and the dominant organizational response is to internalize, program, and reward such inimical drive to outproduce the other, we should

not be surprised to see a growing tendency towards shirking. To increase the metrical values, academia is increasingly fallen victim to a fabrication or manipulating of data, piecemealing of the research in various articles, (self-)plagiarism, the adding of each other names to articles or even enforced adding a name without effective co-authorship because one has merely supervised (PhD's) or discussed a work prior to publication (Lacasse and Leo, 2010; Liu et al., 2016).

Instead of undoing the systemic failure of the points system that is provoking such impairing behavior, the typical university is only fighting the symptoms by creating only more sticks, in the form of audits, evaluations, forms, and other control mechanisms (like a plagiarism-scan and the handing in of the rough data). This, in turn, is only further boosting the adverse bureaucratic grip on the daily research and teaching activities as well as further lowering the recognition and academic autonomy of lecturers and researchers as professionals. In short, the incentives based on a system of counting and control counterproductively is increasingly harming the openness, freedom, and the intrinsic zest that according to the own mission statement is deemed to be essential for a critical and independent academia, and even risks to be replaced with a systematic production of jealousy, shirking, and mistrust.

Mission three: societal contribution

Paradox: The university aimed to benefit society is increasingly becoming self-referential

Already almost 20 years ago, it was calculated that more than 80% of all the academic publications have been written in our era (Bergstrom, 2001). Since then, the number of publications have only gone up, pushed forward by the publish or perish system. Whether the average academic is also reading 80% publications or has become 80% smarter is of course highly questionable. What the university thus *de facto* is stimulating is a societally subsidized overproduction of articles that in most cases are not read at all, or by a relatively small number of academics at best (Morris et al., 2009). And this has a negative impact on the own mission to contribute to society, the topic of our third autoimmunity paradox. For, a system that is meant to disseminate knowledge for society in which a game-like system of points has become the key target risks prioritizing metrics over substance and hence becoming self-referential (Brown, 2015; Butler and Spoelstra, 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Macdonald and Kam, 2007). Some even question whether this massive amount of published articles have a significant and distinguishing meaning at all, or are only small footnotes, adding near-to-nothing to the existing knowledge (Alvesson et al., 2017). As a former editor of the *Academy of Management Journal* powerfully has put it: "Like black cats in coal cellars, published studies are increasingly indistinguishable from previous ones, and the contexts in which these theories are tested or developed tend to fade into irrelevance" (George, 2014: 1). This *cri-de-coeur* does not stand in isolation, as more editors and researchers have pointed out that really interesting and critical articles are missing and big impact articles are elusive (e.g. Bartunek et al., 2006; Clark and Wright, 2009; Daft and Lewin, 2008; Grey, 2010). In its inappropriate mimicking of a neoliberal logic, the university has thus created a "production market" without "consumers," not necessarily for the "benefit for society," let alone sustaining "a unique forum for the development of the cultural, political, and social dialogues that are the lifeblood of a mature democracy" as is promised and aspired for in the typical mission statement of a university (see above). This output-mentality has generated a decreasing societal relevance of university knowledge, and that, in turn, has led to the lowering of the credibility and authority of university knowledge (Brown, 2015). As a result, what we see happening, and at an accelerating pace, is a widening of the gap between universities and society, thereby constructing distrust in science and creating a lacuna that post-truth politics are more than happy to fill, as we have seen in the topical debates on climate, migration, and most recently on the corona-outbreak.

Conclusion

What we have put forward in this speaking out essay, is, that in its attempt to counter the apocalyptic pictured neoliberal competition, the management of a typical university is responding in a Derridean self-harming reflex of power. The university risks turning itself into a mere corporate factory of publications and diplomas, in which quantity is mistaken for quality and control for freedom, thereby derailing itself further and further from its societal function and orientation. By mimicking a hypercompetition inside the organization in order to adapt to the imaginary of a survival-threatening hypercompetition, the modern university has been turning the competition against itself, resulting in a *vicious suicidal circle of repression* (Derrida, 2003: 100). Worryingly and sadly, the university, that self-declared bastion of autonomous, free, and critical thinking, has been transforming itself more and more into a remarkably oppressive and straitened bureaucratic organization (McCann et al., 2020).

It is actually staggering how much and how fast public universities have internalized and prescribed such an harmful managerialism logic. It is not that we do not know that using metrics to indicate or contribute to achieving innovative quality is illusionary and is leading to lower quality, more shirking, and less autonomy in the end (Baum, 2011; Macdonald and Kam, 2007; Muller, 2018). Most academics are well aware that the numerical measurements are a false mirror-image, a fantasy-reality of all of the daily work s/he does as researcher and teacher (Burrows, 2012). The question then is what impedes academics from subverting this intrinsically paradoxical, repressive system that they largely created for and by themselves? Or as Lorenz provocatively stated: “if you are so smart, why are you under surveillance?” (Lorenz, 2012). The average individual academic still participates and plays along, apparently, because s/he agrees and/or takes profit from it, or maybe does see its shortcomings but passively accepts it as the normality, or perhaps because does not see him/herself as personally accountable for what happens to others, or maybe does not consider him/herself powerful enough to change the system (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012; Burrows, 2012; Lorenz, 2012; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Runia, 2019). Perhaps the power of the system is, as philosopher Michel Foucault has abundantly made clear in his writings, that there is no central power who has decided that the gathering and dissemination of knowledge should be done in any prescribed way, and rather that it is individuals themselves who subject themselves to a certain governmentality and in so doing grant it its power (Foucault, 1977, 1982). What is seductively being addressed by the self-created apparatus is the imaginative power in giving us, social creatures, a recognizable confirmation and an assessment of being successful individuals. And so, the monitoring and intermittent rewarding system fosters academics to counterintuitively long for more monitoring, as this reifies their uniqueness (Bloom, 2019). The sneaky part of it is that, as with capitalistic consumption, the celebratory peak after what is seen as success will be short-lived, because we will never tick all the boxes, and the final satisfaction is never reached, also because the others are not stopping either, and hence there is a constant fear of missing out. If an academic wants to make promotion or keep his or her research time, s/he should perform as good as and preferably better than last year and possibly be at par or outperform the own co-workers, and that ideally every year, thereby increasing the quantitative standards for getting tenure or promotion only further. Hence, there is a incessant autoimmune threat of turning ourselves into junkies, hungry caterpillars, never satisfied, always yearning for the next shot, the next acquisition or publication to score with. It is this combination of cunning subjection to disempowerment on the one hand and intermittent, selected empowerment, the occasional and inconsistent shots of recognition, on the other hand which may very well be why this autoimmune system is so persistent and hard to change (Zizek, 2015). It implies that more than an opposition to a repressive Them, it is an inward struggle: it is Us against Us.

But there is hope. As we pointed out in the beginning, the tide seems to be turning. Increasingly, it can be witnessed that the response to the largely co-constructed autoimmune threat of academic life by the “techno-socio-political machine” with its mechanic, repressive rituals, and dogmatic discourse, is being challenged by outcries for more autonomy and freedom by academics themselves. This manifests itself in the academic debate (see e.g. Jones et al., 2020; McCann et al., 2020; Mumby et al, 2017; Ruth et al., 2018) but also in discussions on the work floor, in the media and in the wider public realm. See the above mentioned recent massive demonstrations and strikes, see the manifesto “Reclaiming our University” by staff and students of the University of Aberdeen (Reclaiming our University, 2016), see the so-called San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) signed by universities around the world, in which they made a plea to eliminate the use of journal-based metrics, in funding, appointment, and promotion considerations and to value research on its own merits and, see the recent report of the Dutch university organizations (VSNU, 2019) in which they make a plea for the accounting of one’s talent, intellectual drive and development rather than the counting of one’s performance numbers, and see the already applied University of Ghent model (Cardol and de Knecht, 2019) in which the rector declared to “renew the trust in the staff rather than to overly measure and control them.” These movements and protests make clear that what still intrinsically motivates most academics is not the points, the evaluation scores or any other metrical system, but the care for quality of research and education and the desire to contribute collectively and often also collaboratively with meaningful knowledge to society.

It is this humanistic spirit we also recognized and valued in the midst of the corona-crisis when everyone was doing their best to uphold at least the education for students and when so many rectors and deans sent out heartwarming messages to their staff in which they wished everyone good health and praised the passion of their staff, their solidarity, collaboration, and hard work. Perhaps it takes a crisis to realize that the disciplining management by metrics to incentivize the own smart, yet no less vulnerable people of flesh and blood who are driven by intrinsic curiosity and motivation, is severely flawed and can even be, as we have argued, counterproductive. Our hope is that the new movements and changes within the university will create an akin humanist paradigm in which the focus is on trust, exchange, and collaboration rather than falling back time and again on the autoimmune *reflex of power* to protect itself by mimicking and prescribing internally what it paradoxically aims to offset: a distrust provoking *pervasive, internal competition* (Derrida, 2003).

What an “excellent” move it would be if our own beloved universities, in which we teach and critically write about responsible organizations and the governmentality in our societies, would be the protagonists of this new wind that has started blowing and fully embrace its powerful academic spirit that would help the university recover from its autoimmune inclination and genuinely turn around its self-produced organizational disorder and bring back in what the university promises and aims to deliver in its own mission statement: high quality research and education to the benefit of society.

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Note

1. To wit, most notably, the randomly selected wordings of the mission statements of the Universities of Johannesburg, Peking, Oxford, Antwerp, Ghent, Nijmegen, Luxemburg, and Graz have been used to fabricate this generic mission statement.

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