

# Setting the scene

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## Introduction

The role of trust in higher education is becoming an increasingly delicate issue. As state budgets have tightened in the post-welfare state era, governments have placed greater emphasis on accountability, relevance and value-for-money in return for the funding they provide universities, replacing the more relaxed and less intrusive relationships between state and higher education that prevailed in the now lost ‘golden time’ of the second half of the 20th Century. As a result, trust has appeared to be eroded. As quasi-market relationships have developed, whether in the form of contracts between the state and universities or more directly as a consequence of the introduction of tuition fees (and the redefinition of students as customers), higher education has been drawn into a new web of complex accountabilities. Once again, trust appears to have been compromised. As pressures on (and from) students have increased, and enabling technologies have been developed, plagiarism is on the rise (or so it is alleged). Although uncommon in Europe, many North American universities and colleges now require students to subscribe to honour codes. Again, trust seems to have been sharply reduced. As more formal systems of performance measurement have been introduced, initially of research outputs but increasingly of teaching quality, and as competition between universities has become sharper (and more explicit), the pressures at best to publish research findings prematurely and at worst to indulge in scientific fraud have increased. Once again, trust appears to have been compromised.

This erosion of trust, it is argued, poses particular difficulties for institutions that are based on different forms of trust. For example, the state needs to trust universities by granting them not only reasonable autonomy as institutions, but also the creative ‘space’ to develop new ideas; this is a particular responsibility of the liberal and democratic state. Students, even in their new guise as customers, cannot predetermine the value (or even the content) of the academic goods they are purchasing with the tuition fees they are required to pay; a university education merely conveys a license to learn not a guaranteed outcome, and the fundamental characteristic of advanced knowledge is its provisional, and even indeterminate, quality. Scholars and scientists cannot predict the outcomes of their research; if they could, it would not be worth embarking on in the first place. In other words, the creativity and potential of higher education and research require that much must be taken ‘on trust’.

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However, the pressures to which teachers and researchers, individual universities, and whole higher education and research systems are now subject to cannot simply be ‘rolled back’. There can be no return to the academic ‘Garden of Eden’, if such a place ever existed. The issues are far too complex to permit such a straightforward solution. First, the modern university and the much wider systems in which it is embedded are complex social structures that have evolved and continue to evolve. The same social, political, economic and cultural forces that may now appear to constrain them and diminish trust in them are the same forces that have given them life and enable them to realise their creativity. There never was a time where the university was completely ‘trusted’; nor perhaps should there have been. Universities, similar to all institutions and systems, are subject to history, and history, it should be recalled, is everything that has happened until this instant. Secondly, trust cannot be treated as a one-dimensional characteristic or quality. Instead it must be seen in multi-dimensional and pluralistic terms. Indeed, there may be multiple trusts, often in tension with each other if not in outright opposition. Neither can trust (even in the plural) properly be seen as in Manichean opposition to notions of accountability, audit, relevance, engagement and the rest. In fact, all these notions may be part of a complex mosaic. To take the simplest example, research findings cannot be taken on trust, they must be justified by evidence [1,2].

The present book attempts to tease out some of these complexities with regard to trust in higher education, particularly as it relates to ethical and quality standards in research and teaching. The book has grown out of an international symposium arranged jointly by the Academia Europaea and the Wenner-Gren Foundations held in Stockholm in May 2011. The chapters are based on the original papers delivered at that symposium and the responses to those papers. However, both have been developed considerably in the light of discussions during the symposium and subsequent reflection. This introductory chapter does not attempt to summarize these chapters. Its more modest aim is to set the scene.

## Historical context

The university in its current form is a creature of the 19th Century, and so is a product of the political, social, economic, cultural and scientific forces that emerged with increasing strength in the decades after 1800. These forces included the drive towards systematic state building, initially validated by the revolutionary impulses of 1789, but increasingly justified in terms of nationalist ideologies; towards the professionalization of occupations, partly in response to the Napoleonic ideal of “*la carrière ouverte aux talents*” and partly in response to the explosion of technical and scientific knowledge; towards the development of an industrial economy that also had its origins in technological innovation (and created the hegemony of the west, which is only now two centuries later being seriously challenged); and towards the creation of an urban, and increasingly liberal and secular, civilization within which democratic values emerged with gathering strength.

Some would point to the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810 as the birth of the modern university. Others would highlight the passing

of the Morrill Act by the United States Congress in 1867 establishing the great American land-grant universities, Michigan, Wisconsin and the rest. In Victorian Britain the University of Manchester was established in 1851, at almost the same time that Friedrich Engels was writing about Manchester in almost apocalyptic terms as the heart of a new industrial civilization. Across Europe, universities were being founded, or re-founded, in response to the same impulses of state (and nation) building, urbanization, industrial innovation, professional formation and educational reform. Older universities, established in the Middle Ages and early modern period (Bologna, Oxford, Cambridge, Uppsala, Heidelberg, Harvard and many others) were largely absorbed into the same movement. Where they proved recalcitrant or were judged to be irrelevant, they were superseded by new kinds of institution, of which the French *grandes écoles* are perhaps the most celebrated example. Although universities had existed for many centuries, the university in a recognizably modern form is a more recent creation, and one that grew out of a particular set of historical circumstances imposing their own constraints, but also embodying fundamental potentialities (see e.g. [3]).

The development of modern higher education systems is a 20th Century phenomenon. The explicit articulation of such systems did not begin to get seriously under way before the second half of the century, and accelerated after 1960. The major structural components were, first, an unprecedented increase in the number of students enrolled; secondly, the establishment of new universities that attempted to combine tradition and innovation; thirdly, the incorporation of higher technical and professional schools within wider higher education systems (in some cases this incorporation was limited in scope, whereas in others it led to the creation of fully unified systems in which former institutional categories were largely dissolved); and finally, the creation of new legal and regulatory frameworks [4].

However, these structural changes cannot be divorced from a wider range of causes and effects. The causes were often profound, for example, the increasing demand from potential students (which, in turn, reflected rising social aspirations, declining class barriers and changes in secondary education); the growth of ‘youth culture’, of which a distinctive ‘student culture’ was a key element; the emergence of new intellectual contexts combining the dynamism of the natural sciences and their applied technologies with the criticality and engagement of the social sciences (with the traditional humanities in their wake); and the strengthening of the idea of a ‘knowledge society’ in which universities and research institutions were transformed into primary producers [5].

The effects were equally varied; these included the development of more sophisticated management and governance systems within what had become much larger and more heterogeneous institutions, and critics alleged of a new culture of ‘managerialism’ opposed, to some degree, to traditional academic values; the growth of more sophisticated funding systems as higher education accounted for an increasing fraction of national budgets; and a heightened public and media interest in higher education systems that now reached out to touch the daily lives of the masses rather than be confined to servicing traditional elites [6].

Once again, the nature of trust was transformed by these changes. Intellectual life, increasingly expressed through the media, formed a symbiotic relationship with academic life; scholarly research fed into the wider world of ideas,

whereas scientific research was quickly translated into new goods and services. As a result of mass access social distance was replaced by familiarity, domesticating the once almost out-of-reach mysteries of a university education. As knowledge producers, universities came to occupy a central role in economies. At the same time, the managerial revolution within higher education not only undermined the pretensions of universities to be treated as self-governing communities of scholars and teachers it also provided the tools for more intrusive scrutiny [7].

These trends, and their impact on the meaning of trust, have accelerated into the 21st Century. As a result, the environment within which the modern university was formed in the 19th and early-20th Centuries, which has always imposed certain constraints on the degree to which universities could be trusted to determine their own futures, in the later 20th Century has been further transformed by the establishment of higher education systems, producing new constraints and interventions that seem (to some) to have radically compromised traditional notions of trust.

It is perhaps over-simplistic to imagine too categorical a distinction between trust and an absence of trust; there are important differences between distrust (or mistrust) and engaged interest (or pressures for transparency or accountability). However, it is clear that a number of factors are working together, if not to undermine, at any rate substantially to modify traditional definitions of trust in higher education, and, in particular, the practices that have embodied and sustained trust. These factors will be discussed here in two ways: first, at a conceptual level in terms of five fundamental ideas; and secondly, at an operational level in terms of three institutions of governance, that appear to challenge trust in higher education.

## **Conceptual challenges**

The notion of trust is often linked strongly to institutional autonomy and academic/scientific freedom. At first sight, institutional autonomy appears to be under attack, even at a time when Governments are also granting universities greater formal autonomy; although predominantly to be able to respond more rapidly and flexibly to changing market conditions. Scientific and, more broadly, academic freedom, although generally respected in principle, also appears to be under attack. This attack takes two main forms. First, and overtly, some types of research are subject to moral challenges and even legal restrictions, for example, research that makes use of tissues derived from human embryos or stem cells. Secondly, and more subtly, scientific freedom can also be eroded by the proliferation of more intrusive forms of review and assessment, of both teaching and research.

There are five ideas that, to some extent, provide conceptual justification for what can be seen as a reduction of autonomy, especially for individual teachers and researchers, and also perhaps for students who are now encouraged to see their relationship with their universities within a more constricted consumerist framework. These ideas are social engagement, utility (or impact), accountability, modern management and neoliberal ideology.

## **Social engagement**

The idea that universities should actively engage with society is hardly novel. As has already been mentioned the modern university, as it emerged in the 19th Century, and to an even greater extent, contemporary higher education systems as they developed in the second half of the 20th Century were built on dialogue with wider society. At a national level, engagement was expressed in terms of satisfying aspirations for greater participation in higher education and of developing a more skilled workforce. At a local level, it was expressed through the links between universities and the cities and communities in which they are located (if not embedded). However, in a more media-obsessed and intrusive society there are two dangers. The first danger is that engagement will cease to be expressed in terms of even-handed reciprocity in which the rights and responsibilities of higher education and its social, economic, political and cultural partners are mutually respected; instead universities will be redefined as delivery organizations for the agendas of these partners. It is in this context that the growing emphasis on the utility of higher education emerges (which is discussed next). The second danger is that the process of engagement will become more intense, leading to pressure to devise more elaborate and sophisticated mechanisms. It is in this context that the growing demand for greater accountability arises (see e.g. [8]).

## **Utility**

The trend to justify higher education and research in terms of their outcomes or outputs, or in more managerial jargon their deliverables, is already well established. This has led to greater priority being attached to the utilitarian purposes of the university, for example, at the expense of its normative and critical functions. The reasons for this shift towards emphasizing higher education's utility, impact and relevance are many. But among the most significant is the growing popularity of the concept of the knowledge society. Global prestige and competitiveness are increasingly defined in terms of the production of knowledge goods and services. This, in turn, has focused attention on the central role played by higher education, whether the production of world-class research by research-intensive universities, the connections between global knowledge and local resources offered by regional universities, or the production of skilled workers by higher education as a whole.

As a result it is now expected that the output of research should not only keep up with high scientific standards, but also make contributions to society that are direct and, if possible, measurable. This demand seems to have increased in the last two decades as a result of the tendency for politicians worldwide to stress the role of Higher Education Institutions as motors in the economic development of their countries. High ambitions are set with respect to the share of the population going into higher education. In addition, investments in research are pointed out as crucial for economic growth and welfare. Although the rhetoric has not always been matched by resources, expectations that universities can (and should) produce useful results have soared. However, such results are not always immediately observable particularly in the humanities and social sciences, but also in the natural and even applied sciences. As a result, the credibility of higher education, and the trust in the commitment and capacities of universities are challenged. At the same time, trust in higher education is threatened from a different direction as scientists

and scholars come to be seen as too closely related to economic interests in their roles as consultants, co-owners or part-time employees of companies.

### **Accountability**

If greater emphasis is placed on the responsibility of higher education to engage with nations and communities, citizens and customers, and also on the instrumental purposes of the university, it logically follows that more elaborate and sophisticated mechanisms are required through which this engagement is expressed. As a result, more attention must be paid to accountability. Again this is not new. It has always been accepted that higher education must, in broad terms, be governed by the political priorities of democratically elected governments that provide the bulk of their funding. It has also been accepted that universities, similar to all societal organizations, must be accountable for their actions both legally and more broadly. However, accountability has now been extended to more nebulous array of stakeholders. These include not only students and other direct beneficiaries, but also activists of all kinds and even the public-at-large. At the same time, traditional forms of academic and scientific accountability, through peer review, have been extended to national assessment systems opening the door to a new order of political scrutiny and steering [9].

Just as the idea of the knowledge society has decisively shaped the orientation of the modern university, and encouraged it to adopt a more instrumental orientation, the parallel idea of the audit society has explained, and encouraged, the growing emphasis on accountability mechanisms [10]. The idea of transparency is closely related. It is regarded as axiomatic that both outside stakeholders, a constantly expanding category, should be able to scrutinize the activities of all kinds of professional and expert organisations, and that these organizations should be able to demonstrate their efficiency in terms of their use of resources. In this context universities are often seen as being on the defensive because both education and research are accomplished in relatively closed environments. As a result of the apparent opacity of these key activities, universities have been subject to increasingly intrusive scrutiny regimes, embracing evaluation, accreditation and ranking. In these regimes, publication indicators have come to play an increasing role through more and more sophisticated systems for monitoring scientific impact. However, this has had the paradoxical effect of emphasizing scientific quality at the expense of social relevance. As a result, universities stand accused of perpetuating self-referential research practices, in other words, undertaking research in their own self-interest (in the mode of ‘art for art’s sake’). A subsidiary effect is that increasing emphasis on the quality of scientific publications has had a tendency to reinforce the suspicion that correspondingly less attention is paid to the quality of teaching, with the result that the interests of students are ignored. This also is likely to undermine trust in higher education.

### **Modern management**

The fourth idea that has tended to undermine traditional notions of trust in higher education is the development of more elaborate management regimes in universities. It is hardly an exaggeration to describe this change as a managerial revolution in higher education. This revolution has two aspects; the first, paradoxically, is

the growing autonomy of universities. Previously, universities had been formally subsumed within state bureaucracies, or organized as self-governing academic collegia. Both these forms made independent and activist management actions difficult to organize. Yet, over the last two decades determined efforts have been made to reform the governance and management of universities to enable them to take such management action. These efforts generally took the form of relaxing bureaucratic controls and enhancing the role of Vice-Chancellors, Presidents and other senior managers. However, it is important to distinguish between these new forms of institutional autonomy and the traditional idea that in an open society, universities should be spaces that are substantially protected from political interventions on the one hand and market influences on the other. Instead, the emphasis was placed in enabling universities to act as adaptable organizations able to respond promptly to new demands and not be weighed down by redundant administrative rules and unnecessary regulation. This new definition of autonomy is closely linked with the rise of managerial class within universities.

The second aspect of the managerial revolution in higher education is linked to the wider transformation of the culture of public services, often labelled the New Public Management [11], which is related to the hegemony of neoliberal ideology established in the 1990s (the fifth, and final, idea that has challenged traditional notions of trust in higher education). In many countries, the state has largely abandoned its fiduciary responsibilities for providing public services, including, of course, higher education. Instead it has redefined its role as that of a purchaser of services on behalf of the public, although there no longer seems to be an overwhelming need for these services to be provided directly by the state itself. As a result, existing providers of public services are now required to compete with alternative providers in the private sector. This drive towards outsourcing and outright privatization has inevitably been accompanied by increasing emphasis on the cost effective and efficient delivery of services. To promote efficiency, more elaborate management structures have been developed, and new managerial cadres have emerged. For universities, the New Public Management poses two challenges, both of which impact on trust. First, external trust in higher education (i.e. the willingness of wider society to trust universities) is compromised because universities have been redefined as service organizations with only a limited normative significance; as such they deserve no special trust. Secondly, internal trust (i.e. relationships between senior and junior academic colleagues, and also between teachers and students) is also eroded.

### **Neoliberal ideology**

The fifth, and final, shift that has tended to challenge trust in higher education is the rise of neoliberal ideology, which has progressively superseded older welfare-state notions of political economy and, has, so far, survived the successive shocks of the banking crisis, the wider collapse of confidence in financial institutions, sovereign debt crises and the subsequent economic recession. In the context of higher education, neoliberal ideology can be traced back to the growing popularity of notions of the knowledge society according to which universities have taken a primary production role. This increasingly instrumental view of the purposes and functions of higher education, in turn, has encouraged both political leaders

and the general public to regard teaching and research as essentially commodities to be bought and sold. From there, it is only a small step to concluding that higher education is best conceived of as a market.

This conclusion appears to be confirmed by the wider belief that the market is the most effective mechanism not only for maximizing choice, producing efficiency and promoting quality, but also for enhancing innovation. Although sharply contested, this idea is attractive both to politicians and policy makers (who see it as an alternative to state regulation and funding) and even to some institutional leaders (who are increasingly preoccupied with the struggle for positional advantage, often as measured through league tables and making use of marketing tools including brands). As a result, neoliberal ideology has become established as the dominant policy discourse in higher education, which has tended to infect wider public perceptions of its purposes. This far-reaching shift in how higher education is perceived, and perceives itself, has had equally far-reaching implications for how trust in higher education is to be established and maintained.

### **Five ideas but not a simple opposition**

As has already been suggested, the relationship between trust, as traditionally defined, and these five ideas cannot in fact be reduced to one of simple opposition. First, many of these ideas remain contested, if not as general principles, then in terms of specific implementation. Secondly (and of greater significance), trust and these ideas are often entwined in ways that have been discussed. For example, peer review is based on trust, but at the same time is a form of accountability. Nevertheless, these opposites do appear to provide conceptual alternatives to the idea of trust, at any rate in its traditional form.

## **Operational challenges**

These five ideas – social engagement, utility, accountability, modern management and neoliberal ideology – have been both enabled by and expressed through three more concrete trends and practices. These are the rise of the audit society, the media and markets.

### **Audit society**

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that higher education is now in the grip of a formidable audit industry. A growing proportion of teachers' and researchers' time is now taken up by various forms of audit such as validating and accrediting teaching programmes, reviewing course aims and outcomes, measuring student satisfaction, peer-reviewing articles and book proposals, and engaging in formal assessment of research quality. At an institutional level, increasing efforts are devoted to the management performance of individuals, departments and whole institutions. At national and international levels, rankings of universities have become key policy inputs. To service this burgeoning audit industry, increasingly sophisticated tools have been developed.

It is now taken for granted that the activities of universities should be systematically audited, not just in the familiar context of auditing financial

accounts or even related contexts such as value-for-money and effectiveness reviews, but also the context of teaching and learning, teaching programmes (and, increasingly, their employment outcomes), research and staff performance. Audit on this extended sense has become a powerful tool for institutional managers. Its published results also provide the raw material for university league tables (which, in turn, increasingly influence institutional behaviour). In this new environment, traditional notions of trust appear to be increasingly anachronistic for two reasons. First, the development of the audit industry seems to imply an erosion or absence of trust. Why else would such substantial resources be applied to this end, at the expense of teaching and research? Secondly, the readily availability of new audit tools means that increasingly less needs to be taken on trust; instead, outputs can be measured and outcomes evaluated. Of course, in most audit systems, a key element of trust remained embedded in the sense that many evaluation systems continue to rely heavily on the collective judgment of individual experts that are taken on trust. For example, on the rare occasions on which peer-review judgments have been legally challenged, courts have been reluctant to interfere provided the established processes were followed.

### **The media**

Mass media has had a complex impact on universities, and in this development the information and communication technology revolution has been very important. Clearly, this revolution has helped to create much more powerful audit and management tools, potentially enhancing the capacity for surveillance over teaching and research activities and correspondingly reducing the need for trust. However, the most dramatic effect has been to call into question the need for the existing teaching and research cultures, and the organizational structures and governance and funding arrangements that sustain these cultures. As access to information is now globally available at the click of a mouse, there needs be no restrictions on its availability. Higher education no longer needs to be rationed or spatially constrained. Tweets can take over from tutorials. As a result, new models of delivery are being developed, of which the University of Phoenix owned by the Apollo Group is the highest-profile example. These new models are typically commercial for-profit operations, reflecting the dominance of the neoliberal ideology that has already been discussed. Indeed, some go further and argue that there is no need to establish any organizational structures relying instead on the free-for-all open-access Internet.

The counter-argument, of course, is that universities fulfil key functions in relation to quality control, in the context of the quality assurance of teaching programmes that are offered, but also of fundamental taxonomies of knowledge. They also provide an environment in which the successful socialization of young adults can take place. More significant perhaps than open access to teaching materials is the open-source movement in research. The greater transparency and availability of research findings have the potential to improve understanding of scientific methods and to increase levels of trust. However, another effect of access to the Internet is the opportunities it offers for plagiarism, whether of student assignments or research findings, which clearly has a negative impact on trust in higher education.

The ICT (information and communication technology) revolution has led to a wider revolution in both the structure and the role of the media industry. In terms of structure, a number of phenomena can be observed. Perhaps the most important is the emergence of new media, most recently the rise of social media that have had far-reaching impacts on student behaviour and expectations. Higher education has been caught up in the much wider mediatisation of 21st Century society, the consequences of which are only beginning to be glimpsed. Patterns of individual identity and social interaction are clearly being radically renegotiated, with students as the most articulate (and affluent) representatives of their generation are in the vanguard. Clearly, notions of trust are likely to change at least as radically.

Another phenomenon is market deregulation that has, paradoxically perhaps, often led not to more open markets, but to a concentration of ownership in the hands of a limited number of multinational companies operating across a range of media platforms. A third phenomenon is the professionalization of journalism and, even more significant, the rapid growth of a 'communication industry' in terms of public relations and marketing. Universities have by no means been exempt from this change. Powerful communication offices closely aligned with the senior management of universities have been established [12]. This creates the danger that important research findings are now likely to be announced through the media even before they have been properly scrutinized through traditional peer-review processes. A good example is the cold fusion case at the University of Utah in 1989 [13,14]. However, even these traditional peer-review processes have come under strain [15–17]. This is perhaps hardly surprising given the increasing volume of manuscripts submitted to journals and increasing competition among scholars. In a few cases, there have been proven examples of fraudulent behaviour. Although fraud is not new [18,19], the pressure on individuals and their institutions to score bibliometric victories may be reducing the barriers to such misconduct. In terms of maintaining trust in higher education, scientific fraud has devastating consequences.

### **Markets**

The third operational challenge is that posed by the growing emphasis on markets in higher education. The impact of neoliberal ideology that has tended to crowd out other accounts of the purposes of higher education (whether traditional accounts that emphasize institutional autonomy or more radical accounts that emphasize social purpose) has already been discussed. However, equally, or more significant, has been the impact of policies that seek to introduce market mechanisms into higher education. The most prominent is the drift towards charging, or increasing, tuition fees payable by students. This has stimulated a more consumerist orientation that has in turn placed greater emphasis on transparency.

In some countries, such as England, universities are now required to publish a range of detailed information on inputs and outcomes in order to 'inform' student choice (these are referred to as 'key information sets'). Even when such information is not required, the growing popularity of university league tables has led to important shifts in consumer behaviour and institutional responses. Although the introduction, or increase, of tuition fees is the most visible example of

marketization in higher education, there has been a general increase in competitive behaviour among universities that has also been apparent in the domain of research. Indeed, league tables of ‘world-class’ universities are determined more by research performance than teaching quality. Advances in ICT and the development of new mass media cultures, which have already been discussed, have been decisive factors in empowering this marketization.

This increasing emphasis on transparency, whether to enhance student choice or strengthen institutional reputation, is not in itself a direct attack on the belief that universities deserve to be trusted. However, it creates a new context within which trust must be defined and then operationalized, and has produced a corrosive effect. For example, higher education may now become embroiled in debates about the extent to which market organizations in general, and large corporations in particular, can be trusted (and whether they should be tightly or loosely regulated). As large corporations on the whole are trusted much less than universities, this association has not favoured the latter. However, it is important to recognize that marketization in higher education has so far had its limits. Even in the U.S.A. and Japan, bastions of private higher education, genuinely free-market approaches remain the exception. More typically, moves towards the market in higher education have tended to push universities into that ambiguous borderland between the public and private spheres, between the state and the marketplace. This space is occupied by privatised and outsourced public services, and is perhaps best described as a quasi (or *ersatz*) market. There is little evidence to suggest that politicians have abandoned their ambitions to steer higher education systems, or that they are prepared to tolerate market outcomes that seriously conflict with political objectives. This means that notions of trust must be renegotiated under conditions of considerable ambiguity and uncertainty.

## Conclusion

There is an instinctive belief that higher education deserves to be trusted, and needs to be trusted if it is to be true to its values and successful in achieving its goals. Yet that belief cannot be regarded entirely as a ‘given’ not open to being questioned or contested. Instead, it must be justified, and under contemporary conditions. Three points, in particular, need to be considered. First, over the last half century higher education has been transformed; it no longer comprises small and elite systems about which there was a high degree of ignorance among the mass of the population and towards which there was an equally high degree of deference (as there was to social and political elites more generally). Today, higher education comprises mass systems. As a result, going to a university or college has become a familiar, even domestic, experience. At the same time much more open research and knowledge production systems have developed in which the users, and other beneficiaries, of research are merely passive spectators. Instead, they have entered the research game as active players, not simply in terms of influencing priorities, but also promoting new methodologies. It is hardly surprising that a much higher level of participation in higher education and more open research systems have transformed the context in which trust in higher education is determined.

Secondly, higher education is not alone in suffering from what is perceived to be an erosion of trust. By definition, democratic states create ‘low-trust’ environments; at elections, the voters are able to turn unpopular governments out of office. Changes in society over the last half century have also led to an overall decline in deference towards traditional elites, whether judges, doctors, professors or, more recently, bankers. This strain of populism has been reinforced by changes in the mass media. In these circumstances, traditional forms of trust must be renegotiated.

Finally, universities themselves are low-trust institutions, not in the sense that they are distrusted by the general public (all the evidence suggests they are trusted much more than the media and politicians who complain that universities are unaccountable and unresponsive), but in the more fundamental sense that they embody critical and sceptical values. Their key message to students is that knowledge is provisional not final, and that contestation and controversy, far from being signs of under-development or weakness, are the means by which knowledge advances. On a moral plane, they teach the Socratic principle ‘I know that I do not know’. In terms of research, similar principles of systematic scepticism are applied. Received wisdom is constantly challenged; theories are tested to destruction; evidence is ceaselessly demanded (and constantly renewed and extended). In short, nothing is taken ‘on trust’. Seen in this light, it hardly seems reasonable for Higher Education Institutions to expect unquestioning trust from their stakeholders. Yet, of course, it would also be unreasonable to suppose that the purpose of these stakeholders, who are proliferating all the time in a knowledge-based society, have hostile intent or aim to curb the creativity of teaching and research.

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