

# Audits and the university: the restoration of personal trust in higher education

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## Setting the stage

For most of its history the university has absorbed future uncertainties by means of collegiality and trust. With the introduction of the NPM (New Public Management) these strategies have been altered. Now the narrative of good governance obeys, to paraphrase Power ([1], p. 98), the holy trinity of quality, efficiency and organization. For this trinity, audits have assumed a vital function, as they represent a widely used management tool for judging whether organizations are on track. Such judgement is impartial and focused on evidence ([1], p. 5) and provides “a check of conformity to pre-existing standards of best practice” ([2], p. 16). It is worth noticing that the change through audits relies on a type of governance mechanism that does not require the exchange of resources or presuppose formalized networks, but coordinates activities through surveillance. Such observational management promises more efficient decision-making and is linked in higher education to the fear of audits challenging and potentially transforming the traditional university.

This chapter examines how such observational governance tools affect the university and whether the above fear is justified, particularly with regard to the substitution of personal trust with a generalized mistrust. For example, Power [1] identified audits as the main challenge to traditional trust relationships and thereby the social texture of academia. Instead of relying on personal trust, collegiality and common values, audit-based university governance relies increasingly on formal, impersonal control mechanisms. Power’s analysis confirms Luhmann’s more general hypothesis that, in modern societies, trust in individuals is (gradually) substituted by systemic trust and trust in formalized procedures [3]. In higher education studies, this shift has been described as a loss for universities or dysfunctions in the higher education system. However, from a Luhmannian perspective instead of indicating loss, the auditing [2] of higher education may be perceived as a critical sign of modernization, and insisting on personal trust is nothing but nostalgia.

This contribution assumes a position between nostalgia and modernization. It hypothesizes that although audits are based on mistrust, in the longer run they restore personal trust. The chapter argues that even if audits overcome

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the asymmetry between principal and agents by more and better information, in the higher education sector, this solution is constrained by the particular features of research and teaching that cannot be reached or controlled by organizational means; there are no organizational routines that can ensure individual learning or good research results [4]. Even under conditions of auditing, universities depend on persons as far as new insights and innovation are concerned; persons bear the programmatic orientation of universities and are therefore critical for the academic production. Hence, it is hypothesized that problems in university governance are resolved not by formalization, but by falling back on personal relations and, in turn, on trust.

To develop this argument, the chapter first shows some of the effects of audits on the traditional university in general and more specifically, the effects it has on traditional trust relations. In the first section it is outlined how university governance is shaped by the introduction of audits. It also elaborates on the principal–agent relationship that is conceived as a structural prerequisite for the auditing of university governance. Instead of resolving the underlying asymmetry with more information, a detailed analysis of the model suggests that the introduction of audits lead to an organizational overload, challenging the basic governability of universities. In the third section, empirical examples outline what strategies universities develop in order to contain the organizational overload and regain, at least partial, governability. These ‘solutions’ lead me to conclude that audits reproduce organizational structures rather than alter them and, as a consequence, revive personal trust as one predominant solution to the organizational overload.

## **Basic ideas on audits**

### **Mutual observation**

Recently, higher education studies have devoted considerable attention to the use of observational governance tools such as audits, rankings and evaluations [5–8]. Two distinct, yet not mutually exclusive, ways of using them have been discussed. On one hand, a methodological critique emphasized that as audits misrepresent and oversimplify academic reality, their effects may be unfair and dysfunctional. From this appraisal of unfairness, it follows that audits may have a demotivating impact on the community of scholars and misguide university governance; such conclusions can be traced all the way to the call for the conference on ‘Trust in Higher Education’ suspecting the scrutiny by audits to backfire on the higher education system because external control fosters ‘more rigour than relevance’. However, this line of argument is not new. The Matthew effect may be considered its ancestor, as it also stands for the unfair and unjust attribution of reputation. However, Merton [9] showed that, whereas the unfairness of the invisible hand allocating reputations ([10], p. 246) is located with individuals, it is functional for the science system as it unburdens scientific communication by drawing attention to probably important contributions. This focus on the contribution to sustained communications in science represents the second way of conceptualizing audits.

Compared with the Matthew effect, audits are also considered unfair, but can, in clear contrast with reputation, be linked to identifiable decisions. In other words, audits are not general indications given by an invisible hand but carried out on the basis of formalized, quantified and reproducible assessments. Secondly, as far as the continuation of communication is concerned, the concept of uncertainty absorption developed by Simon and March summarizes how such assessments guide and structure further communication. Fundamentally, uncertainty absorption means that "...interferences are drawn from a body of evidence and the interferences instead of the evidence itself are then communicated" ([11], p. 165). Those interferences are, for example, the number of publications, graduates and the amount of third-party funding that may guide university decision-making and shape the allocation of attention and resources. From the perspective of communication theories, a critical contrast with reputation concerns the possibility to criticize audit results and control them. Audits can be contested, whereas reputation can only be accepted or ignored as its origin and 'methodology' is blurred for the observer.<sup>2</sup> Thus, although the function of audits for the new university system seems close to the traditional system, the specific factors that characterize audits: organization, decision-making and (much more) explicit assessments, impact on governance and in turn the social dimension of the university in new ways.

### The 'audit university'

The main feature of the new university may be recapitulated in the concept of the audit university (e.g. [12], pp. 94–131). The audit university highlights the new governance strategy as well as growing demands on public accountability, turning the university into an increasingly complex 'multiversity' [13] that can no longer be comprehensively described with reference to collegiality and trust. Expectations in the audit university are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, observational management tools are expected to have a crucial impact on the governance of higher education,<sup>3</sup> as they promise to foster academic managerialism and entrepreneurship, turning the university into a complete organization, boosting its autonomy, the rationality of decisions and triggering the emergence of strategic skills [14]. However, the audit university must, on the other hand, also account for the reactivity of audits, i.e. the fact that the act of measuring is 'contaminated' by the reaction of its 'objects' (e.g. [6]) and for the argument of organization literature that even the entrepreneurial university is deeply rooted in the academic heartland, i.e. in the traditional common value base of a collegial institution. Thus, although governance decisions are based on audit scores, and resources and attention are reallocated accordingly, the expected degree of control promised cannot be realized, as professional and traditional forces redirect governance.

2 The contestation of audits hardly takes place other than in the form of new, complementary audits ([8], p. 11).

3 The increasing importance of observational management tools does not imply that hierarchies, bureaucratic routines and contracts, just to name a few traditional tools, have no currency in the management of universities anymore. With the label Audit University as an additional layer of tools, its consequences for university governance is brought to our attention.

Focusing on social dimension, the internal tensions and complexities of the new university are described in the dynamic asymmetry between principal and agents, which is based on the assumption of an informational opaqueness and in turn fundamental mistrust between those two actors.

### **The principal–agent relationship**

The asymmetry of the principal–agent relationship is the *raison d'être* of audits and is therefore also a constitutive element of the audit university. Some scholars conceptualize this relation as a matter of fact, whereas others have interpreted it as a normative governance model. In the second sense, the principal–agent relationship is no recent invention. Strathern [15] traced the principal–agent relationship back to the emergence of written university exams in the second half of the 18th Century through which the state was established as principal and the university as agent. Within the collegial university, organizational matters were still managed through 'invisible' institutional settings based on trust among scholars and common values. With NPM, the principal–agent model was installed as an indispensable normative design element of university governance, reproducing the traditional asymmetry of state and university also at the organizational level. As a consequence, the role of the Vice Chancellor and of the central administration gains importance: they are principals, whereas departments and scholars are identified as agents, and in a further step, are transformed into resources for strategic planning. This reform impacts university governance; trust in scholars dissolves and is replaced by trust in systems and formalized procedures.

As a result of designing university governance according to the principal–agent asymmetry, the central administration gains control over all university resources. This implies that the range of decisions taken centrally needs to be expanded from administrative and financial issues to decisions including research and teaching, academic appointments, and strategic issues. With this expansion of responsibility in breadth and depth, the central administration experiences difficulties in making rational decisions, as the often-contradictory agendas of research and teaching, competing agents and adequate tools cannot be resolved easily. As a consequence, systematic and formalized control is implemented. However, the formal control threatens to overburden the organization. This overload can be illustrated in the social dimension when Scholz and Stein [16] note that newly appointed professors who fully accept the entrepreneurial shift in university governance are inclined to maximize benefits through negotiating directly with the central administration. Such 'individualization' of resource allocation provides the entrepreneurs with advantages at the expense of departments and other colleagues. This new development brings about a presidential feudalism that needs to find ways of reducing the unfolding complexity of multiple negotiations as what seems reasonable from the point of view of individual faculty members may overwhelm the central administration. In other words, the diversity of the numerous individual interests increases the complexity of the general planning process, and Scholz and Stein expect, as a common interest in the university cannot be identified, that a coherent and sustainable governance strategy cannot and will not be developed. Therefore they hypothesize that regardless of the potentially

enlightening effects of audits, auditing at the organizational level ends in a systemic failure of the university.

Yet, this hypothesis does not fully apply in higher education as universities develop strategies to contain these failures, one of the solutions being the renewal of personal trust. But before discussing trust, we examine some of the other solutions to this organizational overload.

## **Unburdening university governance**

At the political level, audits such as the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) provide an opinion on the research strength of institutes or departments and thereby give a rough guideline for resource allocation, the effects of which have been studied in great detail (e.g. [17]). For the purpose of university governance, those audits are supplemented and sometimes substituted by local assessments. Either system-wide assessments are reproduced locally (e.g. anticipating the RAE [18]) or comprehensive and formalized management systems are established to ensure a continuous flow of detailed, governance-relevant information. For this purpose, the HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) trusted in risk management, because “there are genuine business benefits to be gained [...] quite apart from improvements in accountability and shareholder confidence” ([19], p. 1). HEFCE emphasized that all universities develop their individual ‘risk appetite’ and risk management therefore needs to be adapted to local circumstances. In Germany, TQM (Total Quality Management) is widely applied for the same end (e.g. see [20]).

Information gathering through management systems cannot resolve the organizational overload triggered by audits, and therefore universities apply additional strategies that have the specific aim to stabilize governance structures and make them more predictable, with the effect that efficiency and rationality may turn out to be of secondary importance for governance.

## **Bundling large-scale structures**

A first strategy to simplify governance is to bundle research projects into groups or clusters. For example, my university in Bielefeld has recently introduced five focal areas (Profilschwerpunkte), which thematically clusters projects in the Excellence Initiative and other large-scale research. Seen through the lenses of the overload-hypothesis, the establishment of such focal areas reduces the complexity of negotiating with individual entrepreneurs and shifts attention to the representatives of the focal areas (and attributing them Dean-like powers). At the same time, this administrative relief is not without costs for the university, as these clusters increasingly compete with the departments, that with some right, fear being degraded to administrative entities responsible for teaching only, and to become a ‘quarry’ for centrally developed research plans. Moreover, the coordination at the departmental level is complicated by the interdisciplinary nature of these focal areas: what eases the burden on central administration overloads departmental administrations as they have to coordinate their input not only internally, but also among each other.

### Turning everything into a project

When large-scale research cooperation dominates universities, the effects of the project as a form of organizing university governance become discernible. Basically, stable university structures, such as chairs or research institutes, cannot provide the needed flexibility to the research process. This flexibility is ensured by projects. They provide a viable form to unburden universities from committing to ideas or persons for a long time. According to Torka ([20], p. 71), the concept of a project means that within a clearly defined period of time, a group of collaborators with a very different standing, contractually commits itself to a specific topic, a predetermined methodology and, most important of all, the promise of a predictable outcome. Projects not only unburden the university, but also relieve researchers from a lifelong dedication and thus turn research interests into episodic commitment. However, the advantages of projects can only be harvested within a strong organization that bridges these fragments and stabilizes results, often in the form of (interdisciplinary) institutes. Luhmann ([10], p. 324), too, emphasizes that,

*“...the temporal form of research projects pervades all areas of research, all disciplines of the scientific system. Therefore, scientific research depends on organization to a previously unimaginable extent.”* (Translation by M.H.)

In the ‘audit university’, the focus on research projects attracts particular attention, as projects are the major source of additional income. For example, the programmatic core of the application of Heidelberg University to the 2007 Excellence Initiative promises to transform virtually any societal problems into interdisciplinary research projects, suggesting that the organization has control over research activities. In that sense, the project is a promise of internal control for the central administration, but also a means of self-observation as third-party allocations quickly identify the relevant scholars and institutions, and university administrations select the focus of their attention accordingly. The audit university is driven by these competitive and visible items, implying that projects are more attractive than structures. As a consequence, universities will aim for the maximization of income through research funding. For example, in a strategic paper by the University of Heidelberg, it is claimed that all resources provided for research by the university must be applied to acquire third-party funding. This demand about rigorous reinvestment may be interpreted as ‘Academic Protestantism’, substituting curiosity with maximizing the financial turnover, sometimes losing sight of academic interests. In the social dimension, this ‘Protestantism’ has effects on the long-term employment and the careers of young researchers, and research is driven by concern for re-employment rather than by substantive research interests.<sup>4</sup>

### Decoupling of teaching and research

University governance can be unburdened by the gradual decoupling of research and teaching. Modern university has been characterized by the unity of teaching

<sup>4</sup> The notion of an academic proletariat was developed for this phenomenon as early as the 1980s [22].

and research establishing the new as the distinguishing focus of modern higher education. The search for novelty makes organizational control and governance difficult, as no organizational routines exist that safely generate innovation. To simplify the administrative task, universities uncouple the two functions and focus on research innovation. In the social dimension it means, for example, to differentiate academic scholars into a large, but increasingly insignificant, group of teachers and a small, but influential, group of researchers. Steinert [23] outlines how this development is sedimented in the allocation of teaching duties, where excellent scholars concentrate on doctoral students and normal professors are predominantly concerned with MA students, whereas BA students are 'left' to part-time teachers. Many current conflicts in a university develop along this differentiation between teaching and research, not least as it represents a crucial challenge to the remaining basic collegiality of academics.

This very preliminary overview suggested how university governance is unburdened by these (and other) strategies. The strategies not only rely on audit results, but simultaneously reinforce their use. Thus the success of these strategies depends on the extent to which they contribute to further auditing. Focusing more narrowly on the social dimension of auditing at the university level, we see trust re-emerging with a new type of actor in university governance, the auditors.

## Auditors

The principal-agent model is expected to handle the unequal distribution of information and knowledge to the advantage of the principal. As the principal cannot collect and assess the information himself, a new type of actor emerges that, in the audit model, is ascribed an invisible role. The focus on the dyadic relationship of agent and principal implies that because auditors are invited by the principal into the control regime, the auditor is assumed to take the principal's position. This contradicts the idea of audits as independent and professional. Moreover, the subordination of auditors under the principal would be dysfunctional, as only a 'third actor', located between principal and agents can control the agents but, by reference to standards of best practice, can also protect the principal against his idiosyncratic and partial positions.<sup>5</sup> Thus, if auditors are independent professionals, the dyadic relationship needs to be expanded to a triadic one. As a consequence instead of top-down control, auditing becomes a process of organizational negotiations and bartering, depending on local alliances and established decisional structures. The organizational overload is not contained but actually increased with auditing.

### Emergence of auditors at the university level

When the new principal requires more and more detailed information at the university level, not only on research performance, but also on, among other

5 For example, Marx [24] claimed to distance himself from Hegel's [25] analysis of the Prussian Bureaucracy, which although state administration is at the side of the bourgeois class, it is impartial in order to protect particular capitalist interests against themselves.

aspects, teaching, administration, knowledge transfer, infrastructure and the assessment of students, this new hunger for information can be satisfied neither by external auditors (consultancy firms or regulators) nor by the university's central administration alone. Local auditors emerge as a new type of information broker between agents and principal. In the case of risk management these auditors were labelled risk owners. They monitor specific activities inside and outside university and scrutinize them through a risk-lens. Ideally, risk owners are experts, objective and reliable sources for internal audits; practically, the selection of risk owners is less straightforward and based rather on their position in the hierarchy than on their expertise and on the trust in these risk owners (for more detail, see [26]).

The practical side of risk ownership can be illustrated by the example of an elite institution that describes its main learning risk as "teaching experience may undermine the market position". The risk ownership is allocated to the Teaching Committee that derives the relevant information from routine surveys of students' learning experience. In its assessments, the Teaching Committee focuses on a limited set of indicators of good teaching. For example, it assumes that high fees and contact hours with teachers positively influence the experience of students, whereas the growing number of part-time teachers, the fundamental tension between teaching obligations and the need to perform in the RAE has a negative impact on the student's experience. Comparing this assessment of student satisfaction with assessments from other universities makes it safe to assume that the risk owners develop (more or less explicit) 'theories' of how universities work and base their assessment on them. We find that the 'objective', evidence-based opinion of auditors is tainted by a variety of organizational and other factors. Organizational factors refer, for example, to the fact that the focus on an organizationally weak group, such as part-time teachers, suggests that management are shaped less by the intention to rationalize university management, but rather subscribes to organizational power relations and issues of manageability [26]. One of the other factors concerns the extent to which auditors can be trusted with the responsibilities they should assume. The concluding section focuses on the need for personal trust.

### Restoring personal trust

With audits, it was suggested that trust in individuals becomes obsolete and the demand for more trust represents, if anything, a nostalgic perspective. My analysis suggested that trust plays a role and more specifically that two groups of agents are trusted to contain the organizational overload that unfolds with the auditing of universities. On the one hand of the objective of auditing, scholars with a high audit potential are selected and trusted. On the other hand of the auditing process, auditors emerge as the other trusted group of agents that the 'audit university' cannot do without.<sup>6</sup> Management relies on their expertise and willingness to

<sup>6</sup> Overlaps between the two groups are not only possible, but highly probable and lead to a form of self-control of a small elitist group within universities.

assume responsibilities in case of failures. In both cases, audits are functional in the identification of these persons, and they are functional for the continuation of the auditing process. The emergence of these trustees in university governance implies that personal trust in a traditional sense regains a role, however, in two features. First, it is not unstructured trust to all university members anymore, but in the audit university secondary trust relations derived from audit scores emerge and in turn structure university governance. For example, the German Excellence Initiative suggests that central administration invests trusts only in those persons that commit themselves to large-scale research, and in that way contribute to good audit results. Becoming an auditor is often related to positions in the organizational hierarchy and thus linked to commitment as well as audit success. Secondly, trust is one solution among others to the fundamental flaws of controllability in university. Organizational literature has extensively reported on the organizational deficiencies of the university that were briefly touched on, namely the difficulty to control and govern research and teaching. As research and teaching are unclear organizational technologies [27], control measures assumptions rather than realities, as “we miss the correct instrument to measure which explanation is relevant and therefore often rely on highly speculative interpretations” ([4], p. 73). Consequently, universities invent causal factors and relations, and personal trust may be one of the inventions and strategies that allow sense to be made of the organizational complexities. Trust allows for making sense of even complicated organizational realities as it is a blurred, value-laden concept and due to these features offers connections to virtually all aspects of university governance. In this context, trust might not only be a tool to establish meaningful theories of how universities work, but also become an indicator of the trustworthiness of administrations as only those administrations that still trust in (some of) their employees can be expected to be successful, as they are able to handle the organizational overload of auditing.

The legitimacy of audits through allocating trust is reminiscent of the organizational use of reputation that has been seen as a generic indicator relating to virtually any event within and outside of universities (see [26,28]). For example in the context of university risk management, we can distinguish three sources of reputational risk: (i) the corruption of the invisible hand allocating reputation, e.g. if politics or economic interest systematically prejudices the attribution of reputation; (ii) confusing, unambiguous signals of reputation are sent with the consequence that scholars or students misread the signals and act inappropriately; and (iii) the loss of reputation, measured e.g. in diminishing league table results or rankings. This loss of reputation assumes the function of generic academic risks as it can be triggered by virtually any event within and outside of universities. In risk registers, reputational risks include all events from property management to the impact of press statements by staff, bad press about student excursions, equality and diversity issues, to a dirty classroom. Individual but increasingly organizational or aggregated reputation is a decisive indicator of success. In the audit university, reputation is taken out of the hands of the academic community and utilized as an all-purpose tool that can be adapted to virtually all needs of organizational governance. Similarly, trust may be utilized as such an all-purpose

tool of governance, as everything can be connected to or be made dependent on trust, putting enormous pressure on the trustees.

Personal trust is restored in the audit university on the side of the auditees, of the auditors and of the legitimacy of the auditing process and may be perceived as a helpful, meaningful mechanism to reduce the complexity of governance, and, as such, it contributes to the containment of the cognitive or administrative overload in the audit university.

## Comments by Kerstin Sahlin<sup>7</sup>

### Audit society and distrust spirals

Michael Huber has given an excellent overview of how the audit society has come to permeate higher education and how it has changed the very dynamics of trust and change in the higher education sector. When Michael Power coined the concept of the audit society he showed how this audit society partly grew out of distrust in those operations that were increasingly subject to audits, but also that audits fed on this distrust further into what can be envisioned as distrust spirals. When applying this reasoning to higher education, Michael Huber finds that trust, and distrust, in higher education, and the reputation of Higher Education Institutions, is increasingly being shaped by audits and risk assessments. This also means that the building of trust and reputation is no longer primarily in the hands of researchers and scholars themselves, but is largely shaped by those many independent scrutinizers that make up the organizing of the audit society.

I will not repeat Michael Huber's arguments here, but I will pick up two specific points from his presentation and illustrate them with a few brief examples from the Swedish university landscape. A first point is about the emerging distrust of the audit society. I will briefly comment on how distrust follows from and feeds on the very way in which higher education is currently organized and scrutinized. The second issue that I would like to comment on is how this emerging distrust may affect change and the possibilities of effecting changes in Higher Education Institutions.

Michael Huber notes that distrust follows from the very way in which higher education is organized and scrutinized. He discussed two main drivers for distrust as it evolves with this organizational development and with the emerging audit society. First, he discussed the organizational overload hypothesis. As I see it this has mainly to do with what can be described as internal distrust. With a transformed funding of research and an increased dependence on external project and program funding, and with the proliferation of audits, evaluations and other forms of scrutiny, many university leaders experience a greater demand for coordinating and managing Higher Education Institutions. Top-level management is strengthened and university administration expands. In a system that is traditionally governed by collegiate principles, where those doing the research and teaching were those who made decisions, the very distance between top management and

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the researchers and teachers that are managed fuels distrust. A negotiation culture evolves within the university that compromises the traditional meritocratic culture of this system. On top of this there is a capacity problem. Central administration and top-level management only have limited knowledge and contact with the broad spectrum of research and teaching. A spiral may evolve if university management translates signals of a fragmented and not fully controlled university organization as signalling a need for yet even more elaborate administrative structures.

A second driver to distrust could rather be described as external. It is clear when viewing organizational reforms of universities that the prevalent organizational ideals and reforms are not at all unique to the university sector. Related changes in management and organization have swept through the entire public sector and to some extent the entire organizational world. So, even if the organizational reforms clearly affect university activities and the role of universities in society, changes in university governance and organization can be explained only to a limited extent by changes in research or education policy. Instead, we can see that organizational reforms, as well as ideals and principles of what constitutes good governance and good management, follow more general trends, where certain ways of governing and managing appear ideal at certain times. These ideals then form templates for how to assess organizations and also for what reforms of such organizing appear important or even necessary. Many audits of research and teaching integrate such organizational ideals or templates in their assessments research and teaching.

In Sweden (and in other countries), the evaluation, assessment and scrutiny of higher education is a densely populated organizational landscape where the National Audit Office, the National Agency for Higher Education, individual research councils, and a whole set of national and international organizations are scrutinizing and auditing various aspects of universities. An area that has grown dramatically around Europe is the assessment of risk, from which have followed extensive efforts to establish procedures, management units and control measures for the management and control of risk [26]. A few years ago, a law was passed in Sweden that demanded all public agencies, including universities, to regularly perform risk assessments and to build up risk-control procedures. The kind of risk that has been most emphasized in these assessments is reputational risk. As a response, universities tend to build elaborate administrative structures. With this development, Huber notes a shift from trust in individuals to systemic level trust. Reputation becomes key, and an ideal of transparency follows, everything should be possible to measure, explain and compare. Operations, activities and results that do not follow the widespread templates appear alien or at worst wrong. And, of course, no operation can function fully according to the book. This means that every audit and every risk assessment will detect things that deviate from the expectations or that cannot easily be justified and explained. What has evolved is a society characterized not only by extensive and growing documentation, evaluation, auditing and scrutiny, but also a society in which operations and organizations are increasingly structured in ways that make them 'auditable'.

### How to effect changes in the audit society?

Research, at least basic research and research at the forefront, is by its very nature a risky business. We do not know the end result, and we cannot plan and foresee what will happen. In contrast, the organizational and audit trends pointed out above and described and discussed in detail by Michael Huber, seek to minimize risk. General organizing principles of these kinds did not originate in universities, but rather have spread globally across organizations, sectors and continents. Current research policies in many countries allocate resources in the form of specially planned, often multidisciplinary and largely applied, research programmes. Such research is subject to planning, evaluation and assessment in detail. There is a risk that such programmes prioritize risk-adverse behaviour. Highly uncertain basic research, with an open-ended future, runs the risk of being seen as too risky, uncontrollable and impossible to plan. Templates and ideals against which university operations are measured and assessed are built on general organizational principles or they are built on previous experiences. This may result in a management and planning structure of universities that does not take the specifics of university life, and of research, into account. This emphasis on management, planning and audit may also result in conservative rather than visionary research. Research programmes are formed around issues that are already known or at least those where results can be envisioned within knowledge frames of today. In contrast, we know that much of previous ground-breaking research has been clearly seen as counterintuitive, not possible or simply unimportant when first presented.

I have painted a rather pessimistic picture of the future for research in the emerging audit society. Can we do something about it? I will end this brief comment in a more optimistic manner. I do think that there are important ways for us to embrace the audit society without being trapped by it. If it is true that many audits and management tools are based on generalized organizing principles rather than on the specific logics of research and higher education, I think that we need to argue for and explain the logics of doing research. If it is true that the audit society drives distrust, an important countermove from us as university people is to seek to build trust, and we need to take the effort of maintaining and developing unique governing models for universities. Collegiate models have for many years, at least to a large extent, worked as ways of governing and scrutinizing research. We need to remind ourselves and others how such models work and how they should work, and we need always to find ways in which to combine such a mode of governing with those that appear to be demanded by the audit society.

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