

Trust in universities, audit society, the media and markets

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Basic considerations

At the end of a volume such as this one, where trust in universities – or more generally HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) – has been in focus, it is appropriate to come back to the question of why trust is so important for these institutions. Needless to say, trust and reputation are becoming increasingly important for most organizations as well as individuals. However, there are reasons that point to the fact that trust is particularly important for HEIs, since their core activities, education and research are associated with great uncertainty. In terms of education, students, by definition, are largely in the dark when they choose their education. To start with, they cannot have much knowledge of the content of an education that they have not yet gone through. If they did have this knowledge, then there would hardly be any point in their choosing that education. Secondly, no matter how much they like their education, they do not repeat it. Thirdly, only in exceptional cases do they ever hear anything negative about the education they chose, as alumni are eager to have their education perceived by the job market as good. Moreover, it can often take some time before students can know whether their education was good or not. Indeed, surveys of student perceptions of components of their education show that they change over time. Elements that got rave reviews in course evaluations tend to be less appreciated after a period of work experience, whereas less appreciated elements are subsequently regarded as much more important [1].

The uncertainty associated with research is, if possible, even greater than that surrounding education. On the one hand, HEIs must steer clear of anything unscientific by constantly reviewing research presented to ensure that it follows the established rules. On the other hand, research is expected to produce breakthroughs and present new, preferably pioneering, research findings, which entails a break with the established thinking. This is the tension that defines the cutting edge of science. Answers can never be regarded as definitive. To use Karl Popper's [2] argument: even though all swans have always been white, one day a black swan might appear.

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The conclusion that trust is so important for HEIs naturally leads to a second question: to what extent are these institutions trusted? Several of the earlier chapters have indicated that HEIs have lost trust and that they were much more trusted before. It could be said that in the early times of the presently ancient universities, there was not much to be trusted. They were to a large extent seminaries for the education of priests and, even in the following centuries, the HEIs were few, small and insignificant. They were also considered too isolated, which stimulated the foundation of academies, particularly in Western Europe [3,4]. However, with the advent of modern science in the 18th Century and onwards, HEIs acquired higher status. As mentioned in Chapter 1, a significant event was the founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who emphasized the dual mission of educating and research for HEIs. Thereafter, students came to be involved in research, thereby expanding its scope. However, the strong expansion of HEIs occurred in the 20th Century, particularly after the Second World War. Since then, the landscape of HEIs has changed considerably. They are no longer few, small and insignificant. Instead they are numerous, much larger and very significant. This expansion of the higher education sector must be interpreted as a strong sign of trust in HEIs. National and regional politicians across party frontiers have agreed on the need to expand higher education and to put resources into research in order to be competitive in the modern world. As such, policy on higher education and research has become the modern defence policy: teaching and research have, in many countries, taken the place of armed forces.³

Parallel to the described growth of the system for HEIs, there has been a considerable scepticism towards scientists over time. This is clearly demonstrated by Roslyn Haynes [5] in her book *From Faust to Strangelove*, which presents representations of the scientist in western literature. In contrast to positive pictures of Victorian scientists, scientists as adventurers and scientists as heroes, she provides a number of negative images of scientists. An early example is Jonathan Swift's [6] *Gulliver's Travels*, followed by works such as Mary Shelley's [7] *Frankenstein*, Herbert G. Wells' [8] *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Aldous Huxley's [9] *Brave New World* and Kurt Vonnegut's [10] *Cat's Cradle*. So although expectations have been built up regarding the positive contributions of HEIs, there have been recurrent fears that scientists will lose control, be amoral and inhuman. The questioning of trust in HEIs can therefore not be considered a new phenomenon. However, as pointed out by Ray Spier (Chapter 2) and Stephanie J. Bird (Chapter 3), ethical issues, not least in relation to students, have today come into more focus, and every now and then arouse public debate. Over the last few years, a number of cases of fraud (Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, Georgios Chatzimarkakis, Silvana Koch-Mehrin, Milena Penkowa etc.) have reminded the HEIs of threats to the trust in them.

The negative accounts, as those mentioned, do not seem to have had any significant effect on trust in HEIs, however. Studies of trust in various institutions in society that have been undertaken in Sweden even indicate that the

³ In Sweden, this is true even physically. Universities and university colleges have taken over the buildings of the old regiments.

public trust in HEIs is very high in relation to other institutions. According to a survey in 2009, two-thirds of the interviewees had a medium or high degree of trust in universities. These institutions thereby outnumbered the Bank of Sweden (56%), the Government (47%), radio/TV (41%) and the Parliament of Sweden (40%). Political parties scored a mere 16%, whereas the EU (European Union) commission was on par with The Coca Cola Company with 22% [11].⁴

The expansion of the field as well as the results from the above survey may indicate that HEIs constitute a success story. However, it is also a story with risks, since expectations from politicians and individuals may be too high. Politicians may become disappointed with the deliveries of scientists, and individuals may find that the academic degrees they have achieved did not lead to the jobs that were acquired by earlier alumni. In relation to these risks it is important for HEIs to continue the building of trust. Therefore, although there are a number of complaints from the academics, they are, as demonstrated in this volume, not passive in modern society, with increasing interaction with auditors, the media and markets. In the present section, we discuss each of these relationships on the basis of the earlier chapters.

HEIs and the audit society

It has been evident from the earlier chapters, particularly by Enders, Huber and Weingart (Chapters 5–7), that HEIs are indeed facing the audit society. The measurement of performance has become widely applied in systems of HEIs, with the intention to build trust by demonstrating the rational management and productivity of HEIs. This is happening on many different levels. Ministries are following the competitiveness of their researchers in different fields and start worrying when citation figures decline. Agencies for HEIs and funding bodies evaluate different fields or specific initiatives. University leaders start evaluations of their HEIs in order to find out where their ‘golden nuggets’ are located. Deans and department chairs continuously follow the publications, and, albeit often to a less extent, the teaching evaluations of their faculty. And, in most cases, there are links to funding. Key areas lagging behind may get extra resources, whereas others may be closed down. Faculty members with successes in top journals get less teaching, whereas their colleagues may be punished with more.

In relation to these developments it is appropriate to ask: how did this come about? What were the driving forces? Who were the actors pushing for them? In attempt to answer these questions we can first note that auditing is not something peculiar to HEIs. It is occurring in all institutions. It is a profession that has developed over the last century or so [13]. It benefits from the fact that corporate laws decree that authorized auditors should go through the books of companies above a certain size. Auditing has then spread to other types of organizations in a world of efforts to show efficiency and return of operations. The latter, in turn, as pointed out in Chapter 1, is a result of the diffusion of modern management

4 For similar evidence for the U.K., as pointed out by John O’Leary, see [12].

methods, for which HEIs themselves have played an important role through the emergence and expansion of management education in HEIs. This started on both sides of the Atlantic from the latter part of the 19th Century, and advanced considerably after the Second World War [14,15]. At present, management education is a dominant element in most HEIs, providing considerable income streams.⁵

The above are general features of these developments. However, when it comes to more specific forces behind auditing of HEIs, the most important factor is probably the expansion of the system, i.e. the massification of higher education through the foundation of a large number of new institutions. This has paved the way for a demand in ministries of education for devices to differentiate between them in resource allocation. However, HEIs and faculty members are not innocent victims in this process. They also like to show their superiority in relation to competitors. As has been pointed out in the media chapters (Chapters 8–10) and will be discussed below, this has led to considerable promotional efforts in the media. However, inside academia this is not enough: in the fight for resources it is hard facts from evaluations and citations that count. This means that insiders are often very active in auditing in many different roles.

As pointed out by Enders, Huber and Weingart (Chapters 5–7), auditing is an arena for negotiations, where both insiders and outsiders take part. It is a matter of the design, the choice of evaluators, the external and internal uses as well as interpretations of audits. A particular feature in academic auditing or evaluations is that it is difficult for persons outside the HEI system to be evaluators. Therefore they are chosen among academics that are trusted, which is particularly important for the acceptance and interpretation of evaluations.

However, the use of peers is costly and may also lead to complaints about subjectivity. This in turn has led to an increasing formalization. In the words of Michael Huber (Chapter 6): “Instead of relying on personal trust, collegiality and common values, audit-based university governance relies increasingly on formal, impersonal control mechanisms”.

It is obvious in the chapters that there are complaints regarding both informal and formal auditing. In terms of evaluations it is argued that they lead to an organizational overload. An often-heard complaint is therefore: “Either you are evaluating another institution or discipline, or you are evaluated yourself”. Those familiar with transaction cost theory [16] therefore complain that transaction costs have become too high.

Different types of metrics, which have become more easily available and analysed through modern information technology, have likewise been criticized, although for other reasons. For example, they force researchers to stick with mainstream research in order to be published, they make researchers strategic in their publishing by cutting up their research results into LPU (Least Publishable Units), and they are more suited for some scientific fields than others.

However, although there are a lot of complaints regarding the burgeoning auditing, it should thus be noted that HEIs and their faculty play significant roles

5 It has to be admitted that management education was not received with great enthusiasm when it was first proposed. It was met with the same scepticism that all new disciplines face, and could in many cases only enter academia through the addition of private donations.

in them. They do so in a struggle for resources among institutions as well as among scientific fields with the hope of gaining resources. They do so in order to gain trust in HEIs in general and their own institution in particular.

HEIs and the media

It has also been evident from the earlier chapters, particularly those by O’Leary, Park and Rogerson (Chapters 8–10), that the media are playing an increasingly significant role for HEIs. As pointed out by John O’Leary (Chapter 8), who has vast experience of the field, the interest from both parties has changed considerably in the last few decades. Representatives of HEIs are no longer afraid of the media, but instead want to be visible in order to strengthen the brand of their institution or themselves. In the same way media companies have a higher interest in HEI reporting. Thus in the words of O’Leary: “academia and journalism have moved closer to one another than any observer would have predicted even 30 years ago”. He offers two explanations for this development: professionalization of the information industry in general and the massification of higher education in particular. In terms of the former, there has been a vast expansion of people educated for the media in schools of journalism, schools of communication etc. As a result, these graduates have developed into what Etienne Wenger [17] labels as a community of practice, whose members know each other well but who work for different employers. Some are employed by media companies, others by media consultants and by corporations as well as other institutions as communication officers (see further [18]). As shown in an earlier study [19], this development also includes HEIs, which at present often have extensive offices of communication with close relations to the Vice-Chancellors. These are no longer merely defensive to protect their institutions from bad press, but rather work actively with promotion. In addition, university leaders use blogs, Twitter and Facebook, to an increasing extent and are in some instances, as pointed out by Robert Kvavik (Chapter 10), even subject to GPS tracking systems.

The massification of higher education, already mentioned in the previous section, has had significant consequences on the field. In addition to contributing to the audit expansion, it has made HEIs as well as individuals eager to promote themselves by being visible in the media. Again, the uncertainty of the output of HEIs plays a role by stimulating efforts to create images of high or even ‘world-class’ quality. As is made evident by several of the chapters (particularly those of Huber, O’Leary and Drori et al. in Chapters 6, 8 and 11 respectively), rankings of HEIs have become a significant feature in the relationship between the media and HEIs. Published by various newspapers or magazines they are, as demonstrated not least by the comment by Thorsten Nybom (Chapter 8), the object of considerable criticism. However, at the same time it has to be acknowledged that HEIs take rankings seriously. HEIs boast about their positions on their websites and include in their strategy documents their ambitions to become “among the ‘x’ best universities in the world”. It is also evident from research by Linda Wedlin [20] that HEIs take an active part in negotiations to design the rankings. In addition, it is obvious that the rankings have an impact on the working conditions of faculty

members through pressures to publish in the top journals. Finally, it can be noted that HEIs have responded to the media rankings by creating their own rankings, for example, the Chinese Shanghai ranking (<http://www.shanghairanking.com>), the French l'École des Mines ranking (<http://www.mines-paristech.fr/Actualites/PR/Ranking2011EN-Fortune2010.html>) and the Swedish U-rank (<http://www.urank.se>).

Rankings constitute one method to differentiate among the numerous HEIs. Another, demonstrated by Gili Drori, Guiseppe Delmestri and Achim Oberg in Chapter 11, is the efforts of HEIs to promote themselves through branding. For this type of promotion, as the authors point out, it is important to note that such efforts are not only directed towards the external world, but are to a considerable extent aimed at the internal organization. It is also food for thought that even small and highly localized universities are communicating messages as if they belonged to the Ivy League.

In addition to the above relationships between HEIs and the media, there is, as mentioned in many of the chapters, increasing interaction between individual academics and the media. Although publishing has long been a significant activity in scholarly work, in the last few decades it has become even more important. In the words of André Oosterlinck (Chapter 4): “publishing is a social requirement”. This is true for textbooks for education as well as journal articles and monographs reporting on research. As a result we can see a symbiotic relationship between scholars and the media. The former are eager to get their research results published and in some cases to earn money on best-selling textbooks, whereas media companies want to develop high-prestige journals and find the best-selling authors. In this interaction, faculty members offer publishers several advantages: they submit a lot of manuscripts, they review manuscripts for free and they are key gatekeepers in selecting textbooks for their students. In return faculty members can gain reputation and sometimes even income streams. At the same time, as pointed out by Robert Park in Chapter 9, they have to safeguard their role as critical scrutinizers of publications that are not living up to scientific standards. In order to be trusted, in the long run, HEIs have also an important task of unlearning, i.e. to work for the abandonment of old truths.

According to John O’Leary (Chapter 8), we have only seen the beginning of the development of a much closer relationship between HEIs and the media. Furthermore, we may expect strategic actions on the part of the media industry: at present, companies such as *The Washington Post* and Pearson are already described as education and media companies. The University of Oxford even has a Rupert Murdoch Professorship of Language and Communication, and more of this kind may be expected. In U.S. universities, endowed chairs are becoming more and more common. Furthermore, most prestigious business schools no longer carry the name of their university but that of a donor.

It should also be mentioned, as stressed by Simon Rogerson in Chapter 10, that the relationship between HEIs and the media has radically changed through the development of modern ICT (information and communication technology), implying that “information of nearly every form is available at the touch of a button, the click of a mouse or the pointing of a cursor”. This raises a number of questions about information integrity, i.e. information accuracy, consistency and

reliability. In terms of fraud it both provides opportunities for plagiarism as well as for control (the latter through systems such as VroniPlag Wiki).

All in all, we can again conclude that HEIs are not innocent victims. Although complaints are often heard about bad media coverage, rankings, publishing pressures etc., representatives of HEIs on all levels work actively with the media to promote their institutions or themselves. All these efforts boil down to struggles to gain trust.

HEIs and markets

Several of the contributions to the volume, particularly those by Drori et al., Natile and McKelvey (Chapters 11–13), point to the movement of HEIs into governance through markets. To quote Maureen McKelvey: “The metaphor of competition is being used more often, and can be seen as more relevant now than in the past”. However, it could also be argued that HEIs have always been in competition for students, faculty and financial resources. The major change therefore appears rather to be a question of transparency in the competition. In the words of Jürgen Enders “universities are no longer funded for what they are but for what they do” (Chapter 5). Behind this development we can see a general trend in society towards market governance. For the field of HEIs there is no doubt that the addition of a large number of institutions has made political resource allocation more difficult, although there are nevertheless limits to the market solution. As pointed out by André Oosterlinck in Chapter 4: “Not every university can have a Large Hadron Collider in its backyard”. It is also clear that HEIs face two types of market forces: a competition for students and faculty as well as a competition for research funding.

Competition for students and faculty

In terms of education it is evident that the last few decades have brought the increasing stress of international competition. In Europe this has been particularly emphasized through the Bologna process discussed by André Oosterlinck. The basic idea behind this is that students should be able to move freely between HEIs in Europe. This can be seen as part of a more general tendency to give emphasis to internationalization as a quality factor in HEIs. It has also been seen as a revenue generator to attract foreign students. However, as argued in another paper [21], national differences still constitute strong barriers to the mobility of graduates between national systems. And, as a matter of fact, it may even be interpreted as a sign of an overcapacity of a specific HEI system that students have to be brought in from other countries. Nevertheless, the rankings discussed above have prompted many HEIs to conceive of themselves as global players. And, as pointed out by André Oosterlinck (Chapter 4), another basic idea behind the Bologna process, in addition to stimulating mobility within Europe, is that European degrees should compete with those from leading U.S. universities. However, at the end of the day, most HEIs basically recruit nationally, or even locally, for national labour markets. Owing to the expansion of the system, that competition has also become fierce, which, in the words of Thorsten Nybom (Chapter 8), often has

been manifested in “glossy folders of the run-of-the-mill travel agency model”. At present, they are more and more supplemented by promotions via social media. In light of this competition for students, trust is playing a significant role, particularly for HEIs that charge tuition fees, but for others as well. Even without fees, students have considerable costs and abstain from regular income during some years of their life. Trust in specific HEIs is also very important for employers who select among graduate applicants. In both cases, the uncertainty associated with education, discussed above, is crucial.

In the same way that competition for students has increased, there are increasing efforts to recruit faculty internationally. However, although it is true that science has always been international, it seems that there are also barriers to mobility for this market owing to personal considerations, cultural factors, language differences etc. Nevertheless, competition for faculty positions has increased due to international mobility, but even more so as a result of expansion of the various national systems.

Competition for research funding

In terms of research, the complaint is often heard that resources have deteriorated. However, as Peter Weingart points out in Chapter 7, on the whole, it has instead increased steadily in the major OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. Nevertheless, the impression of individual researchers of a resource decline does have some grounding in reality, since the average funds per researcher is lower today than in the past. This, in turn, is an effect of a more rapid increase in the number of researchers than in funding. In other words, the market for research funding has become more competitive.

Another feature that has made the research funding more competitive is that governments have increasingly tended to move from block grants to project grants. This has brought about a tough competitive environment, in which the vast majority of applicants are rejected. Needless to say, these rejections reinforce the impression of a reduction in funding.

It should also be noted, as pointed out by Kerstin Sahlin in Chapter 6, that competition for research funding is not a totally free-market competition. Although many governments have left it to the market to allocate project grants, they, or their funding agencies, have tendencies to not just be reactive to the proposals of researchers, but rather proactive, i.e. to define special research programmes that are considered to be important for the development of innovations. As discussed by Giovanni Natile in Chapter 12, these ambitions are even truer for the EU (European Union) and its ambitions to deploy KETs (Key Enabling Technologies). These efforts, in turn, are related to the expectations of HEIs as entrepreneurial strongholds contributing to regional competitiveness. In this spirit, Burton Clark [22] has even advocated the transformation of traditional HEIs to entrepreneurial universities. Peter Weingart (Chapter 7) mentions Arizona State University as an example of an institution that has entered this path, thereby abolishing the traditional disciplinary structure. Obviously, this change was undertaken with the ambition to gain more trust in the competition for resources by “accelerating the rate of transferring research achievements from the lab to the market” (Giovanni Natile, Chapter 12). Although, the jury is still

out to determine the outcome of these changes, we can note from the study by Maureen McKelvey that, in the case studies she presented in Chapter 13, it had been possible to strengthen teaching, research and societal interaction. This may not always be the case as Mode 2 research [23,24] and Triple Helix collaboration [25] may imply tensions with the traditional quality assessments, particularly in times of strong pressures for publication in top journals.

Concluding remarks

It should by now be obvious that the three features we have been dealing in this volume – auditors, the media and markets – are closely interrelated. For HEIs they are all significant in their struggle for trust. Auditors may show how well or poorly an institution performs, and the media reports on performance and provides a channel for promotion, whereas education and research are increasingly evaluated by markets.

It has been pointed out above that these features have been with HEIs for a long time, although they have become more pronounced nowadays. It has also been stressed that HEIs are not innocent victims of auditors, the media and markets. They are to a considerable extent participating in auditing, communication and competition in order to strengthen the trust in their institution or even in individuals. A significant force behind this has been the expansion of the system of HEIs all over the world, leading to more numerous and larger institutions with more students and more scholars in an increasingly diversified world of academic fields. However, of even more importance has probably been the general trend in modern society to consider the large stock corporation as the template for all other institutions, HEIs included.

The reason why the corporate model has become so widely accepted is the great visibility of a number of these in the beginning of the 21st Century. Some of them have reached sales figures that outstrip the GNP of several nations, and in this way they have become dominant in the world. In addition, daily news reports include a multiplicity of stories that focus on corporations, mainly giant, multinational, often manufacturing groups. They are in focus especially because of their importance in terms of citizens' future pensions and employment opportunities, but also because of the performance and compensation levels of their leaders. As a result, the large corporation has come to characterize the public view of how human activities should, and sometimes should not, be organized and governed.

The wide diffusion of the corporate template can be explained by the neo-institutional view that imitation constitutes one significant force for homogenization [26].⁶ It means that we can expect the most dominant and most visible actors to constitute role models, and spur others to emulate them. This has had

⁶ In addition to this force, homogenization is also reinforced by political systems and norm-governed systems. In political systems, the state, authorities, municipalities etc. establish what the constraints are and also have the authority to impose sanctions on those who violate the rules. In norm-governed systems, including professions such as medicine, law and accounting, for instance, norms are developed that members should follow.

particular effects on the view of academic leadership, which, in the wake of the confrontations with auditors, the media and markets, has tended to move from a model of *primus inter pares* in the direction of corporate leadership. However, that trend misses the particular significance of trust for HEIs in their competition to attract students, faculty and research resources. If this instead is taken into consideration the conclusion would rather be that HEIs need leaders who lead by inspiration instead of by fiat, and who are thereby trusted by subordinates as well as by stakeholders. Therefore they may be able to lead their institutions in a favourable direction, thus increasing the trust in their institution. This is indeed important, since, as shown in this volume, trust is the key issue for HEIs.

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