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## **End the Blame Game: Targeting Managers Won't Cure Universities' Ills**

"Misery narrative". That's how I heard the prevailing academic discourse on the current state of higher education described recently, as exemplified by Anonymous Academic in a recent article (*Academic ideals are being crushed to suit private-sector style management* 2 February) bemoaning the sacrifice of academic ideals on the altar of corporatisation.

Of course universities have changed dramatically over the last twenty or thirty years, and not always for the better. The twin forces of marketisation and managerialism have impacted on academic work, subjecting it to greater scrutiny and attempts at performance management. I feel sure that many academics would agree they are overburdened with administrative tasks and struggle to find time for what really matters, i.e. scholarly activity. But, are things really as bad as depicted? Perhaps the refuge of anonymity tempted Anonymous Academic to vent his or her frustrations in rather more hyperbolic terms than may otherwise have been the case. For the truth is that, despite all the recent changes to higher education, academics continue to enjoy considerably more flexibility and autonomy over their work than do most other university staff – or indeed those in other sectors.

The image of the academic as a "rare bird" with a "noble lineage" is telling and perhaps betrays rather more than the author intended about how some academics see themselves: as innately different from, and superior to, the rest of the "pets" – a view that permeates the author's portrayal of the demise of higher education.

That's not to say that the article doesn't identify some major problems, such as pay inequality. There are perhaps few people beyond the confines of a university senior management team who would find it easy to justify the yawning pay gap that is emerging between themselves and the vast majority of staff – academics or otherwise.

Where Anonymous Academic and I part company, though, is on the question of who has overseen the alleged "full-on crisis mode" of higher education. Although it is true that an increasing number of specialist managers, such as in estates and marketing, have been recruited from the private sector, with the notable exception of finance directors they are rarely given a seat at the top table (in the 'old' university sector at least). It may come as a surprise to some, but "non-academic managers recruited from the private sector" do *not* run universities, academics do. My research shows that the vast majority of vice-chancellors, deputy and pro-vice chancellors in pre-1992 universities are academics, albeit acting in a management capacity. It is not they – rather than "middle-management bureaucrats" - who are responsible for determining the strategic direction and values of the institution?

It is as if once academics cross the Rubicon onto the senior management team they are no longer regarded as belonging to the academic community, becoming instead part of "management". Perhaps this demonstrates that the gulf between university senior management teams and rank-and-file academics is more than just one of salary. In any case, if higher education is indeed in a state of crisis whereby academic ideals have been superseded by those of the private sector, it is academic managers who have led it there. And just maybe the wider academic community needs to assume some responsibility for allowing it to happen?

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