Academic identities in the managed university

Neoliberalism and resistance at Newcastle University, UK

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In an era of neoliberal reforms, academics in UK universities have become increasingly enmeshed in audit, particularly of research 'outputs'. Using the data of performance management and training documents, this paper firstly offers an analysis of the role of discourse in redefining the meaning of research, and in colonising a new kind of entrepreneurial, corporate academic. In the second part of the paper, we narrate a case study of resistance to management by metrics. In 2015, Newcastle University managers introduced a new set of research 'expectations' known as 'Raising the Bar', which the academic body were able to act collectively to resist. The collective refused the imposition of individual targets and refused to subordinate academic values to financial ones. There was a successful negotiation with management, and in July 2016, Raising the Bar was rescinded in favour of collegial action to work towards research improvement.

Keywords: neoliberalism, resistance, performance management, outcomes, targets, metrics, audit culture, academic identities, critical discourse analysis

Introduction

In the neoliberal era, academics in UK universities have become increasingly enmeshed in systems of metrics. These have moved beyond audit (Strathern, 2000), to the recasting of identities as universities enact markets (Burrows, 2012), and increasingly to the situation in which data itself has become a new exchange value and thus productive of new subjectivities (The Analogue University, 2017).

Driving a new ethos of competition has been the growing influence of university league tables, and in the UK the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which governs the distribution of one tranche of government research money. In an attempt to game this system, institutions have set in place strategies to achieve institutional goals of enhanced national and international league table positions by setting 'performance' targets for their staff. Described as The Metric Tide, in a 2015 report for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the chair of the review body, James Wilsdon, cautioned against the misuse of metrics as a tool of research assessment or management in UK higher education. He wrote; 'Metrics hold real power: they are constitutive of values, identities and livelihoods.' Yet despite such critiques and a widespread awareness that outcomes-based performance-management in the public sector inadvertently produces a whole set of negative outcomes (Lowe & Wilson, 2015), university managers, like the proverbial rabbits trapped in car headlights, seem unable to escape their lure and logic. At the same time, although they critique these developments, academics can often feel despondent or even helpless in the face of them. We might know that the 'there is no alternative' argument is untrue, but we can often be hard-pressed to point to successful instances of resistance and the embrace of workable alternatives.

In this article, we critically examine a recent dispute about one such example of that outcomes-based performance-management, that of 'Raising the Bar' (RTB),

introduced by management at Newcastle University, England. By attempting to channel staff energies into what counts highest in those audit exercises, RTB was explicitly designed to game the system to position the university better in national and international league tables. It sought to do this by a 'carrot and stick' approach: rewarding academics deemed likely to improve the university's rankings in competition with others, and disciplining those deemed to be underperforming in the key metrics. Although this has become a common story in the Anglophone world in recent years, academics at Newcastle were able to successfully resist RTB leading to its withdrawal. RTB is worth studying in detail not only because it is a classic example of that outcomes-based performance-management in higher education, but also because it provides clues as to how the seemingly relentless march of neoliberal values can be resisted.

The article's purpose, therefore, is to illustrate the growing literatures on the logics and effects on academics of neoliberal that outcomes-based performance-management in universities, and extend the scant literature on how it can be successfully contested. It is based on archival work, discourse analysis of key documents, and interviews with 27 members of the university from senior managers to union activists. We begin by setting out how calculative practices and neoliberal discourse generate new forms of academic identities. We then move to the Newcastle example, providing a critical analysis of management discourse, piecing together a timeline of the RTB dispute, and drawing from this an analysis of strategies of resistance. We conclude by arguing that the neoliberalisation of universities is not inevitable and can be successfully resisted by academics through collective efforts that draw upon one of the keystones of academic identity – the ability to tell truth to power. We hope that this research will be of value to other academic collectives facing similar struggle.

Literature review: neoliberal discourse and academic identities

The spread of calculative practices (Ritzer, 1993) has emerged in a context in which universities have been increasingly compelled to justify their existence in economic terms. This has taken place within a wider political landscape of neoliberalism described by Graeber (2012) as a form of capitalism which has systematically prioritised political imperatives of competition, entrepreneurialism, and the supremacy of the market over economic ones (Harvey 2005). These priorities

become embedded in cultures and institutions rather than economies (Brown, 2015). In universities, the resonances of this ideological project have been apparent in the installation of the twin sisters of neoliberalism: New Public Management (Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007), and managerialism (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005). We have seen a shift to neoliberal ideology which is manifest in a culture of audit in which every aspect of work and 'the business' is assessed by its calculative value.

The following are familiar characteristics of the higher education landscape in 2017:

- Students (and staff) are located within a framework of human capital (Becker, 1994).
- Higher education is re-visioned as a project of acquiring skills which can be justified in terms of economic benefit (Holmwood, 2017).
- There is an emphasis on individual benefit, such as 'value for money' and 'return on investment' (US Government, Department for Education, No Date).
- Degrees are viewed internally as 'products' requiring 'business cases' (Fenton, 2011).
- Students are positioned as 'customers' (Molesworth *et al.*, 2009; Williams, 2013).
- Students are seen as units of profit via fees, halls of residence, sports facilities, branded goods, graduation (Molesworth *et al.*, 2011; Brown & Caruso, 2013).

In order to achieve this transformation, all who study and work in universities need to be made to comply with this view of themselves as units of productivity, profit or consumption. This requires a reshaping of the identities and declared motivations of these individuals and it is achieved through what Fairclough (2010) has called the technologisation of discourse – a calculated intervention in discursive practices in order to effect social change.

For example, US universities are ranked on 'Return on Investment'. Return on Investment in the new US College Scorecard (US Dept. Education) is determined by the likelihood of a high-paying job for graduates of a particular college or university. Colleges and courses are ranked according to the likely salaries obtained by graduates, and this in turn becomes part of the college marketing narrative. This particular metric of graduate salaries, known as Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data, has just reached the UK in 2017 (HEFCE, 2017; Boys, 2017) along with the passing of the Higher Education and Research Act, 2017. This indicates the extent to which the ideological penetration of neoliberal ideas has been very successful in UK public services, and in higher education in particular. In 2017, any academic who hopes to progress in their career is forced to submit to academic capitalism
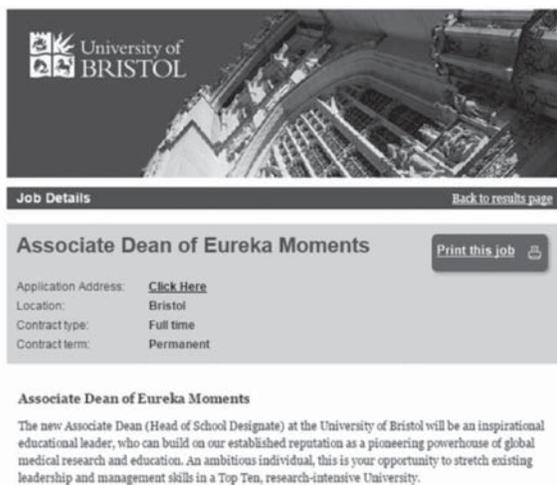
Figure 1: Bristol University Associate Dean of Eureka Moments. 2015.

https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/01/26/associate-dean-eureka-moments

(Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) and the marketisation of the self. When the university is constructed as a revenue-making enterprise, the individuals within it must also subordinate themselves to the profit motive. Increasingly, academics are required to defray their own salaries with grant income, and as we see below, some universities are making this a factor of performance management.

This is the kind of logic which prioritises the cost of research over its content or intrinsic worth. Equally, this logic is sustained by a discourse which reframes achievement and the parameters of the possible entirely within economic and calculable terms. In the 'Data University' academic identities are so recast that scholars themselves desire data: for example, devising strategies to maximise followers on venture-capital

sites such as Academia.edu, or mentioning the value of a grant on their websites rather than telling us the objectives of the research program (Analogue University, 2017). Entrepreneurship has gone from metaphor, to a state in which it is both literal and mandatory. Indeed, in some academic job descriptions it is stated as a 'key competency' and has even given rise to completely new academic identities. Figure 1 shows a job advertisement was placed in January 2015 and was a cause of mystified comment in the higher education press. What it betokens, though, is a person who can somehow be guaranteed to inspire or occasion the advent of discovery – as if this can be summoned up by mere aspiration, rather than, say, financial support, continuity and security of employment, freedom to fail and other necessities of successful science.

We see an increasing narrowing of these latter opportunities in UK academia. What has come to be known as the accelerated academy (Carrigan, 2015) is all about process and targets, and we now face a future in which employees are established in a shifting hierarchy according to metrics. In this that outcomes-based performance-management (Lowe & Wilson, 2015), there is typically little value accorded to what is actually accomplished; instead there is an overly-scrupulous fixation with accountability, monitoring and reporting, and with what Power (1999) has described as 'rituals of verification.' Indeed, the measures proliferate, mirrored by institutional compliance regimes – and gaming practices – to ensure success. The following obligatory audits have come to arrest academic energies to a degree which overshadows the principal functions of a university, namely teaching, scholarship and research:

• National Student Survey – a student survey of their satisfaction with courses. It asks final year students to
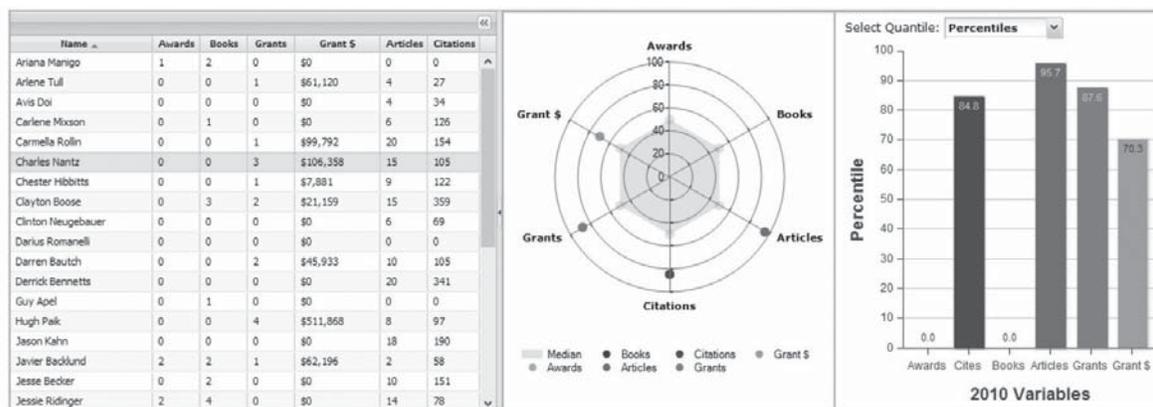

Figure 2: Academic Analytics, example data. http://www.academicanalytics.com

give scores for how interesting they find the course, clarity of marking criteria, speed of feedback and access to tutorial support. These figures are used in calculating league tables of universities. The actual satisfaction score is very high at over 85 per cent average.

• Research Excellence Framework (REF) – a six-yearly audit of research outputs, and impact.

• The forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) – student retention and progression rates, satisfaction rates and graduate salaries. These are assumed by the current UK government to stand as proxy measures of good teaching.

Scores for departments, and even individuals, for each of these aspects of research, NSS and TEF measures will be compiled on the Vice-Chancellor's dashboard, and some commercial models have now been adopted by UK and US universities (Figure 2).

Academics working in the UK, US or Australia, are commonly monitored by a similar system of academic analytics. We inhabit a 'watching culture' (Mather & Seifert, 2014) and increasingly we notice an elision of audit, performance management and disciplinary procedures to the point where the latter becomes normalised and expected. There is anecdotal evidence that universities are using performance management and disciplinary procedures more promiscuously and punitively than ever before. Failure to meet management expectations of 'performance' will result in the public humiliation of some 'improving performance procedure,' and possible demotion to a lower grade or a teaching-only contract. No accrual of reputation can be permitted; the criteria must be met every year, not just over the course of a distinguished career. In this way, any prestige associated with the rank of lecturer, senior lecturer, reader or professor must be considered temporary, as is its tenure. Just as we have a growing casualised sector of contingent labour in universities, all academics may soon be made to join this expanding precariat.

It is not a great step from accepting the logic of the market, to seeing one's own academic worth reduced to a bundle of metrics. Those metrics may shift quite abruptly, and so measures of success are never stabilised. The discourse reveals a focus on competition, finance and a preoccupation with 'excellence' – another semantically unanchored concept (Moore *et al.*, 2017). The discourse also installs clear limits to what can be considered research or even work, but the threshold of achievement is rising out of reach of many talented academics. This is a recipe for despondency and burnout in the workplace (Gill, 2010).

As we have indicated, there is much literature which features moving and sophisticated critiques of these processes, however, the literature analysing successful cases of resistance to them in specific case studies is scarce. This article seeks to address that in its study of Newcastle University, England.

Methods: Analysing raising the bar at Newcastle University

In October 2015, at the start of 2015-16 academic year, senior managers in Newcastle University emailed each academic staff member a document entitled 'Research and Innovation Performance Expectations' (RiPE). These expectations – on grant income obtained, top-rated publications, and graduate student completions – were a key element of 'Raising the Bar', the Vice-Chancellor's program of improving Newcastle University's position in league tables. The remainder of this article traces and analyses the genesis of that document and the dispute which led to its withdrawal at the end of the academic year.

Our evidence and arguments are drawn from three sources. Firstly, discourse analysis of RiPE via its key documents; and also of a presentation by the Vice-Chancellor, Chris Brink, in a 'town hall' event on RTB which Liz Morrish attended. Secondly, we collected and analysed archival sources of minutes of the university Executive Board, RTB Steering Group, Senate, Council, University and College Union (UCU) and other relevant sources, looking for all references to RTB. Finally, the article draws on a number of interviews conducted by The Analogue University, a writing collective of Newcastle academics. In the course of conducting research on RTB, we interviewed 20 middle managers such as heads of academic units and senior managers (Executive Board) and lay members (Court and Council) of the university, and 7 UCU activists. The interviews were semi-structured and were aimed at understanding the genesis of the RTB discourse and the unfolding of the dispute, with a focus on understanding why RTB was withdrawn. Although the Analogue University authors were involved in the dispute as activists, we have not drawn on our own ethnographic experiences for this article.

For analysis, we adopted an 'interpretative policy analysis' approach to discourse analysis of documents, interview transcripts and ethnographic observations, to chart both key points of divergence and also the prevalent precepts and understandings in groups of management and activists (Fischer 2003, Glynos *et al.*, 2009).

A word on our positionality. The origins of our collaboration go back to 15 November 2015, when Liz Morrish visited Newcastle at the invitation of the local branch of the UK academics' trade union, the UCU. Based on her scholarly expertise in this field, Morrish provided a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010) of the RiPE documents and also made a semi-covert study of the Vice-Chancellor's 'town hall' presentation of RTB to Newcastle academics. The Analogue University is a writing collective formed of Newcastle academics who became active in the dispute. This is thus not a disinterested study by remote scholars, as we began with the assumption that the current UK version of neoliberalism has an adverse effect on universities. Nonetheless, by focussing our interviews heavily on managers and senior lay members (20) rather than activists (7), and by immersing ourselves in university documents, we sought to be directed wherever the data would take us: we had a genuine desire to understand what led to the withdrawal of RTB from the perspective of the managers who made the decisions, rather than activists.

In the remaining sections of this article, we analyse this data. In the next section we analyse the discourses used in RTB documents. The following section discusses the course of the dispute, and finally we seek to understand what lessons can be derived from it.

The discourse of performance: What's in a name?

In this section, we begin our analysis of RTB by identifying and unpacking the presuppositions encoded in the *Research and Innovation Performance Expectations* (RiPE) document which framed the substantive performance management element of RTB. A different set of RiPE metrics was produced for each of Newcastle's three faculties, but the general principle and covering letter was the same. Quotations below, appearing in italics, are drawn from this document.

It should be observed from the outset that Raising the Bar is a coercively innocent phrase. It conveniently conceals all the judgement, hostility, pain and pressure that academics at Newcastle knew would follow its

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deployment. It is striking that Chris Brink resorted to a sports metaphor in naming his strategy. The scheme was initiated by managerial anxiety, amidst chatter about so-called 'bottom Russellers' that Newcastle had been 'lacking in competitiveness compared to other Russell Group institutions' [the Russell Group is a collective of leading, longer-established UK universities] (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research and Innovation Performance Expectations, p. 1).

RiPE refers to '[T]he expectations on research active staff' – makes clear that if you do not meet these, you are not research active, regardless of any evidence to substantiate other kinds of performance. Significantly, these are expectations, not objectives, nor targets, nor goals. Expectations are finite, concrete and measurable, so by definition, if staff do not meet them, they cannot be considered research active. A justification is offered for the turn to metrics: 'This document is focussed on research performance….. as this will determine our ranking in the next REF.' However, a new understanding of 'performance' itself is at issue. The key to this new definition, we learn, will be increasing the number of research outputs graded at the REF 4* level (internationally excellent) (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research and Innovation Performance Expectations, p. 1). The actual academic value of the scholarly enquiry cannot be measured, and so will be disregarded. The parameters of 'performance' are drawn so rigidly as to circumscribe any kind of professional autonomy, or even what counts as academic labour, guaranteeing that much of what academics do will be rendered invisible. The whole endeavour of research, so personal and integral to academic identity, is collapsed into the term output. This is a designation which itself excludes as much as it includes, inasmuch as only those works which are, firstly, REF submissable, and secondly, judged to be internationally excellent or world-leading can be considered within its scope. There is also some duplicitous reasoning evident: '[W]e have largely relied on REF 2014 entry as a proxy for reaching the minimum expectations for research outputs '(Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research and Innovation Performance Expectations, p. 2). This is a post hoc reckoning. The strategy was introduced after the REF

2014 exercise had been concluded. It seems contradictory to assess a scholar's current 'productivity' on the basis of past performance. And in any case, how would a local assessor know if an individual's outputs were scored as the quoted minimum 3* (internationally excellent)? Individual REF scores are categorically not available; they have been destroyed (HEFCE REF FAQ, 2014). But once again, this is a discursive attempt to construct new academic binary identities: those who were submitted to the REF, and those who were not.

A criterion for a chair is someone who: 'aspires to be in the top quartile in UoA [Unit of Assessment] for income, or aspiring to 4*' (world leading) (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research and Innovation Performance Expectations, p. 2), which begs the question, how can everyone be in the top quartile? With success rates for research council grants as low as 12 per cent (Matthews, 2016), then that is an expectation one will probably not meet, but the invitation to appraise oneself against that benchmark is as much discursive as it is statistically illiterate. Managers are aware of the academic predisposition to overwork and to self-scrutiny, and so the coercion need only be implied in the requirement to aspire. If expressing the aspiration itself is an adequate indicator, then its limits will never be exhausted in an audit environment of shifting and expanding goals.

Objectification and unattainable targets

The use in universities of metaphors and analogies borrowed from business and management has irked many academics including the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, who identified a 'new barbarity' in the 'corrupting' language of the research excellence framework (REF) in which academic scholarship and research is collapsed into the process metaphor of 'outputs' (Williams, 2015). If we need evidence that targets and performance management cause insupportable stress, we should remember the tragic case of Stefan Grimm who took his own life after being threatened with performance management procedures at Imperial College (Parr, 2015). The coroner found Stefan's death to have been 'needless' and Imperial College said that 'wider lessons' would be learned.

Universities in the UK, US, Australia, and other systems which have adopted a neoliberal model have become 'anxiety machines.' Hall and Bowles (2016) argue that this anxiety is intentional and inherent in a system driven by improving performance. In the parodic contronyms of management–speak, employees are told that such performance management will 'empower' them. In the experience of many academics this is not objective setting; rather, this is objectification. We can identify several of Martha Nussbaum's (1995) features of objectification (in bold) in the RiPE document:

- Instrumentality – to be treated as a tool for man's purposes. According to the Newcastle expectations, the function of an academic is to 'raise the bar,' increase grant income and raise the university's position in the league tables.

- This would also entail denial of autonomy – the legitimate activity of an academic and what counts as work is tightly defined and controlled in RiPE. Similarly, Nussbaum defines ownership as something that can be traded or commodified. As long as a scholar continues to produce 4* REF-able outputs in high-impact journals, they may be traded on 'a transfer market' of superstar professors.

- There is an avoidance of human agency in the Newcastle documents, signalling inertness and abdication of responsibility on the part of management. Grammatical subjects include this document, and this aspect of our academic portfolio, a detailed analysis of the results and expectations (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research and Innovation Performance Expectations, p. 1). The passive voice is used throughout, with just three instances of an unattributed pronoun 'we'. 'We' is inherently ambiguous; it can be used either inclusively, or exclusively of the addressee. Looking at the contexts: we do not expect all staff to have equal strengths; we have largely relied on REF 2014; we will take early career researcher…rules (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research and Innovation Performance Expectations, pp. 1-2) – 'we' is being used to offer the illusion of inclusivity, while retaining the prerogative of its exclusive attribution to the management of the university.

The result of these regulatory systems is that academics are forced to define themselves in terms which thwart their ability to express their lived experience outside of the dominant managerial paradigm. This is known as illocutionary silencing (Meyerhoff, 2004). Any discourse other than that framed by management is deemed impermissible. The academic must undergo forcible alignment and compliance with managerial values which ensures that all academics must conceive of themselves in neoliberal terms of accountability, calculability, and competition.

In the discourse of performance management, perfectly illustrated in RTB, we recognise a large degree of semantic instability in words such as 'performance,'

Table 1: Timeline of events detailing the genesis and withdrawal of RTB

July 2013	Raising the Bar (RTB) was first mentioned in the university Executive Board minutes.
April 2014	The vice chancellor presented RTB to Council.
January 2015	RTB steering group established.
July 2015	Senate approved the key RTB initiative of faculty-specific sets of targets subsequently called 'Research and Innovation Performance Expectations' (RiPE).
Early October 2015	RiPE document emailed to all staff and all heads of academic units called to a meeting and instructed immediately to embed research expectation for Faculty in all academic recruitment.
21 October 2015	UCU Newcastle Branch President, Joan Harvey, writes to Vice Chancellor formally requesting withdrawal of RTB.
28th October 2015	A UCU branch meeting approved an indicative ballot to see whether members would be willing to undertake industrial action to oppose RTB.
November 2015	Increasingly vocal opposition to RTB; open letters to management from Professoriate and a group of Geography academics.
February 2016	The branch indicated its willingness to consider industrial action. The university management formally engaged UCU in discussion about RTB, and drew up a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with UCU negotiators.
March 2016	A UCU branch meeting rejected the MOU.
11th May 2016	A revised MOU is presented.
18th May 2016	Professor Ed Byrne, Vice Chancellor of Kings College and former head of Monash, invited by Chris Brink to speak to Head of Academic Unit Forum on May 18 2016 about 'The transformation of Monash to a World Top 100 University,' is seen to undermine RTB by arguing against 'top-down' management.
23rd May 2016	The revised MOU is rejected by both the UCU branch committee and an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) of the branch. The EGM also voted to take Action Short of a Strike in the form of a marking boycott, authorised soon after by the UCU's Higher Education Committee to begin on June 3.
1st June 2016	Newcastle UCU wrote to the vice chancellor offering an alternative to RTB, entitled 'Improving Research Together' (IRT) and launched a petition on campaigning website change.org, 'Say no to coercive performance management at Newcastle University'.
2nd June 2016	The UCU Congress, meeting in Liverpool, passed a solidarity motion recognising the Newcastle issue as 'a local dispute of national significance'.
Friday 3rd June 2016	Marking boycott begins. In response, the vice chancellor called an emergency Heads of Academic meeting to discuss the marking boycott.
Monday 6th June 2016	In negotiations with the UCU, management swiftly agreed to abandon RiPE and ditch the RTB terminology.

'good', 'satisfactory' etc. which means that it will always be possible to claim that there are 'areas for improvement' (Morrish & Sauntson, 2016). Recent research from Australia on the impact of aggressive performance management on early career researchers (Petersen, 2016) has shown that many of them 'struggled to articulate the value and worth of their work outside the productivity discourse' (2016, p. 116). The constraints of metrics cause the content of the research to change, and researchers attempt to mirror what is 'hot' – likely to get funding under the shifting priorities of research councils. As Petersen says of her informants, 'they and the substance of their work become easier to control' (2016, p. 116). The accelerated academy is facilitated by academics who have acquiesced to the fear that their 'underperformance' will be revealed by the pitiless intrusion of metrics which cannot lie.

The raising the bar dispute

The previous section analysed the policy discourse of RTB. In this section, we explore where that discourse came from in Newcastle's institutional history, how it developed, its coercive enactment, and resistance to it. Key moments are summarised in Table 1.

Origins of a discourse

'Raising the Bar' was first mentioned in the university Executive Board minutes in July 2013, referring to plans to increase the size of university, later called 'the growth agenda' (Executive Board Minutes, 24/04/2014). In April 2014, the Vice-Chancellor, Chris Brink, presented RTB to Council as aiming to 'Have at least 10 subjects (Units of Assessment) which are ranked top 50 in the world' (Chris Brink, 'Raising the Bar: actions over the next three years,

28/04/2014). In January 2015, an RTB Steering Group was established, which focussed RTB down to a two-fold approach to improving performance, by (i) managing individual performance through the use of 'specific numerical targets' and (ii) the development of a Research Excellence Support Framework to 'help staff enhance their performance' (Executive Board Minutes, 3/02/2015). In July, Senate approved the principle (but not details) of faculty-specific sets of targets which were eventually called the Research and Performance Expectations (RiPE), which were subsequently emailed to staff.

In October 2015, all heads of academic units were called to a meeting and instructed immediately to 'Embed research expectation for Faculty in all academic recruitment' and implement RTB through a Performance Development Review process. This would envisage a rapid assessment of each staff member through a red-amber-green traffic light system. Those flagged 'Green' were to be rewarded, whereas those referred to as 'the reds' would be subject to an 'action plan for improvement' identifying appropriate 'support and development' monitored by monthly reports, and eventually leading to the commencement of 'capability procedure[s]' (Raising the Bar Implementation: Notes from the meeting held with Academic Heads of Unit on 8 October 2015) should progress prove inadequate. One middle manager, fiercely critical of RTB, told us that RTB 'was sold as making research better, but I think it was about trying to get rid of some people.'

Opposition and dénouement

Although management insisted that that this coercive element was a last resort, as this starkly coercive nature of RTB became increasingly clear, unhappiness and unease amongst staff mushroomed. Angry debates at staff meetings and fearful corridor conversations amongst colleagues genuinely scared for their futures began to harden into action in the run up to the Christmas vacation 2015. (We detail these actions as a case study of resistance in the last section of this article). The UCU branch became increasingly active, organising meetings in different units and helping galvanise the opposition to RTB. The UCU claimed that RTB was leading to a culture of bullying, and asked the Vice-Chancellor to withdraw RiPE and discuss how we could improve research in a more collegial way. Groups of academics (at school/ unit level) sent letters to their Pro-Vice-Chancellors expressing disquiet, and a similar letter signed eventually by 100 professors (believed to be a quarter of the professoriate at the time) was delivered to the Vice-Chancellor. Behind the scenes,

heads of academic units increasingly conveyed the disquiet of their staff to senior managers. A UCU branch meeting on 28 October 2015 approved an indicative ballot to see whether members would be willing to undertake industrial action; in February 2016, the branch indicated its willingness in this regard.

The level and breadth of unhappiness over RTB took senior managers unawares: an Executive Board member said that when RTB started to go badly wrong, 'it genuinely came as a surprise to the steering group.' They responded with a series of town hall events, a letter from Chris Brink to all staff, and a meeting with representatives of signatories of the professors' letter. The main message was that management had got the tone wrong and poorly communicated RTB – which was most expressly not about targets – and that the Vice-Chancellor recognised he needed to engage more clearly with those people doing research. At the same time, management sought to formally engage the UCU in discussion about RTB, and drew up a Memorandum of Understanding with UCU negotiators, which recognised that different academics have different strengths that together form units. However because management would not backtrack on the linkage between RiPE and capability proceedings, a branch meeting in March rejected the Memorandum of Understanding. An ACAS (Advisory and Conciliation Service) meeting on 11 May 2016 led to a revised memorandum of understanding, rejected by both the UCU branch committee and an Extraordinary General Meeting of the branch on 23 May. The meeting voted to take Action Short of a Strike in the form of a marking boycott, authorised soon after by the UCU's Higher Education Committee to begin on June 3. This would disrupt graduation of final year students, so was a serious step. In spite of this, the Vice-Chancellor indicated at a meeting of Academic Board on 25 May that RTB would not be withdrawn, and the management wrote to staff threatening to deduct pay at a rate of 100 per cent for non-completion of marking duties.

In the week that the industrial action began, the UCU held meetings across the University to bolster support. On 2nd June 2016, the UCU Congress, meeting in Liverpool, passed a solidarity motion recognising the Newcastle issue as 'a local dispute of national significance' (available at https://www.ucu.org.uk/hesc16#HE54). Newcastle UCU wrote to the Vice-Chancellor offering an alternative to RTB, entitled 'Improving Research Together' and launched a petition on campaigning website change.org, 'Say no to coercive performance management at Newcastle University'(available at https://www.change.org/p/chris-brink-say-no-to-coercive-performance-management-

at-newcastle-university). In response, the Unit's Vice-Chancellor called an emergency Heads of Academic Meeting on Friday June 3, the day the industrial action began, where Heads of Academic Units supported the withdrawal of RTB. On Monday June 6, in negotiations with the UCU, management swiftly agreed to abandon RiPE and also discard the RTB terminology. Instead, drawing on the approach suggested in 'Improving Research Together', management and the Union agreed to 'develop a coming understanding and collegial approach to improving research' (Academic Frameworks for Research Improvement, Newcastle University/ UCU, June 6, 2016). We now go on to consider strategies of resistance to RTB, focussing in particular on the discursive critique of a set of documents which were themselves aimed at discursively remaking academic identities in Newcastle.

Erasing 'raising the bar': Unpacking strategies of resistance

As our critical understanding of the impact on academic identities of neoliberal values in the accelerated academy has grown, so too has practical resistance to it. As we saw above, in June 2016 the research income performance expectations and the entire RTB agenda at Newcastle were withdrawn in response to vocal expressions of dissatisfaction across the university which culminated in industrial action. The positive outcome of this dispute was a rare example of a win by staff over a neoliberal management program. Usually the trend is opposite, as university managers have been able to implement increasingly coercive and punishing performance management schemes with little or no sustained and effective opposition from staff.

Consequently, as one element of our research we were keen to explore the tactics and strategies used by Newcastle academics to bring about this victory. What follows below is a summary of our findings based on interviews with the key activists who led the dispute. We discuss five main strategies, which emerged in our interviews as being most effective in shifting the balance of power in favour of the staff and the Union.

1. Organise and mobilise support

The use of organised support was central to the success of the campaign against RTB. At Newcastle, the UCU provided a significant degree of leadership necessary to communicate the grievance of the staff to management. Despite some internal differences in the Union committee, the activists organised under the auspices of the union to mobilise UCU and non-Union support for the cause. This was done primarily through meetings organised at school and departmental levels to bring together staff to listen to their anxieties and responses regarding RTB and to communicate the Union's plans for opposition. These meetings were usually led by the Union representatives and were crucial in cementing a collective opposition to RTB early on. They were open to all staff regardless of whether they were members of the Union or not. As a direct outcome of these meetings, academic collectives met together and wrote open letters to their Pro Vice-Chancellors and the Vice-Chancellor expressing their concerns. 100+ professors drawn from all three faculties – roughly a quarter of the Professoriate – wrote a similar letter. These letters were instrumental in communicating to management the growing and widespread dissatisfaction of university staff with their initiative. Support was also sought from the student body by holding information sessions with students about the opposition to RTB – the students' union newspaper, *The Courier*, carried sympathetic articles (Velikova, 2015a; 2015b).

2. Deconstruct management-speak

It was recognised that to put forward a case for opposing RTB, the activists needed to deconstruct its policies. The opaque and vacuous nature of management-speak, as exemplified in metaphors such as 'Raising the Bar', can make opposition difficult. The activists felt that to have an effective opposition strategy they needed to deconstruct and expose the lack of substance behind measures such as RTB. Two practical steps were taken, first; a linguist, Liz Morrish, from Nottingham Trent University (and co-author of this paper), was invited to conduct a discourse analysis of the RTB and RiPE documents to lay bare 'the regime of punishment', as one interviewee put it, which embodied these policies. Morrish presented her analysis in a public talk which energised the staff to oppose RTB. Her talk was followed by a productive question and answer session in which academics from different parts of the university exchanged ideas, made notes, swapped references, raised ideas for collective action, and began acquainting themselves with the scholarly literature on outcomes-based performance management. Her talk, made available online (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1thgkQWV8t8) and widely circulated amongst staff, was instrumental in providing a vocabulary to critique RTB and place it in broader UK-wide contexts. Second, members of the Union coordinated their attendance at management-organised meetings to press

and challenge them on the ill-thought through policies of RTB. These included high-profile 'town hall' meetings run by the Vice-Chancellor, but also regular 'Executive Board' lunches, meetings with faculty pro-Vice-Chancellors, and others. The dual strategy allowed activists to not only highlight to the management the intellectual, moral and practical shortcomings of their proposals, but also alerted them to declining employee morale.

3. Publicise the story

Since the RTB was primarily driven by a desire to raise Newcastle University's reputation as a premier research institution, the activists felt that the management would be more receptive to their demands if they saw the University in the news for the wrong reasons. The news and social media platforms such as *Times Higher Education* and Facebook served to publicise the growing dissatisfaction and opposition to RTB. A public petition asking the Vice-Chancellor to withdraw RTB was circulated via the website Change.org, highlighting that RTB had 'unleashed a culture of bullying across the institution'. Within three days over 3,500 people worldwide signed the petition urging Chris Brink to abandon RiPE in favour of 'Improving Research Together'. The activists also employed some more creative ways of publicising their opposition to RTB. UCU members were asked their opinions on RTB, and choice quotes were used in posters displayed around the University. One member started a pilot research project to document the impact of RTB measures by asking staff members to keep a diary of their thoughts and anxieties related to RTB measures in their department. With the permission of their respondents, anonymised quotes were drawn from these diaries and used by activists as evidence of the harm being done by RTB. The same project succeeded in getting public intellectuals who have written on the threat of neoliberalism to the humanities, such as Martha Nussbaum, Marilyn Strathern, Stefan Collini, and Rowan Williams to join its advisory board. Their very presence drew attention to the dispute and helped ensure it was more widely publicised. As one head of academic unit told us, RTB damaged the University's reputation, by 'giving the impression that we are a hostile place.' Given that one key goal of RTB was raising the reputation of the University internationally, such attention risked undermining RTB by negatively damaging the reputation.

4. Industrial action

In the summer of 2016, after all the attempts at getting the University management to withdraw RTB had failed, the UCU moved towards industrial action in the form of Action Short of a Strike, principally a marking boycott. Our interviewees were keen to stress that they believed this was the sharpest weapon against management in their arsenal, but also the one that they were most loath to employ because of the direct impact it would have on the students' ability to graduate. However, when management refused to address their demands, the UCU branch members voted for Action Short of a Strike, precipitating a swift climb down on their part, and a successful resolution of the dispute in favour of the Union and its members. Many of the interviewees also stressed that the strategy of a marking boycott was perhaps the one which carried the most risk of failure if a critical majority of staff did not support it and that it was employed only as a last resort. Many members were uneasy with a marking boycott on principles of pedagogical ethics since a research matter such as RTB was being resolved by putting the students' academic futures at risk.

5. Articulate an alternative vision and vocabulary of excellence in academia

The activists felt that they 'fought hard but without bitterness'. It was important for them to not personalise the campaign as being against the Vice-Chancellor and senior management, but rather saw it as a campaign against the forces of neoliberalisation and metricisation plaguing contemporary academia – to which management themselves were also victims. Thus, for example, key activists sought to maintain good relations with management in informal meetings, and the suggestion of voting on a motion of no-confidence in the Vice-Chancellor was rejected. To this end, it was felt that an alternative vocabulary of excellence in academia was needed to counter the metric-heavy approach being used via RTB. An alternative to RTB was drafted under the title 'Improving Research Together' This recognised the need to be seen to perform well in key audit exercises, and asked management to withdraw RiPE and engage in the proposed 'Improving Research Together' alternative as, 'an inclusive, collegial, evidence-based, bottom-up process to devise a non-coercive framework in which to foster a higher-performing research community' (Academic Frameworks for Research Improvement, Newcastle University / University and College Union, June 6, 2016). In contrast to the competitive and punitive assumptions of RTB, this outlined the UCU branch's vision of a collegiate and co-operative research environment in which academics were given space for autonomy and creativity, and the steps needed to realise this in practice.

Framed as a recognition of management concerns and an invitation to cooperate, 'Improving Research Together' set a constructive tone for the dispute and communicated to management that objections were not reactionary but progressive. This also allowed management to back down with dignity.

The five strategies outlined above were identified by our interviewees as being central to the success of their resistance campaign. It would be misleading, however, to think of all resistance to RTB as part of a coordinated campaign led by UCU. Opposition occurred across different parts of the university from different actors with different agendas, both pragmatic and principled. For example, we know from our research with University managers (discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article), that middle managers (heads of academic units) became increasingly critical of RTB behind the scenes. But this was as much for pragmatic reasons –although many agreed with the need to perform well in league tables, some resented the top-down model of RTB and the crude traffic-lights system that designated many of their staff as failures. Others regarded RTB as too blunt an instrument, as it did not recognise that different staff made different contributions to a collective whole in different ways.

A senior lay member told us of a 'growing sense that more and more people were expressing opinions about this, at personal, individual, town hall levels, and the Union was threatening strike action.' Serendipity also played a role. A number of middle managers and Executive Board members highlighted the importance of the visit of Professor Ed Byrne, Vice-Chancellor of Kings College London and former head of Monash University, Australia, invited by Chris Brink to speak to the Heads of Academic Units Forum on 18 May 2016 about 'The transformation of Monash to a World Top 100 University.' One head of academic unit said 'He dropped a bombshell,' by saying 'don't do it top-down.' The professors' letter was seen as 'crucial' (middle manager) in representing the views of the 'high-performing, senior academics' (Executive Board member) upon whom RTB's success was dependent. However, this did not result in the withdrawal of RTB, but rather the creation of a 'Forum.' As one of the key authors of the letter said, 'I thought we were being palmed off, there was no backtracking at all on RTB…industrial action was the tipping point.' It was, said a Head of Academic Unit, the UCU industrial action seemed to prove the tipping point or 'trigger': it 'raised the temperature and precipitated the final abandonment.'

As the former Vice-Chancellor, Chris Brink, declined our invitation for an interview, we have been unable to ascertain what led him to finally decide to withdraw RTB. But it seems that a combination of multiple forms of sustained opposition and criticism from a number of disparate actors across the University, some acting under UCU auspices and some without – as well as some serendipity – combined to render RTB 'so toxic', as an Executive Board member told us in an interview. The UCU industrial action seemed to prove the tipping point. Thus whilst we recognise that local conditions vary and chance plays a part, we argue that the hard work of coordinated organisation, deconstruction of discourse, good media and rhetorical strategies, formal industrial action, and the articulation of a positive alternative vision to that of neoliberalism, all played crucial roles and could be profitably considered by other collectives facing similar examples of coercive neoliberal performance management.

Conclusion

At a 'town hall' meeting on RTB in [November 2015], Newcastle University's Vice-Chancellor, Chris Brink, set out his methods of raising the University's position in a variety of competitive league tables. These consisted of rewarding 'excellent' units and researchers with even more resources and – although he didn't foreground this aspect of RTB in his presentation – concomitantly those scholars identified as 'red' by a traffic-lights system would face coercive performance management, and potential shifts to less favourable contracts. A UCU activist stood up and offered this objection: 'In academia it is not individuals, departments, universities or countries that compete: the only thing that competes are ideas, for the benefit of humanity.' The Vice-Chancellor fully agreed: as a mathematician, with a distinguished career prior to Newcastle in widening racial participation in higher education in post-Apartheid South Africa, he understood far better than his questioner both how metrics were deeply flawed and what universities are for. But he said that, nonetheless, in the current policy environment, there is no alternative, and RTB represented only a necessary means to achieve that end.

We contend, however, with Rev Martin Luther King, Jr, that 'we must come to see that the ends and the means must cohere.' Outcomes-based performance-management is never simply an end: it inevitably leads to perverse unintended outcomes in gaming the system, but also fundamentally transforms our understanding of what universities are and what academic labour is. Neoliberal outcomes-based performance-management schemes such as RTB, recast academic identities in ways

that not only make universities less pleasant places to work in, but ultimately threaten the very environments and practices in which new the risky experimentation necessary for new ideas can take place. Outcomes-based performance-management fails to recognise that academic staff are intrinsically motivated to perform well. Research (evidenced by the recent Newcastle experience) shows that RTB-like 'carrot-and-stick' attempts to extrinsically motivate those who are already intrinsically motivated is counterproductive because it actually produces a reduction in overall motivation and job satisfaction (Pink, 2009).

The Newcastle example shows that there is an alternative. The Newcastle action was not simply reactive against a bad idea; it invited managers and the whole university to envision an environment where reputation is improved not by playing the system, but by trusting its scholars enough to give them autonomy and the resources to be creative and innovative. At the time of writing, the post-RTB landscape at Newcastle remains unclear. But what happened there should be understood in the context of broader international movements: the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA http://www.ascb.org/dora/) denouncing the (mis)use of journal metrics in performance management (Newcastle University became a signatory to DORA in 2017 – see minutes of Senate, 2 May, 2017), or Aberdeen's attempt to 'Reclaiming our University' (https://reclaimingouruniversity.wordpress.com/) by reinvigorating extant but degraded collegial mechanisms of governance, for example. There is an alternative: not just one, in fact, but plenty.

Yet the RTB example perhaps provides even greater lessons for university managers than activists: show some collective fortitude. Managers know better than most of us that metrics are not only flawed and problematic in the higher education sector, but also monstrously inefficient in all the resources they consume for REF-preparation and other audit exercises. If they, collectively, refused to participate in league table exercises like the REF and TEF, the government would either have to back down or enact the immediate paralysis of almost the entire higher education sector in the UK. For any advanced economy, let alone one facing the unprecedented challenges of negotiating Brexit, that outcome would be unthinkable.

So let's indeed raise the bar. Let's raise the bar for decency, humanity, respect and trust. Let's remember that we can't treat people like assets to be sweated, manipulated, and then dispensed with, without fundamentally dehumanising them and radically changing the identities of academics and universities. Let's raise the bar for humane, supportive environments that allow learning and creativity to flourish. Let's return to the inclusive meaning of 'we', and stop using 'the university' as shorthand for 'the decisions of senior management.' And, in asserting that there most definitely is an alternative, let's be sure to maintain distinctive identities that are congruent with academic values of cooperation and fearless scholarly enquiry. We should not allow ourselves to be objectified and colonised to the extent that we cravenly try and jump over any bar set for us by middle or senior managers, funding bodies, or governments.

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Liz Morrish is an independent scholar. Her primary discipline is linguistics which she applies to the analysis of managerial discourse in universities. Liz blogs at https://academicirregularities.wordpress.com/

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