

# I'm an academic and I want to be proud of it

There was never a golden age in which academic values such as universalism and disinterestedness were not at risk, argues **Bruce Macfarlane**. But in an age of sponsorism and insecurity, all scholars must hold fast to the precepts that make our intellectual endeavours worthwhile





**W**hich values define what it means to be an academic today? We live in an age in which universities take full advantage of their intellectual property. The divide between public and private institutions has blurred. Students have become customers and lecturers are treated as service providers and knowledge entrepreneurs. This brave new world threatens the values that are core to academic identity.

In an article published in the *Journal of Legal and Political Sociology* in 1942, the US sociologist Robert Merton identified what he regarded as the four norms of science: communism, universalism, disinterestedness and organised scepticism – or Cudos for short. Merton’s use of the word “science” included the social as well as hard sciences. The norms he identified might be thought of as academic values more broadly. The aphorism Cudos has since become widely used. It represents one of the most important and enduring expressions of academic values.

The word “communism” is now more often associated with political systems than academic norms, but Merton used it to mean a willingness to freely share the products of intellectual endeavours. While Merton acknowledged that academics want recognition and esteem, he did not believe that intellectual property should be exploited for material gain. We do research to benefit mankind, not to make money from it.

By “universalism”, Merton meant that the personal or social attributes of the scientist were irrelevant in evaluating any claim to truth. Academic knowledge should transcend national, political or religious prejudices. All knowledge is contestable and there are no sacred cows or protected spaces.

His third value, “disinterestedness”, is a word still widely used in academia today. We speak of someone doing “disinterested research”, meaning that the researcher has no material stake in the outcome. This is vital if the public are to trust the results of academic research.

Finally, “organised scepticism” is about being critical of knowledge claims. It applies as much to one’s own research results as to those of others.

Sixty years on, is Cudos still alive and well in academic life? Are the values it expresses still widely held or have we allowed our principles to bend to a harsher reality? Sadly, there is a different set of values in the ascendancy. “A Crisis” is displacing Cudos.

#### Academic capitalism

Academic life is now less about communism and more about academic capitalism. This

term, originally used by Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie in their 1997 book *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*, usually refers to the market-like behaviour of universities that act more like businesses than educational institutions. Universities do not embrace Merton’s ethos of sharing. Intellectual property rights (IPR) are ascribed by institutions and by research sponsors. This even includes the greedy appropriation of student IPR by some universities. Despite the push towards open educational resources, most teaching materials remain hidden behind commercial firewalls. And while open-access research sounds like a welcome antidote to academic capitalism, leading journals charge several thousand US dollars for the privilege of publishing your paper in this way.

But it is not just our higher education institutions that act like businesses. Individual academics have become more proprietorial and less sharing. They are encouraged to think of themselves as individual enterprise units rather than as public employees. Devoting a lot of time and energy to looking at ways to generate income and boost perceptions of the “relevance” of research is now essential for survival. The key questions are “how much money does your research generate?” and “what impact does it have?”

Research audit exercises are a case in point. As University of Cambridge academic Mary Beard has argued in her popular blog, you end

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<b>O</b> rganised	<b>I</b> nterestedness
<b>S</b> cepticism	<b>S</b> ponsorism
	<b>I</b> nsecurity
	<b>S</b> ubcontracting

up writing papers when you should be completing a more important, but ironically less valued, book. Another consequence is that those who see co-authorship as part of mentoring less-experienced colleagues must face an inquisition about exactly how much they contributed as an individual. Collectivism is marginalised at every turn.

#### Relativism

Merton was clear that research should not be bounded artificially by nationalism, religion or politics. Yet what we see now is the opposite of this: the triumph of relativism over universalism. The idea that knowledge is socially constructed has become widely accepted. The argument goes that everyone’s research is bounded by paradigms and context. This makes it tougher to make the argument that there is any such thing as objective truth. Everything is relative.

You have to be brave, or perhaps reckless, to assert an absolute truth in modern academia. Those who make such claims can be charged with advocating a particular “cultural hegemony” or a “Western perspective”. Ironically, while claim-making about personal achievements as an academic has never been so puffed up, the opposite holds for knowledge claims.

As academia has become more fragmented, our areas of expertise have shrunk accordingly. This trend has undercut our confidence as academics that we have anything important to say about the “bigger” questions and has undermined our ability to offer intellectual leadership in wider society.

#### Interestedness

People need to be able to trust academic research. Without this, it is of little value to anyone. This is, at heart, why disinterestedness is so important. But this value is under threat from interestedness where the researcher has a real stake in the outcome of their work. If they have not got some “significant” results to share, their honest efforts might be judged a failure. Their funding will dry up along with the chance of another contract.

Interestedness has made academics ever-more conscious about promoting and selling their wares. Performance appraisal means that academics spend hours ego-surfing as they trawl the net for evidence of their “impact”: citation counts, good reviews, policy and practice applications and so on. In short, your research must influence others to be of any value. The world of social media metrics beckons where your number of Twitter or blog followers might be important too. Perversely, all this drives academics to take fewer risks

and do research in popular areas with more funding and more fellow researchers likely to cite their work.

These expectations put further pressure on the sincerity of researchers, encouraging exaggerated claim-making. How long do we spend updating our websites, our CVs and completing performance documents rather than doing academic work?

### Sponsorism

Sponsorism is when someone's research is designed to fit the agenda of funding bodies. Less than 20 years ago, the higher education scholar Sinclair Goodlad identified sponsorism as one of the heresies of academic life.

But what was once a vice now looks like a modern-day virtue. Researchers follow the funding rather than pursuing their own independent, curiosity-driven interests. They are increasingly cast as consultants, not independent critics or thinkers. Even our engagement with the media is as a service provider. Institutions emphasise the career-shaping importance of grant-getting, encouraging strategic behaviour among academics to chase the cash.

The message from universities and government research audit exercises is clear. Funded research has status. Unfunded research has none. My own research has shown that if you want to become a full professor, your research grant record plays a much bigger role than it used to, whatever your discipline.

But according to Merton, the academic should not respect divisions between the sacred and the profane. Everything deserves critical attention and objective analysis. However, the role of universities and governments in determining what are "relevant" and "strategic" research themes and questions puts organised scepticism under pressure. A politically correct research agenda has resulted, centred on topics such as global citizenship, sustainability and understanding cultural differences. It is harder to afford to be a sceptic about knowledge claims when some are sanctified in this way.

A further effect of sponsorism is on the dissemination of research. Commercial sponsors such as drug companies impose moratoriums on publication to protect sensitive information that might give rivals an insight into findings. This type of restriction has a negative impact on the free sharing of research, potentially holding back results that may have important public benefits.

### Insecurity and subcontracting

Preserving the academic values embodied by Cudos has always been a challenge. There has

never been a "golden age" when holding on to them has been easy. The risks of sponsorism have long been a part of the funding of academic research. Ego and self-promotion have always existed, as has competition for awards, for promotion and, above all, for recognition.

But academic capitalism, relativism, interest-edness and sponsorism have become more than simply the ugly sisters of Cudos. These values are now considered positively attractive. While they might have been frowned on in the past, conforming to them has been legitimised.

To appreciate why these alternative values have become so influential, it is important to understand the environment in which most

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academics now work. Insecurity of employment and subcontracting of academic work is reinforcing a culture of compliance, rounding off my alternative aphorism.

More than a third of all UK academics now work part-time, while fixed-term contracts are also the norm. The trend can be seen elsewhere in the world with a declining proportion of academics occupying permanent or tenured positions. Despite the benevolent image of universities, few employers, apart perhaps from the catering industry, have as many casual workers.

The effect of job insecurity goes well beyond those on fixed-term and part-time contracts. It affects everyone's sense of security and puts subtle pressure on the extent to which academics feel they can afford to be independent. Sustaining a disinterested attitude to the results of your own research is tougher when the "successful" outcome of a research project, and publications confirming this, are essential to keeping your job.

Casual and part-time staff teach courses, quality assurance officers and university managers design the university's new curriculum, research students collect empirical data and write papers for projects "fronted" by academics – they also teach seminars and sometimes assess undergraduates. These are all examples of the increasing subcontracting of academic work. While we think of academics as all-rounders who teach, research and administer, the reality is that this model is dying. Most academics are now really para-

academics, specialists in just one element of the traditional tripartite role.

According to figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, in 2010 only just over 50 per cent of UK academics had a contract to teach and research. The real figure is probably even lower given the fact that some academics doing management roles effectively neither teach nor research but remain as "academics" for pension purposes.

Subcontracting means that the academic profession is rapidly unbundling. There are fewer academics able to understand how the values of teaching and research interconnect. Researchers are less likely to be teachers and are therefore even more dependent on generating cash from sponsors in order to survive.

**W**e are sometimes too content to blame the changing nature of academic values on our institutions or "the system".

Beyond the pressures everyone faces there is what Jon Nixon, honorary professor of education at the University of Sheffield, has called a culture of complicity. Academics play the game of academic capitalism. In return, we hope to be left alone as far as possible and we try to protect our precious time and the space for research. We disengage as academic citizens since most performance models marginalise service work. This is also why, for example, academics are too content to demonise "management" without taking part in time-consuming leadership roles themselves.

At a recent lecture I gave in Australia, an academic asked me what could be done about "neoliberalism". It's one of those questions you dread and I struggled at the time to come up with a convincing response. But if I was asked this again, I would say that it is easy to blame "neoliberalism" rather than looking at ourselves. The institutions we work for are ultimately symbolic of our own values. Universities are still organisations of special standing in society and academics trade off a privileged position of trust. Nor should we forget why we became academics in the first place: to research and write about things we think are important; to take intellectual risks; to share a passion for learning with students. We must maintain sight of these aims and stiffen our resolve if we are to resist the pressures that threaten the integrity of the academic vocation. ●

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