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.
Which 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, universism, disinterestedness and organised scepticism—or Cudos for short. Merton’s use of the word “science” included organised scepticism. 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 that has become more proprietary 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 “bottom line” is so important. But this value is under threat from relativism, where there is any such thing as objective truth. Every value 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.

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 relativism where the researcher has no real stake in the outcome of their work. If they have not got a “significant” result to share, their honest efforts might be judged a failure. Their funding will dry up along with their career. The world of social media metrics beckons where your number of Twitter or blog followers matters more than the substance of your research. Performance appraisal means that those who see co-authorship as part of “organised scepticism” are displacing Cudos. Performance appraisal means that their wares. Performance appraisal means that their wares.

Interest has made academics ever-conscious about marketing and selling their wares. Performance appraisal means that academics spend hours eago-surfing as they travel 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 matters more than the substance of your research. Performance appraisal means that those who see co-authorship as part of “organised scepticism” are displacing Cudos. Performance appraisal means that their wares.

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neither has 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, con-
forming 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
academics now work. Insecurity of employ-
ment 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 else-
where in the world with a declining propor-
tion 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 atti-
dute to the results of your own research is
tougher when the “successful” outcome of a
research project, and publications confirming
dies, are essential to keeping your job.

Causal and part-time staff teach courses,
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
serenity of researchers, encouraging exagger-
ated claim-making. How long do we spend
updating our websites, our CVs and comple-
menting performance documents rather than doing
academic work?

Sponsorism
Sponsorism is when someone’s research is designed to fit the agenda of funding bodies. Researchers follow the
funding rather than pursuing their own inde-
pendent, curiosity-driven interests. They are
increasingly cast as consultants, not independ-
ent critics or thinkers. Even our engagement
with the media is as a service provider. Institu-
tions emphasise the career-shaping importance of grant-getting, encouraging strategic behav-
ior among academics to chase the cash.

The message from universities and govern-
ment 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
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We 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 educa-
tion 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 citi-
tizens since most performance models marginal-
ise service work. This is also why, for
example, academics are too content to demon-
ise “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” 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;
and to share a

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