Is there a crisis of trust in universities?

Paper for the CIHE/SRHE Consultation on **Trust, Accountability and the World to Come** at St George’s House, Windsor Castle, 22-23 April 2010

Rob Cuthbert  
Professor of Higher Education Management, University of the West of England, Bristol

Introduction

One of my formative experiences in entering HE was working in an institution where there was little trust by the staff in the chief executive and his team. So when I started studying how HE worked I chose almost my first assignment to be about ‘managing in an atmosphere of distrust’. At that time there was very little direct interest in the phenomenon of trust as a managerial variable; literature searches produced nothing. Now things are very different. And I will draw on the recent advances in understanding to inform my argument.

Is there a crisis of trust in, or of, universities? What is the problem? It seems that trust and accountability are indeed a central concern worldwide. I will be drawing on recent literature from the UK, North America and Australasia, and there is currently a petition ([www.trust-researchers.eu/index.php?file=declaration.htm](http://www.trust-researchers.eu/index.php?file=declaration.htm)) with more than 10,000 signatures calling on the European Council of Ministers and the Parliament to ‘Trust researchers’ and ‘to urgently simplify the financial and administrative provisions related to the Framework programme and other European funding instruments considering their important leverage effect for the competitiveness of the European Research Area.”

Quality is much talked about but much less commonly defined (pace Peter Williams). Pollitt (2009:379) has argued that: “… ‘quality’ has become a vehicle to which almost everything that anyone wants to do to or with public services can be attached. And …. if it means everything, then it means nothing.”

The pervasive audit culture is condemned everywhere in higher education. New Zealand anthropologist Cris Shore (2008) analyses how neoliberalism and new public management have refashioned the academic workplace, and argues (p19), following Michael Power (1994) that: “… a slippage has occurred between audit as a means of financial verification and bookkeeping, and audit as a generalised model (and technology) of governance.” There are profound consequences, says Shore, for how academics behave and even what they believe about knowledge and good practice. He sees audit as a kind of 21st century Taylorism.

Onora O’Neill (2002: viii) puts it like this:

“We set detailed performance targets for public bodies, but are complacent about the perverse incentives they create. We try to micro-manage complex institutions from the centre, and wonder why we get over-complex and inadequate rather than good and effective governance. We try to judge quality by performance indicators rather than by seeking independent and informed evaluation. We aspire to complete transparency in public life, but neglect the more fundamental goal of limiting deception. We endorse a version of press freedom that is not supported by the reasons why we need a free press.”
The problem re trust and accountability is fundamentally that higher education is too big and expensive simply to be left to get on with whatever it does. And, reflecting a wider problem, the Whitehall bubble has become disconnected from the lifeworld of academic practice. And the denizens of the bubble increasingly have no practical understanding of how large organisations work and how they need to be managed. True for business organisations too, but by and large Govt doesn’t try to micromanage business in the way it tries to micromanage public services. And univs are not unique but they are rather unusual organisations which demand rather unusual ways of managing to be effective. And there is a fundamental weakness in the govce of HE, reflected in the few causes celebres such as London Met, whereby governors are insufficiently expert and insufficiently accountable for their failings. Which allows them in extreme cases to fail spectacularly eg evangelists at Gloucestershire, the Newbys at UWE. But those tend not to be the cases that hit the headlines.

So the problem is a need for accountability which is very imperfectly met by our current systems and people in regulatory positions with their inadequate understanding of how things work, or need to work. This is amplified by media, adding their own failures of understanding and looking for the bad, increasing pressure on governance and fuelling distrust between governors and governed, between managers and managed.

The endless public bad/private good mentality about managers then feeds the culture in which senior managers get paid more and more and focus less and less on the rounded contributions of HE, being driven by CUC and the like to adopt corporate PIs/dashboard mentalities which are a poor fit with HE’s realities. For most people in HE, and perhaps in most public services, it is the concept of service which is an important part of their motivation. That is why so many of the best people work for salaries much lower than their abilities might command in some private arena. Managerialism which minimises the significance of public service, overemphasises economic performance, and tries to fit activities into boxes designed by some senior/remote managers/planners and marked ‘corporate priorities’, alienates rather than motivates. Too much emphasis on fitness for purpose rather than fitness of purpose drives away the very people who are key to making things better, in both senses - what and how.

What we need to do now is to get the most we can from the reducing funds available for public services, including HE. How can we do it? That is what I want to talk about.

Structure of talk: the state we’re in re society and trust; how HE changes; what works best in shaping HE change to fit social needs and priorities; the opportunity we now have, and what we should do about it.

Society’s trust in public services

The nature of trust

The dictionary defines ‘trust’ as

- Complete confidence in a person or plan
- Certainty based on past experience
- The trait of believing in the honesty and reliability of others

As a verb:

- To have confidence or faith in
- Be confident about something
All of these have some relevance for us. But note that ‘trust’ can also mean ‘cartel’, something we are actually unlikely to trust ...

There is a perennial and growing problem of trust in public services in general, reflecting their growing size and cost, but also due to social and technological changes. This manifests itself in various guises. Ten years ago in HE it was ‘risk management’ that was the touted ‘solution’ to this problem, but this turned out to be just another part of the virtual reality that managers and regulators sometimes invent to deceive themselves into thinking that everything is alright. Paul Slovic (2006:675) argues that: “Risk management has become increasingly politicized and contentious …. as a side effect of our remarkable form of participatory democracy, amplified by powerful technological and social changes that systematically destroy trust.”

In similar vein Barbara Misztal (1996) has argued that the reconstruction of trust, which used to be taken for granted in earlier societies and in earlier sociological thinking, is made both urgent and difficult by contemporary social change.

Dasgupta (2000) says trust is vital but usually taken for granted as a kind of social lubricant for all kinds of transactions. And trust among persons and agencies is interconnected, so that if your trust in one falters, so will your trust in the other. Hence strong professional boundaries have the hidden benefit of protecting trust in professionals (like doctors) even when trust in their organisations falters, and in this sense we might see the 1980s Thatcherite assault on some of the professions as having accentuated the problems of trust that we now face. But this is less relevant in HE, where we have never had that kind of strongly-bounded professionalism for academics qua academics (witness the failure of the ILT etc etc).

Via a game-theoretic economic analysis Dasgupta (2000:53) argues that credibility and commitment are crucial intermediary variables and concludes that: “You do not trust a person to do something merely because he says he will do it. You trust him because, knowing what you know of his disposition, his information, his ability, his available options and their consequences, you expect he will choose to do it.” In brief, you depend on reputation. This is something accrued through repeated transactions over time. So one question we should ask ourselves is how and why the reputation of HE might have been diminished, and how it might be restored. Dasgupta’s argument as an economist is that it can be built through the commitment of resources to underpin transactions eg through guarantees given by the party wishing to enhance reputation.

Luhmann also makes a helpful distinction between confidence and trust. ”Both concepts refer to expectations which may lapse into disappointments.” (p96) Confidence is the normal case, it is what you rely on most of the time. Trust comes into play when a noticeable risk is explicitly presupposed. If you do not consider alternatives, you reply on confidence. If you choose one of several alternatives, you rely on trust. The absence of confidence breeds alienation, but the absence of trust restricts the range of activities which may rationally be undertaken. “Trust or distrust: this is certainly not the distinction we should use to characterise modern society. In describing modern societies it may be more important to accept two interdependent structural changes: firstly, the increasing diversification and particularisation of familiarities and unfamiliarities; and secondly, the increasing replacement of danger by risk, that is by the possibility of future damages which we will have to consider a consequence of our own action and omission. If this is true our rationalities will,
as a matter of course, require risk-taking; and risk-taking will as far as others are involved, require trust. And again, if this is true, we are likely to enter sooner or later into the vicious circle of not risking trust, losing possibilities of rational action, losing confidence in the system, and so on being that much less prepared to risk trust at all. We may then continue to live with a new type of anxiety about the future outcome of present decisions, and with a general suspicion of dishonest dealings.” (p105)

The problem of MPs’ expenses and the public attitudes it revealed. And the public service attitude it revealed. And the underlying issues.

The argument about ‘waste’ in the public sector. Industrialists saying: “We prefer not to pay higher NI contributions because they only subsidise public waste.”

Perhaps we have just gone beyond the high water mark for ‘new public management’. As Labour are experiencing now, performativity has actually driven down performance levels despite huge investment. We have better buildings through PFI, but the efficiency and performance gains we need to pay the future PFI interest bills have not been so readily forthcoming. And measuring everything can make it worse, hence the abandonment of SATs at key stage 3 in schools.

The implicit narrative on management: private good, public bad. The counter-examples: banks and the financial crisis; Enron; obscene pay levels in the private sector = waste of a different kind; etc. Now the public sector must be cut to pay for the subsidy to the private sector. The problems with ‘public’ and ‘private’ as labels (Watson). BAA? BAeSystems? Mouchel? Manchester United? Univs are neither and both. If there is a difference, it is perhaps that some organisations can focus on just part of the relevant population, seeking profit for a narrow group of stakeholders, while others must insist that ‘every child matters’ or whatever, seeking social return for a wide range of stakeholders all of whom may be vocal and may expect to have their interests taken into account.

But in HE let’s not simply respond to apparent private sector ignorance about ‘the other’ with analogous ignorance. In The Protestant Ethic Max Weber (cited by Gambetta 2000:214) once observed (in Gambetta’s words) that “... the universal diffusion of unscrupulousness in the pursuit of self-interest’ was far more common in pre-capitalist societies than in their supposedly more competitive capitalist counterparts.” Gambetta’s definition of trust: “... trust (or symmetrically, distrust) is a particular level of the subjective probability with which an agent assesses that another agent or group of agents will perform a particular action, both before he can monitor such action (or independently of his capacity ever to be able to monitor it) and in a context in which it affects his own action.” (p216, emphasis in original).

“The condition of ignorance or uncertainty about other people’s behaviour is central to the notion of trust.” (p216)

“If we are lucky enough to live in a society which holds some moral or religious beliefs – a side effect of which is to motivate cooperation for its inherent virtues – then we can make good use of them. But we cannot count on these being readily available.” (p210)

Communication is a crucial element in trust, and that may be distorted by mass media in a way which predisposes people to be less trustful, eg through the dominance in reporting of negative instances/bad news.
Trust is a psychosocial concept, and my colleague Paul Hoggett has written about new public management from this perspective. It is generally agreed by psychoanalysts that social systems function as a defence against individual anxiety. Some individuals develop what is known as the ‘perverse social defence’, when they go beyond mere narcissism to engage in collusion and organised self-deception. Hoggett and others see a classic case of this in new public management. Studies of the NHS in particular show that PIs, performance management, quasi-markets etc have many negative consequences: the neglect of unmeasured or untargeted performance (think of Stafford Hospital), the ‘crowding’ of performance levels around the targets (to prevent targets being raised after too high a performance), ‘gaming’ such as the manipulation of waiting lists, or keeping patients waiting in ambulances outside A&E. Managerialist regimes create a ‘virtual reality’, an ‘auditable surface’ that is a proxy for the customer in the absence of prices. Hoggett concludes that: “… the further removed the observer (ie managers, policymakers, politicians) is from the reality of the frontline the more they are likely to be taken in by the illusion they themselves have been instrumental in creating.” Consider the case of the Cambridge Primary Education study, a careful, large scale, dispassionate, expert academic review which was selectively quoted and comprehensively rubbished by Government because it challenged the dominant (illusory) discourse. That study found that the new testing regimes in schools had made children better at passing tests but less well-educated, a conclusion borne out by unrelated authoritative international studies such as OECD PISA, in which the UK fell from 7th to 17th in reading as a result of the new regimes.

O’Neill (2002) argues that audits often create the very mistrust they are supposed to alleviate.

We need to revalue public services to acknowledge public servants’ motivations are not wholly financial. And then we need to appeal to altruism as well as self-interest (cf Tory manifesto).

Universities and the State

Mark Murphy (2009), a British sociologist, argues that we should reinterpret the ‘new bureaucracy’ using Weber’s account of bureaucracy and rationality, as reformulated by Habermas. Habermas speaks of a loss of freedom in modern society as the effect of the uncoupling of social system from lifeworld, a separation I will return to later. Murphy (2009:693) argues that: “… the development of an accountability culture is only the latest way in which the tension between higher education and the state has played itself out.” He suggests that we need to avoid a monolithic view of surveillance and audit, arguing like Burke (2005) for a middle way between autonomy and accountability, ‘service without subservience’ (2005:5).

Academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie, Rhoades and Slaughter) and Bok’s (2003) (former President of Harvard) railing against the ‘Faustian compact’ between universities and the State though commercialisation and marketisation.

In HE, league tables encourage and sustain managerialism when managers’ nerve/ethics fail them (Cuthbert 2010, forthcoming)

What works best in shaping HE change to fit social needs and priorities

Can HE change? A ludicrous question. See Tight’s history of UK HE since 1945. Expansion from elite through mass to almost universal participation. 50 years ago (1962-63) only 217000 FT HE students
5% participation. Now almost 40% (higher in Scotland), over a million FT and another million PT. New universities have been created through greenfield development, through restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, and through redesignation. So where we once had about 15 universities we now have over 150, with much greater diversity and much greater social, disciplinary and professional reach. We have invented whole new forms such as the Open University, much admired and copied across the world. Where we once regulated universities through a Treasury UGC we now regulate a huge HE system through 4 different national systems. Where funding formulae were once imagined and secret we now have open and transparent funding mechanisms. Unit costs for teaching have gone down by 80 or 90%. Course design has changed dramatically, first with modularisation and credit transfer and later with e-learning and the transformation of teaching now taking the web, virtual portals, virtual learning environments and increasingly web 2.0 as central to learning. Organisation structures have changed and changed again. The staff base has become much more international, much more diverse in terms of differentiation of roles and the emergence of a ‘third space’ for new professionals. And the idea of the university has changed, though not as far and not as fast as it needs to. Every university now must see itself in a global context, not just the European Bologna-driven context which UK HE has been slow to adapt to for good and bad reasons. So the history of HE in the last 50 years has been one of radical and enduring change, almost all positive, which has maintained and perhaps even strengthened UK HE’s reputation and global competitiveness.

That contextualises what Peter Williams has been saying. There is a historic divide between QA for improvement and QA for justification (for a recent treatment see Blackmore 2009). What is QA for and who is it supposed to benefit? This is the subject of an article by Australian Vin Massaro (2010), who concludes that an effective QA system should:

- Make a difference to students – through value being added and the measurement of outcomes
- Be owned by HEIs and accepted as valid by them
- Be relevant to the purposes of HE
- Promote diversity
- Be a cyclical process rather than sporadic snapshots
- Address the question of standards
- Be conducted by national and international peers
- Be conducted at subject or program level
- Contain international comparative measures
- Be reported in terms that are easily understood by a lay audience

Although performativity is self-defeating, there are examples where new accountability measures have been productive, at least in some respects. In HE there was through the 1980s and 1990s growing tightening of controls over teaching but for many years there was no equivalent control over research. Initially the RAE was introduced just for the (pre-1992) universities. It was the epitome of self-regulation, albeit with much greater transparency than most private sector (eg Press Council) self-regulation. Performance was not really measured, which would have been either impossible or impossibly crude. It was assessed subject by subject by a panel of experts, who then came up with a rating. Yes it was open to bias, subjectivity, etc, but the protections against it were its relative openness, transparency and the rigour of the process. But it is an essentially subjective process, so its working depends on sufficient trust in the expertise of the panels. So long as there is trust then RAE judgements can be legitimated by the mass of academics.

In practice people have objected not so much to the RAE itself but to the uses to which its results have been put, notably the ever-increasing concentration of research funds on relatively few institutions, the (mis)use of RAE scores as a proxy for many other aspects of institutional performance (cf Massaro 2010:19 “So, in a peculiar chain of events, research performance has
become a proxy for educational standards simply because research rankings are easier to develop than a set of rational and accepted measures of academic standards - measuring the measurable rather than the important, with no regard to fitness for purpose, skewing the focus of institutions towards research productivity,”), and the way some institutions have allegedly used poor RAE ratings as the grounds for unpopular changes such as closing departments and/or getting rid of academic staff. It is widely argued that the RAE has induced a culture of compliance/fear and a downgrading of longer-term academic outcomes in favour of RJAs, thus threatening the necessary long-term perspective for blue skies research. But it seems incontrovertible that the quality and quantity of research has gone up, and that as a system for accountability the RAE is relatively cheap compared with many of the alternatives. Witness the furore when the REF was mooted, with metrics and impact measures, and the long march back to something almost identical with the previous RAE under pressure from academics themselves. Combined with the Research Councils’ greater emphasis on themed research to address national priorities, we might be seeing a moderately effective and efficient way to ensure accountability in an activity with notoriously unpredictable outcomes and impacts over unpredictable timescales.

We have perhaps found a system which avoids micromanagement, trusts people to do the right things, and allows for accountable diversity. The interesting phenomenon is why Govt still wishes to promote greater concentration of research funds in a few institutions when all the evidence of the RAE is that there are much greater returns from investing in excellence wherever it is found. That can only be explained by the power of the elite universities’ lobby and the biases towards the elite in the dominant discourse.

But separating research and teaching is itself undesirable and counterproductive. Take an institutional case: my own. UWE’s most effective and rapid strategic change happened when we were clearest that strategic management was about leading through academic and educational values, and directions for people, not directions to people. (ref). “A new kind of first class university” in which the expansion of R was directly in support of the WP mission, and we pursued access and quality in a coherent way against the policy of the day (teaching-intensive etc).

**The opportunity we now have, and what we should do about it**

Let’s not waste a good crisis – opportunity for step change in mgt and/or governance. And less money should = less control, not more (pace Mandelson)

We have an outdated narrative/discourse which needs to change to reflect the new realities of HE, its much greater diversity, reach, participation rates, subject/professional coverage. In fact need to change to reflect the fact that HE is a necessary (but not sufficient) prerequisite to full citizenship. Motion and Leitch (2009) argue that public policy discourse can be transformational, enabling us to see new possibilities for policy. So it behoves us to get it right.

Not all of this is a new problem. Consider (some of) Ackoff’s (2006) F-Laws of management:

- Rising in the hierarchy means knowing less about more
- Managers who don’t know how to measure what they want end up wanting what they can measure (cf Einstein)
- There is nothing a manager wants done that educated subordinates cannot undo
- Getting rid of what we don’t want drives out getting what we do want
Consider also Fairtlough’s (2006) argument that there are three ways of getting things done: hierarchy, heterarchy and responsible autonomy. What mix would be best for HE in the coming era?

Narratives are powerful and resist change even when they go against the evidence. Consider Arthur Hauptmann’s (2009) ‘four faulty assumptions about American higher education’. He says the US narrative’s components are: access is declining; degree completion rates are flat or declining; US rankings in attainment of college degrees has dropped from first to the middle of the pack; and degree attainment in the US has been flat for 40 years. And then he shows how the evidence is against each of these propositions, arguing that it is hard to make things better if we don’t have a reliable view of how things are.

The current UK narrative involves: distrust; a lack of understanding of ‘science’ (which eg Today presenters often seem to glory in) and a belief that academics deliberately obscure things; English anti-intellectualism (the English think that intellectual = Stephen Fry); HE isn’t ‘worth it’ anymore, it’s not what it was, it’s been dumbed down; wider access means lower standards; there are too many graduates being overeducated and going into ‘non-graduate’ jobs; too many people fail; UK plc is losing its global place and poorer education is partly to blame; all these new universities aren’t proper universities and would be better off reverting to being polytechnics; vocational education and FE are OK, for other people’s children; academics whinge all the time and they don’t know when they’re well off, with all those long holidays.

How should the narrative change?

In ways that meet the challenges identified by Freedman?:
- Mission definition
- Funding structures and arrangements
- Student engagement
- Institutional transparency and accountability
- Ability to partner

Freedman suggests 8 critical responses:
- Willing to change
- Choose institutional type
- Broaden vision to include schools/HEI axis
- Understand/improve student engagement
- Commitment to change and exercise change management
- Improve institutional assessment and accountability
- Build a process-driven HEI
- Involve students/study what works best

Middleton (2010, after Seddon 2008) a book on ‘Public Services that Work’ arguing the case for systems thinking and giving case studies that show how the dominant narrative can change, and how trusting public servants delivers results. Seddon’s prescription:
- Scrap the myth of choice (people don’t want to choose a hospital, they want a good hospital)
- Scrap targets (they don’t work, and people massage the data)
- Scrap specifications (they’re wrong and they don’t work)
- Scrap inspections (they’re expensive to do and to prepare for, and all they do is ensure that people are doing the wrong thing correctly, meeting bad specifications)
- Scrap ‘deliverology’ (because it’s nonsense)
- Scrap the obsession with sharing ‘back office services’ in huge call centres and data warehouses (they don’t work half as well as front offices where people talk to the public)
- Scrap the Audit commission (because it’s a white elephant)
• Scrap the centralised regime that oversees the disastrous public sector (because it is the problem)
Then use systems thinking!

And what should we do instead? Trust people more/differently, and change the nature of regulation/accountability.

• If we need system reform we may also need ‘dislodging events’ (Zemsky). Strong rhetoric no good on its own. Faculty must want to change. State agencies can’t prescribe change but can create conditions which make change possible. Best to focus on truly systemic change.
  o Should universities be allowed to fail? The fact that they appear ‘never’ to do so is misleading, there are always closures, mergers and acquisitions, sometimes forced by regulatory pressure. And some institutions do disappear eg UWIST. But non-visible failure is a testament to the values of humanity, respect and, crucially, support for current and past students whose present and future prospects depend on the standing of their alma mater.
    o Consider
• Inspection using respected experts
• Troubleshooting
• Encourage openness, transparency, rigour, authenticity, morality and ethical behaviour.
  o The Mortgage meltdown was ‘immoral but not illegal’ - Hirsch and Morris, who suggest the pendulum will start to swing back towards a rights-based rather than a profits-based economic framework. Friedman no longer rules: “the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits” – 1970 dictum quoted by H&M, who cite Roe (2006: 39) as saying Friedman’s view “is now mainstream in American business circles”.
  o We should beware of ‘fake authenticity’ (Blackburn 2010) and be sure to remember that ‘Universities are about habits of truth’ and (perhaps?) that ‘universities are about getting things right rather than putting them right’. Remember Heidegger’s words as the VC of ? Heidelberg University, as immortalised in verse:
    “Higgledy-piggledy,
    Herr Rektor Heidegger
    said to his students
    “To Being be true!
    Lest you should fall into inauthenticity.
    This I believe –
    and the Fuhrer does too!”
    Also see Watson (2009). It can also be argued that authenticity, especially in hard times, is undesirable. Former American college president Rita Bornstein (2009) says: “College leaders …. must maintain the delicate balance between the institutional need for role maintenance through managed inauthenticity and the human desire for authentic relationships.”
• Re-educate academics and others in HE, politicians, governors, regulators, media journalists, the public to re-value HE in all its dimensions. NUS/QAA trying to do this – Streeting and Wise (2009)
  o Governors and VCs should pay more attention to ‘general educational character’ and rather less to ‘mission’

References


Hoggett P (2009) Government and the perverse social defence A paper for the memorial conference for Isabel Menzies Lyth


