Correlation in the Data University: Understanding and Challenging Targets-based Performance-management in Higher Education

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Abstract

We need new ways to understand university management in the twenty-first century. Although the literature diagnosing the neoliberalisation of universities is invaluable in helping us comprehend the increasing metricization of academic labour, it is nevertheless accompanied by a despairing tone which implies that effective resistance is virtually impossible. In this paper, we argue against this pessimism by making two interrelated arguments. First, we show that this sense of hopelessness arises from a disjuncture between this literature and the industrial relations field. We contend that by bringing these two bodies of scholarship into dialogue with each other, effective intellectual and practical resistance strategies for collective mobilization can be developed. Second, we conceptualise the datafication of universities as part of a broader paradigm shift in governance of contemporary neoliberal societies from 'causation' to 'correlation.' Universities have become less focussed upon upholding fundamental principles enshrined in their founding documents – about science and education being intrinsic goods – and instead have concentrated increasing energies upon producing metrics that correlate their activities to multiple external audit exercises. We propose that for effective resistance, we need to move away from this correlation and back towards causation. Empirically, we detail a case study example of the 'Raising the Bar' dispute at Newcastle University, United Kingdom, to show how successful mobilisation against neoliberal 'outcomes-based performance-management' (OBPM) was achieved. Using Kelly's (1998) mobilization theory, we analyse the key strategies that enabled the Newcastle resistance, showing that successful opposition to correlative practices of neoliberalisation within the 'data university' is indeed possible. We conclude by highlighting the significance of reclaiming the central purpose of the university

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through building resistance from the fundamental premise and truth that science and education are good for society in and of themselves.

Keywords

Higher education; outcomes-based performance-management; industrial relations; neoliberalism; correlation

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Neoliberalism and performance targets in the university

Universities exist to deepen our understanding of the universe for the benefit of humanity and for the sheer pleasure of knowledge. The scientific project is an inherently internationalist one, driven by our basic geographical impulse that we are "a place-making and place-loving species" (Bonnett, 2014, 3): we seek to understand the worlds in which we live, in order to make them more conducive places in which to dwell. Although this project has frequently been captured and driven by the interests of the privileged (Kearns, 2009), at its best it remains a vehicle for generating visions of better ways of living in our shared home. More than a job or a career, scholarship is a vocation[2] that requires the mastery of disciplines of integrity, honesty, openness, service and respect in pursuit and transmission of truth. At its best it cultivates practices of creativity, tolerance, generosity, understanding and critical awareness that allow good human societies to flourish (Nussbaum, 2010).

The contemporary argument, coming from a significant and growing body of critical literature, is that this vision of the university is radically threatened by neoliberalism (Lorenz, 2012; Radice, 2013; Williamson, 2018a). Neoliberalism in academia is the ideological belief that education should as far as possible mimic, enact and be governed by market principles; it effectively attempts to turn "universities into corporations that also happen to hand out degrees every summer" (Slater, 2011, 118). In higher education, neoliberalism is marked in particular by the production of data about multiple aspects of the 'performance' (Brenneis, Shore and Wright, 2005) of academics, departments, faculties and universities (Burrows, 2012). Collated in league tables, this data is used to determine individual career progression as well as the allocation of resources between institutions (Carson, Bartneck and Voges, 2013). In order to succeed in this funding environment, a new breed of university 'managers', paid historically unprecedented incomes (Adams 2015), use metrics to measure and manage the performance of individual scholars against targets they set for them (Dyson, 2015). This practice is known as 'outcomes-based performance-management' (OBPM), and is the focus of this article.

Davies and Petersen (2005, 34) pointedly ask: "How is it, given that neoliberal discourse can so easily be constituted as monstrous and absurd…. that academics appear to have engaged in relatively little systematic or widespread resistance and critique of it, given their overt commitment to resistance and critique as a way of life?" It is an excellent question, for the literature bemoaning neoliberalism and OBPM is extensive (Kallio, Kallio and Grossi 2017; Rowlands 2015; Parker 2011; Nelson, Espeland and Sauder 2007) yet the comparable collection of studies detailing successful resistance to it would make a very slim volume indeed. Typical of this pessimistic, descriptive approach is Kalfa *et al*'s account of the imposition of neoliberal OBPM in an unnamed Australian university. They describe a situation in which scholars were too scared to challenge the management or do anything other than "play the game", and

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[2] On the distinction between these three concepts of work, see Bellah, Robert, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton. 2008. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. With a New Preface. London: University of California Press.

conclude that "silence, neglect and exit" are "more realistic options" than resistance (Kalfa et al., 2018, 274). Going beyond their case study, they write that "scholars are almost unanimous in their conclusion that academics have largely complied with managerialist imperatives and document ways in which they cope with them" (ibid, 275). The basic message of this literature can be simply understood as saying 'this is awful but apart from moaning or quitting there is nothing we can really do about it.' In this paper we argue against this counsel of despair, which we diagnose as having arisen because of two shortcomings in the literature:

First, these discussions have not engaged with the extensive body of literature on mobilisation and collective action within the fields of industrial relations and sociology. Following the ground-breaking work of Tilly (1978), this literature seeks to theorise how mobilisation occurs: that is, how individual workers with individual grievances are transformed into a collective who come to see themselves as facing a shared injustice that they are willing to take collective action over. Scholars of social movements have also used this approach (McAdam, 1988). We draw particularly on the articulation of Tilly's mobilisation theory as developed by John Kelly in his 1998 book *Rethinking Industrial Relations*. For Kelly, mobilisation theory addresses what he suggests are three main problems of industrial relations: first, how do individuals acquire a sense of collective as opposed to individual grievance; second, how to they organise collectively to pursue this grievance; and third, how and when will they take collective action? (Kelly, 1998, 24). This article analyses successful union mobilisation at Newcastle University, UK through Kelly's framework.

Second, we argue that the generally pessimistic tone of writing about recent changes in higher education is due, in part, to how such changes are being conceptualised at a fundamental level. Whilst the dominant focus in the critical literature today upon 'neoliberalism' and 'data infrastructures' is certainly useful, in this paper we argue that there is a further need to consider a broader paradigm shift in governance in contemporary neoliberal societies from 'causation' to 'correlation'. In our specific case of education, this manifests in the shift away from the holding and foregrounding of fundamental truths, such as education is intrinsically good, to correlation and relations of interaction as instead proxies for 'revealing meaning'. Here we draw upon the influential work of Beck (2009; 2016), Agamben (2014) and Chandler (2018), among others, who do not specifically write about education but draw out the broader trends towards correlation in wider society. Indeed, today both supporters and those who critique the changing nature of the university tend to adopt *relational* frameworks of meaning. On the one side, we have those government officials, managers and academics who support the rise of correlational metrics and real-time data feeds, for example, as giving meaning to the university and those who work for it. On the more pessimistic side, we have those who employ more critical relational frameworks to reveal the darker side of such transformative relations through relational ontologies, assemblage theory, cultural topologies, and so forth (Williamson, 2018a: 1; Perrotta and Williamson, 2018 and Williamson, 2018b; Nazerian, 2018). In both cases, however, meaning is understood to be seen and revealed by transformative relations of interaction themselves.

Instead, in this paper, we seek to go beyond these *relational* accounts to suggest that in order to effectively resist the proliferating datafication of academic labour, we need to build resistance from the more fundamental truth that science and education are 'good for society in and of themselves' (i.e., from this *non-relational* premise). We argue that since the very function of new societies of control (Deleuze, 1992) is to simply absorb critique by improving data metrics and the relations they correlate in ever new ways, we need to do more than merely reveal the darker side of these transformative neoliberal relations; we need to find ways to mobilize and actively resist them. For us, this change in approach to analysis and industrial action takes us beyond merely diagnosing what our Newcastle colleague Sinead Murphy (2017) calls in the title of her eponymous book the "Zombie University". It involves a more profound shift in the stakes of debate away from relational critiques and associated modes of correlation, towards

the more negating, non-relational truth that education is good in and of itself. To be clear about what we mean by this, we are not seeking to hark back to some idealised time when education was supposedly better than it is today. Indeed, there have been many improvements brought about through feminist interventions and debates about the decolonialisation of the university. Rather, and in part inspired by the 'withdrawal' associated with decolonialisation, we are simply raising the point that critically mapping and tracking ever-proliferating modes of correlation plays into the same logic as those who advocate them, by fighting the battle on the same terrain. Instead we invoke the non-relational premise that 'science and education are good in and of themselves'; something which, as the Newcastle University example will illustrate, can amount to a powerful mode of resistance and form of withdrawal which works against the rise of what we call the 'data university' and what Chandler (2018:24) calls the "correlational machines" of wider contemporary society.

Our argument is based on detailed empirical study of a specific case: the 'Raising the Bar' dispute at Newcastle University. Founded as a self-standing university in 1963 but with its origins in nineteenth-century schools of medicine and physical science (University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1963-4, 23-4), Newcastle is a civic university in the North East of England. According to its statutes, it exists "for the public benefit, to advance education, learning and research" (Statutes of the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, 3 (2)). Because the funding and policy environments in which higher education occurs has changed dramatically in the United Kingdom (as elsewhere) in recent years, securing the necessary resources to pursue this goal increasingly depends on performing well in various metric-gathering audit exercises. 'Raising the Bar' (RTB), and in particular its 'Research and Performance Expectations' (RiPE), was Newcastle University's senior management's attempt to work out how to do this between 2013 and 2016.

The RTB dispute is analysed here not primarily as an exemplar of OBPM in higher education. Rather, it is explored as a case study of successful mobilisation and collective action. This paper is divided into three further parts. In part two we conceptualise the rise of 'the data university' in relation to OBPM practices. Following that, we outline the RTB dispute at Newcastle University as an example of OBPM in higher education, and the methods we used to study it. In part four, we identity and analyse resistance in Newcastle University using mobilisation theory.

Outcomes-Based Performance-Management as a strategy of correlation in the Data University

Correlation and Causation

Extensive research exists on how universities are being reshaped "by a combination of free market rhetoric and intensive managerial control practices" (Lorenz, 2012: 600; see also Strathern, 2000; Grove, 2015b; Gill, 2010; Perrotta and Williamson, 2018; Bacevic, 2018; Williamson, 2018a). Much of this research understands and frames this shift as taking place within "the risky neoliberal world" (Lorenz: 2012: 605), and the associated rise of the 'neoliberal university' as marked by proliferation of audit cultures, league tables, citation metrics, student feedback scores, accreditation agencies, and so forth. A growing body of scholarship argues that these developments amount to a culture of pervasive control (Lorenz, 2012; Burrows, 2014), as academics are constantly monitored through the proliferation of metrics, bureaucratic machinery, dashboards and, more recently, data-streams that correlate performance in real time (Williamson, 2018a).

Exploring the rise of the neoliberal university in the germinal 2012 article "If You're So Smart, Why Are You under Surveillance?", Chris Lorenz draws upon the work of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck and his term *McKinsey Stalinism*. Foregrounding the intensified levels of monitoring and auditing in the contemporary university, Lorenz argues that the level of control has reached such proportions that it now "leaves no institutionalized room for criticism" (Lorenz 2012: 608). We contend that control is

indeed pervasive through the proliferation of data and measurement techniques, but that this can better be understood as a consequence of another of Beck's (2009; 2016) key concerns: *the shift from causation to correlation in neoliberal societies* (see Chandler, 2018 for an excellent elaboration). It is important to flesh out this argument as it opens up the possibilities for the resistance which we go on to explore through our case study of RTB.

As Beck (2009; 2016) usefully started to draw out towards the end of his life, the basis of neoliberal governance is more generally *correlation* than *causation* (see also Chandler, 2015; 2018; Agamben, 2014). Risk, precarity and complexity are increasingly held to be uncontrollable in contemporary neoliberal societies - indeed, as Foucault (2008) explained, neoliberalism encourages them. As Chandler and Pugh (2018) argue, under such conditions the key drive of governance switches from addressing the root causes of problems (ie *causation*) towards an intensified focus upon attuning, adapting, and being resilient and correlating to the world (that is, *correlation*). The contemporary university, does not govern through a deep and shared framework of reasoning that education is good 'in and of itself' for wider society because such causal links and 'self-evident truths' are not widely held. Instead, the university switches its register of engagement with the wider world to a more pragmatic, adaptive and correlational approach. This enables university managers to better attune to emergent processes, new opportunities, and changing funding regimes, and to be resilient and sell their products on the market.

This shift from causation to correlation is enabled by metrics and data-streams, which supposedly allow "the unseen to be seen" (Chandler, 2018: 179). Proliferating academic metrics attune and reveal the university to the wider world. In the absence of deeper causal debates about the fundamental value of education in society, it is instead metrics, league tables, student satisfaction scores, facilitating dashboards, real-time data-streams and algorithms which enable any given university to be 'brought into view'. Like the proverbial 'canary in the coal mine', these metrics enable people to detect whether or not the university is a 'healthy' place to be.

Thus, as Agamben (2014) might say, the rise and intensification of correlation as an overriding ethos for the contemporary university is unsurprising. Indeed, it is absolutely necessary – according to the logic of correlation – to invest a great deal of money, time, effort, computational labour and resources in the intensive development of metrics. It is also therefore quite natural that in recent years we have seen the pace of all this accelerating in the correlative university, where the increasing traffic of transactional data displaces a reliance upon older, clunkier annual audits and data gathering procedures. Indeed, it becomes necessary to invest heavily in the development of new and innovative technologies that map, correlate, and reveal the connections and relations of interaction (Chandler, 2018). However, these metric exercises are widely recognised as flawed (Wilsdon, 2015) and require fundamental changes to the nature and practice of academic labour. The key question that universities thus face now is how can we succeed in this environment whilst remaining true to our vocation of pursuing science and education as an intrinsic social good.

Drawing upon Agamben, Chandler (2018: 169) argues that the more general switch in governance techniques in neoliberal societies towards correlation is nothing short of an "epoch-making transformation." As we discuss below, RTB precisely reflects a desire to make the university's core research activities correlate to metricised audit cultures. The desire to correlate to the world – to better sense, adapt, attune, and be resilient, to today's complex and changing world – leads the university to exert significant time and effort in reorienting itself in these new ways.

The prevalence of *relational frameworks of reasoning* which 'reveal' and enable us 'to see' meaning is deeply entrenched in many societies; not only for those who positively support the rise of the data university, but also in many ways for those who critique it as well. Recent examples of this include

the employment of relational ontologies and assemblage theory to critically examine the coming together of "different functions, actors and relations" in universities (Bacevic, 2018:1; Perrotta and Williamson, 2018). They also include the employment of "cultural topology" for "analysing spatial relations between educational data, discourses, policies and practices in new governance configurations" (Gulson and Sellar, 2018: 1). Ben Williamson's (2018c) critical blog, exploring in manifold ways how relations of interaction are being negatively reconfigured in the contemporary university, has become a particularly high-profile examination of such approaches (see also Williamson, 2018a: 1; Perrotta and Williamson, 2012 and Williamson, 2018b; Nazerian, 2018). This method of critique entails foregrounding the reconfiguration of relational networks, connections and subjectivities. Yet although important in revealing what is happening, it unintentionally reinscribes the notion that 'meaning' itself is revealed by mapping and tracking relations. We contend that non-relational negation is a better form of critique than this tracing of surface-level relations (Laruelle, 2013; Galloway, 2014). We need to foreground the insistence that science and education have a less negotiable function and role in society, being intrinsic goods in and of themselves. That is to say, we need to shift back from correlation to causation. Whilst this particular argument has received less prominence in recent debate and critique, we contend that it is fundamental to envisioning successful resistance in the data university.

Outcomes-Based Performance-Management

We argue that the shift to correlation in the data university has been facilitated not simply by proliferating data streams and technologies of management, but also by the rise (since the late 1990s) of outcomes-based performance-management (OBPM) in the public sector and education. Lowe and Wilson (2015, 982) defined OBPM as 'an umbrella term for using 'outcomes' as a way of making a judgment about the performance and effectiveness of social policy interventions'. It describes the increased use of a range of metrics to measure the performance of social interventions and reward or punish employees and units in accordance with the success or failure they have in meeting them. Crucially, the literature on OBPM suggests that it cannot be introduced without significantly altering the processes whose performance it is seeking to manage. As Bevan and Hood (2006) put it, "what's measured is what matters" – so measuring changes values as universities seek to correlate their activities to changing audit regimes. Studies like these demonstrate the enduring veracity of Campbell's Law (1979:85) that, "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor."

Here we agree with Burrows (2012, 356) that this "metricization of the academy" is not simply a new game academics have to play, with a wink of the eye and our fingers crossed behind our backs, to continue our work as before or do the same thing slightly better. Rather, it is a "distinct cultural artefact" that has far-reaching consequences in how we think and do scholarship (Strathern, 2000, 2). Metrics become so reified that academics cannot but help profoundly reorient their practices towards them. Davies argues that being obliged to rephrase our work in terms of metrics engenders "a powerful relanguaging of our work" and therefore a reworking of what we understand it to be and how we value it (Davies, 2005, 6). This has proved a particular concern for the humanities (Nussbaum, 2010; Collini, 2012) where the monetary value of the academic work may not always be apparent. As Collini (2015) observes; "the true use-value of scholarly labour [has] been squeezed out; only the exchange-value of the commodities produced, as measured by the metrics, remains" (see also The Analogue University, 2017).

Other analyses of OBPM in the data university claim it is associated with differential impacts on historically more marginalised groups of academics, such as female and part-time (Petrina and Ross, 2014; see also Collier, 2014), and has a negative impact on staff wellbeing (Kallio and Kallio, 2014;

Franco-Santos et al., 2014). The desire to correlate to the world – to better sense, adapt, attune, and be resilient to today's complex and changing world – means that the university has reoriented itself in these new ways, fundamentally changing the nature and meaning of academic labour and the experience of those who work in it. RTB was an OBPM scheme that was also an attempt to explicitly enshrine this as central to the management and purpose of Newcastle University. It is to this that we now turn.

Raising the Bar at Newcastle: An outline of the dispute

Methods

This article is a study of mobilisation and collective action in response to Newcastle University senior management's 'Raising the Bar' (RTB) OBPM. It is thus at the same time also an examination of counter-mobilisation by the university's senior management. It is based on a study of the minutes of relevant university bodies (University and College Union, - UCU, Executive Board and its RTB Steering group, Senate), emails amongst senior managers obtained by a Freedom of Information request, and interviews with 27 members of the university: from Executive Board managers and senior lay members, to union activists. All interviews are anonymised and in some cases with gender designations altered so identifying individuals is not possible.

This article adopts a case study approach. A case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context (Yin, 2014: 16). It cannot be used to generalise statistically, but rather to generalise analytically by shedding empirical light on important concepts and other similar cases (Yin, 2014, 40).

We are all scholars who work at Newcastle University. This raises questions about objectivity – namely, the ability of the researchers to stand back from a topic in which they are personally invested, and the willingness of respondents to share information with people they may know (and/or mistrust). Tietze (2012, page 68) discusses this in an illuminating chapter on 'researching your own organization,' helpfully suggesting that whereas most organizational research is about making "'the strange' more 'familiar' and known", in this case it is "about making the 'familiar' 'strange'". Interviews were conducted by two members of this writing collective, one who was actively engaged in an organisational role in the UCU dispute and one who was not. We divided up interviews so that the second person mentioned interviewed UCU activists, whilst the first person focussed on senior and middle managers, who were the majority of interviewees.

Our research sought to answer the basic question of why RTB was withdrawn: or, to put it analytically, how did mobilization occur and what form of collective action (if any) led to its withdrawal. This analysis is presented in part four; in the remainder of this part a brief timeline of RTB is sketched out.

Outline of the dispute

RTB was first mentioned in the university Executive Board (EB) minutes in July 2013, referring to plans to increase the size of the university.[3] In April 2014, the then Vice-Chancellor, Chris Brink, presented RTB to Council (a governance body responsible for ensuring the viability of the university)

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[3] For a fuller discussion of the origins of Raising the Bar and the Research and Performance Expectations, from which this summary is derived, see Morrish and The Analogue University, 2017; see also Newcastle University Branch of the University and College Union and Nick Megoran, 2017. *Moving Forwards from Raising the Bar: A report on Lessons Learnt for Newcastle University*. Newcastle upon Tyne: UCU.

with the aim of having "at least 10 subjects (Units of Assessment) which are ranked top 50 in the world." In January 2015, an RTB Steering Group was established, which focussed RTB on a two-fold carrot-and-stick 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."[4] On July 7th, 2015, Senate approved the principle (but not details) of faculty-specific sets of targets which were eventually called the 'Research and Performance Expectations' (RiPE).

The core strategies and intent of RTB were outlined in a document dated October 7th, 2015 entitled 'Embedding Research Expectations: Actions for Heads of Academic Units.' This document (provided to Heads of Academic Unit, thereafter HoAU) informed a meeting of HoAU on October 8th, which involved setting out a timetable to implement RTB through an employee appraisal process which is known as the Performance Development Review (PDR) at Newcastle.

After this, two major areas of work were identified for those staff identified as being flagged "Green" or "Red" in the traffic light system, where staff classified as green were seen as meeting the University's new expectations while the staff identified as red were seen as below the bar. Firstly, HoAU were told to meet with staff identified as being "Green" to explain the RTB process and reassure them about their own position. Secondly, by January 2016, they were to also conduct combined RTB/PDR meetings for those below the bar. These combined meetings were to assess the individual academics' performance against the RiPE expectations and to devise an action plan for improvement. HoAU were also instructed: "Where PDRs and performance reviews have been in place for a reasonable period without improvement, seek advice from HR prior to commencing capability procedure." RTB was thus progressing on a twofold focus of (i) further rewarding and advancing the already excellent in order to game the league table system by "working on the world top 50 subjects" through a "focus on research strength" with "£13m for research," and (ii) an intense and coercive targeting of "the reds."

One HoAU asked directly whether "staff [will] know the colour category that they fall under?" The answer was "No, however it is important to see the reds in the first semester so inferences may be drawn by individuals." Strikingly, a policy of giving different messages to staff and middle managers was explicitly set out. One HoAU commented that "communication" was going to be a problem because "Staff will always pick up negative comments." The response given was that RTB is a "supportive and constructive approach" but because "the audience today is Heads therefore we need to talk about difficult bits." This policy of a deliberate lack of transparency (telling staff that "Raising the Bar is not a redundancy or cost-cutting exercise"[5] whilst simultaneously briefing HoAU on how to facilitate and speed up redundancies) placed middle managers in a difficult position.

Management insisted that this coercive element was a last resort, and not the purpose of RTB. But this coercive potential of RiPE came to make RTB synonymous with RiPE. Tremendous unhappiness, upset and unease amongst staff increased and, citing anonymous case-work, the UCU claimed that RTB was leading to a culture of bullying and asked the VC to withdraw RiPE and discuss how research could be improved 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 that originated in discussions amongst a Newcastle University women's network (NU Women) eventually signed by over 100 professors was delivered to the VC. Behind the scenes, HoAUs increasingly conveyed the disquiet of

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[4] EB Minutes, 3/02/2015.

[5] "Raising the Bar – Frequently Asked Questions 31st May 2016", attached to an email from the Executive Director of Corporate Affairs to Chris Brink, May 31st 2016 (obtained by Freedom of Information Request).

their staff to senior managers. A UCU branch meeting on October 28th, 2015 approved an indicative ballot to see whether members would be willing to undertake industrial action over RTB, and in February 2016 the results of this ballot suggested a willingness on behalf of the branch to consider this. Management sought to formally engage UCU in discussion about RTB, and in March drew up a Memorandum of Understanding with UCU negotiators. The UCU Branch Committee and branch meeting on March 3rd rejected both this MOU and, on May 23rd, a subsequent one negotiated by Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), voting eventually to take Action Short of a Strike (ASOS) in the form of a marking boycott, authorised to begin on June 3rd. This would disrupt graduation of final-year students, so was a serious step. In spite of this, the VC indicated at a meeting of Academic Board on May 25th that RTB would not be withdrawn, and the management wrote to staff threatening to deduct pay at a rate of 100% for non-completion of marking duties.[6]

In the week that the industrial action began, Newcastle UCU wrote to the VC offering an alternative to RTB, entitled *Improving Research Together* (IRT) and launched a petition on the campaigning website change.org. The campaign attracted international attention.[7] In response to the industrial action, the VC called an emergency Heads of Academic Meeting on Friday June 3rd,[8] the day the industrial action began, where HoAU supported the withdrawal of RTB. On Monday June 6th, in negotiations with the UCU, management agreed to abandon RiPE and to ditch the RTB terminology. Instead, drawing on the approach suggested in IRT, management and union agreed to "develop a coming understanding and collegial approach to improving research,"[9] in a document entitled the *Academic Framework for Research Improvement* (AFRI).

This timeline of the RTB dispute clearly shows how a "logic of punitive quantification" (Collini 2015) underlined the university's attempt to reduce academic labour to managerial metrics, thereby making RTB a classic example of OBPM. The university staff fought hard against it and did eventually win by having it fully withdrawn. This rare victory over the neoliberalising and correlational forces of OBPM re-energised the union branch. Against a tendency to grudgingly accept the inevitably of the relentless march of neoliberalism in academia, the withdrawal of RTB showed that successful mobilisation against OBPM in the neoliberal university is an available option. In the final section, we recount the different aspects of mobilization that we argue helped bring an end to RTB in Newcastle.

4. Mobilisation against RTB

In this section, we use Kelly's version of mobilization theory to understand how mobilization against RTB occurred and why it succeeded. We structure our analysis around the three questions that Kelly suggests are central to mobilisation: how do individuals acquire a sense of collective as opposed to individual grievance? How do they organise collectively to pursue this grievance? And how and when will they take collective action?

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[6] 'Update on local industrial action,' email from Chris Brink to all staff, 2/06/2016.

[7] www.change.org/p/chris-brink-say-no-to-coercive-performance-management-at-newcastle-university

[8] Chris Brink, email, 'Extraordinary meeting of Heads of Academic Units Friday 3 June,' 1/6/2016.

[9] Academic Framework for Research Improvement, 06/06/2016.

Collective grievance

The fulcrum of mobilisation theory is *interests* and how people come to define dissatisfaction in the workplace not as something unavoidable given 'the economy' or 'policy environment,' but as unjust and illegitimate.

In the RTB dispute, activists we interviewed described resistance as intellectual resistance, beginning where academic activity always begins: with the literature review. Activists felt that, to have an effective opposition strategy, they needed to deconstruct and expose the weak evidential base for the potential effectiveness of measures such as RTB. They thus found key authors in the field of critiques of OBPM and the neoliberal university, and asked them for guided reading lists to get them started. These arguments were circulated amongst discussion lists and rehearsed at union and staff meetings.

A linguist, Dr Liz Morrish, from Nottingham Trent University, was invited by the Newcastle UCU Branch to conduct a discourse analysis of the RTB and RIPE documents and address a branch meeting on this topic. This galvanising meeting made links across the university and beyond it, energising opposition to RTB. Her talk was made available online, and provided a vocabulary to critique RTB and place it in broader contexts.[10] This well-attended event was crucial in articulating personal dissatisfaction as a collective grievance in a larger field, recruiting and connecting activists. Using this knowledge, activists coordinated attendance at events organised by the Executive Board, challenging the logic and language of RTB at every opportunity. One activist recounted:

> I started reading up on the literature on new public management and wrote a letter to [the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research] to ask if while drafting the RTB and RIPE agendas, they had done any sort of literature review in search of evidence for the effectivities of policies on new public management. He did not give me a direct answer, I emailed again (copied our departmental colleagues in on the email) and again he did not give a direct answer. I visited the faculty Research Dean in his surgery and asked the same question, and it became (somewhat embarrassingly) apparent that they hadn't done their research before implementing this.

Building on their reading, union activists also began conducting research on RTB. One conducted research showing how positions in the 'Russell Group' league table were fairly static over time (Grove, 2015b), and another began a research project getting colleagues across the university to record diaries of their experiences of RTB (Grove, 2016). These projects provided arguments against the wisdom of RTB's goals and methods, and being covered in *Times Higher Education* (the UK's leading magazine about the Higher Education Sector) also ensured that local and national critical scrutiny was focussed on Newcastle. Together, they served to help mobilise staff by transforming private unhappiness into a sense of collective injustice against not only Newcastle University staff, but against the entire academic enterprise in which they were a part.

Shaping the narrative

The anti-RTB campaign was successful in part because activists were more successful than managers at shaping the narrative of RTB, presenting it as coercive, anti-intellectual and ultimately harmful to the university.

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[10] Liz Morrish 'Raising the Bar? Why We Should Resist Target Culture,' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1thgkQWV8t8

Two different narrative strategies can be observed. For the UCU, the campaign against the 'Research and Performance Expectations' (RiPE) was more commonly headlined as the campaign against 'Raising the Bar' – an evocative and problematic metaphor from the sporting world. Thus, in the autumn of 2015, the UCU asked its members for their thoughts on RTB. Choice quotations were depicted in speech bubbles and made into posters, which members were asked to put up around the university (see figure 1). One example was, "I did my PhD at a real top ten world-class university and they would not have produced such rules because the staff would consider them narrow, obnoxious and counter-productive." Other strategies (discussed below and in Morrish and The Analogue University, 2017) also focussed on creating a narrative that RiPE/RTB was coercive, anti-intellectual and detrimental to the university.

In contrast, a major element of counter-mobilisation strategy of the Executive Board was to attempt to narrate RiPE as part of a broader strategy that included a set of positive, supportive measures. In interviews, EB members identified *communication* as the problem. They argued that RTB was primarily about offering incentives to undertake the improvements that they saw as necessitated by funding frameworks, but that it was misunderstood or wilfully misrepresented. As one EB member put it, the intention was "an admirable one… but I don't think communications was handled seriously, there wasn't a communications plan in place." In particular, she thought RTB "was a clumsy title and not properly thought through in its connotations." Another EB member elaborated that "it became understood as a high jumper raising the bar until it is not possible to jump higher." A different EB member blamed the UCU for its message that RTB was about "targets" rather than also recognising "the wider support" in terms of additional financial resources made available for research.
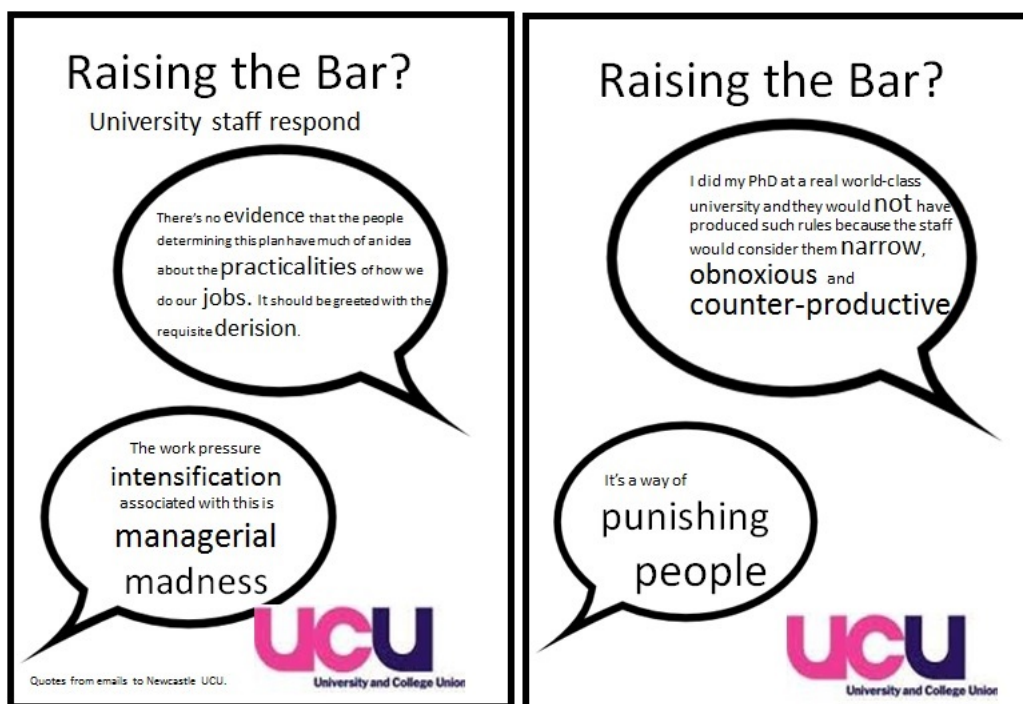

Figure 1: Campaign posters produced by Newcastle Branch of the University and College Union, Autumn 2015.

It is particularly instructive in this regard to look at a very long letter sent from the Vice-Chancellor to the 'Executive Director of Corporate Affairs' (head of public relations) on May 30th 2016, just before industrial action was due to take effect. This letter was acquired by a subsequent Freedom of

Information request, and can be seen as an insight into the counter-mobilisation strategy Chris Brink wanted senior management to pursue. At the start of the letter, Brink wrote:

> As you know, the temperature is rising fast on the UCU local action, and I think the local campaign will get very active over the next week or so. I expect they will deploy all the tactics we have seen before and likely a few more: misinformation about 'targets', getting the students mobilised, a one-sided view of the ACAS negotiations, etc. Just over this Bank holiday weekend so far I have already received a number of emails from students (from English, this time) about the marking boycott, and I expect more to come. The parents will be next, probably followed by the press. I would expect a social media campaign too.

This shows how seriously university management took the activists' campaigns to shape narrative. Brink went on, complaining that the university web page on the dispute "almost reads like it could have been written by the UCU rather than by us." Crucially, he was particularly frustrated with the page on the Research Expectations, which he criticised for "not really mak[ing] a clear differentiation from RtB." This highlights how important the shaping of narrative was: whereas management tried to use 'Raising the Bar' as a signifier to link RiPE with a range of positive university support measures such as funding posts, the UCU and other activists were more successful at depicting RTB as coterminous with RiPE and isolating it as something indelibly coercive and flawed. This was pursued through a range of tactics, which included: emails signed by multiple scholars; petitions; enlisting the support of students and parents; social media; posters around university space; the repeated raising of these critiques in university meetings; and proactively engaging national and local media. These all served to frame a sense of collective grievance.

Alternative vision and vocabulary

Part of the activist strategy against RTB was not simply to oppose what they saw as a bad idea, but to articulate an alternative vocabulary of excellence in academia to counter the metric heavy approach being used via RTB. An alternative to RTB was drafted under the title 'Improving Research Together' (IRT). This recognised the need to be seen to perform well in key audit exercises, and asked management to withdraw RiPE and engage in its proposed IRT 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."[11] In contrast to the competitive and punitive assumptions of RTB, IRT outlined the UCU branch's vision of a collegial and co-operative research environment in which academics were given space for autonomy and creativity, and the steps needed to realise this in practice.

IRT opened with the words, "Newcastle University exists to further human understanding of the universe for the benefit of humanity." This was illustrative of an important resistance strategy, of restating the intrinsic value of public education as opposed to the correlative logic behind RTB. At the same time, IRT was framed as a recognition of management concerns and an invitation to cooperate. One activist claimed that this was characteristic of the campaign, that they "fought hard but without bitterness". According to another union activist, it was important for them to not personalise the campaign as being against the VC and senior management, but rather saw it as a campaign against the forces of neoliberalisation, correlation 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 VC was rejected as personalising the issue. IRT set a constructive tone for the dispute

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[11] Academic Frameworks for Research Improvement, Newcastle University / University and College Union, June 6, 2016.

and communicated to management that objections were not reactive but progressive – in defence of a shared vision of the university – and that engagement was sought. This also allowed management to back down with dignity. But IRT was also a mobilisation strategy in framing individual unhappiness as a collective injustice and assault on the values of the university, by setting out an alternative vision around which to rally people.

Collective organisation

Mobilisation theory suggests that *organization* is crucial both to frame a sense of collective interests (as we saw above)and then translate these into collective action (as we shall see below). The RTB dispute demonstrated various examples of this.

Mobilizing support and building solidarity was central to the success of the RTB campaign. Meetings were organised across the university at the departmental level, out of which academic collectives wrote open letters to university management expressing concerns about RTB. As we saw above, a similar letter was written by 100+ professors drawn from all three faculties. These letters were instrumental in communicating to senior management the growing and widespread dissatisfaction of university staff with their initiative. As a member of the Executive Board said in an interview when asked why she thought RTB was withdrawn, "[Chris Brink] received a letter from a lot of profs, saying they didn't think it was going in the right direction. He thought these were 80 people, not radicals, [but] intelligent, caring people. For me, that's probably the key trigger."[12]

One of the striking features of mobilization against RTB was how it gained momentum through small groups of scholars sharing their concerns with each other. As one of the activists put it:

> During the RTB dispute the school level meetings were crucial in getting people to share their concerns and plan our response; we had four in history, I know you had some in geography too. We need to make sure that we make this a habit, to have periodic meetings to discuss university policy and how it will affect us. We need to draw confidence from our victory rather than be astonished by it.

School or departmental meetings played a vital role in organising mobilisation, as did university-wide reading groups and UCU-led discussions. Emerging from that, our writing collective is one example of these communities of resistance which are actively engaged in exploring alternatives to the neoliberal academy, the rise of correlational machines, and what we now prefer to call the 'data university' as a term which is more reflective of the times. There are also other collectives and movements which are mobilising to resist similar assaults on scholarship in their institutions (Reclaiming the University[13], The edu-factory collective[14], ResSisters[15]). We can term this form of organisation as 'building communities of practice.' Inspired by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's diagnosis of the moral vacuum that plagues our liberal capitalist society, we want to suggest that it is by building and nurturing small political communities of practice that we can begin to reclaim the moral economy of the academy where the university economy is structured by the moral norms of education as a public good. In his book *After Virtue*, McIntyre provides a detailed plan of the conditions under which these small communities of

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[12] The discrepancy in the number of signatures can likely be explained by more people adding their names to it over time.

[13] http://cdbu.org.uk/reclaiming-the-university-of-aberdeen/

[14] https://libcom.org/library/towards-global-autonomous-university-edu-factory-collective

[15] https://ressisters.wordpress.com/about/

practice can be build. Following his notion of practice, we want to extend the remit of academic labour to a form of practice one which "involves standards of excellence and obedience to rules as well as the achievement of goods" (1981, 190). Here practice is understood as the bedrock of the knowledge making exercise - as a regular activity performed to acquire, improve or maintain proficiency in a skill. And the goal of such academic practice then is not the pursuit of what he terms "goods of effectiveness" (external rewards of power, wealth, status, prestige as measured by OBPM schemes), but rather pursuit of "goods of excellence" (internal rewards of virtuosity, mastery, sense of achievement). The practice of acquiring these goods of excellence can best take place in small communities of teachers and learners, and what can provide a better environment for nurturing these communities of practice than a university setting?

These communities were underpinned by an ethics of care – one which recognizes that there is moral significance in caring for the self and others. Kathleen Lynch (2010, 57) has argued that universities today are marked by a hidden doxa of carelessness where "The highly individualized entrepreneurialism that is at the heart of the new academy has allowed a particular "care-less" form of competitive individualism to flourish." Academic communities of practice at Newcastle countered this carelessness by recognizing care as "a species of activity that includes everything we do to maintain, contain, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto, 1993:103). Because OBPM hurts workplace relations (Gill, 2010; Collier, 2014), cultivating better relations can be seen as an act of resistance generally, but also as part of collective organisation in a mobilisation theory analysis of workplace relations.

Vocational disciplines

As well as mobilising against RTB, some activists we interviewed spoke of what we might call the cultivation of personal vocational disciplines as part of their resistance to RTB. These include taking the time to be collegial, disconnecting from 24-hour email, and so forth (Mountz, 2015; see also Mrs Kinpaisby's [2008] ideas of the 'communiversity.') But crucial to our argument is the *suppression of the desire for data*. In the data university, we contend, it is not merely that metrics are forced on academics; it is also that academics actively desire and pursue data as a central means of exchange. Thus, for example, some academics invest heavily in neoliberal platforms such as 'Academia.edu,' actively pursuing, discussing, and cultivating strategies for increasing their number of followers on it, and trumpet this as some indication of their importance as scholars and the value and quality of their scholarship. In such a context, the repression of the desire for data as an individual practice challenges the economy of academic production. Phil Cohen (2015) argues for the distinction between academia as *career* (whereby data are used to demonstrate status in competition with others in a market economy of worth) and *vocation* (operating within a moral economy of worth, where data are irrelevant because the value of work performed is the means of satisfaction it produces). Thus, in discussion with each other, some Newcastle activists engaged in personal disciplines of refusing to use academia.edu or check other citation indexes, ignoring impact factors of journals in decisions about where to publish (The Analogue University, 2019), strengthening spaces and practices of collegiality, and the like. As one Newcastle academic put it to us:

> as academics we have become too invested in metrics. People seem to have this bizarre investment of their own identity with the statistics and ranking of their own university. For example, I got really frustrated with [Facebook] friends posting how well their university had done in some metric or the other, I responded in a post where I argued that we need to oppose these metrics and not embrace them as another way of self-promotion. If you are proud of where you work then that is great but don't use these artificial metrics to proclaim it.

The RTB dispute thus demonstrated multiple forms of collective organisation; including collective reflection on vocational disciplines.

Collective action

Mobilisation theory sees the outcome of collective organisation around collective interests as the willingness to take various forms of collective action. Although the primary type of collective action in the RTB dispute was industrial action, others fed into it. One form was the widening of networks of support outside the university. Nationally, in the week that the industrial action began (see below), the UCU national Congress was taking place in Liverpool. On June 2nd, 2016 congress passed a solidarity motion, put by Newcastle delegates, recognising the Newcastle issue as "a local dispute of national significance."[16] This meant that the national union provided additional support in hardship funding and negotiations. The above-mentioned research project, whereby scholars kept diaries of their experiences of RTB, created an advisory board with leading public intellectuals from the UK and elsewhere who have written on neoliberalism and the university, including Martha Nussbaum, Marilyn Strathern, Stefan Collini, and Rowan Williams. Their very presence drew attention to the dispute and helped ensure it was more widely publicised. Activists believed that the threat of scrutiny by such people – including Nussbaum, who held a Newcastle Honorary Degree – would focus the minds of management.

Building support amongst students was also important, especially as Action Short of a Strike in the form of an assessment boycott drew close. Meetings were held with students across the university, and the student newspaper, *The Courier*, carried sympathetic articles. Students were encouraged to sign a petition established by the UCU on Change.org, calling on Vice-Chancellor to "End coercive performance management at Newcastle University." One signatory, identifying as a student in Newcastle's School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics, wrote:

> I'm signing this because it's not right that students like myself might suffer because of internal disputes. By showing my support, I'm hoping this boycott will come to an end.
>
> I'm also signing this because the academic staff in SELLL produce world-leading research that has inspired me (and others) to work to the best of my ability. It is ridiculous that management are trying to reform research standards and 'raise the bar' when it is the staff at this university who set such high standards in the first place.

As the industrial action kicked in, academics encouraged students and their parents to contact the Vice-Chancellor and urge him to withdraw RTB and end the dispute. This undoubtedly had an effect. A senior manager told us, in an interview:

> It may have been small scale, but at that stage VC took the decision to withdraw RTB. I don't think he relished explaining to parents and students why we were getting into such a muddle over teaching when this was related to research… that action was the final straw, the final thing that broke it.

A middle manager also corroborated this, saying that "parents were contacting the university" and that "this had a significant impact." The widening of networks of solidarity outside of academic collectives to include students, and colleagues nationally and internationally, was an important strategy.

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[16] https://www.ucu.org.uk/hesc16#HE54

Threats to employer legitimacy

Mobilisation theory in the industrial relations literature has focussed on strikes. As Kelly acknowledges, petitions, lobbies, collective appeals and other threats to employer legitimacy are important in the white-collar sector but have been under-researched (Kelly, 37). Our research showed that such strategies were crucial forms of collective action in mobilisation over RTB. After all, RTB was primarily a drive to improve Newcastle University's reputation as a research institution as measured by league tables. Many of the strategies identified above pursued by activists had the opposite effect to what the university wanted, by attracting negative attention and putting the institution in the news for the wrong reasons. News and social media platforms such as *Times Higher Education* (*THE*) and Facebook were used to publicize the negative effects of RTB at Newcastle (see for example Grove, 2015a). Meeting minutes show that publicity in the *THE* was discussed at EB, and the press office was forced to generate responses. As Gamson (1995, 94) argues, the media spotlight plays an important role in mobilisation.

The *Change.org* open petition asking the VC to "end coercive performance management at Newcastle University" was an important part of this. It claimed that RTB had "unleashed a culture of bullying across the institution," and within three days 2,701 people worldwide signed the petition urging Chris Brink to abandon RiPE in favour of the Union's alternative, positive proposal, 'Improving Research Together.' For example, Professor Derek Sayer, a Fellow of Royal Historical Society (UK) and the Royal Society of Canada, signed the petition commenting:

> I believe this kind of performance management is totally inimical to decent productive research. I write as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada with more than a dozen books to my name--none of them "managed" by such bullying philistine methods.

Durham University geographer Cheryl McEwan wrote, "I collaborate closely with colleagues at Newcastle University, none of whom need to be bullied into performing. Congratulations to NU UCU members for taking a stand." Andrew Heath, a historian at Sheffield University, posted:

> This proposal risks destroying Newcastle's reputation as a centre for real research. I have often encouraged postgraduate students to apply to your stellar History department, but I would not be able to do so if such a performance management system was in place.

Interviews with managers indicated that reputational damage was important in the success of the anti-RTB campaign. One middle manager said that the RTB research project damaged the university's reputation, by "giving the impression that we are a hostile place." An Executive Board member acknowledged that despite the VC's repeated attempts to communicate what he saw as the necessary and positive nature of RTB, "the brand had become so contaminated" that it needed to be abandoned. This position was brought about by collective action, not least by an effective social media campaign and proactive media engagement.

Industrial action

In the summer of 2016, after the failure of its previous attempts to persuade the university management to withdraw RTB, the UCU moved towards industrial action in the form of Action Short of a Strike (ASOS). This was principally a marking boycott. By withholding key data streams on which university committees running to tight timetables depended, this threatened significant disruption by preventing final-year students from graduating and earlier-year students from progressing. Our activist interviewees stressed that they believed this was the sharpest weapon against management in their arsenal, but also the one that they were most loathed to employ because of the direct impact it would have on the students' ability to graduate. However, when the management did not address their demands in ways they found satisfactory, UCU Newcastle branch members voted for ASOS. This came into force on Friday, June 3rd, 2016. On that day, the VC summoned Heads of Academic Units to an emergency

meeting at which they supported the withdrawal of RTB. The next working day, Monday June 6th, EB formally withdrew it in negotiations with UCU in return for the ending of industrial action.

ASOS was a high-risk approach on behalf of UCU. Many activists interviewed stressed that the strategy of marking boycott carried perhaps the most risk of failure if a critical majority of staff did not support it. Some members were uneasy with a marking boycott on the grounds of pedagogical ethics, since a research matter such as RTB was being tackled by putting the students' academic futures at risk. Furthermore, it proved contentious in the union branch, with some elected members of the branch committee and employees of the union opposing industrial action. Thus, for example, on the day that the industrial action began (June 3rd 2016), a UCU representative wrote to the Newcastle branch committee expressing the view that the Improving Research Together paper did not present a credible bargaining approach because it sought the effective capitulation of the employer. The representative was adamant that this was unrealistic, a view he said was shared by national colleagues.

With the benefit of hindsight this judgment proved strikingly off the mark, and the employers capitulated wholly at negotiations on the very next working day (June 6th). But these internal arguments and lack of unity delayed the imposition of the assessment boycott until early June, when a lot of marking had already taken place, thus increasing the risk that the action would not succeed. We speculate that this lack of belief in the ability of the union to win the dispute may have been the result of a series of largely-unsuccessful national campaigns against poor pay awards and changes to pensions, and also a sense that the march of neoliberalism in universities is irreversible and the best we can hope for is to mitigate its worst impacts. In the end, the mobilisation strategies analysed here proved that this is not the case.

Why was RTB withdrawn?

Why did the Vice-Chancellor of Newcastle, Chris Brink, withdraw RTB / RiPE? As he declined our invitation for an interview, and as the results of a Freedom of Information request to Newcastle University told us little about his personal deliberations or of those of his inner circle, we have been unable to ascertain what led him to finally decide to withdraw RTB. Nonetheless, his emails to other members of the EB, as late as May 31st, demonstrate a determination to pursue a tough counter-mobilisation strategy by fighting the UCU and keeping RTB in place. At a meeting of Academic Board (most academic staff across the university) on May 25th, the Vice-Chancellor insisted that RTB would not be withdrawn, and following the ASOS ballot, management wrote to staff threatening to deduct pay at the punitive rate of 100% per day for non-completion of marking duties (even though staff would still be carrying out other aspects of their employment such as research, administration, writing student references, sitting on committees, and such).

We have analysed elsewhere in more detail the combination of factors, including serendipity, which led to RTB's withdrawal (Morrish and The Analogue University, 2017). Our research suggests that it was the widespread disquiet and concerted opposition of many members of the university – some part of the organised UCU campaign and some not – culminating in the industrial action that led to the withdrawal of RTB. A senior lay member of the university reported 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." The professors' letter was seen as "crucial" (interview, middle manager) in representing the views of the "high-performing, senior academics" (interview, EB member) upon whom RTB's success was dependent. However, this did not result in the withdrawal of RTB, but rather in the creation of a 'Professorial Forum' to meet regularly. As one of the key authors of the letter said, "I thought we were being palmed off [and] there was no backtracking at all on RTB… industrial action was the tipping point." In other words, we understand the creation of this professorial forum as a counter-mobilizaion strategy. Rather, said a middle manager, it was the UCU industrial action that provided the tipping point or "trigger": it "raised the temperature and precipitated the final abandonment." RTB/RiPE

wasn't withdrawn simply because it was a bad idea that was destined to fail: the commitment of the VC to a rigorous counter-mobilization strategy is evidence against this contention. Instead, in the RTB dispute we see a classic example of mobilisation in action: effective organization transforming personal grievances into a collective sense of injustice, and the UCU branch leadership persuading enough members (in the face of counter-mobilization efforts) to engage in various forms of collective action including, ultimately, the withdrawal of labour.

Conclusion

In a provocative 'heresy', Newcastle University scholar Toby Lowe argues that the weight of evidence shows that outcomes-based performance-management (OPBM) makes the delivery of social goods (such as education) worse, not better. "Measuring 'outcomes' cannot be used to performance manage the delivery of social interventions without distorting and corrupting the practices it intends to manage", he contends (Lowe, 2016, 38). Nonetheless, as Newcastle University's ill-fated 'Raising the Bar' initiative shows, managers of the data university seem drawn to such programmes. Whilst academics have subjected this to extensive critique, they have generally been pessimistic about their ability to resist it, preferring instead to offer mitigation strategies (e.g., Mountz et al., 2015).

Whilst mitigation (including slowing down the intensifying relations of the data university) is an important tactic, in this paper we have argued for what we call a 'non-relational' approach. A general pessimism about the potential for successful resistance originates in part from the analysis of the university as 'neoliberal.' In contrast, as noted above, we theorise these changes as a shift from causation to correlation. Universities have become less interested in upholding fundamental claims enshrined in their founding documents about science and education as intrinsic goods (*causation*), to concentrating their energies upon producing metrics that *correlate* their activities to multiple audit exercises upon which their financial futures increasingly depend. This understanding enables us to resist the 'target culture' of OBPM both intellectually and practically, as our research has shown.

Intellectually, we have argued that in addition to challenging the "hidden architecture of higher education" (Williamson, 2018a:1) by mapping and revealing the darker side of neoliberal transformative relations brought about by data, metrics and proliferating technologies, we also need to explicitly re-centre the debate upon the intrinsic worth of education for its own sake (what we call a non-relational adherence to this non-negotiable truth). In short, we argue for a negation of debate as it is presently being configured around merely revealing how relations of interaction generate and transform meaning in ever more oppressive ways. We should choose not to play by the rules of the correlation game.

Practically, because the correlative management imperative demands constant data streams, universities are increasingly vulnerable to the threat of having these streams disrupted or switched off. This offers multiple possibilities for new forms of resistance in the data university; resistance that is illuminated by bringing the literature on university neoliberalisation, and the rise of the data university, into dialogue with that on industrial relations. Drawing upon Kelly's (1998) theoretical insights on collective mobilization, we demonstrate, through a case study of the successful opposition to the RTB dispute at Newcastle University, how mobilisation against neoliberal practices of correlation is indeed possible. We identify the three key strategies employed at Newcastle: first, to scale up individual RTB-related issues into collective grievances; second, to organize an effective collective opposition; and finally to launch collective action. Whilst we recognise that, due to the limitations inherent in the case-study nature of the example highlighted here, these strategies may not be directly transferable to other situations, we suggest that they offer a ray of hope in an environment where we seem to have accepted defeat in the face of ever new forms of the neoliberalisation of our vocation.

Our research offers a much-needed reconceptualization of the problem we face. As we argue, the issue is not just about neoliberal relations, it is about neoliberal *correlation*. Opposing neoliberal

correlation means we need to revoke its terms of reference that are based on the premise that metrics are the primary way to capture, reveal and give meaning to the effectiveness of our labour. We do this by refusing to readjust our core practices or realign our core principles to correlate to outcomes-based performance-management schemes. And we do it by insisting on the truth that science and education have a fundamental, non-relational and non-negotiable value for society, and that they are of intrinsic worth in and of themselves. Incautious managers of the data university may tell us that it is 'the data that matters.' To resist this, we need to insist upon the opposite: *people* matter, and *scholarship* matters.

Acknowledgements

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