

Remedying failures of corporate management in UK universities

A submission to the Institute for Public Policy Research Commission on the Future of Higher Education in England. 27 September 2012.

by David Bignell, Larissa Fradkin, Gavin Vinson, John Allen and Rachel Ashworth

Summary

Drawing on information freely available from the national press, the universities' own publications, the academic literature and related internet sites, we highlight many wholly undesirable developments in the ways in which universities are now managed. We submit that these undermine the primary functions and ideals of the university concept, demoralise and disenfranchise academic staff, and damage, perhaps irreparably, the excellence in research and scholarship that is the traditional hallmark of the English university system. We call for shared governance, the alignment of managers' incentives with the long-term interests of their institutions, a halt to the separation of teaching and research, and continuation of the dual system of support to reverse the dangerous trend towards research concentration.

Contents

Introduction	2
Shift from collegiate governance to corporate governance of UK universities	2
Disconnection between the personal motivations and incentives of managers and the long-term interests of their institutions	4
Use of discredited or inappropriate management techniques and tools	5
Abuses of employment law, immigration law and whistleblower law	6
Decline in the quality of higher education	7
Decline in the quality of university research	8
Overall conclusions	9
Recommendations	9
Authors	11
Summary diagrams	12, 13

Remedying failures of corporate management in UK universities

Introduction

We describe the current stewardship of UK universities, which are increasingly becoming dominated by restructuring exercises and the imposition of performance management. Both activities are declared to improve standings in league tables and meet short-term strategic goals but are devised without sound, considered professional advice. These activities are accompanied by changes to statutes, imposition of new job descriptions and by the reskilling of Human Resources departments to focus on staff dismissal and turnover at the expense of staff development. In extreme cases, perhaps destined to become the norm, there are large scale losses of skilled teaching and research staff, a sharply reduced student experience caused by chaotic schemes for transient replacement of lecturers and a rapid narrowing of expertise in both teaching and research portfolios. As illustrated below, these trends arise from the introduction of “reckless management”, and bear a strong resemblance to the well-publicised irresponsible conduct of the UK banking sector before 2008, and allowing for context may have similar causes and outcomes.

We offer a public brief to draw attention to the undesirable consequences of permitting capricious managers to govern UK universities, and we identify some public policies that encourage damaging behaviours. We suggest that poor management of universities is increasingly a waste of public funds. Our case is presented under six headings. The prospective recipients of our brief include the Minister of State for Universities and Science, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, the Commons Science and Technology Committee, and the Institute for Public Policy Research’s *Commission on the Future of Higher Education in England*. This document is addressed to the last of these.

Heading 1. Shift from collegiate governance to corporate governance of UK universities.

Encouraged by successive governments since the Jarratt Report of 1985, universities have experienced a progressive shift from collegiate to corporate governance, justified as a key step to effective quality control. We recognise that with the introduction of mass higher education and sharply reduced contributions from the taxpayer, no university can avoid the need for some sort of bureaucratic management and hierarchical organisation. However, both the institutions and the Country are ill-served by excluding academics from involvement in personnel decisions, selection of administrators, preparation of the budget, and determination of the direction of research and educational policies. Academic influence is necessary to understand and maintain the nature, purpose and diversity of universities, and to preserve intellectual autonomy.

We note a trend for Vice-Principals, Deans, and Heads of Departments to be appointed on the basis of questionable academic success criteria and a limited definition of leadership. Preference appears to be given to those who favour management through large scale redundancies or staff turnovers. This is accompanied by a trend for academic policies and academic hiring decisions to be made in Human Resources departments and for new research agendas to be dictated from the centre without the benefit of adequate peer-review

and professional advice. As a result there are unwise investments, unachievable and moving targets, a waste of staff talent accompanied by blatant age and gender disparities, and above all a lack of effective leadership.

Reference materials:

[Convergence or divergence in international higher education policy. Lessons from Europe](#)

This paper by Barbara Sporn for the Educause *Forum for the Future of Higher Education* documents and compares the impact of neo-liberalism on universities in Europe and North America over the past two decades, including the strengthening of the power of institutional leaders, introduction of quality controls and audits, encouragement of market-like behaviours and formulation of strategic plans. Since supporters of these changes argue that only through rapid and accountable management decisions can a university be turned into an entrepreneurial and competitive institution, the broad trend is the removal of active faculty members from increasingly powerful central administrations and their replacement by professional or career managers of varying competence. However, in examples of best practice power is given to a small governance board made up from outside the institution, but jointly advised by the academics (through a senate) and the permanent administrators, thus reducing the ability of these last two groups to promote self-serving policies. (2003)

[VCs: useless or priceless?](#)

In these opinion pieces from the *Times Higher Education*, Fred Inglis takes issue with the allegedly tame behaviour of vice-chancellors and other university leaders in acquiescing to fundamental changes in the relationship between the academy and the state, while themselves enjoying high status, large salaries and many perks ... and meanwhile sacking their academic colleagues. In complete contrast, Nicola Dandridge argues that university leaders face tasks which demand a diversity of skills, including business acumen, fundraising, community liaison, lobbying with government, arbitration and international engagement, and that their pay matches the required skill-set by all reasonable comparisons. (2012)

[Leadership Foundation for Higher Education: Governance](#)

This current website contains a large store of legal, technical and policy-related information about university governance, as well as providing advice and guidance for prospective governors/council members. The material available includes comments about league tables and their limitations.

Heading 2. **Disconnection between the personal motivations and incentives of managers and the long-term interests of their institutions.**

We note that institutional leaders and senior executives are now appointed with shorter contracts and defined tasks linked to re-positioning in league tables and the Research Excellence Framework (REF). Salary and bonus prospects appear to encourage dramatic gestures and high-risk policies, including large scale staff turnovers, departmental closures and commitments to invest heavily, even recklessly, in narrowly defined priority research areas, rather than supporting diversity of scholarship. Further, such policies are introduced without genuine consultation with staffs. No adverse consequences are suffered by senior managers if the position in league tables is not improved or REF results are adverse, while the burden of reorganizations and restructurings falls largely on the academic departments. Notably, there are no mechanisms for independent assessment of the quality of management in place of self-determined indicators of success and self-congratulatory proclamations. By comparison, large corporations are open to shareholder and public scrutiny, and as a result it can be seen when the actual outcomes of their policies differ from the declared intentions.

Reference materials:

[An economist's view of university league tables](#)

An early opinion piece by Andrew Oswald in the journal *Public Money and Management* discusses the balance between informing consumers and motivating employees. Maintaining this balance is a requirement for any business or public organisation. While league tables are a part of the landscape for universities, they can have a negative effect on morale and motivation, as well as generating perverse incentives for managers. (2001)

[Learning to live with league tables and ranking: the experience of institutional leaders](#)

In an analysis of the responses of consumers and institutional leaders to league tables and ranking systems, published in the journal *Higher Education Policy*, Ellen Hazelkorn shows that in anticipation of the possible effects on the stakeholder community, rank order has become an instrument of policy. Amongst the resulting responses are organisational change, revision of institutional priorities and the imposition of performance targets for individuals and academic departments. (2008)

[Measuring success: league tables in the public sector](#)

This recent major report from the *British Academy Policy Centre* examines the use of measurements of performance, rankings and targets for public institutions, focusing on schools, universities and constabularies. While acknowledging the value of measurement for public information and accountability the authors, Beth Foley and Harvey Goldstein, call for disaggregation of indices and also warn of the institutional behaviours that results, especially managerial tunnel vision, gaming and myopias which encourage the pursuit of narrow quantifiable phenomena at the expense of long-term development. Broadly, inspection should be preferred to metrics. (2012)

Determinants of success in academic careers

In this contemporary technical Dutch study, published in the journal *Higher Education Policy*, Barbara van Balen and co-authors examined the retention of high-performing academic staff by universities. They found that there was no systematic relationship between career success and commonly used indicators of scholarly performance; however, a heterogeneous conducive environment comprising positive mentoring, family support and stability, a tenure track and the opportunities for promotion unrestricted by institutional economics all contributed to job satisfaction and a willingness to engage positively with the system. (2012)

A selection of self-congratulatory press releases from British universities, based on league table results (various dates):

http://www2.surrey.ac.uk/mediacentre/press/2012/81330_university_of_surreys_impresive_rise_in_the_guardian_league_table.htm
<http://www.dur.ac.uk/news/newsitem/?itemno=14833>
<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/about/quality/leaguetales/>
http://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/news-items/ne_197788
<http://www.rhul.ac.uk/aboutus/newsandevents/news/newsarticles/royalhollowayrisesuptheuniversityleaguetales.aspx>
<http://www.exeter.ac.uk/about/facts/success/>
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/about/facts/internationalleaguetales.aspx>
<http://www.falmouth.ac.uk/138/the-university-college-8/league-table-results-461.html>

Heading 3. Use of discredited or inappropriate management techniques and tools.

We note the persistent misuse of discredited bibliometrics in performance appraisal, the resort to anonymous external refereeing of candidates for inclusion in the REF without right of appeal, the imposition of retrospective targets in restructuring exercises and the substitution of directed research agendas and compulsory partnerships for intellectual curiosity and free collaboration. Particularly disturbing is the use of arbitrary metrics contrived to dismiss academics whom management find inconvenient or irritating, by reason of their criticisms of their managers, their enthusiasm for teaching and even in some cases the topic or invidiously high quality of their research. The resulting atmosphere of intimidation is inimical to success. Management by fear is a path to mediocrity.

Reference materials:

[Academic values no longer add up](#)

Jeremy Garwood writes in the on-line magazine *Lab Times*, providing a detailed account of recent restructuring exercises at Queen Mary, University of London, which have seen controversial bibliometric and other disputed criteria used to identify a number of academic staff for redundancy or demotion. The article documents the effects of restructuring on staff morale and the student experience, as well as providing background information on research assessment and other strategic issues which have led to the upheaval. (2012)

[Lost in publication: how measurement harms science](#)

Writing in the journal *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics*, Cambridge biologist Peter Lawrence describes how bibliometrics, not new discovery, have come to dominate the academic agenda, to the detriment of sensible career structures and accelerating a haemorrhage of talented young researchers from universities. (2008)

[Bibliometrics as weapons of mass citation](#)

Antoinette Molinié and Geoffrey Bodenhausen use the chemical journal *Bunsen Magazin* to argue at length against a bibliometrics-driven science policy, proposing instead that peer review must be the basis of assessment for individual scholars, individual papers and grant applications. (2010)

[Impact Factor: outdated artefact or stepping-stone to journal certification?](#)

In this paper in the journal *Scienometrics* Jerome Vanclay exhaustively dissects the Thomson-Reuters Impact Factor, revealing its statistical inaccuracy as well as its inadequacy as a measure of journal quality and the merits of individual articles in high impact journals. The impact factor is also considered a long-term threat to specialist literatures. (2012)

Heading 4. Abuses of employment law, immigration law and whistleblower law.

We note that universities are increasingly subject to litigation in Employment Tribunals, and to investigation by the UK Border Agency for dubious practice in the recruitment of non-EU overseas students. In addition, they may now bring internal disciplinary actions against staff who publicly criticise poorly considered management policies and decisions. We also note the increasing use of Compromise Agreements in cases where staff are made redundant or demoted, limiting the ability of employees to criticise management decisions and to communicate outside the institution on the subject of unfair practices within it.

Reference materials:

[Professor unfairly dismissed in restructure that increased the number of posts](#)

Larissa Fradkin was one of 8 engineering professors dismissed in 2009 by London South Bank University during a restructuring process in an apparent attempt by a new management team to modernise the University. She fought the case successfully in an Employment Tribunal by showing that there was no redundancy situation, no other substantial reason for dismissal and that the criteria selected to identify candidates for sacking were arbitrary and designed to fail those pre-selected for “redundancy”. She also showed that replacement appointments were made without applying the same standards that had been used to justify the original dismissals. The case was heard in January 2012.

[Professor Fradkin’s case to the Employment Tribunal](#)

[The Employment Tribunal judgement](#)

Heading 5. Decline in the quality of higher education.

We note the trend to delegate service teaching to TS (teaching and scholarship) staff on short-term contracts, depriving undergraduate students of contact with research-active staff, reducing curriculum choice, and increasing class sizes. Separation of teaching and research undermines the fundamental principle of a university. While some TS staff are very good, the rigid application of this divisive policy runs contrary to the finding that exposure to teachers who are research active is a key element in enhancing the quality of the student experience. Intimidation of staff is also detrimental to student experience: education is not complete without exposure to ethical principles that are best taught by example. Academics, no matter how gifted cannot fulfil these roles if they live in constant fear of losing their jobs through failing to conform with management’s passing aspirations and shifting strategic plans.

Reference materials:

[Redundancies at Queen Mary, University of London](#)

In this recent letter to *The Lancet*, Rachel Ashworth complains that practical laboratory science teaching is being phased out, even in medical and biomedical education, in favour of curriculum that can be delivered directly from a computer screen, thus saving cost and effort but reducing the utility and quality of the training. (2012)

[The attack on knowledge](#)

Writing in the magazine *Index on Censorship*, Thomas Docherty describes how corporatisation of UK universities and the line-managements originating in HEFCE have led to the largely unchallenged assumption that academics are primarily accountable to the requirements of a government and the economy. Even in teaching, such consumerist principles have led to the modular presentation of a commodity-orientated and state-approved curriculum, where knowledge becomes information and critical skills merely a predicted learning outcome. Imperceptibly, such restrictions extend to freedom of speech within the academy, which is no longer seen as having the right or duty to challenge its own orthodoxies, let alone those of society at large. On research, Docherty is critical of quality assessments, which he suggests are anodyne ways of achieving research concentration and therefore, *de facto*, mechanisms for cutting public spending in universities, without concern for how the research base, and therefore by implication the quality of higher education, will be sustained. (2012)

Heading 6. Decline in the quality of university research.

While we appreciate the need for public accountability, in the wrong hands the supposed assessment criteria of the Research Excellence Framework and other audits lead to short-term decision-making, constantly changing priorities and a lack of attention to fundamental planning and the provision of basic facilities. Research assessment and inspection schemes (exemplified by REF) now dominate management agendas, with internal planning processes focused obsessively on staffing turnovers and submission selections (“REF-returnability”), rather than the long-term process of creating high quality departments. We note with alarm that practically no British Nobel prize-winner of the 20th century could, on the basis of his or her early record of publication and grant income, now obtain or retain a permanent position in any UK university implementing central direction of research agendas and schemes of performance management. The prospects of the UK continuing to demonstrate global leadership in scholarship and the fundamental expansion of human knowledge are therefore diminishing.

Reference materials:

[Research and how to promote it in a university](#)

In this article from *Future Medical Chemistry* John Allen explains how scientists can best interact with their managers and funders, and how the ideals of publicly supported scholarship are being undermined by short-term and short-sighted resort to bibliometrics and impact studies as pseudo-measures of quality and potential. A seven-point plan to create and sustain a research-led department is included, in which the theme is investing in the talents you already have and allowing academic staff to chart their own directions. (2010)

[Scientific Freedom, The Elixir of Civilization](#)

In this book published by Wiley Interscience, Donald Braben shows how revolutions in science (transformative research) are dependent on an absence of bureaucratic and managerial restrictions, as well as an adequate source of funds not subject to short-term peer review and impact audits. Using examples from the 20th century, including work that has led to Nobel Prizes, Professor Braben demonstrates the link between free enquiry led by curiosity and the resulting advances, and how the heavily managed academic environments of the 21st century make future revolutions much less likely. (2008)

[Assessing the impact of developments in research policy for research on higher education: an exploratory study](#)

In this report for the *Society for Research in Higher Education*, Carole Leathwood and Barbara Read examine the relationship between the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the agenda for selectivity and concentration of funding which is widely perceived to accompany it. Concern is expressed for the future of unorthodox research (innovative and/or critical) and for research capacity building. In addition, many academics complain of intensified workloads and the lack of time for research coupled with greater demands for REF-returnable outputs, exacerbating existing gender and age disparities. (2012)

Overall conclusions

We are sharply critical of the current generation of institutional leaders and senior managers, whose personal motives and incentives conflict with the long-term interests of their universities and lead them to introduce unacceptable policies and methodologies. While we accept that high fees, research audits, league tables and impact assessments will continue into the foreseeable future in some form, we urge administrators to resist, not acquiesce to the pressures to exhibit unrestrained corporate behaviours. We believe that shared governance by academics, students, administrators and external stakeholders is a better option than executive dictatorship.

Recommendations

We address this submission to Questions 1 and 2:

Q1. How should our HE sector be organised to achieve the best outcomes for individuals, institutions and society?

a. Towards more convergence or divergence?

We advocate that research should be open to all universities, according to their talents, and that all teachers should have the opportunity, though not the compulsion, of doing research. All researchers should do at least some teaching.

b Should all subjects be seen as equally “academic”?

We have not addressed this issue.

c. Towards more collaboration and transferability?

We support collaboration, and we specifically oppose forced competition between institutions for students and research rankings.

d. Research and teaching.

We strongly oppose research concentration. We support efforts to improve teaching quality, but insist that the creation of teaching-only posts on a large scale is counter-productive.

Q2. To what extent should the overall structure of higher education be determined by market forces and to what extent should the government play a strategic role?

a. Undergraduate fees and recruitment.

We believe that departments cannot be research-led if they carry excessive teaching loads, but that internal support for research should be proportionate to fee income. The practice of advertising a university on the basis of its alleged research excellence while delegating the bulk of teaching to non-research staff is unethical.

b. Relationships with the government and other stakeholders.

While universities are rightly expected to respond to the needs of all sectors of society and to benefit the economy, direct micromanagement from HEFCE, research councils and elsewhere should be resisted because it is ultimately counter-productive, narrowing focus and limiting priorities when advances in human knowledge require diversity of scholarship and free enquiry driven by intellectual curiosity.

c. Support of research.

Research defines a university and sets it apart from other institutions of learning. Therefore by definition research concentration disenfranchises universities from which support is withdrawn and threatens the national skill base. A small core of research-led institutions, however well supported, cannot on its own match Britain’s traditional output of scholarship or maintain its reputation. We support the dual-funding principle, as it provides (in theory) opportunity for research which is not in step with current fashions and the priorities perceived by politicians and bureaucrats. This is how radical new discovery comes about.

Authors:

David Bignell (Emeritus Professor of Zoology, Queen Mary, University of London) **Lead author:** d.bignell@qmul.ac.uk; 24 Portland Road, East Grinstead, West Sussex RH19 4EA. Tel. 01342-322004.

Larissa Fradkin (Emeritus Professor of Electrical Engineering, London South Bank University)

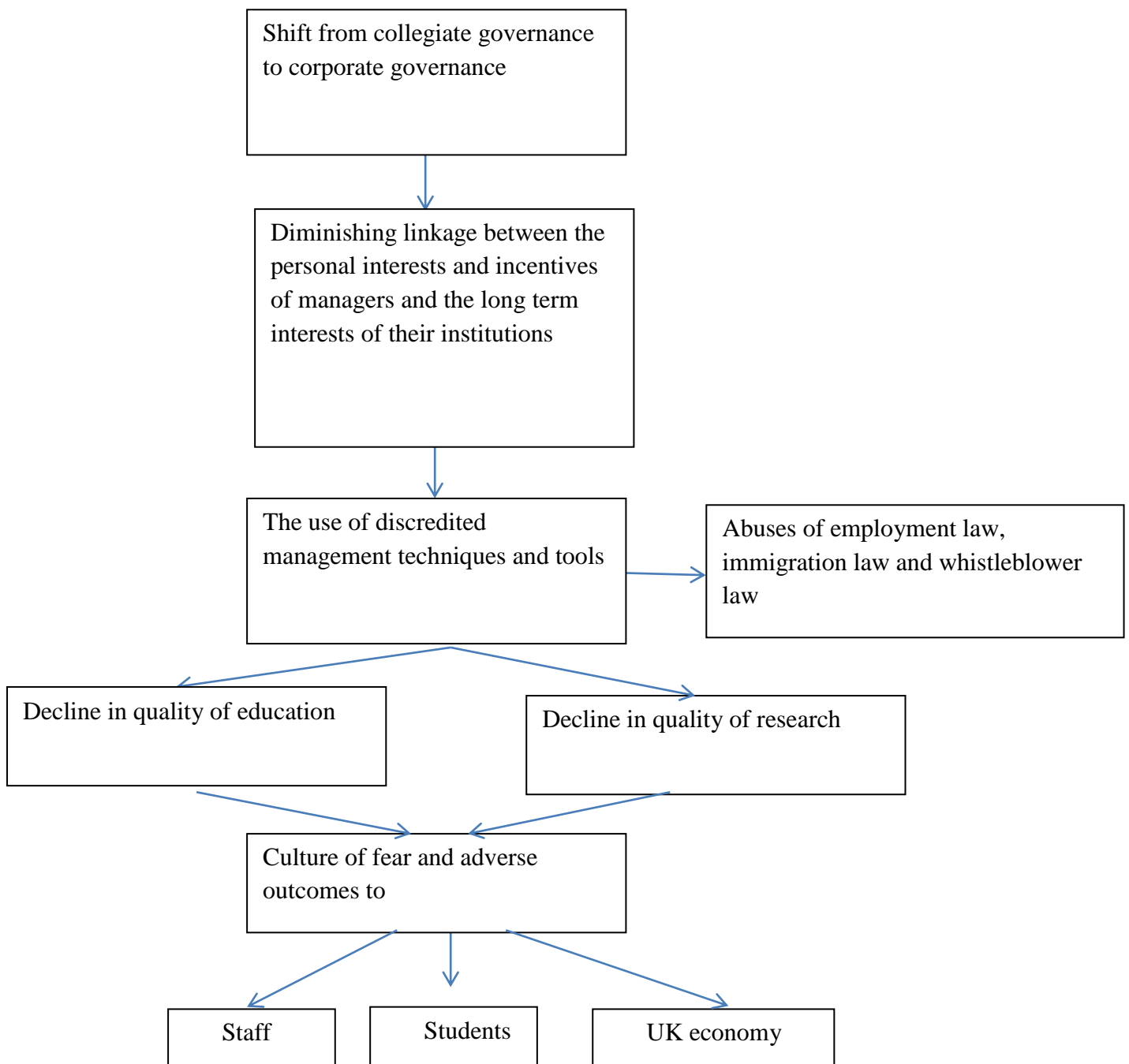
Gavin Vinson (Emeritus Professor of Biochemistry, Queen Mary, University of London)

John Allen (Professor of Biochemistry, Queen Mary, University of London)

Rachel Ashworth (Lecturer in Physiology, Queen Mary, University of London)

27 September 2012

SUMMARY DIGRAM: WHAT WE HAVE



SUMMARY DIAGRAM: WHAT WE WANT

