

Chapter 13

Coda



Paul Gibbs and Peter Maassen

Among the phenomena that characterize the early twenty-first century, the most significant must be the disappearance of the landmarks that society uses to find its bearings, and the increasing difficulty that individuals have in visualizing an optimistic future for themselves – a feeling exacerbated by following a daily spectacle of wars and mass migrations

Winand (2018: 221)

The dominance in higher education of the discussion of trust in, rather than the trustworthiness of the sector, is accompanied in the UK by an audit culture and intensifying use of performance indicators. The growing belief in the untrustworthiness of higher education, especially in England, has even spread to one of the pillars of university self-identification – academic freedom. UK national policy has substituted a trust for the guardianship of academics to facilitate a clear educative purpose of higher education for a raft of simulacra of trust and, in so doing, has diverted meaningful discussion from the inherent importance of trusting in higher education's many forms and contexts, from governance to student plagiarism. In such turmoil, academics' own trustworthiness, revealed in their practice, is questioned. Adopting measurements for everything distorts the importance and wonder of academic discovery and the universities' focus on learning. This has left the sector incurring high costs without securing substantial benefits. Indeed, the opacity of many metrics have led to concerns being raised, or at least suspicions voiced,

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reflecting diminishing social and individual trust in the higher education institutions and the members who constitute them.

This does not have to be inevitable as is shown by the developments in higher education in Norway, which has a long tradition of a rather homogeneous and parliamentary-based political leadership having a stable and transparent governance relationship with the higher education sector. This implies that the political leadership of the country has maintained also in recent years a close, interactive connection with the leadership and academic communities of the universities and colleges, characterised by mutual trust, which favours incremental administrative reforms, control by cooperation, and a democratic, communicative way of policy-making for the sector. Nonetheless, also in Norway maintaining a mutually acceptable balance between trust and accountability is seen as a challenge, even though there are relatively few accountability mechanisms in Norwegian higher education compared to England.

As the contributions to this Volume illustrate, trust is used in a wide range of contexts and with a variety of meanings in higher education. In line with this, the approaches to ‘trust’ used in the various chapters of this Volume vary widely, from structural versions, such as Luhmann’s ‘institutionalised mistrust’ (Luhmann, 1979), to existential and psychological ones, with varieties in between. In addition, the relation between social trust and trust at the individual level has been discussed in a number of chapters. While trust at both levels has remained high in Norway and other Nordic countries (Rothstein, 2011: 146), in countries such as the UK and the USA, both have declined. As argued in a report by the Pew Research Center (2019: 5), “personal trust turns out to be like many other personal attributes and goods that are arrayed unequally in society, following the same overall pattern as home ownership and wealth, for example. Americans who might feel disadvantaged are less likely to express generalized trust in other people.” The decline in levels of trust in the UK has been accompanied by the emergence of an audit culture designed to augment trust, but which, at its core, creates alternatives to trust, favouring external standards, control and sanctions. This changes the disposition of trustworthiness to one of compliance to rules and regulations: it allows expertise to be placed not in the wise and the worthy, but in the hands of technicians and pragmatists.

Higher Education

The above quote by Winand opens a UNESCO Courier article on Universities and the democracy of the gullible. In this Volume, we have addressed one of those landmarks of society referred to by Winand (2018) and its relationship with the university: trust. This has been done from the perspective of the eroding pact between higher education and society, and levels of societal trust in higher education varying from country to country. In addition, the authors in this Volume have discussed trusting within academia, from trusting in students and peers, to trust in teaching and research and from trusting colleagues to trusting institutional leadership and

management. What can be inferred is that trust is rhizomatic: it is the foundation of the university and it appears in predictable places where it can be codified, in policy, process and practice and it can occur in unforeseen ways where only a disposition of trust, an ethic of trustworthiness, can offer assurance against deceit, mistrust and lies. In order for a pact between higher education and society to flourish, we need our higher education institutions, as well as those who work in them, to be independent and to envision their work in the public interest to seek to benefit the common good and not to structure their work to follow a system of metrics, rather than follow their curiosity. From this perspective, it is important to acknowledge that forms of accountability can be made to support rather than supersede intelligent forms of trust¹.

However, this is not warranted where shifts to academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) in the form of individualism, personal profit and self-aggrandisement become self-serving machines to generate knowledge – and power – for a slim sector of society. It is not the way to increase credibility in universities and in those to whom trust is entrusted. Trust is only enhanced when there is a clear purpose for compliance and that is to ensure that universities work for the good of the many in society. This provides a reason why the general public should trust them. Indeed, what may be required of higher education is a new moral compass; one that can enhance trust and direct society. This is not a call for blind, unconditional trust in anything or anybody, but rather an educative process that enables the development of astute persons who would bestow trust on someone who is demonstrably trustworthy. As Žalec (2013: 67) argues, if “we want to reach an improvement in the field of (higher) education we must take care of moral and professional virtues and competencies of teachers and pupils/students and then trust them.”

At the same time, in many countries consumerist forces – driven in the United Kingdom by high tuition fees, quality assurance, managerialism and the student-consumer paradigm – are reducing the power of the academics to, “define the curriculum, determine acceptable standards of student achievement and decide appropriate pedagogic strategies” (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005: 268). These changes are having an impact on the very nature of academia through changes in students’ and academics’ pace of work and their time perspectives of the form of education that universities and colleges deliver and the knowledge that is produced at these institutions. Under these changing circumstances, as has been argued in a number of the chapters in this Volume, leadership is required. Such changes need to generate justice, equality and participation, which require leadership itself to be participatory and democratically distinguished to achieve these goals (Maassen, 2017). Here we can refer to Gross (2015) who claims that without trust, the connectivity so central to the creation of community and the capacity to learn and take risks, diminishes.

¹For a detailed presentation of various meanings of the term accountability, see Stensaker and Harvey (2011) and Maassen et al. (2017).

Trust and Trustworthiness in Higher Education

The authors that have contributed to this Volume have approached trust from various perspectives and disciplinary lenses. This reflects the state of the art of the academic interest in the concept of trust in the field of higher education studies, and the fact that it is still too early for a conceptual synthesis of the terrain. What the Volume's authors have in common, though, is an interest in studying tensions that emerge as a result of NPM inspired governance reforms in higher education, whether far-reaching, as in the UK, or more moderate, as in Norway. This concerns, for example, tensions between:

- Student autonomy and effectiveness of securing learning outcomes.
- Student and academic well-being and revenue growth.
- Academic and administrator satisfaction, economic realities and common goods.
- Intra-university and external values and norms.
- Individualism and the common good.

With this as a starting point, we can point to the insights the chapters of this Volume provide in the importance of context in the study of trust in higher education. As discussed in the introductory chapter, and addressed throughout the Volume, the national context for the governance of higher education as well as the developments in higher education for Norway differ from that of the UK, and especially England. Therefore, the impact of the (national) context on the role of higher education in the generation of personal and social trust should be one of the core issues addressed in a future research agenda.

In addition, the future research agenda on trust in higher education should be multi-disciplinary, and be aimed at contributing to a better understanding of the factors that affect trust in and for higher education. This would include macro level investigations, such as the study of the shift from a trust-based to an executive governance approach, and the analysis of how macro level developments affect the level of individual and social trust among the population of universities and colleges. Does an executive governance model in higher education institutions erode or free up the positive role of higher education in generating social trust, as presented in Chap. 2 of this Volume (see also Rothstein, 2011: 163)? Does a move away from the emotional and ethical notion of decline in social trust among students imply that the level of education will become less significant as a variable explaining variance in our citizenships? At the micro-level, we need more knowledge, for example, on how trust relates to the learning outcomes of students in higher education. In this, it will also be of relevance to analyse the relation between trust and its attributes and other variables, such as disciplines, type and geographical location of higher education institution, level of study program (Bachelor – Master – Doctoral), etc.

This preliminary agenda is obviously far from exhaustive. As shown in the chapters in this Volume, there are many issues and questions with respect to trust in and for higher education that need to be addressed in a more structured and valid way.

Instead of seeking a synthesis of the views expressed in this Volume, we hope that the questions and issues that have emerged in this Volume, as exemplified by the research issues presented above, offer a worthy approach to further conceptualizing trust (in higher education) and developing and implementing a more comprehensive research agenda. The chapters in this Volume offer meaningful illustrations how this approach might be achieved.

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