

# WHY UNIVERSITIES NEED GOOD WORK

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## WHY UNIVERSITIES NEED GOOD WORK

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### PEOPLE: STRATEGICALLY IMPORTANT OR A STRATEGIC AFTERTHOUGHT?

Are the people who work in the higher education sector strategically important for universities? A survey of recent documents looking at the future of higher education, and beginning with the Higher Education White Paper, would point to the conclusion that the genuinely strategic subjects at issue in the higher education world are funds, consumers and incentives. The people who work in universities appear to dwell under the strategic radar. The opening sentence of a report for Universities UK sums up the priority list that is front-of-mind for many university leaders at present: “Effectiveness, efficiency and value for money are central concerns for the higher education sector.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it seems no more than a statement of the blindingly obvious that it is the 380,000 people (and another 190,000 or so blessed with the label “atypical”, meaning flexible and non-permanent) who must make the reorganised British higher education landscape post 2012 successful and productive. The systems and institutions of higher education are formed of human beings: what they think and do is surely consequential. The sentiment is recognised. There are initiatives on engagement and wellbeing among staff emanating from a variety of sectoral bodies. These initiatives do not argue that people and the work they do are significant for their own sake – that might be regarded as a non-strategic perspective – but rather make their point in the instrumental terms of a “business case”. As another opening sentence puts it: “In knowledge intensive organisations, our people are at the core of everything we do and key to our success. As institutions face the challenges of funding cuts, potential job losses, restructures, and doing more for less, how will you ensure that your staff remain motivated and engaged?”<sup>2</sup>

Strategy ultimately boils down to the choices that are made about the future. These decisions are not generally premised on workforce considerations: the people dimensions are secondary. That said, however, the failure of leaders to properly engage staff in change, and the failure to have the right people with the right skills in the right roles, is a recipe for strategic mistakes. So the theoretical case for people being a strategic issue in higher education institutions could be argued either way.

This paper takes the view that while systems, incentives, efficiency and “putting students at the heart” of higher education are the understandable preoccupations of HE leaders, how people behave inside organisations will ultimately determine institutional success. Their work matters. Few university staff rise in the morning animated by a desire to achieve greater value for money; rather more rise in the hope (if not necessarily the expectation) that they

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<sup>1</sup> Universities UK, Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Education: A Report by the Efficiency and Modernisation Task Group, 2011

<sup>2</sup> Shutler Jones, K, Improving Performance Through Wellbeing and Engagement, 2011, available at [http://www.qub.ac.uk/safety-reps/sr\\_webpages/safety\\_downloads/wellbeing-final-report-2011-web.pdf](http://www.qub.ac.uk/safety-reps/sr_webpages/safety_downloads/wellbeing-final-report-2011-web.pdf)



are going to do meaningful work. In an ideal world, they would not be the subjects of initiatives, akin to feeling forced to buy a present for a distant relative.

Yet all the talk of engagement and wellbeing cannot hide the widespread sense that the work of universities and the work of university staff are under strain, as perhaps never before. Within universities a popular response to the arrival of a fully-fledged market in higher education has been to prioritise the needs of administrative staff over those of academics, and so staff have experienced a growing trend towards managerialism, centralisation, performance management and increased bureaucracy<sup>3</sup>. The growth of administrative power, to which academics feel subjected, is a familiar refrain. One expression of this is how unremarkable it is to hear universities described as “a business” like any other. The notion may make perfect sense to some. But it risks a mass switch-off among academics, who simply do not conceive of their work in these terms. It is probably a fair judgement that universities have in the past been endemically inefficient, slow to change and indulgent towards poor performance. It is also true that the relationship between academics, administrative staff and leaders is absolutely fundamental to institutional success. But at stake in this debate is the risk of the loss of core institutional purpose: what it is that makes universities special.

The majority of university workers may not be academics, but it is academics and the academic mission that gives universities their special character. For them, meaning is unlikely to be served by market concepts and market relationships; in fact they see these things as a threat to their work. Instead, for academics, meaning rests on the concept of the public good of higher education served by a community of scholarship. The fundamental allegiance of academics is to universities as enlightenment institutions, as creators and disseminators of the public good of knowledge. As one paper put it, the “primary orientation of university staff is to collegial relations of peer review, to the testing of arguments and to public debate...Critical knowledge serves a public good that is guaranteed by the character of the university as an institution. Universities are not aggregates of individuals, they are epistemological communities.”<sup>4</sup> Given this starting point, there is a need to understand the work of universities not as commodified arrangements geared to the ends of winning student-consumers and out-putting qualifications, but in a way that salutes the nature of professionalism in universities and the unique craft of academics. This paper looks at how to support an institution’s core purpose with a conception and design of work that better serves the nature of universities: the notion of good work.

### **LET’S HEAR IT FOR ENGAGEMENT**

At this point, it is worth pausing to consider the language we use to talk about work. Surely, there is already a perfectly respectable, widely used and broadly understood term through which university leaders discuss work, namely engagement. As well as being popular, it also

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<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of this see Richard Sharpe and Stephen Overell, *Strategy and Change in UK Higher Education: Navigating in a Turbulent World*, 2012, available at [www.elementaleadership.co.uk](http://www.elementaleadership.co.uk)

<sup>4</sup> In *Defense of the Public Good of Higher Education*, available at <http://www.noconfidence.org.uk/documents/In-Defence-of-Public-HE.pdf>



bears the imprimatur of cross-party government support. The previous government set up the MacLeod Review of Employee Engagement, led by David MacLeod, which resulted in the 2009 report *Engaging for Success*<sup>5</sup>, which has become a kind of *ur-text* on the subject; the current Coalition supports a task force that aims to bring the report's recommendations into practice inside organisations. Engagement has become an increasingly prominent ideology of workplace relationships. What's wrong with it?

On one level, the employee engagement movement can be seen as a positive force. Decades of management thought have thus far not come up with a settled vocabulary of people management. A recent report backed by the Higher Education Funding Council on "wellbeing" notes there are many terms floating around speaking to broadly the same agenda (wellbeing, resilience, the psychological contract, discretionary effort, organisational citizenship, organisational commitment and loyalty...), all of which have downsides, before going on to observe that leaders revert to engagement because it is more focused on the needs of organisations<sup>6</sup>. Engagement has stuck whereas other words jar. It might be added that engagement, by being a term which senior leaders feel comfortable with, has succeeded in generating a strategic hearing for people issues that they may not otherwise have had. This is no trivial achievement. Engagement, by turning the focus on discretionary effort, has made people management and leadership more performance orientated, and thus less *recherché*.

But at a deeper level, the concept is flawed – and these flaws may limit its usefulness given that universities comprise the most archetypical knowledge-intensive workforces.

First, it is unclear what "it" actually is. Commentators tend to mean very different things by the term engagement: one person might use it to mean simply harmonious workplace relationships; another might refer to the famed "going the extra mile". Yet this extra mile is also disputed territory: if an employer gets £10 work for £8 pay, should this be seen as commitment or exploitation? *Engaging for Success* offered five different definitions of engagement, including one which abandons words altogether and appeals to the senses ("you sort of smell it, don't you?"). Perhaps the most compelling one is the following: "A set of positive attitudes and behaviours enabling high job performance of a kind which are in tune with the organisation's mission". Alternatively, the management consultants McKinsey use a definition that says an engaged employee:

- Is committed and will go "above-and-beyond";
- Is passionate and takes personal ownership for the quality of their work;
- Paints a positive image of the organisation and recommends it and its products/services to others;
- Understands how their work results in meaningful outcomes;
- Vigorously pursues the organisation's goals.

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<sup>5</sup> Available at <http://www.bis.gov.uk/files/file52215.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Shutler Jones, *ibid*



According to the organisational psychologist David Guest, the definitional problem with engagement is that it can refer variously to an attitude, a behaviour or an outcome – or indeed some amalgam of all three. In his evidence to MacLeod he suggested that unless there is greater clarity on this point the word should be abandoned. To extend the olfactory theme for a minute, it just doesn't smell like the kind of idea that is likely to animate an academic workforce.

However, as an approach to people management in universities engagement is flawed *in principle too*. The premise of engagement is that by leading and managing people in a way that corresponds to so-called progressive people management practices, staff internalise and identify with an organisation's objectives ("alignment"), and thus contribute added value to business unit or organisational performance. This could be no more than a mild restatement of what management is all about; employers often need employees to do things they do not want to do. Yet engagement aspires to a unification of objectives between employer and employee. At its worst, it can feel as if it trespasses into the territory of psychological control, as if people are a means-to-an-end in the service of organisational missions: the human face of engagement masks underlying principles which are inherently instrumentalising and controlling. Far from being a meeting of minds between equal parties, it is concerned with how one party can encourage another to identify with the first's will. Engagement is predicated on a relationship of power that it is at some pains to deny.

Its un-realism stems from its refusal to allow that employers and employees may have different, but perfectly legitimate, interests in work – what in the old days of personnel management used to be called "unitarism". Of course, employers and employees share an interest in an organisation's success; but beyond this, a more realistic view of employment would allow that different interests need to be reconciled in the workplace ("pluralism"). Engagement so often strikes a false note because its intellectual horizon is limited to a shared-interests perspective masking a corporate interests view of work. Employee engagement is the 21st century descendant of the 20th century studies in motivation, led by American business psychologists such as Herzberg and McGregor. In truth, work – any work, but university work in particular – is not simply about the dedication to organisational missions: work is where people act on the world. Engagement shuts down the space where difference and different interests are permitted.

As an example, let us take the topical subject of job security. Employees have a direct and powerful interest in the maintenance of a regular income stream: it invariably ranks as one of the aspects of work that is most precious to workers. But an employer's interest in job security is more nuanced. Certainly, they have an interest in the retention of key talent, and recruitment can be difficult and expensive (especially in some academic disciplines). It is also true that efforts to engage a workforce depend on a degree of rootedness and stability among a workforce, so excessive turnover can be detrimental to an employer's interest in organisational performance. But the true interest of employers is in labour flexibility rather than general workforce security – security on an employer's terms, in other words. This kind of understanding of a balance of objectives between employers and employees which have to



be reconciled in the workplace is anathema to the shared goals approach of engagement. Interestingly, there is no mention of the subject of job security anywhere in the MacLeod review. This is not a fault. It's a logical outcome of the premise of engagement. Engagement is not about the things that workers need from work, but about the things that employers need from employees.

Nothing wrong with that, one might say. People need to be clear on what is expected of them and so they do. But if this was all that was necessary to get the best out of people, there would be no need for employee engagement. Getting the best out of people demands an understanding not just of work in general, but of *their* work in particular. Which returns us to the question of what might be a better approach to the work of university staff – an approach which allows that not all interests converge on a neatly trimmed utopia of shared organisational missions?

The American scholar John Budd has updated the idea of a balance of goals in work in his book, *Employment with a Human Face*<sup>7</sup>. Budd argues that in democratic societies, efficiency, equity, and voice are moral imperatives that need to be balanced in the employment relationship. Within this context, efficiency is characterized by the economical production of goods and services (equating to “performance”); equity is defined by granting employees fair rewards and working conditions, while voice guarantees that employees have input, both individually and collectively, in determining issues of importance to them in the workplace<sup>8</sup>. This balance of objectives is not just an inherently more reasonable view of the employment relationship because it does not allow one set of interests to over-ride the others, but one which would seem to be more relevant to the task of inspiring university workforces as well. In the psychology of employee engagement the archetypal worker is something akin to a wayward child who needs to be coaxed to co-operate through a series of organisational inputs. Yet the irony is that high performance in higher education institutions is far more likely to flow from setting professionals free to pursue their craft than from attempting to adjust their motivation levels. The passion of academics is fundamentally stirred by allegiances beyond the employing institution – to research, teaching and scholarship. In other words, they see their work as a worthwhile end in itself before it is a means of meeting an organisational end. The current predilection in the sector for “organisational transformation” initiatives frequently seems to locate academics as the central inhibiting force. This perceived resistance to change can then be interpreted as further evidence of the academics being the key barrier to future success. Ironically of course an institution without academics who are passionate about their discipline and keen to engage with others in a learning dialogue around this, is likely to be intellectually arid and unattractive to discerning potential students and staff. Good work offers a framework that can value academic diversity and commitment to an academic discipline with a bounded level of autonomy that will allow the “craftsperson” to do their work and the university to make progress towards legitimate corporate goals and strategies. That universities will need to act differently in the future in the light of a fast

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<sup>7</sup> Budd, J. *Employment with a Human Face: Balancing Efficiency, Equity, and Voice*, ILR Press, 2006

<sup>8</sup> Budd, J. *ibid*



changing strategic environment is a given. It is how they act that good work particularly speaks to. Engagement can never fully shake off the shadow of manipulation. Ultimately, it is another expression of the managerial impulse in higher education and thus the wrong tool for the job.

### **ON GOOD WORK**

So, if not engagement what should be the animating philosophy of people management? What would better meet the respective requirements of employees, employers and society at large in a university setting? The answer advanced below is that of “good work”.

At first the term can sound at once painfully commonsensical (who could be against the idea?) and worryingly abstract (define “good”?). Doesn’t it have much the same fuzziness as “engagement”? Lots of intellectual traditions have devised wish-lists of what makes for good work; most of us can imagine how we would like work to be and draw up a list of its features on the back of an envelope. But by what criteria is it possible to draw universal conclusions from these lists?

The concept of good work outlined here is derived from three sources. First, from philosophical first principles about the aim of work in democratic societies; second, from sound social scientific evidence about how people’s health and wellbeing is affected by work; and third from what workers themselves say they most value in work. Briefly, we will look at each of these in turn.

Regarding the philosophical origins of the idea, a particular debt is owed to the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. Sen has spent much of his career promoting ethical, social and political arrangements that take account of the diversity of human beings and their values. To that end, Sen directs his research at the capabilities that empower people to pursue activities in accordance with their particular values, provided they can be reasonably defended: an individual’s wellbeing is dependent upon their ability to make meaningful choices regarding their favoured pursuits, and it is the range of the choices available that is important, even if only one choice is actually made. Applied to the specialist realm of work, the question then becomes how can work enhance an individual’s ability to make meaningful choices about the life they value and so add to their wellbeing?

One point here is that although an individual is subject to an employment contract (and therefore a relationship of power), this does not mean they abandon all the normal expectations of liberty in a democratic society the moment they cross their employer’s threshold. True, this liberty is qualified: it is part of the nature of employment that work is directed. But in enquiring how work can promote capability, it seems obvious that people ought never to be treated as a means-to-an-end and certain practices and management styles are incompatible with the objective. The economist Francis Green argues, in applying Sen’s thinking to the workplace, that employees enjoy a higher quality of work when they can pick their tasks from a range of choices, when they can cooperate with others in how work is done, and when they have the possibility to advance themselves while also having the



capacity for outward consumption. He therefore understands the main features of work to relate to five core indicators: pay; skills and skill utilisation; security; autonomy and task discretion; working time and work “intensification” or strain<sup>9</sup>.

However, to our understanding of how work affects capability, we need to add a second intellectual debt. This is to the rapidly growing evidence base concerning the interaction of work with health. Some £100 billion is lost each year from British GDP due to ill-health – but the relationship also operates the other way round: work can also drive health outcomes. Thanks to developments in social and epidemiological science, we now know a lot that we didn’t in previous generations about health, work and wellbeing. This is less a reference to the risks of falls from ladders than the impact of the “psycho-social environment” of work on a person’s health and wellbeing. Very compelling evidence now tells us that the external environment affects how we feel and how we feel affects physiological reactions. The presence or absence of certain aspects of work can trigger negative or positive reactions – for example, reactions to stress are different depending on how much control people have over their work and the sources of support they can call upon; too much stress without control or support can and does translate into an array of serious cardiovascular, musculo-skeletal and mental health conditions. Thus stress has been found to have an especially adverse effect on people lower down the social gradient, even though popular understanding associates stress with high-paying and high-responsibility jobs at executive level. There is good evidence to suggest that increasing job control and autonomy reduces sickness absence and has positive effects on mental health<sup>10</sup>. The literature on health and work has become substantial, but the main aspects of work known to have significant health outcomes overlap almost entirely with Francis Green’s Sen-inspired list. They are:

- The security of employment;
- Whether work is characterised by monotony and repetition;
- Whether employees have autonomy, control and task discretion;
- The extent to which there is an appropriate balance between efforts made and rewards received;
- Whether employees possess the skills they need to cope with periods of intense pressure;
- Whether the workplace is seen to be fair;
- The strength of workplace relationships (or “social capital”).<sup>11</sup>

These are the basic conditions that need to pertain for any kind of flourishing at work to occur. Together these features amount to an agenda around good work that ought to guide

<sup>9</sup> Green, F. *Demanding Work: The Paradox of Job Quality in the Affluent Economy*, Woodstock : Princeton University Press, 2006; see also by the same author, *Job Quality In Britain*, Praxis, UKCES, November, No. 1, 2009

<sup>10</sup> See Marmot, M. *The Status Syndrome: How Social Standing Affects Our Health and Longevity*, Times Books, 2004; also by the same author, *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*, The Marmot Review, UCL, 2010. In addition, see Black, C. *Working for a Healthier Tomorrow*, DWP/DoH, The Stationery Office, 2008

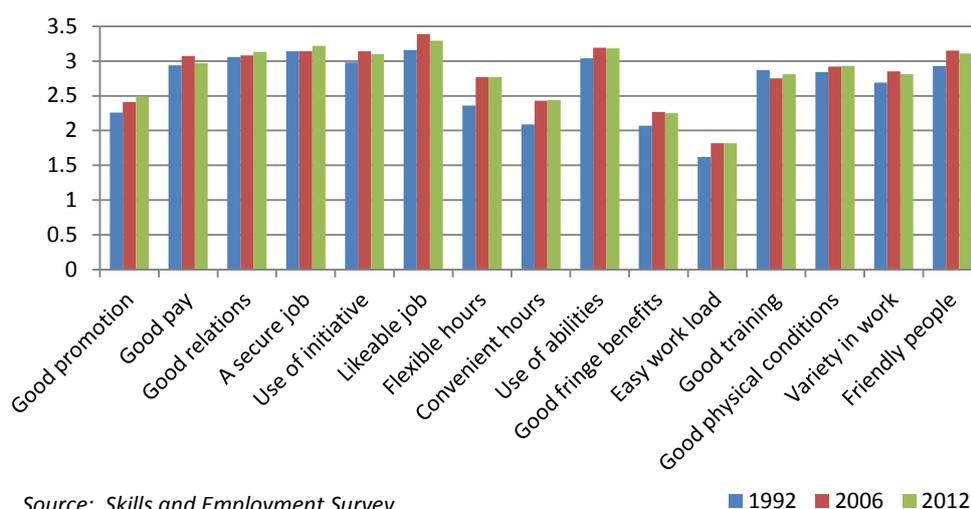
<sup>11</sup> For a series of essays on the subject, see Coats, D. (ed), *Advancing Opportunity: the future of good work*, Smith Institute, 2009; for more on the concept, see Coats, D, *Good Work: Job Quality in a Changing Economy*, The Work Foundation, 2008.



both policy formation and the activities of employers. Of course, different sectors have different norms of work and different abilities to meet the requirements of good work. Yet while employment practices inevitably differ, the criteria of good work aim to be universal, founded as they are on the evidence of social science. They offer a list of the most important job quality features for employers and employees to focus on and – theoretically at least – a means of measuring progress against them.

Finally, a third part of the justification for good work is that it closely follows what workers themselves want from work. There have been many surveys over the years that have asked what employees value in the work they do. The example cited below comes from the Skills and Employment Survey<sup>12</sup>, which has run in the UK every five years since 1986. When asked for their preferences about work using a four point rating scale, which was then averaged, the features that workers themselves identified as important or essential came out as follows.

### JOB PREFERENCES



Source: Skills and Employment Survey

It is sometimes assumed that the ultimate consideration of workers is their pay, but the Skills and Employment Survey is consistent with many others in demonstrating that while pay is certainly important, it is not necessarily the most important aspect of work. Work’s intrinsic satisfactions score prominently (likeable job, the opportunity to use abilities and demonstrate initiative). The social capital aspects of work (friendly colleagues and good relations with one’s supervisor) also figure prominently. Following the above discussion of job security, it is also obvious how much security remains an enduringly fundamental concern among employees – one that has understandably increased during the recent recession. The aspects of work that workers highlight once more bolster the definition of good work.

<sup>12</sup> The survey can be accessed at <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/ses2012>



So putting these strands together, we can say with some authority that good work revolves around security; autonomy; a reasonable balance between effort and reward; sufficient skills and that one's skills are utilised effectively; perceptions of workplace fairness; and social capital.

In summary, then, here are five key points about good work. First, it is not a wish-list because it is derived from the best social scientific evidence available. Second, it aims to be universalisable – in other words, aiming to offer guiding principles to improve the work of all workers in all sectors, not just some, even though norms differ. Third, the list is not utopian because it is firmly anchored in the real world. Fourth, it corresponds to the notion that work is an arena in which different parties have different orientations: the right – obligation, even – of employers and senior leaders to manage and lead organisations is not questioned – provided they do so in ways that are compatible with the principles of good work and voice amongst a workforce. And fifth, it aims to offer a clear agenda for workplace improvement. There are unlikely to be Eureka moments of “we’ve arrived!” by those who adopt a good work perspective; it’s about steady, incremental improvement under solidly-grounded principles. What can be said about work in the higher education sector in the light of this list?

#### **GOOD WORK AND HIGHER EDUCATION: PRIORITY AREAS**

To this author's knowledge, there is insufficient data available to determine the extent of good work in the higher education sector across all these issues. And if it was available, analysis of it might make for a tome rather than provocation paper. So the discussion below singles out three difficult issues for universities in terms of how they choose to manage work.

Autonomy is a sensitive issue in universities. Academics have long enjoyed freedom of thought and freedom of expression and many perceive these ancient virtues are under threat in a new market-based, cost-conscious, consumer-driven system. They frequently see instruments aimed at managing their performance and securing value from their contribution – workload models, for example - as reducing their autonomy. More bureaucracy and admin, but less support is the common refrain. On the other hand, leaders and administrators might observe that the academic sense of entitlement is out of kilter with the way most other workers operate, and universities cannot offer a blank cheque to unfunded or underfunded research interests, or continue to indefinitely support unpopular courses. A good work perspective on this issue would start from the premise that there are clearly different interests that have to be reconciled and there needs to be a very careful and avowedly fair process for doing so. However, it would also be nervous about management processes that are linked in staff minds to an incremental reduction in autonomy and diminishing discretion because it risks frustrating key people and is ultimately unlikely to yield its promised performance benefits. Command and control is an unpromising offer to anyone interested in the performance of knowledge workers.

Nationally, something strange has happened to perceived levels of discretion at work across public and private sectors. Given the rhetoric about the knowledge economy and received management wisdom about how to get the best out of people, an observer might presume



people feel less “controlled” or micromanaged than they once did. After all, work is said to be more flexible. Worryingly, however, this is not how workers see it. Surveys in fact indicate that people say they have less discretion to do their work as they see fit. Looking at the Skills and Employment Survey once more, there has been a fall of discretion during the 1990s which has not recovered in the years since<sup>13</sup>. The falls have been sharpest in the public sector and, over recent years, amongst men rather than women. Why does this matter? It matters because the scope to exercise judgement is an important ingredient in fulfilment – perhaps especially in the case of professionals: it points to a good work deficit. And it matters because studies link extensions of discretion with higher performance outcomes<sup>14</sup>. If the work of knowledge workers is associated with Taylorism, diminishing returns may follow.

Closely linked to the autonomy question is that of workloads and perceived strain amongst workforces (those with greater control over their work tend to suffer less strain from workloads). In universities many staff complain their workloads are unmanageable. In one survey of 2004, 69% of university academics agreed with the statement “I find my work stressful” with up to a fifth of work being done at weekends and evenings<sup>15</sup>. No single method of workload allocation is without its problems, but the issue of work intensity is clearly a central job quality problem for universities that demands attention. In some ways, higher education is not unusual. Nationally, the trend has been towards an increase in the perception of work intensification over the period of the recession with high speed, deadline-driven work increasingly regarded as the norm; women working full time have experienced the largest rises in intensification<sup>16</sup>. Yet some issues of work strain do appear to be particularly germane to higher education. For example, some studies have highlighted that as well as volume of work, the problem is one of conflicting roles, especially paperwork associated with quality assurance procedures detracting from preparing for classes and undertaking quality research. Staff also complained of constant interruptions. There was “a feeling that...levels of control had been slowly eroded to meet the demands of quality systems,” as one paper put it<sup>17</sup>. University jobs are unlikely to be “low control” jobs in the sense that would be broadly understood, but this interaction between high workload demands and perceptions of decreasing control ought to trouble any institution dedicated to high performance.

A third strand of good work that is particularly relevant to universities is security. Job insecurity has a subjective element to it: it is the loss of welfare that comes from employment uncertainty. It also has an objective element: the numbers of people on non-permanent,

<sup>13</sup> See [http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/ses2012/\[hidden\]resources/3.%20Job%20Control%20in%20Britain%20-%20mini-report%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/ses2012/[hidden]resources/3.%20Job%20Control%20in%20Britain%20-%20mini-report%20(2).pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Walton, R. E. Toward a strategy of eliciting employee commitment based on policies of mutuality, in Walton, R. E. and Lawrence, P. R. (Eds.), *Human resource management: Trends and challenges*, Boston : Harvard Business School Press, 1985

<sup>15</sup> Barrett, L. And Barrett, P. (University of Salford), *The Management of Academic Workloads*, Leadership Foundation, 2008

<sup>16</sup> See [http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/ses2012/\[hidden\]resources/5.%20Work%20Intensification%20in%20Britain%20-%20mini-report.pdf](http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/ses2012/[hidden]resources/5.%20Work%20Intensification%20in%20Britain%20-%20mini-report.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Barrett and Barrett *ibid*



flexible work contracts. In objective terms, the higher education sector has a lot of insecure work. Some 49.6% of all staff are on “atypical” contracts. Among academics, 36.2% worked on fixed term contracts in 2011, up from 33% a year earlier<sup>18</sup>.

Zero hours contracts have been the focus of attention nationally as being the phenomenon that most clearly demonstrates “casualisation” at work. The Office for National Statistics has been forced to admit its official figures of the numbers of people employed on zero hours contract appear to underestimate the scale of their use. They appear to be a feature of life in certain employment sectors much more than others; the education sector is one of them. According to the University and College Union, 53% of higher education institutions use zero hours contracts<sup>19</sup>. There will be good reasons why universities have chosen to make such extensive use of flexible labour contracts in this way. Yet questions need to be raised about the effect of them on the quality of work. Even if one’s perspective was limited to employee engagement, it would, on the face of it, make it more difficult to engage a workforce if such large proportions had a limited emotional and practical stake in an organisation. Put bluntly, it could be a recipe for low trust workplace relationships.

### **GOOD WORK AND THE ETHIC OF PROFESSIONALISM**

In their book, *Good Work*, three American psychology professors wrestle with the conundrum of how to balance excellence and ethics in a market-driven society. All professions are to some extent under pressure from the bottom line, they note. But inherent in the idea of professionalism is a set of enduring values that reach beyond market relationships. Professionals have a mission – they serve a societal need; they subscribe to a set of standards enshrined in established best practices; and their personal integrity is in some way bound up with their professional identity. But market norms can eat away at the basis of professionalism by shifting the values in play. “If a profession cannot offer the opportunity for doing good work...enabling individuals to do their best in meaningful occupations – young people unsuited by talent or temperament will enter whatever field pays better or gives the most prestige.”<sup>20</sup> Universities are not an obvious arena in which to get rich quick or become a master of the universe. Yet the basis of their work is under threat from market norms and universities do appear to be struggling to find a language to speak of the work of university staff that is not simply a business language of products, consumers and people.

Universities comprise a variety of professionals, but their heart – their institutional *raison d’être* – must remain with the nature of the professional academic project: a community of scholars. University academic staff work for inevitably complex motives, but within the mix will be a sense of craft, a desire for professional recognition and respect, and perhaps even a sense of vocation – that their role is about trust, caring and responsibility. The argument of this paper has been that universities need to manage people in a way that is truly supportive

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<sup>18</sup> Statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, see [http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2662&Itemid=161](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2662&Itemid=161)

<sup>19</sup> UCU press release, <http://www.ucu.org.uk/6754>

<sup>20</sup> Gardner, H., Csikszentmihalyi, M., and Damon, W., *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*, Basic Books, 2001, p30



of the academic project. What is the kind of work that nurtures an epistemological community?

The notion of good work offers a concept that is superior in philosophy and in practice to that of other contenders for inspiring the work of university professionals because it does not seek to prescribe the ends of work – individuals can be relied on to have their own views of that – but does offer firm principles for the means of how to get the best of people. Professionals do not need their work to be “aligned” to a business case; rather, work needs to be seen within a framework of professionalism and service to a public good.

Good work is an approach that is wholly compatible with the objectives of running a high performance organisation; in fact, were its principles to be adopted more widely, the evidence suggests it would foster sustained productivity gains. In a time where individual institutions are re-asking the question “why do we exist?” and as the complexity of a globalised higher education environment plays out, good work offers a practical framework to both employers and employees to find a mutually respectful and productive route to a successful future, avoiding the opening up of deep rifts and schisms that may become the graveyard of strategic aspiration. If a university can join up around good work it can focus its collective energies and talents on making a real difference in the world, in its country and region and for its students. It does all of this without adopting a control orientated unitarist agenda. This is the outcome that many university management teams and employee populations would legitimately hope for. It might be that good work offers a better way forward, in this regard, than evidence-light approaches to organisational transformation and change, largely based on notions of engagement in which the management team is accorded control and the authentic voice and autonomy of employees is subjugated. Good work is not just a philosophical treatise; it can also be eminently practical. It can be the basis of “how we act around here”, informing approaches to strategic planning, organisational change, performance management, rewards and incentives, organisational innovation, organisation and job design, and for academic and administrative leadership development (including the behaviour of top teams). Good work differs from other popular terms such as engagement, because it does not start from the misleading premise that organisational performance is the only objective of work. Furthermore, it rests on rather more than exhortations to think positively. Good work is leading and managing well - but with evidence.



### **ABOUT ELEMENTA LEADERSHIP**

Elementa Leadership is a specialist strategic change and leadership consultancy with cross-sectoral international experience, focused on UK higher education. We are currently working at strategic level with universities that cover the various HE mission groups. We are committed to the future of UK higher education as central to the development of both a better society and a better economy.

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