CHAPTER THREE

‘WHEN THE LEVEE BREAKS’:

ACADEMIC LIFE ON THE BRINK

INTRODUCTION

It is, of course, impossible to separate the pressures on staff within business schools from the state of the universities in which they are based. I therefore start this chapter by paying tribute to the memory of a late academic colleague in a different discipline, and who I never met. His name was Stefan Grimm and he died in 2014. The story of what happened to him is extreme, though perhaps less so than we would like to imagine. I think it serves as an illustration of university life at its worst and should alert us to the need for a change of direction.

Stefan Grimm was a professor of toxicology at London’s ‘world leading’ Imperial College. His achievements in this role did not prevent the then head of the Division of Experimental Medicine at Imperial from e-mailing him in March 2014 to say:

‘I am of the opinion that you are struggling to fulfil the metrics of a Professorial post at Imperial College which include maintaining established funding in a programme of research with an attributable share of research spend of £200k p.a and [I] must now start
to give serious consideration as to whether you are performing at the expected level of a Professor at Imperial College.’

There was no criticism of the quality of Grimm’s work or the volume of his output. Rather, he was being criticized for doing work that was not expensive enough. Other emails made it clear that Grimm believed he was earmarked for dismissal. He may have been right. His line manager’s email asserted that his communication was the ‘start of informal action in relation to your performance.’ It offered to ‘help’ him, if he wished to ‘explore opportunities elsewhere.’ The stress was immense. In an email commenting on his treatment by Imperial College, Grimm wrote:

‘I have to say that it was a lovely situation to submit grant applications for your own survival with such a deadline. We all know what a lottery grant applications are… Why does a Professor have to be treated like that?’

He went on:

‘What these guys don’t know is that they destroy lives. Well, they certainly destroyed mine. This is not a university anymore but a business, with a very few, up in the hierarchy, profiteering, and the rest of us milked for money.’

In September 2014, at a time when he faced further action by his managers, Stefan Grimm committed suicide at his home. His death attracted much media attention, including from the mainstream press. Imperial’s treatment of Professor Grimm featured as a key issue in this coverage and at the inquest into his death. The coroner noted that the funding pressures on him were a major stressor, and described his death as ‘needless.’ A fellow academic from Imperial was quoted in the press as follows:

‘Perhaps what is most shocking is that none of us are actually shocked this has happened. Higher education is like big business these days, and Imperial is absolutely focused on its
position in the global rankings. Lots of us thought academia was about ideas and expanding the realms of science, not a business in which the people who do the research are treated as disposable commodities… It is brutal and horrible and unfair. Everybody knows a story about someone who has been targeted because they no longer “fit” or are deemed unproductive in some way.’

This tragedy, though particularly horrific, is part of a broader process in which academic work is scrutinized more closely than ever before. For example, *The Times Higher Education* carried a report on June 8th 2018 headlined ‘Cardiff plans review after suicide of ‘overworked’ lecturer.’ It reported the death of Malcolm Anderson, an accounting lecturer, who had been given 418 exam scripts to mark within a 20 day period, in addition to his other duties. In analyzing how and why this has come to be, this chapter is my attempt to offer some answers to the agonizing question Professor Grimm posed in his last communications: ‘Why does a professor have to be treated like that?’

When anyone writes about the pressures of modern academic life they are often accused of hankering after a lost Golden Age that never was. Their laments are viewed in the same light as those who pine for the return of steam engines, quill pens and the un-invention of social media. But in criticising the present it isn’t necessary to believe that everything before today was perfect. It is only necessary to argue that what we are now doing is diminishing the quality of academic life and that this is damaging the research which we produce. Stefan Grimm’s memory, and those who have come after him, deserves better.

**UNIVERSITIES AS HUMAN INSTITUTIONS**

It is strange how much discussion of what universities do fails to consider the importance of the conditions under which staff work. Here is a typical example. David Willetts was at one time Minister for Universities and Science in the UK Government. He is now a Visiting Professor at King’s College London, an Honorary Fellow of Nuffield College in Oxford,
Chancellor of the University of Leicester and a member of the House of Lords. In 2017, he published a book entitled *A University Education*. It is a passionate and eloquent defence of Universities, their value to society, and of how they enrich the lives of their students. When he declares that ‘I love Universities’ there is no reason to doubt his sincerity, even if one disagrees with some of his policy options. Yet there is a curious lacuna through its 439 pages. At no point does Willetts discuss the welfare of the staff who work within the system, or the impact on them of the various initiatives that he debates and often defends. Universities, he insists repeatedly, must ‘do more’ to improve the quality of their teaching, including providing students with more contact hours. But Universities are not just buildings. They are people. When Willets says that ‘Universities must do more’ on teaching, or anything else, he means that academic staff must do so. He doesn’t say what we should stop doing in order to do more of whatever is currently in vogue with Government. However, we are not – yet – an inexhaustible resource. Perhaps Willets thinks that our physics colleagues should work on bending the fabric of space-time, so that a twenty-four hour day becomes forty-eight?

In line with this, he bullishly declares that research assessment ‘has transformed the performance of British research by putting academic researchers under greater pressure to perform than in any other national system.’ Of course, those who work within Ivy League institutions in America, the Group of Eight in Australia or any other segment of a higher education system that regards itself as research intensive could justly argue that they face similar pressures. Australia’s research assessment exercise is grandly dubbed the ‘Excellence in Research for Australia’ (ERA) initiative. There is growing evidence there too that it has become an all devouring preoccupation, distracting attention from teaching, and provoking alienation, stress and dissatisfaction on the part of staff. In fairness to Willetts, he acknowledges problems with assessment in the UK, including its cost, its bureaucratic burdens and its stress on competition between institutions and individuals rather than collaboration.
This leads to multiple absurdities. For example, many UK Universities require those applying for promotion or jobs to specify the percentage contribution that they have made to joint publications. But no one keeps a detailed inventory of how many hours, and how much hope and sweat, they invest in a paper, whether it is co-authored or a solo run. This is a surreal and pointless requirement that compels people to invent figures (that is, lie) so that they can seem to comply with the request. It could be worse. The ‘Handelsblatt’ ranking is widely used in Germany, and has rules and weightings designed to penalise co-authorship.7

But let us consider the implications of a system that is praised because it has put staff under ‘greater pressure.’ David Willetts seems to imply that academics will not be motivated to do their best work unless a blow torch is held to their feet. This seems implausible. There is also a difference between a research climate where more is produced, even when it is highly graded, and the publication of work that makes a positive difference. No one can doubt that we have more management research than ever before, as is now true in all disciplines. Whether it is of genuinely better quality than work published before formal research assessments led to targets specifying how much of it we should publish, and where, is a different question. Nor does Willetts consider how individuals have been affected by the ‘pressure’ that he plainly thinks was needed to jolt us out of our natural state of lethargy. Let me try to help him out.

Working in the 21st Century University and Business School

The popular image of academic life remains one of a cloistered ‘Ivory Tower’, in which academics drink port and ponder great but useless ideas, before embarking on a three-month summer holiday. In reality, the audit culture I have discussed in the previous chapter has produced an environment of long hours, high stress and weakening commitment to an academic life. Maxamillian Fochler and Sarah de Ricjcke argue that, as a result of audit pressures, we now have a situation where ‘Higher education institutions fight for top positions in rankings, individual academics strive to be among the tiny top percentage funded by specific sources or
published in selective outlets, and even scientific journals compete to be listed in the top percentage of their respective fields. Driven by these considerations, senior managers at the University of Exeter sought to improve their University’s league table position in a truly fanatical fashion. They ‘succeeded’ – but at the cost of hugely increased levels of stress, intensified workloads, the creation of a top down culture and ‘alarming reports of bullying, (and) manipulative and unpleasant behaviour by particular senior managers when staff express views which contradict them.’ How far this takes us from what Universities purport to be.

Thus, the pressure on individual academics is constantly ratcheted up, in some kind of arms race that always creates more losers than winners, and where the ‘winners’ are so shattered by their efforts that they often look in need of intensive care. There is only so much grant money to go around, only so many papers published in ‘top’ journals, and in any ranking system only ten universities can ever be in the top ten. People run at an ever more frantic pace, but mostly find that they are standing still.

The effects on morale are easily imagined. I recall a conversation with a senior colleague who has an international reputation and gazillions of citations, about a close relative who was considering studying for a PhD. My colleague said: ‘But I think I’ve talked them out of it.’ The data suggests why. A 2013 survey of University and College Union (UCU) members in the UK found that 73% agreed with the statement ‘I find my job stressful.’ Half felt that their general level of stress was high or very high. Nor is the UK alone. Burnout measures the extent of people’s emotional exhaustion, cynicism, inefficacy and reduced sense of personal accomplishment. 1439 faculty across 42 Universities in the US were surveyed on the extent to which this applied to them. 27% experienced burnout often or very often, levels that are on a par with such high-risk groups as healthcare workers. Speed, over-work and a feeling of always being ‘on’ have become endemic. Many junior and senior scholars in the US have now written about their experiences and why they have left academic life as a result of them – a
genre that *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has termed ‘QuitLit.’ It has compiled links to many of these pieces, in which grief, pain and regret mingle with relief at the discovery that talented and educated people can find other worthwhile things to do with their lives.  

In 2018 the *Times Higher Education* reported on a survey of some 2,379 higher education staff. 61 per cent of its respondents were from the UK, with 17 per cent based in the US and 5 per cent in Australia. A smattering of staff from 53 other countries also participated. Two-fifths reported working longer hours over the previous three years and forty per cent said they worked ten or more hours a day. A social science professor in the US said that s/he hadn’t taken ‘a holiday of a full week in more than three years.’ A lecturer at a prestigious UK university said that she ‘had to mark coursework every Christmas holiday for five years.’ As Glaudo De Vita and Peter Case argue, increased bureaucratisation and auditing have ‘transformed what was once one of the most rewarding professions into one that records increasing stress levels as a result of a feeling of loss of control in day-to-day working life.’ These seem unpropitious conditions under which to produce a great piece of research, or a great anything for that matter.  

Undaunted, some Australian business schools now require academics to produce at least two papers in top journals in any two-year period. I know of one where professors are required to publish three A or A* papers over a rolling three-year period. At least one of these must be co-authored with a mentee/early career academic. They are also expected to submit a serious competitive grant application in the same period. The prospect of having such ongoing expectations is frankly nuts. Note that saying something meaningful is subordinated here to publishing frequently in the ‘right’ places. This is a Legoland model of scholarship, in which facades matter more than substance. Conditions in Australian universities have been dire for many years. Malcolm Saunders noted as far back as 2006 that ‘a climate of fear pervades Australian universities; its most obvious product is what we might call conformist cynicism.’ This was certainly my impression during my brief tenure there, and all the indications are that
this and many other problems have only grown worse. Australian higher education has
certainly indeed acquired an international reputation. Unfortunately, it is one for being at the
cutting edge of bad ideas. But, throughout academia, it is fair to conclude that ‘the numbers of
journal articles published by a researcher and the level of the journal in which they appear has
moved from a modest issue to a major concern. For some it has become almost the only
concern.’

Ben Martin has suggested that ‘Amongst academics, one senses growing dissatisfaction,
dissillusion, even despair with life in universities.’ I do not think this is far-fetched. Consider
one of the UK’s leading business schools at Warwick University, and the crisis that befell it
when an ambitious new Dean, Mark Taylor, was appointed in 2010. He held the position until
2016. It was immediately clear that his top priority was moving the school up various league
tables. In itself this is unobjectionable. Who would advocate that a school or a University
should aim to move down the league tables? But his methods and his metrics were a different
matter. Publishing articles in ABS four star journals quickly emerged as the only criteria to be
used for appointments and promotions. Teaching ability was unimportant. Those who failed to
publish at the desired level found themselves being performance managed, and a great many –
including internationally renowned academics – chose to leave.

When a number of administrative positions were then identified for possible redundancy a
discussion forum developed on the website of the University and College Union (UCU) where
the anguish and despair of individual staff was clearly ventilated. I offer some samples here in
Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1 – COMMENTS FROM WBS STAFF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
1. ‘There is now a growing sense of crisis at WBS. Since the appointment of the new Dean what used to be a very successful business school has been run into the ground, reflected in massive staff losses from amongst the best academic and non-academic staff and these losses far outstrip new hires. Those new hires are either semi-detached from the school or put immediately into the ever-changing so-called ‘senior management team’ which as a result has no understanding of the institution. Some of these new staff have themselves left within months of joining so chaotic and unhappy has the School become.’

2. ‘Crass, bullying attempts to achieve managerial aims have left WBS demoralised and disaffected. For example, new senior people (4x4*s) being hired for huge sums are, it transpires, frequently being told that they don’t have to teach/mark.....This is not what ‘research-led university’ means.’

3. ‘As a WBS member of staff who has recently left, I can honestly say that the decline of the school, in terms of collegiality and staff morale, has been shocking. Anyone employed at the school before the ‘Taylor era’ will know that it was not always perfect but it was not a dictatorship and people were committed to their jobs. This is simply no longer the case.’

4. ‘The 4 x 4* REF obsession clearly results in perverse consequences. As academics we have a choice: play the game and aim for the Magic 4 at any costs (i.e. sod students or collegiality or being human.) Or we can trust our professional judgment that a more balanced portfolio of academic life is more suitable and rewarding both as a career and for student experience.’

It is sobering to think of the ambition that drove this regime. The Dean declared that his vision was to make WBS ‘the leading business school in Europe.’ What is striking is the absence of any serious justification for the vision in question or a sense of proportion. In what rational world is being in second, third or fourth place in a league table a cause for despair? Taylor of course had his defenders, some of whom participated in the UCU forum discussion. Positional games always create at least some winners. But, as Olan Alakavuklar, Andrew Dickson and Ralph Stablein have pointed out:
‘…when you frame accountability with a business discourse in line with a neoliberal agenda in terms of competition, efficiency, rankings, performance, and cost-benefit analyses, then it is very likely that institutional regimes intervene in, and transform, the nature of scholarship and its professionalism built up over the years.’

WBS is an excellent case study of this. Alas, it is not unique. A similar regime seems to have been installed at the UK’s Swansea University in 2013, when Nigel Piercy took over as Dean of the School of Management. He held this role for two tumultuous years. The tone of his leadership is best captured by his emails to staff, in which he explained that the school was ‘not a rest home for refugees from the 1960s with their ponytails and tie-dyed T-shirts.’ In another such communication, he described trade unionists as ‘unpleasant and grubby little people…usually distinguished only by their sad haircuts, grubby, chewed fingernails and failed careers.’ When he decided that the school’s economics programme had to be closed, a position paper was circulated that described some of the staff as a ‘poison’ that is ‘infecting and destroying the rest of the School of Management (SoM)… Certain senior individuals have created themselves into a cancer – that must now be removed to allow the rest of the school to survive.’ This is a model of academic management that sees staff as little more than recalcitrant cattle who must be rounded up, branded and herded West by their target toting betters. It is not a formula for collegiate relationships.

In line with this top down approach, Yiannis Gabriel describes a change process within another organization that reads like a leading business school. Once more, improved positioning became the over-riding aim, justifying all kinds of practices. Its effects on people were profound:

‘…criticism became internalized and part of the way many employees came to view themselves. Constantly measuring themselves against the idealized standards of the official story, the stars, the celebrities, the world leaders, it was not surprising that they found them-
selves lacking in some way or another. As a result, a widely felt depression afflicted many participants and was apparent but not generally discussed. People rarely smiled and rarely joked. Occasionally feeble black jokes surfaced, lacking the rebellious and original qualities of real humour. Even among the higher leadership echelons, feelings of doom and gloom regularly prevailed, often associated with the futility of fighting the wider organizational bureaucracy or the competitors’ ability to succeed in projects at which this organization was failing.23

All this demonstrates that attempting to perform at the level demanded by top schools over a prolonged period of time requires an obsessive commitment that precludes anything like living a normal life. Such Stakhanovite work norms provoke profound and debilitating identity crises. Nancy Day has published one of the few outputs that address the impact on authors when an output they have written is rejected. Given rejection rates at top journals, she points out that if 1000 scholars submit their work to such an outlet 900 of them will be rejected. If most of them then resubmit to a lower tier journal with say a 20% rejection rate, 720 will go on to experience a further rejection. If these scholars then submit to a still lower tier journal with a 30% rejection rate, 504 will remain rejected: ‘Thus, unless they are consistently skilled or lucky, at least half of all scholars will experience rejection numerous times.’24 The emotional effects include alienation, discouragement, disillusionment, damaged egos and threats to one’s identity as a scholar. For those still on the tenure track at US Universities, where six papers are normally expected within a six-year period, these pressures are particularly intense.

Nor are those who succeed in publishing exempt from anxiety about their overall worth. David Knights and Caroline Clarke conducted interviews with fifty-two academics.25 Many reported that they suffered from what the authors called ‘Imposter Syndrome.’ This was the belief that they were not as secure and able as others, combined with a paralysing anxiety about their ability to meet the multiple competing demands on their time. Their worry is well founded,
since past success is no guarantee of future success. Douglas Peters and Stephen Ceci demonstrated as much in an admittedly small but famous study published in 1982 where they resubmitted twelve psychology papers to journals that had previously accepted them. While three of the papers were recognised, the rest went out to peer review. This time, sixteen out of eighteen reviewers recommended rejection. They provided devastating critiques of the methodological and theoretical shortcomings of the papers in question. The editors agreed, and rejected eight papers that their journals had already published.

Established scholars are evidently not immune from stress, rejection and the prospect of professional failure. Mats Alvesson has noted that:

‘…increasingly also senior persons like myself may feel that one is only as good as one’s latest journal article or book and increasingly aware of how much and in what journals we have published. This is certainly a drastic change over the past few decades.’

It seems likely that female academics face particularly heavy forms of stress. Here is just one example, from a comment on a THE discussion thread which looked at stress levels and why so many people are walking away from academic life:

‘I was working on average 60 hours a week during term time - and spending another 30-40 hours running the household, cooking, childcare, etc…. We are entitled to all of one research day a week, but that is always occupied with teaching prep and bureaucracy. The only time I found I could squeeze in any of my own research (much of which requires travel to a foreign country - and so is increasingly impossible to do) was after my child’s bedtime, and I would work until 12-2 am 5 or so nights a week after being up and on the go non-stop since around 6. Not surprisingly, I became very ill. As I’m the family breadwinner I can’t quit, but I also know that I simply can’t keep this up. This is not a normal life - it isn’t really any kind of life. Universities seem to think, dismayingly, that the problem in
maintaining a home/life balance for people with children is to ensure that they have adequate childcare - hence it’s ok to ask me to do Saturday open days or, increasingly, evening teaching/events... The fact that I may actually want to spend time with my child rather than palming him off to others to care for doesn’t seem to enter into it. I meet so many academic women who have avoided having kids because they can’t imagine juggling life and work.”

I shared this quotation with a female colleague who is a professor in one of the UK’s leading business schools. She immediately responded that she also knew of many women who had decided to have either only one child or none at all, such was the perceived impossibility of combining a normal family life with an academic career. What an indictment this is of the journey on which so many Universities have embarked. As the eminent economist Andrew Oswald has argued: ‘It is almost as though we have consciously designed a system to maximise stress and fear. That is dangerous, muddle-headed and against the spirit of universities.’

But while the stress so valued by David Willetts may increase the quantity of what we produce, it is likely to have a negative effect on its quality. A meta-analysis of seventy-six experimental studies that examined the relationship between stress and creativity is telling. It found ‘a curvilinear relationship between evaluative stress and creativity such that low evaluative contexts increased creative performance over control conditions, whereas highly evaluative contexts decreased creative performance.’ In short, the more intense the systems of evaluation the more damaging to creativity they are. This is why the data I have presented here on academic stress matters far beyond their implications for the well-being of individuals, important as that is. Exercises such as the REF in the UK and the ERA in Australia have intensified performance expectations and the process of evaluation to such an extent that they are now damaging the ability of academics to produce the kind of sustained, high quality work
that the system insists is necessary. With so many metrics in play it is always possible to find at least one where you can be judged a failure, by yourself and others. For many academics, feelings of shame, dejection and guilt have become constant companions.  

All of which begs the question: are we doomed to an endless process of decline, or is there anything that we can do individually and collectively to reclaim the primacy of disinterested academic inquiry?

**RECLAIMING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Undoubtedly, there is a widespread sense of fatalism among academics about the depressing trajectory we seem to be on. University and journal rankings along with the tyranny of Impact Factors have rampaged through academia, and seem to have felled all opposition. Alexandra Bristow reports the following incident at one of her Vice-Chancellor’s regular meetings with staff:

‘I thought it my duty to raise my hand and point out that citation indices were misleading and journal lists and rankings were damaging… ‘Given these effects’, I asked, ‘should we not be collectively resisting journal rankings and citation indices rather than committing ourselves to becoming better at playing the game?’ … As everyone was leaving their seats at the end of the talk, I overheard (two unknown colleagues) discussing my question. ‘What’s the point of making a fuss about this?’ said one of them: ‘It’s like arguing against the force of gravity’. ‘Yeah,’ echoed the other: ‘it’s like saying we don’t like the force of gravity — let’s resist it’. 

I think that this fundamentally underestimates our own agency. Despite how deeply they have become naturalised, the influential academic ranking of world universities produced by Shanghai Jiao Tong University in conjunction with Shanghai Ranking Consultancy first appeared as recently as 2003. Unlike gravity, these are human constructions, and what people
make then so they can unmake. The *Times Higher Education’s* University rankings were first published in 2004. (The QS World Rankings was partnered with the *THE* until 2009, and now stands on its own). Recall also that the journal rankings produced by the Association of Business Deans Council in Australia was initially published as recently as 2007 while the infamous ABS Guide first inflicted its wisdom on us in 2009. Oppressive regimes seek to project the impression of permanence. But this is an illusion, as fallen despots throughout history could readily attest. In common with others, I urge a moratorium on journal rankings. Whatever the initial intentions behind them, and these weren’t all bad, we have certainly reached a stage where they now do more harm than good.

We can also help journal rankings and Impact Factors on their road to perdition by treating them with the contempt that they have worked so hard to deserve. This is certainly not a lost cause. Recall the evidence which strongly suggests that the 2014 REF panel set the ABS Guide aside when coming to its own judgements, rather than subcontract the task to the Guide’s authors (see Chapter Two). The Australian Research Council has banned the use of journal ranking lists in its national research assessment exercise, and in the evaluation of grant applications. The influential San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment urged Universities to avoid using journal Impact Factors as a measure of scholarship. All seven of the UK’s research councils signed it in early 2018. With all due respect to King Canute, the metric tide can be turned.

Our agency also extends to how we do our research. We can simply do more interesting work, despite the temptations to do otherwise. Mats Alvesson and Jorgen Sandberg offer many helpful suggestions to guide us on our way. These include cultivating a greater curiosity about assumptions and theories outside whatever microtribe we may belong to, regular interaction with people who have different worldviews to ourselves, deliberate disloyalty to particular sub-fields (however popular they seem to be) and a willingness to make a radical contribution rather
than filling unimportant gaps that no one has ever noticed before and that no one cares about anyway.

In addition, we can make better choices about how we live our lives. In a fascinating article, David Jones describes a ‘slow swimming’ club created by around a dozen academics, whose members met once a week to - yes, swim slowly - connect with each other, and just calm down. Jones described this as ‘counter-spacing’ – the conscious creation of a reflective, supportive and safe environment outside the hurly burly of ‘normal’ academic life. One member commented that the main effect of the Club was:

‘… to keep me sane as it provided a retreat from this daily grind and provided a freedom to think and feel about being truly a researcher again. I feel like my professional identity has been restored with what initially seemed like a deviant act – to have the audacity to get in touch with myself… shocking I know.’

Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, authors of a manifesto for change entitled *The Slow Professor* published in 2016, would surely approve.

Wiser choices can also be made by Government and policy makers. The principle of accountability often seems to mean that researchers are required to guarantee success before they start their work. Consider how research grants are awarded. In line with the audit imperative, applications must offer precise theoretical frameworks, promise definite outputs (often termed deliverables) and minimize the risk of cutting edge approaches that may fail. Otherwise, they are unlikely to win funding. We now seem to have a cottage industry of Nobel Prize winners complaining that they would be unable today to secure funding for the work that made their names. Sydney Brenner won the Nobel Prize in 2002 for work that led to key discoveries in organ development and programmed cell death. Interviewed by Elizabeth Dzeng in 2014 he was asked to reflect on the career of Fred Sanger, a two-time Nobel winner for his work on proteins and DNA sequencing methods. Brenner said:
A Fred Sanger would not survive in today’s world of science. With continuous reporting and appraisals, some committee would note that he published little of import between insulin in 1952 and his first paper on RNA sequencing in 1967 with another long gap until DNA sequencing in 1977. He would be labelled as unproductive, and his modest personal support would be denied.’

Paradoxically, such an approach – designed to produce measurable outcomes and ensure value for money – diminishes the possibility of the major breakthroughs that have traditionally been a goal of university-based inquiry. Tim Harford illustrates this by reference to the awards of grants for medical research in the United States. There, the main source of government funding, the National Institutes of Health, follows careful protocols and encourages relatively safe research that is likely to produce incremental insights and auditable outputs. By contrast, the charitable Howard Hughes Medical Institute encourages researchers to take risks, invites highly speculative proposals, and provides generous funding with minimal interim reporting requirements. The latter’s research results in more failures than the NIH, but the papers published from the research that it funds are twice as likely to be cited. Harford reports: ‘They were also more original, producing research that introduced new “keywords” into the lexicon of their research field, changing research topics more often, and attracting more citations from outside their narrow field of expertise.’ Perhaps the approach of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute could be considered for at least some research council funding applications?

Other more radical options are also worth considering. As the success rate of applications has declined the costs of wasted effort have soared, as have levels of demoralisation. It has been estimated that the costs associated with failed applications amount to fully a quarter of the value of grants awarded by the EU’s Horizon 2020 programme. The President of Science Europe, Marc Schiltz, is one a growing number of influential voices who advocate instead that we experiment with a lottery scheme, for those applications that meet basic criteria. It has
also been suggested that all researchers should receive the equivalent of a universal basic income that they could then combine with those of others to pursue more ambitious projects, if they so wish. These ideas are well worth considering. They could rescue us from the safe and formulaic research that is now so commonplace and which ends up in our journals.

Lastly, Governments need to consider whether the assessment exercises they initiate help or hinder the production of good quality work. This is much more important than quantity. Unlike some, I don’t advocate the abolition of the REF and similar exercises elsewhere. There must be some form of accountability for what we do, and some mechanism is needed to allocate research funds to universities. But we need a sense of proportion. The more layers of assessment that are added and the more bureaucratic the process becomes, the more game playing ensues. I believe that much of this could be reduced in the next REF in the UK if the average number of publications required from each academic was reduced to two, and this was also made a maximum. At present, each academic must submit one publication up to a maximum of six, and an average per submitting unit of 2.5. But a maximum of two would lower the burden of assessment on the relevant panels, and minimise the frantic and time-consuming evaluations of outputs internally to determine which ones should be submitted. By reducing people’s feeling that they are labouring under oppressive systems of surveillance and never-ending evaluation it would also improve their creativity and the quality of their work.

There are other benefits from this suggestion. A major review of the REF in 2016 was led by Lord Stern. It recognised that the REF ‘could strongly influence academics in their choices about what problems they choose to tackle. This can drive them towards safe topics and short-termism, and a reluctance to engage in risky or multidisciplinary projects, in order to ensure reliable, high quality publication within the REF period, and may be discouraging innovative thinking and risk taking.’ Reducing the number of publications that researchers are required to submit would liberate them to pursue at least some projects for their own intrinsic interest...
rather than with the REF in mind. Systems elsewhere that mimic the REF should take note, and exercise some restraint. Not everything that can be measured should be, and doing so often does more harm than good. Would the world be any worse off if fewer management papers were published? I doubt it.

We have choices in how we respond to whatever performative pressures are thrown at us. In this chapter, I have lampooned Warwick Business School’s ambition to be the leading business school in Europe: it is facile. But one can easily make similar criticisms of individual academics who feel that their self-esteem will wither unless they work at an institution garlanded with accreditation from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (ACSB), the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) and the Association of MBAs (AMBA), and which occupies a position at the top of this or that league table.\(^\text{42}\) If the price of belonging to such an institution is a willingness to produce formulaic and empty research for its own sake it is a price that may not be worth paying. These are choices that we can all still make, and which we should make with much greater thought for the consequences than we do at the moment.

**CONCLUSION**

Let us return to where we began – the suicide of Stefan Grimm. In its aftermath, Imperial College reviewed its processes for ‘performance management’. This review did not re-visit the grant income and other targets that he was subject to. Rather, it concluded he had been under ‘informal’ review for too long, and had this advanced more quickly to the ‘formal’ stage, it ‘would have provided more clarity to Professor Grimm on process and support through the written documentation, representation at meetings and HR involvement.’ The suggestion seems to be that more pressure and an increased auditable ‘process’ would have reassured him. The review went on: ‘It is further recommended that all performance management correspondence, both formal and informal, should be reviewed by a member of HR before
dispatch by a line manager.’ Imperial College’s audit culture remains firmly in place, fortified by another layer of bureaucratic oversight. I am not reassured.

Really worthwhile work requires time, autonomy and the freedom to fail, often. I am tempted to suggest that research grants should only be awarded to people who can demonstrate that many of their previous projects have failed, since it at least shows that they dared to ask big questions with uncertain answers.

It is surely worth remembering what brought most of us into academic life in the first place. We do not write or seek research grants only to satisfy research assessment exercises. Nor did we do so to satisfy metrics whose sole purpose is to push an institution up various league tables, whatever the cost. The poet John Masefield, in a 1946 address at the University of Sheffield, described the university as

‘a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see; where seekers and learners alike, banded together in the search for knowledge, will honour thought in all its finer ways, will welcome thinkers in distress or in exile, will uphold ever the dignity of thought and learning and will exact standards in these things.’

These words are a rebuke to the performative practices now endemic in academic life. They did not appear in a top journal. But they express an enduring set of values that should guide each one of us in our publication practices and in the ambitions that we hold for our careers.
ENDNOTES

1 The full text of this email and others can be viewed at:

http://www.dcscience.net/2014/12/01/publish-and-perish-at-imperial-college-london-the-death-of-stefan-grimm/. Coverage of Professor Grimm’s death in the Times Higher Education can be viewed at:

https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/imperial-college-professor-stefan-grimm-was-given-grant-income-target/2017369.article?storyCode=2017369

https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/stefan-grimm-inquest-new-policies-may-not-have-prevented-suicide/2019563.article. See also the following in the The Daily Mail:

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2861588/Professor-dead-cash-row-Cancer-scientist-said-told-fellow-academics-chiefs-treated-like-s.html. The quotation from ‘a fellow academic’ is taken from this report.

2 See http://felixonline.co.uk/news/5475/review-in-response-to-grimms-death-completed/


9 See Task and Finish Group Report (2012) *Listening to our Voices: Towards a Sustainable Future*, University of Exeter. This was an internal University report, and the quotation here can be found on p. 4.


13 See https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1OODoiZKeAtiGiI3IAONCspryCHWo5Yw9xkQzkRntuMU/edit#gid=0. Accessed 22nd February 2019.


The original UCU forum is no longer available online. However, I downloaded its contents at the time they appeared and draw from that archive here. The full text is available from me on request.


27 Alvesson, M. (2012) Do we have something to say? From re-search to ros-search and back again, *Organization*, 20, 79-90. The quotation is on p. 79.


33 For a particularly in-depth argument along these lines, see Adler, N., and Harzing, A. (2009) When knowledge wins: Transcending the sense and nonsense of academic rankings, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 8, 72-95.


43 The report can be viewed at https://workspace.imperial.ac.uk/college/Public/Provost%27s%20Board%20paper%20Performance%20Management%20Review-%20FULL.pdf. (accessed 20 August 2015).