

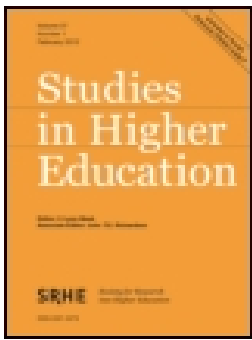
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## And then there were none: what a UCU archive tells us about employee relations in marketising universities

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# And then there were none: what a UCU archive tells us about employee relations in marketising universities

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## ABSTRACT

Our study engages evidence from a University and College Union branch archive to explore developments in employee relations (ER) that reflect the organisational effects of marketisation of UK universities. The evidence exposes points of strain in ER at a level of professional divide between managers and academics, and helps to understand their roots in the context of universities as organisational hybrids. Our investigation reveals the failure of ER to adapt to increasingly conflict-ridden working environments and encourages a different, sustainability-centred, approach to constructing ER in universities in an attempt to coordinate more effectively the clashing institutional logics.


## KEYWORDS

Marketisation of higher education; employee relations; hybrid organisations; managerialism; universities; sustainability

## Introduction

The higher education (HE) sector in the UK has been experiencing the process of marketisation. Through state policies, British universities have been forced to absorb into their operational models such as market principles as income generation and efficiency targets. Although in reality this is a quasi-market created and dominated by government intervention (Agasisti and Catalano 2006), its formation has resulted in universities becoming hybrid organisations combining different, often conflicting, institutional logics (ILs), i.e. socially constructed frames of reference that organisational actors use to infuse their work with meaning (Mangen and Brivot 2015). They represent core cognitive principles and values that guide people at work. In universities, hybridisation happens because the reaction to the pressures of marketisation by managers and academics is often motivated by dissenting frames of reference: market responsiveness versus traditional academic values, respectively (Billis 2010; Rosewell and Ashwin 2018; Shields and Watermeyer 2018).

We investigate how hybridisation affects employee relations (ER) in British universities. We contribute to the literature by exploring the sources of grievances regarding relational tensions between managers and academics, which we associate with the conflict of ILs that characterises universities as hybrid organisations. To achieve this we investigate unpublished data from a University and College Union (UCU) archive. What makes this data particularly relevant is that it includes not only documents representing the position of the union but also, importantly, personal correspondence reflecting the views of individual academics on contentious aspects of ER, thus providing a rich picture of actual relation between employees, work and the organisation. Such a multidimensional approach is largely absent from critiques of marketisation of universities which tend to examine specific issues, e.g. the REF, fetishisation of performance metrics, dictate of journal rankings

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(Burrows 2012; Cameron and Tschirhart 1992; Edwards and Roy 2017; Kalfa, Wilkinson, and Gollan 2018; Moore et al. 2017; Teelken 2012), rather than how marketisation transforms ER in universities.

Archival evidence, still relatively neglected in studies of academic workplace experiences, permits us to join a critical conversation on the HE sector by offering a perspective that incorporates temporality. The records helped to conclude that the aggregate tendency of universities' organisational practices is rooted *not in the market pressures directly but in internal structures and procedures that interpret these pressures*. Our evidence demonstrates that how universities handle ER exacerbates rather than mitigates the challenges associated with the co-existence of the competing ILs in academia and therefore fails to resolve the ensuing issues. We advocate that ER with emphasis on institutionalised trust-based relationships is capable of balancing managerial controls with employees' engagement because different ILs may co-exist effectively if a format for their mutual empowerment is provided.

We pursue two objectives: (a) to identify the specific points of tension in ER attributed to discrepancy between ILs in universities as hybrid organisations, and (b) to explore novel approaches to ER, so it can accommodate the presence of competing ILs. Achieving the latter goal is of a practical consequence, clarifying where management should direct its efforts. We argue in favour of managing sustainability in ER, which we see as maintaining workplace practices and relations that do not suppress professional identities while upholding organisational effectiveness. Our paper calls for a flexible model of ER that can (a) accommodate both human relationships and professional functionality in a specific context of universities, and (b) improve cooperation in areas related to the so-called psychological contract.

In sum, our study helps to advance critical debates on the marketisation of universities, specifically on how professionals experience macro-level changes in micro-level settings, which the current literature designates as under-researched (Kallio et al. 2016; Parker 2014).

## Putting our evidence into context: hybridisation of universities and ER failings

### *ER and sources of competitive advantage*

Universities becoming a hybrid organisation adds a new dimension to relations between academics and managers characterised by differences in the perception about fundamental professional values, purpose and the meaning of work (Bishop and Waring 2016). This dimension reveals itself through evolving relational asymmetry between academics as professionals with a particular vision of the public value of their work, on the one hand, and managers as market champions, on the other (see De Vita and Case 2016; Deem 1998; Fulton 2003; Knights and Clarke 2014; Reed 2002; Tourish and Willmott 2015, among others). In universities, hybridity correlates with the spread of managerialism, which involves the adoption of organisational forms, technologies, management practices and values more commonly found in the private business sector (Deem 1998). This is usually justified with references to the need to respond to competitive pressures that require meeting certain targets. Standardisation and curtailing of the discretionary powers of academics are seen as a necessary strategy to secure these targets. Meanwhile, the literature offers a different perspective on competitiveness. Institutional research has shown that hierarchy may be efficient in the performance of routine partitioned tasks but encounters enormous difficulty in the performance of advanced tasks that cannot be pre-programmed, and where the creative collaboration they require cannot be simply commanded (Adler 2001). The resource-based theory of the firm emphasises the role of rare, inimitable and non-substitutable internal firm resources as sources of sustainable competitive advantages (Barney 1991; Conner and Prahalad 1996). In turn, organisation control theory points out that to be successful businesses must complement formal control with employee empowerment (Simons 2008; Spreitzer and Mishra 1999). From this perspective, providing academics with some slack in relation to self-management and operational discretion is a viable competitive strategy. It may be argued, therefore, that universities face the challenge of playing a delicate balancing act between imposing controls and maintaining sustainable autonomy of academics. Our research suggests that at the current

stage of marketisation, the balance is slanting towards managerialism, creating tensions that in the final judgement may jeopardise whatever gains tighter controls were meant to achieve. We demonstrate that the early victim of this situation has been the psychological contract and trustfulness between managers and academics, which had a destabilising effect on ER.

### ***ER and the psychological contract***

In hybrid organisations, the actions of agents representing different ILs rely on different ‘patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules’ (Thornton and Ocasio 1999, 804). ILs are embedded in perceptions and roles and supported by organisational configurations, practices and routines (Besharov and Smith 2014). A notable feature of a hybrid organisation is that the tenacity of competing logics creates significant internal tensions undermining trust-based collaboration. Although knowledge on the evolution and functioning of hybrid organisations, in general, remains limited (Pache and Santos 2013), for our research the hybrid organisation perspective is crucial because it allows us to flag the flashpoints in ER and propose possible remedies.

In universities, ER tensions are becoming increasingly pronounced: academics are coerced to review their professional functionality as managerialism is replacing a *modus operandi* that afforded academics substantially more discretion than is the norm now (Deem 1998; Rosewell and Ashwin 2018; Winter 2017). This tendency contradicts the view expressed in the literature that professions requiring creativity and very specific (sometimes unique) knowledge render metering individual output difficult and therefore call for a degree of self-regulation (Mangen and Brivot 2015; von Nordenflycht 2010). Apart from academics, an example of such occupations includes accredited professionals in law, accounting and different forms of consultancy. Consequently, managing these professions presumes the presence of high levels of trust within the organisation (Gambetta 1988). The organisational theory has shown (Adler 2001) that authority, compared to trust, is a relatively ineffective means of dealing with knowledge-based assets. This suggests that high-trust institutional relations can be particularly important in the HE sector. Yet, they have found only sporadic assessment in research (Winter and O’Donohue 2012).

In the literature, trust and the associated discretion in the implementation of professional functions are described as constituents of the ‘psychological contract’ (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler 2000, 2002; Gennard et al. 2016; Rousseau 1995; Schein 1978). Although as a theoretical construct it raised certain criticism (Cullinane and Dundon 2006), we use this term as a useful metaphor of the multiplicity of informal links, understandings and traditions that complement the legal contract between the employer and the employee.

Marketisation has created a situation that requires a reformation of the psychological contract; however, this reformation proves to be demoralising because newly-promoted practices are often seen by academics as incongruous with the fundamentals of their professional roles. Importantly, because of its implicitness, the psychological contract does not change through explicit negotiation. Because of the inertia of expectations, the process of change may be distressing for one or both parties to the contract. Mutual trust is usually an early casualty. This has significant consequences for various aspects of ER including job satisfaction, motivation, retention and performance (Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler 2000, 2002; Guest and Conway 1998).

Our study grew on the observation that despite substantial organisational efforts to address work place well-being of employees, academics are dissatisfied with the cumulative effects of changes in their organisations as attested by numerous surveys (UCU 2012, 2016; *The Guardian* 2017). This discontent can be traced directly to the feeling that values and morals inherent to the academic profession have been revised to feed the demands of ‘academic capitalism’ within universities (Moore et al. 2017). At the same time, managers are concerned that in the new context a traditional academic autonomy becomes an obstacle for their own functionality (ESRC no date). These differing opinions are indicative of two ILs that co-exist in universities. The value of our evidence is that it shines light on the shortcomings of current organisational dealings with these logics in universities.

The University and College Union (UCU) branch archive that we studied documents the resentment of many academics as their expectations of collegiality, managerial transparency and certain operational autonomy had been increasingly frustrated as managers were steering them towards corporate style targets. The documents that we have read pinpointed the exact nodes of tension in ER. Accordingly, in terms of evidence, we focused on (a) identifying if, where, and why the existing ER fails; (b) the scope and origin of these failings, and (c) aspects of ER in need of revision given the presence of competing ILs. [Table 1](#) illustrates the analytical progression of our treatment of evidence.

## Data

### *Sources and method: UCU archive*

The main source of our data is a UCU branch archive in one of British universities. According to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, currently, 48% of employees in UK education are union members (DBEIS 2017). Given that unions are national, industry-wide, and represent not only members but also wider stakeholders, the UCU archives offer a useful, yet mostly untapped, source of insights on the perceived state of ER in universities.

Although organisation scholars have shown growing interest in engaging historical data (Mordhorst and Schwarzkopf 2017; Rowlinson, Hassard, and Decker 2014), researchers have been criticised for using archives chiefly to introduce the research context rather than to theorise (Fischer and Parmentier 2010). The level of detail in our evidence allowed us to use archival data to reflect on practice and thus to address this critique to some extent. The ethnographic nature of the documents motivated us to follow the interpretive methodology of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) used to examine behaviour in social structures through co-interpreting influences such as actions, language and positions of status.

Using a UCU archive as a data source has its limitation. The records, first, reflect the views of academics who are members of the union or connected to it and, second, represent the perspective of employees. In addition, controversial or contested issues are more likely to leave traces in the UCU archive. Mindful of these limitations, we made an effort to verify that our material aligns with current debates and has explanatory value. Specifically, we consulted scholarly publications, thematic academic blogs, policy documents, commissioned reports and national consultations on the governance of UK universities and were satisfied with the relevance and actuality of the UCU archival records.

### *Extraction and organisation of data*

The records, predominantly post-1992, were extracted largely throughout 2015. The archive contained 97 thematic areas, more than 500 folders, additional faculty-focused boxes with documents, 21 groups of casework. Not run professionally, the archive required initial exploration to separate ER related documents: action notes and minutes from branch meetings; correspondence, such as

**Table 1.** The logical progression of the presentation of the aggregated evidence.

WHAT IS EXPOSED	WHAT IS INDICATED	SOLUTION
ER shortcomings	ER displays conflicted managerial and professional identities and professional logics	Identify the origins of ER shortcomings
↓ The origins of ER shortcomings	Rebalanced discretionary powers triggered by the marketisation of the HE sector and sequential organisational hybridisation	Identify the specific ER aspects in need of revision
↓ Specific ER aspects that need revision	Disturbed psychological contact, following managerial misappropriation of performativity in organisational discourse	Engage a sustainability approach to ER construction

printouts of staff emails, formal letters, staff inquiries and personal cases; internal policy documents, internal survey results, and position papers by the UCU.

To register the marketisation effects, we examined their manifestations in organisational routines and recorded instances of conflicting logics in internal rules, procedures, etc. Following the RE literature (Bingham 2016; Gennard and Judge 2005; Lewis, Thornhill, and Saunders 2003), we selected for further analysis those documents that dealt with workload, promotion, performance evaluation, research management, teaching, managerial interventions, academic responsibilities, stress-related cases, harassment and bullying, employee engagement, performance benchmarks, and change of professional duties.

The documents were subjected to inductive content analysis for systematic classification (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). Each piece of evidence was incorporated into a thematic narrative account, which eventually formed the basis of our analysis. We arranged evidence into manageable clusters based on recurring themes. We labelled the evidence and subsequently transferred it into cross-referenced tabulated thematic templates. In this way, we condensed the vast amounts of information into meaningful sets of issues, and isolated ideas for examination. Due to the sensitivity of the archival sources, care was taken of the format in which to present the evidence, which forced us to mostly avoid direct quotes and go along the route of evidence aggregation.

## **Making sense of the data**

The selection of issues discussed in this section was dictated by the content of our database. It reflects the themes that our analysis identified as recurrent and important concerns relevant to ER as encapsulated in archival documents. They are the inadequacy of the existing ER, threats to academic professional identity, bureaucratisation and prioritisation of corporate objectives, the curtailment of professional discretion. Because our research is document-based, we decided to use this as an opportunity to enrich our analytics by considering changes in the organisational discourse as a reflection of more profound changes on ER, which we do in the final segment of this section.

### ***The inadequacy of the existing ER***

In judging the ER adequacy, we follow the scholarship that attributes to ER the role of institutionalising the diverse interests that routinely emerge within organisations through daily interactions (Gennard and Judge 2005). Following Emmott (2005), we regard ER as functional if it establishes generalised trust through rules, regulations, agreements, contracts and behaviours so that internal stakeholders' interests are represented. ER attains visibility through the proxy of organisational routines and rules and management practices. How well they uphold mutual trust in the organisation affects its productivity and the welfare of their employees (Salvato and Rerup 2018).

Scholars view 'good' ER as a mutual-gains model of relations that explicitly considers its impact on employees (Guest 2002). Accordingly, we compared the archived results from two staff surveys by the UCU (response rate > 60%), performed two decades apart. Both included questions on the responsiveness of managers to expressed concerns and views, which may be taken as an indirect measure of the workability of ER. In 1996, 72% of the respondents assessed management as distant. In 2017, exactly the same share of participants expressed a similar sentiment, disagreeing with the statement that senior university leaders were 'listening and responding to the views of staff'. Despite the resemblance of results, as follows from the respondents' comments, the 1996 result reflected dissatisfaction with the change of management style, while the 2017 feedback is more linked to the altered discretionary powers as the academics demanded 'more leadership, less management'. In these two decades, the UCU archive reveals a continual growth of records indicating that academics encounter more red tape, experience closer control and a stronger bureaucratic grip. At the same time, UCU documents indicate that the gains from staff mobilisation, such as additional



funding resulting from improved research rankings, unfailingly concentrate at a level to further empower management.

In many instances, the data revealed a difference in outlook between management and academics that manifested in ER a conflict between ILs. We could not find archival evidence indicating attempts to create a mechanism that would help the two logics to connect. The reaction by academics to career progression criteria provides an example. The 2008 documents regarding changes to promotion criteria reveal that the academics were concerned because 'pecuniary objectives' were prioritised: the administration failed to give sufficient recognition to professional achievements that did not directly translate into financial gains for the university. This concern did not find any notable response because a similar discontent was registered again when, after REF 2014, the administration linked career-progression for academics with the objective of maximising the research funding generated by performance in the next REF.

An attempt by the administration to mitigate academics' concerns about stress at work provides another example of how the conflict of ILs created tensions in ER. In the documents, stress was recorded formally as an industrial relations topic in 1996. Since then, consultations on the issue took place, but the positions of management and employees have never converged. At some point, the administration chose to outsource the care for employees' stress to an external counselling provider. Outsourcing was probably justifiable within corporate logic as a cost saving exercise. However, a mistrust that already existed in the organisation influenced the reaction by the academics. The administration was suspected of being interested in coping with the symptoms rather than tackling the origins of stress, some of which were relational in nature, connected to undemocratic procedures and bullying by managers. Once again, there was no meaningful dialogue. As a result, the campaign failed to build bridges between the senior management and the academics who perceived it as an effort to 'protect the organisation from potential costly legal actions'.

These and other examples document how many internal reforms and actions of the administration were regarded by the union as deepening a formal split of managers and academics into different camps. As a result, the ideological foundations of the long-standing psychological contract became increasingly threatened. This is bound to have implications for the behaviour of people involved because actions that undermine an existing psychological contract also compromise the legitimacy of the incoming model of the employment organisation. ER may strengthen trust in a work collective, but according to our evidence in academia, in many instances, an opportunity to alleviate the tensions created by marketisation and consequent organisational hybridisation was missed.

### ***Managerialism and discounting of the academic professional identity***

The archive contains evidence that despite the appearance of collective administration the management acted with a lack of consensus and minimal consultation. Characteristically, from the early 2000s, university documents labelled 'university policy' became more prominent, indicating discernible drive towards standardisation and relations that reduced the employees' chance to be heard, which negotiations and consultations provided previously. This was mirrored in the UCU records with comments like 'lack of conducive environment to collective management and negotiation', 'line managers' arbitrary powers', 'stringent and confining micro-management style guidance', 'confusion over increasing regulation of research activities', and so forth. There are also documents in the archive revealing occasions when the union refused to sign off policies, yet the disputed positions appeared as 'Union consulted' in the Directorate's record and internal communications. Simultaneously, the administration took steps to reduce the visibility of the union. Thus, in 2009, the UCU was suspended from the use of the 'All-Staff' email list, effectively removing union matters from the direct attention of non-unionised staff.

The archive registered numerous instances when trust was undermined by new managerial practices as inconsistency was suspected between new policies and job contracts. Tellingly, we found in the communications from the administration the recurrence of the phrase 'There appears to be a



widespread lack of trust on ...' followed by a description of specific concern. This indicates that the administration was aware that trust was compromised but was slow to react or possibly had chosen a deliberately hard-line approach. As a result, even managerial initiatives that under other circumstances might have been met with indifference or welcomed, now stirred resistance. For example, the adoption of self-reporting development reviews conducted through approved forms was perceived by academics as a management empowering tool. Academics requested a defence armoury for employees in the form of numerous UCU-issued 'Survival Guides', clarifying the rights of academics and providing advice on performance evaluation.

Theorists agree that removing flexibility in ER involving professionals is counterproductive (Nelson and Winter 1982; Salvato and Rerup 2018). However, the documents reveal increasing inflexibility of ER through attacks on professional discretion, which is supposed to be a space for negotiation and trust. As a result, the competing ILs transformed into conflicting ones. Organisational hybridisation of universities is accompanied with the entrenchment of managerialism and discounted professional discretion of academics. These fuels low-trust interpersonal attitudes and a conflict ridden, rather than collaborative ER.

### ***Bureaucracy as a market proxy***

One of the paradoxes of HE marketisation is that it has actually led to more red tape and administrative oversight. The government seeks to create competition, but 'the HE market' is run by administrators. In universities, managers assess academic performance and set values 'as if' on behalf of the market. Hence, the marketisation of HR happens through the proxy of bureaucratisation at the organisational level. As a self-appointed market representative, management interprets and, through locally constructed rhetoric, presents the market demands to employees as internal rules and the base for ER. Consequently, management gains a more authoritative role in setting values. Employees, in turn, increasingly lose autonomy due to growing pressure for accountability and the diffusion of practices that undercut the peer-assessment principle, which they see as a psychological contract breach.

The drive to narrow progressively the scope of the acceptable professional autonomy of academics is justified with references to the need to consolidate the competitive position of the university. In reality, what the archive bears witness to is the weakening of democratic control involving the yardsticks determined by peers and depreciation of tacit aspects of individual professional practice and competence. In retrospect, it is evident that with every new situation that triggered negotiations, the role of academics became increasingly subordinate. The administration makes decisions on what should matter and selects organisational values, discourse, approaches to decision-making, and performance indicators. Managerial bias leading to a narrow interpretation of what constitutes market demands is well illustrated in the following statement issued by the local UCU convenors:

The manipulation of statistics and hypocrisy is shocking: when the Staff Survey revealed that 78% of staff cannot meet workload demands within the 37-hour week, nothing was done. But when the NSS score is at 67%, it's 'action required to reverse decline' and red alert for the department. This is nothing but selective use of statistics and manipulation.

The bureaucracy is fundamental as an infrastructure through which to harness conflicting demands, but in universities, as the archival documents suggest, bureaucracy is used to institute professional values and perceived professional excellence standards without consent from the professionals concerned. Manager-imposed standards of perceived excellence become uncontested norms. Management systematically occupies the previously negotiable territory in ER, which acted as a buffer zone for certain aspects of work relations too elusive to be part of a formal agreement.

Archival documents reveal that academics exhibited discontent every time when managerial objectives were prioritised over developmental concerns, the aspiration of individuals, and professional judgement. The archived results of staff surveys consistently linked the key areas for

concern to over-management and mismanagement. In this respect, the existing ER appears unsustainable in a sense that it does not encourage to negotiate consent in the workplace.

### ***Curtailement of professional discretion***

The archival documents, in particular, staff letters, make it possible to trace how the deepening incongruity of ILs reveals itself in the tendency to replace collegiality with non-negotiable operational formats. Specifically, employees identified snowballing administration duties, instances where staff 'feels excluded', and when they have to deal with the 'imposed value system'. From the early 2000s, the topic of 'lack of consultation and unilateral management decisions' becomes a permanent feature in UCU communications. The evidence points at low-trust anxiety nurtured by the restructuring of the fundamental premises of the employer-employee relationship and institutionalisation of new rules of interaction. The ER tensions in our sample related to many issues, e.g. expectations, incentives, the designation of duties, asymmetric authority, limited opportunities for engagement and participation, access to information, and excessive monitoring and supervision. This was recognised in the UCU meeting minutes as undermining discretionary powers pertinent to the academic profession. The union was alarmed by the growth of numbers and repetitiveness of employee enquiries regarding different entitlements and duties not explicitly listed in formal contracts. Among them were working from home, annual leave, teaching observations, Student Engagement Monitoring responsibilities, recording marks, training in specific skills to perform new administration duties, and a RASA – research and scholarly activity allowance.

Concerns were recorded that managers were 'not trained in managing academics' and relied too much on performance metrics as a substitute for performance management meaningful to academics. Contributing to this detachment was a prevalent management style that tended 'to view employees in terms of cost, rather than as a resource to develop'. The UCU documented growing 'disregard of academic excellence', specifically discernible in modifications of the recruitment and promotion policies.

A strengthening of managerial grip was particularly evident in regard of workload allocation. Archival records of the Workload Model Working Group (WMWG) specify that 'a wide variety of arrangements currently exists for determining the workload of academic staff and ... the openness and transparency of these arrangements vary ...' [letter from a member of WMWG, 9/3/2007]. 'Stealth management' initiatives that expand professional duties were noted, for example, the 'intensification of work load by the addition of further teaching/contact hours through open, drop-in and revision clinics, which have been omitted from individual timetables', often 'resulting in staff having ... additional contact hours beyond the National Contract absolute maximum limits'. The documents produced by the group refer to un-negotiated increases in workload and further erosion of the academic role. They expose concerns about the standardisation of academic performance, inconsistently applied policies, and anxieties over management closing ranks against employees and UCU actions that questioned new practices. Overall, the documents exposed a growing discrepancy in the meaning of value as perceived by management and academics, which translates into distress and anxiety in the workplace.

### ***Managerial appropriation of organisational discourse***

Organisational discourse is one of the influences framing ER, reflecting the fact that relations among people in organisations are established through negotiations as much as through assigned roles. It has the power to shape individual preferences and priorities. Archival records reveal how organisational discourse has been instrumental in the entrenchment of managerialism and make it possible to trace the creeping marketisation of corporate language, as managers appropriated the organisational discourse in universities. We noted that over the last two decades, for example, the language describing teaching observations changed from 'encouraging reflective teaching' to 'development of

teaching through observation and feedback', to 'peer support scheme', to 'means of professional development', and is currently presented as 'teaching enhancement', 'support for academic practice and excellence', and 'commitment to maintaining and improving standards in relation to teaching quality'. Slowly but surely, the administrative discourse has moved away from interpreting teaching observations as an auxiliary to a self-assessment of teaching and eventually framed it as a legitimate corporate objective and an element of corporate strategy.

Relatedly, there has been a conspicuous increase in the use of the word 'strategic' in documents that talk about 'responsibilities' and 'agendas'. It is used as a means of promoting and imposing top-down organisational values. Endorsing issues with the 'strategy' label gives them the aura of something that should be the prerogative of only figures of higher authority who deal with larger goals. They tend to be withdrawn from the list of topics that can be subjected to negotiations and discussions; so they cease to be an accountable element of ER.

In principle, ER is a field where through organisational discourse the employee voice can be given favourable treatment, so the foundations for sustainable relations can be built. Yet, currently, as we have found, managers have appropriated the organisational discourse within universities.

## Conclusions: in search of sustainable ER

The evidence presented depicts ER in crisis: the psychological contract is destabilised and clashing ILs create an atmosphere of tension as many academics have a feeling that they are losing out. This situation contradicts the principles of sustainability, seen in the literature as a development path that encourages a non-decreasing stream of any form of shared well-being (Pezzey 1997). This approach is rooted in the recognition that shared benefit is a legitimate guide for trade-offs among goals in social systems (Barbier 1987).

Making ER sustainable means finding solutions to current problems. ER is a complex phenomenon, maintaining its sustainability may be approached from different perspectives. Our analysis of the UCU data has convinced us that in the current university environment most tension is created by the demarcation of new borders of the professional discretion for academics and associated freedoms and responsibilities. What makes it a particularly contentious matter is that this process demands changes in the existing psychological contract: due to its anchoring in beliefs and convictions that reflect earlier experiences, it has more inertia in comparison to formalised contracts. Although both tangible and intangible elements are part of the employment relationship, their enforcement and management mechanisms differ. Our evidence shows that when ER is concerned with values, trust, ethicality, inclusion and engagement, the points of contention are more intense and problematic to resolve. This is when the psychological contract becomes a factor. The strength of its impact, however, is a derivative of existing organisational trust. The informal side in ER, such as social practices, organisational culture and discourse provide a necessary compensatory mechanism for the potentially counterproductive stiffness of formal arrangements, but this mechanism may be easily damaged if the foundation of trust is weakened or removed. These two observations determine our perspective on sustainable ER in hybrid organisations. In our opinion, it is the ER that makes it possible to maintain and reproduce a level of trust that allows avoiding confrontation even during the period of a radical restructuring of the psychological contract.

Our evidence shows unsustainable singularities in ER specific to academia and sequential to disparities in ILs. As the archival testimonies corroborate, ER in its current form lacks the sense of mutual trust that is essential for the sustainability of new working practices. To harness multiple and often conflicting demands, managing a hybrid organisation requires amenability and mutuality. Currently, the implementation of the marketisation-driven policies in universities empowers management without empowering employees, causing dissatisfaction and compromising their commitment to continuous improvement. Considering that organisational configurations can be a source of unsustainability (Mayer 2017), we argue for a need of a new benchmark that recognises that non-formalised aspects of contracts are highly influential in work relations. The actual format of this benchmark

should be the matter of further investigation, but in our opinion, it should maintain the principle that in order to pass a sustainability test ER must be more sensitive to the intangible aspects of ER, address the interests of all parties and ensure a 'critical mass' of trust. In this sense, sustainable ER would not allow professional well-being to become collateral in pursuit of organisational competitiveness. In practice, a sustainability approach would hold the expectations that the guidance for ER is derived from negotiated values.

ER requires modernisation to ensure that market signals when translated into internal practices are reconciled with both ILs that exist in academia. The essence of sustainable ER is to balance competing needs against existing limitations while creating shared value (Porter and Kramer 2011). This implies that sustainable ER can benefit organisational self-realisation even within a context of competing ILs. Based on our evidence, the current trend in ER is to put self-realisation of academics in a prescriptive straitjacket of standardised functional instructions. Meanwhile, prior research (Gonzalez-Mulé et al. 2014) indicates that autonomous performance can be highly effective when adequately coupled with quality feedback and the clarity of organisational goals.

Academics are classic occupants of high-discretion roles (Adler and Kwon 2013). Having mechanisms that can protect trust is therefore hugely important as they can help to minimise losses during the time when the psychological contract undergoes changes. These mechanisms should be incorporated into ER systems, but as we have evidenced currently they are not. Existing ER practices are under no pressure to mitigate the adverse effects of HE marketisation: universities are not assessed on the grounds of being good employers and university managers are motivated accordingly. By contrast, sustainability assumes that care is taken about *how* goals are achieved in social systems (Ackers 2002).

At this stage, we do not yet know what an optimal ER model could be; however, the conditions are changing and it is right to expect that ER should change too. Currently, universities explicitly support one logic by reducing self-directed controls of academics and intensifying work routinisation as a favoured format for ER. We question the validity of this approach. Our evidence clearly flags what frustrates academics most and why. One thing is clear: new ER is needed to reverse the trend whereby management purposefully gains the territory that lies outside formal contracts. This can be achieved in part through a negotiated organisational discourse (Pelsmaekers, Jacobs, and Rollo 2014) that links employees to decision-making or/and innovative formats of organised autonomy that suit universities as hybrid organisations.

The interdependent, reciprocal and multi-layered nature of ER means that its inherent conflicts require continuous attention. A sustainability approach may be able to change the minds of the parties involved in the construction of ER in universities and enable a transition from confrontation to collaborative consent.

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