

MOVING FORWARD FROM *RAISING THE BAR*: A REPORT ON LESSONS LEARNT FOR NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

Written by Newcastle UCU branch, May 2017

“The art of leadership is not to spend your time measuring, evaluating. It’s all about selecting the person. And if you believe you selected the right person, then you give that person the freedom, the authority, the delegation to innovate.”

~ Accenture CEO, Pierre Nanterme, in announcing abolition of annual performance reviews, 2015.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Raising the Bar* dispute was a painful process, but from it a consensus emerged, summed up in the AFRI¹ agreement that ended the dispute in June 2016. This is: that Newcastle University exists ‘for the public benefit, to advance education, learning and research’ (Statutes), and there is a shared desire to see it fulfil that purpose by producing world leading research. Our collective task is to find the strategy that best achieves this shared purpose, in the context of funding structures which mean that we have to be seen to perform well in certain key but flawed metric exercises; and improving research performance to this end this must be done by a process that is bottom-up, “collaborative” and “non-coercive.” This consensus provides an ideal basis on which to move forwards.

Academic staff are intrinsically motivated to perform well. A substantive body of research (evidenced by the recent Newcastle experience) shows that attempts to extrinsically motivate those who are already intrinsically motivated, is counterproductive because it actually produces a reduction in overall motivation and job satisfaction.² Assuming this, the key performance management question facing the university is, ‘how can managers help staff do the right job, well?’

The **key recommendation** we make is that rather than trying to follow the crowd by playing the system in the increasingly-difficult attempt to rise up league tables, the Newcastle identity and narrative should be marked by the production of a genuinely collegial, supportive, respectful, non-coercive, ambitious, bottom-up and sustainable culture where staff wellbeing is prioritised and in which academics are trusted to be given the freedom, resources, support and autonomy to innovate and be creative. Such an environment, increasingly rare in the academy and thus of tremendous value in terms of building Newcastle’s international profile and reputation, would increase staff happiness and thus productivity, facilitating the recruitment and retention of the brightest and best. This environment and approach would be our unique differentiator and fashioning it should be the key to our values, vision and strategy moving forwards. We should seek to build our external profile and reputation around it, explicitly positioning ourselves as a sector leader in this regard.

To further this, we submit the following proposals:

- 1) Each academic unit should identify its own needs to create the most conducive environment for research improvement.
- 2) Fully implement the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, which Newcastle proved a world-leader in by signing in May 2017.
- 3) Restore trust in the PDR system by negotiating it with the unions.
- 4) Improve communication and listening by:
 1. Expanding Professorial forums to encompass the entire research community.
 2. Opening space on staff home page to recognised trade unions.
 3. Promoting better consultation with Heads of Academic Units.
 4. Improving operation of key governance bodies.
- 5) Senior managers should review relevant academic literature before embarking on changes.
- 6) Establish an interdisciplinary Newcastle Centre for Critical University Studies.

¹ Academic Frameworks for Research Improvement

² Daniel Pink, *Drive, the Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (2009) New York: Riverhead Books. Drawing on behavioural psychology, Pink argues that both the ‘carrot and stick’ approach (like RTB) and the simple ‘carrot’ reward approach often serve to dampen and suppress intrinsic motivation. Pink explicitly identifies academia as a sector where intrinsic motivation is high

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

Newcastle University exists 'for the public benefit, to advance education, learning and research' (Statutes). Because the funding and policy environments in which higher education occurs has changed dramatically in recent years, securing the necessary resources to achieve this increasingly depends on performing well in various metric-gathering exercises. As these metric exercises are flawed and problematic,³ and require fundamental changes to the nature and practice of academic labour, this raises a series of questions about how we succeed in this environment whilst remaining true to our vocation. *Raising the Bar* (RTB), and in particular its *Research and Performance Expectations* (RiPE), was Newcastle University's Senior Management's attempt to answer these questions between 2013 and 2016.

Although RTB came to mean many different things, its primary answer to the above questions was to attempt to 'game' key metric exercises of the REF and international reputational league tables by a two-fold approach: firstly, to target substantial additional resources at those Units of Assessment deemed best-placed to rise up the tables, and secondly to introduce an *Outcomes-Based Management* (OBPM) system which attempted to embed a range of RiPE targets in personnel management. Although the first element of RTB was divisive, it was this second aspect of RTB that was the most controversial, leading to widespread divisive unhappiness, upset and opposition, culminating in industrial action taken by the University and College Union in June 2016. The matter was resolved by the *Academic Framework for Research Improvement* (AFRI) agreement between the UCU and management, which ended the industrial action and saw the withdrawal of RiPE and the RTB terminology and set out principles to guide the university in moving forwards in a more collaborative, bottom-up approach to improving research. The dispute attracted widespread local, national and international attention, both during the dispute and subsequently.

The report submits that the RTB dispute was a collective failure for which responsibility must be widely shared across the university. RTB was not primarily a problem of communication or of different cultures between faculties: it was intrinsically flawed. RTB was also a failed branding exercise and created tremendous upset and unhappiness in many units across the institution, including in units deemed to be performing well by key metrics indicators. The report calls for a new way of thinking about the identity and direction of Newcastle. The dignified nature of the debate means that damage should be limited, and there are many silver linings – not least a new consensus about how to think about metric exercises, a renewal of academic citizenship, and an exciting opportunity to locate Newcastle firmly within national and international contexts as a beacon of collegial, supportive and dynamic research environments. This is encapsulated in what should be recognised as the ground-breaking AFRI outcome of the RTB dispute, and its follow-up in the University's May 2017 signing of DORA.

THE REPORT: AIMS AND METHODS

This report was written by the Research Culture Working Group (UCU Newcastle Branch). Its purpose is primarily internal to Newcastle: to understand what the institution can usefully learn from the RTB dispute, and how we can move forwards strongly as a dynamic collective.

It is based on two data sources:

³ James Wilsdon *et al.*, "The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management", *HEFCE*, 2015.

- archives of minutes, Powerpoint presentations, and emails of the university Executive Board (EB), RTB Steering Group, Senate, Council, UCU and other relevant sources.
- anonymised interviews conducted across all three faculties between October 2016 and March 2017 with 20 employees: middle managers⁴ (Heads of Academic Units, and Deans, forming over half of all interviewees); senior managers (on Executive Board); senior members of lay bodies (Council and Court); and other senior academics in the university. Interviewees were asked to narrate their understanding and experience of the origins of RiPE/RTB, the ensuing dispute, its withdrawal, and what follows for the university as a result.

These texts and transcripts were read to reconstruct (1) a brief outline of the RTB dispute, and (2) to find major points of agreement and disagreement between interviewees. Nine major recurring themes are identified in the data as findings; the six recommendations which follow are the UCU's suggestions in response.

All sources are anonymised by descriptions agreed with respondents. Dates of interviews are withheld to protect anonymity. Due to the low numbers of female colleagues in that position, to protect those interviewed HoAU are referred to by masculine pronouns; and all EB staff are referred to by feminine pronouns, regardless of sex/gender. Some middle managers were comfortable with their faculty being identified, others were not.

BACKGROUND

Raising the Bar was first mentioned in the university EB minutes in July 2013, referring to plans to increase the size of university. In April 2014, the then Vice-Chancellor, Chris Brink, presented RTB to Council with the aim of having “at least 10 subjects (Units of Assessment) which are ranked top 50 in the world.” In January 2015, an RTB Steering Group was established, which focussed RTB on a two-fold carrot-and-stick approach to improving performance, by (i) managing individual performance through the use of “specific numerical targets” and (ii) the development of a Research Excellence Support Framework to “help staff enhance their performance.”⁵ On July 7 2015 Senate approved the principle (but not details) of faculty-specific sets of targets which were eventually called the *Research and Performance Expectations* (RiPE).

In October 2015, at a meeting all Heads of Academic Units (HoAU) were instructed immediately to “[e]mbed research expectation for Faculty in all academic recruitment” and implement RTB through the PDR (Performance and Development Review) process. This would involve a rapid assessment of each staff member through a traffic light system. Those flagged “red” would be subject to an “action plan for improvement” identifying appropriate “support and development” monitored by monthly reports, and leading to the commencement of “capability procedure[s]”⁶ should progress prove inadequate.

Management insisted that this coercive element was a last resort, and not the purpose of RTB. But this coercive potential of RiPE came to make RTB synonymous with RiPE: RTB's carrot and stick approach came to be widely perceived as primarily a stick. Tremendous unhappiness, upset and unease amongst staff increased, and, citing anonymous case-work, the UCU claimed that RTB was leading to a culture of bullying, and asked the VC to withdraw RiPE and discuss how we could

⁴ Not all HoAU are comfortable with the term ‘middle managers’, but it is a common term in the literatures on management science which reflects the responsibilities and constraints of the role of HoAU.

⁵ EB Minutes, 3/02/2015.

⁶ Executive Board, 13 October 2015, “Raising the Bar Implementation: Notes from the meeting held with Academic Heads of Unit on 8 October 2015.”

improve research in a more collegial way. Groups of academics (at school/ unit level) sent letters to their Pro-Vice-Chancellors expressing disquiet, and a similar letter signed eventually by 100 professors (more than a quarter of the professoriate at the time) was delivered to the VC. Behind the scenes, HoAU increasingly conveyed the disquiet of their staff to senior managers. A UCU branch meeting on 28th October 2015 approved an indicative ballot to see whether members would be willing to undertake industrial action: in February 2016, the branch indicated its willingness to consider industrial action.

The level and breadth of unhappiness over RTB took senior managers by surprise. They responded with a series of town hall events, a letter from Chris Brink to all staff, and a meeting with representatives of signatories of the professors' letter in January. The main message was that management had poorly communicated RTB – which was most expressly *not* about targets or changes to the PDR system – and that the VC recognised he needed to engage more clearly with those people doing research.

At the same time, management sought to formally engage UCU in discussion about RTB, and in March drew up a Memorandum of Understanding with UCU negotiators. The Branch Committee and branch meeting on March 3 rejected both this MOU and, on May 23, a subsequent one negotiated by ACAS, voting eventually to take Action Short of a Strike (ASOS) in the form of a marking boycott, authorised to begin on June 3. This would disrupt graduation of final-year students, so was a serious step. In spite of this, the VC indicated at a meeting of Academic Board on May 25 that RTB would not be withdrawn, and the management wrote to staff threatening to deduct pay at a rate of 100% for non-completion of marking duties.⁷

In the week that the industrial action began, the UCU Congress passed a solidarity motion recognising the Newcastle issue as “a local dispute of national significance.”⁸ Newcastle UCU wrote to the VC offering an alternative to RTB, entitled *Improving Research Together* (IRT) and launched a petition on the campaigning website www.change.org ('Say no to coercive performance management at Newcastle University'). The campaign attracted international attention.⁹ In response to the industrial action, the VC called an emergency Heads of Academic Meeting on Friday June 3,¹⁰ the day the industrial action began, where HoAU supported the withdrawal of RTB. On Monday June 6, in negotiations with the UCU, management agreed to abandon RiPE and to ditch the RTB terminology. Instead, drawing on the approach suggested in IRT, management and union agreed to “develop a coming understanding and collegial approach to improving research,”¹¹ in a document entitled the *Academic Framework for Research Improvement* (AFRI).

⁷ 'Update on local industrial action,' email from Chris Brink to all staff, 2/06/2016.

⁸ “HE54 Targeted research performance measures - who will be next? - Newcastle University”, *Higher Education Sector Conference 2016*, UCU Congress 2016. Thursday 2 June 2016, Liverpool. <https://www.ucu.org.uk/hesc16#HE54>. Motion tabled by Joan Harvey and seconded by Geoff Abbot.

⁹ www.change.org/p/chris-brink-say-no-to-coercive-performance-management-at-newcastle-university

¹⁰ Chris Brink, email, 'Extraordinary meeting of Heads of Academic Units Friday 3 June,' 1/6/2016.

¹¹ *Academic Framework for Research Improvement*, 06/06/2016.

FINDINGS OF THE REPORT

1) RTB DAMAGED THE NEWCASTLE IDENTITY

There was broad agreement amongst interviewees that by summer 2016 what became known as the RTB dispute had become what one EB member described as “so toxic” that withdrawing it was the proper move.

HoAU drew attention to specific harms that contributed to this toxicity. Many of them reported concerns, fears and worries amongst their staff over future employment and promotion prospects. One FMS HoAU reflecting on RTB said “there is no trust at all at the moment between staff and university leadership.” Another said it damaged the university’s reputation, by “giving the impression that we are a hostile place.” Describing the serious individual and group-demotivating effect of a rising star in his field not quite fulfilling the RTB requirements, one FMS HoAU said “RTB gave the feeling of a very cold system – missing the human factor behind it – not looking at the large numbers of contributions that have a value that is not valued.” A different HoAU noted that RTB was “severely flawed” because “it did not recognise contributions in the round.”

It was divisive at a number of levels, enforcing comparisons between individuals and units which were exacerbated by RTB’s stated aim of rewarding certain individuals and supporting a chosen number of ‘excellent’ units at the relative expense of the rest. An FMS HoAU said that “[t]he good thing about academia, in contrast to industry, is that basically everyone is motivated and wants to work well in research.” This supports the majority view in the scholarly literature that OBPM does not work in the public sector where staff typically work for less money but are more likely to be motivated by a sense of vocation, so respond to different sets of incentives and work optimally in a high-trust environment.¹²

An EB member acknowledged that in spite of the VC’s attempts to communicate what he saw as the necessary and positive nature of RTB, “the brand had become so contaminated” it needed to be abandoned.

2) DISAGREEMENT ABOUT WHAT WENT WRONG

Although there was agreement that Chris Brink made the right decision for the good of the University in withdrawing RTB, there is disagreement on what went wrong. Senior management saw RTB as poorly-understood but benignly-conceived ‘carrot,’ whereas middle management as an ill-conceived ‘carrot and stick.’

Most senior managers (members of Executive Board) identified *communication* as the problem. They argued that RTB was primarily about offering incentives to undertake the improvements that they saw as necessitated by funding frameworks, but that it was misunderstood or wilfully misrepresented. As one EB member put it, the intention was “an admirable one... but I don’t think communications was handled seriously, there wasn’t a communications plan in place.” In particular, she thought RTB “was a clumsy title and not properly thought through in its connotations,” which another EB member elaborated that “it became understood as a high jumper raising the bar until it

¹² Toby Lowe and Rob Wilson. "Playing the Game of Outcome-Based Performance Management (OBPM). Is Gamesmanship Inevitable? Evidence From Theory and Practice." *Social Policy and Administration* (2015): DOI: 10.1111/spol.12205.

is not possible to jump higher.” A different EB member blamed the UCU for its message that RTB was about “targets” rather than recognising also “the wider support” in terms of financial research support availability.

In sharp contrast, middle managers described a more fundamental issue: the entire *top-down* “process of conception and implementation was the problem,” as one FMS HoAU put it. They commonly saw it as a top-down, blunt instrument that was inappropriate for different schools for different pragmatic reasons. As one HaSS middle manager put it, RTB “reflects a view of the university as a machine: just tell people what to do and they’ll do it.” A recurring, although not universal, theme among middle managers was that RTB was in part intended to engender redundancies in what one PVC apparently referred to euphemistically as “the tail”: [RTB] “was sold as making research better, but I think it was about trying to get rid of some people” reported one middle manager. But the most common theme, as a HaSS HoAU put it simply, was “top down doesn’t work” – because HoAU understood their staff best and knew how to motivate them best.

However even post-RTB it is unclear whether senior managers and middle managers understand the same thing by the term “top down.” For example, one EB member said, in retrospect, “if we could have driven it from bottom up it would have been better.” She apparently understood “bottom-up” as what she explained as “employee engagement” – trying to persuade academics to buy into something still devised from the top. This is not what middle managers saw the problem as (see next section).

3) AGREEMENT AMONGST HoAU THAT TOP-DOWN DESIGN WAS FLAWED

Some EB and senior lay respondents stated that they had not understood what one EB member described as the “key difference” between different faculties: she claimed the RiPE approach “was like water off a duck’s back” for most in FMS, but presented problems for the other faculties, especially HaSS. However, interview data from middle managers challenges this view.

Not a single HoAU we interviewed in any faculty disagreed with the aim of improving research to do better in league tables: most criticised it for what they saw as its broad-brush, top-down approach as being not only “crude” (FMS HoAU) but in some ways counter-productive and even harmful. One HoAU said he thought the aim “was a good move for the university”, yet because of the way it was undertaken “No good school in SAgE wanted it.”

A middle manager explained that although “the idea behind RTB was less alien and confrontational” to staff in his faculty, he berated its “fundamental problems.” These included “trying to drive in a top-down process without adequate consultation and buy-in,” the false assumption that there is a significant problem of “lazy PIs in my institute,” the way RTB “demoralised” people going through a fallow period in grant success, and its danger of “disincentivising new, innovative teaching methods.”

One SAgE HoAU spoke of “lots of push-back” from his counterparts. Another SAgE HoAU said he had told a joint meeting of Senate and Council in late 2015 that “If you want to improve the performance of an organisation, the worst thing you can do is damage staff morale”; and he told his PVC and Dean of Research that “You are branding two thirds of my academic staff as failures,” on being shown a table of how many staff met a target figure for funding. A HoAU who described himself as “more on the pro-RTB side” nonetheless agreed with its withdrawal because “scientists and researchers are self-motivated, we can’t impose things on them.” HoAU became increasingly critical of RTB behind the scenes. This was as much or more for pragmatic than principled reasons.

Strikingly, a number of HoAU, across all faculties, described an almost identical approach to tackling the few academics whose performance is deemed to be in need of intervention. As one HoAU explained, “I work hard with the few who are struggling to help them get better,” ensuring all those in his unit who were not submitted to REF 2014 “have done well in their career progression since”: an approach based on personal relationships, care, and individualised assistance including freeing them up more time for research – in contrast to RTB. An FMS HoAU spoke of creative, supportive mentoring networks he had created. Most HoAU would agree with a comment made by one of their number who said: “no one cares more about our staff than we do, we know them” so university academic leaders or managers should work with heads of academic unit, not over their heads.

4) RTB MISREAD THE NEWCASTLE CULTURE

A theme which emerged in a number of interviews with both middle and senior managers, and also senior lay members of the university was that RTB misread Newcastle University’s unique culture – based on its relative geographical isolation.

One HoAU said that “draconian” measures used elsewhere would not work in Newcastle: “Not only is it inherently wrong, but inherently non-Newcastle.” He explained that “people here tend to look after each other” because the North East’s culture is about “let’s see how we can help each other” - but RiPE was seen as “threatening.”

A senior lay member of the university explained the reason for this culture in the region’s geography: “Newcastle is a long way from everyone, which is great, as it generates a lot of loyalty from our staff. If you are in London you can survive with a peripatetic staff, you can hire between the universities and internationally” – which is not the same in Newcastle. This creates, he argued a “Newcastle ethos” marked by stronger staff relationships and higher levels of satisfaction. Another member of the EB claimed, “We are more collegial than, say, XXXX [another northern Russell Group institution] where I had worked previously,” in explaining why Chris Brink decided to withdraw RTB rather than stand the industrial action down. This extends to the student body, too, suggested another lay member of the university: “Its geographic remoteness in Britain makes it hard for most students to pop back easily at weekends, and this creates sense of identity and strengthens cohesiveness.”

A middle manager agreed, explaining that this isolation raised unique problems for Newcastle in terms of staff recruitment and retention. “Those of us who live here know it is a fantastic part of the world to live in, but it is hard to convince others,” he said: because this made recruitment at senior levels harder, then staff retention becomes a critical issue: “what you really don’t want as a head of school is your good staff saying, ‘I’m pissed off with this place, and am looking for other opportunities.’ He continued by saying that the people we most want to retain are the people most able to leave: the people who would hit RTB targets comfortably, but whom he said in his school were in a class of people who were particularly antagonistic to RTB. Another HoAU, in FMS, who feared RTB would lead to redundancies, said “there has to be an element of reality there, but it seems to be lost in RTB.” He continued, sarcastically, mocking what he described as “The idea that you could get a good provincial university and make it amazingly strong, by sacking people and bringing in this great pool of stars who are desperate to come here!”

5) BROAD AGREEMENT ABOUT REASONS FOR WITHDRAWAL

As the former VC, Chris Brink, declined our invitation for an interview, we have been unable to ascertain what led him to finally decide to withdraw RTB. But senior and middle managers, and senior lay figures, seemed to agree that the withdrawal was due to a combination of factors. Disquiet or opposition occurred across different parts of the university from different actors with different agendas, both pragmatic and principled, both within and without the activities and members of UCU.

A senior lay member reported a “growing sense that more and more people were expressing opinions about this, at personal, individual, town hall levels, and the union was threatening strike action.” Serendipity also played a role. A number of middle managers and EB members highlighted the importance of the visit of Professor Ed Byrne, VC of King’s College and former head of Monash, invited by Chris Brink to speak to HoAU Forum on May 18 2016 about “The transformation of Monash to a World Top 100 University.” One SAgE HoAU said “He dropped a bombshell,” by saying “don’t do it top-down.” The professors’ letter was seen as “crucial” (middle manager) in representing the views of the “high-performing, senior academics” (EB member) upon whom RTB’s success was dependent. However this did not result in the withdrawal of RTB, but rather the creation of a ‘Forum.’ As one of the key authors of the letter said, “I thought we were being palmed off, there was no backtracking at all on RTB...industrial action was the tipping point.” It was, said a SAgE HoAU, the UCU industrial action seemed to prove the tipping point or “trigger”: it “raised the temperature and precipitated the final abandonment.”

6) COLLECTIVE FAILURES OF LISTENING AND GOVERNANCE

The RTB dispute demonstrated a series of failures of various university bodies to do their job properly and to listen to each other. An EB member said that when RTB started to go badly wrong, “it genuinely came as a surprise to the steering group.” This speaks to a striking failure to listen because Senate, the UCU, the professors, Heads of Academic Units, individual academics, departmental collectives, and others, all made cogent critiques of RiPE early on: if the EB had listened, the damaging dispute could have been avoided. RTB revealed that “to a large extent there is a disconnect between the university [EB] and the unit,” as one SAgE HoAU summed up a recurring theme. “This disconnect is quite damaging,” was how another HoAU phrased an oft-expressed sentiment. A senior lay member of the university put it more bluntly still, lambasting the EB’s “gung-ho management.”

This failure to listen is exacerbated in Newcastle’s case because we have scholars with expertise in the field of metrics and public services, who have made widely-read meta-analyses and critiques of Outcomes-Based Performance-Management. Newcastle academics wrote to senior research managers in the university pointing this out, summarising the academic literature, and requesting evidence that management had undertaken a serious review of the relevant literature – which they had not.

But this is far from simply a failure on the part of senior management: as one HoAU put it, RTB “was principally a failure of senior management but there was also a degree to which it was a collective failure.” Activists claimed that Corporate Affairs provided a skewed portrayal in its coverage of the issue on university websites, therefore making listening harder. Some members of Senate raised key concerns early on, but as a body Senate failed to anticipate the problems RiPE would raise, modify it sufficiently to avert them, or to intervene as the dispute escalated. A senior lay member of the local business community said that Council too failed in its duty of governance to spot and stop a bad idea

early on: he suggested that this might have been because the lay members of council often have backgrounds in “the commercial world” which “is about performance, measurement, accountability, and is heavily dominated by that culture.” Heads of Academic Units identified key weaknesses with RTB early on, but did not push back against their Pro-Vice Chancellors robustly and consistently enough: “when I reflect back, the likes of me and other managers should have been more strident earlier on” admitted one HoAU. The Professoriate likewise issued an insightful critique of RiPE, but failed to follow it up forcefully, apparently being placated by the establishment of a new Professorial Forum.

The Newcastle branch of the UCU provided senior management with cogent critiques of RiPE as early as July 2015, and in October 2015 formally requested its withdrawal and the development of “a more positive approach to motivating staff to perform at a higher level.”¹³ But, as one FMS HoAU said, he perceived that UCU “seemed to get involved quite late, which surprised me.” It wasn’t true that UCU was doing nothing: but it took a long time to move to a clear, forceful and unified rejection of RiPE in the form of decisive industrial action. Its branch committee’s sometimes lack of internal clarity and unity meant it went through two lengthy processes of negotiations drawing up memoranda of understanding on slightly-diluted versions of RiPE which were subsequently rejected by both the committee and the wider branch membership, in March and May 2016. EB and senior lay members involved in the dispute expressed understandable puzzlement over and frustration at this: “the union was inconsistent – it was hard to know who we were dealing with”; “there was infighting, disagreement... factionalism” which seriously hampered the process of communication, said another, with evident annoyance at the time and resources wasted on a process entered into in good faith. Greater alacrity and unity in clearly and resolutely opposing RiPE and RTB in its entirety, and accelerating the movement to industrial action, might have led to an earlier resolution of the dispute well before exam time, thus causing less anxiety to students (especially final year students facing graduation).

Thus failures to listen or be decisive are shared by all parts of the university, and to an extent the RTB dispute can be seen as a collective problem.

7) SILVER LININGS: STRONGER UNIVERSITY, ACADEMIC CITIZENSHIP

The community of Newcastle University can draw some positives from the RTB dispute. Instead of lapsing into cynicism, we witnessed a marked increase in academic citizenship as various groups of scholars put in significant amounts of energy in engaging with management to persuade them to rethink RTB: engagements that also took a certain amount of courage and displayed a certain amount of trust that management would respond properly. Ultimately when Council and Senate failed in their appropriate governance duties, UCU stepped in the breach. All of this should be interpreted as a deep and abiding concern for our workplace and reputation, at a time when it is widely recognised that output pressures have put academic citizenship “under strain” across the academy.¹⁴ A senior lay member expressed his hope that “management sees this as an opportunity to engage this activism, not see it as a threat.”

¹³ UCU President Joan Harvey wrote to Vice-Chancellor, Chris Brink, 21/10/2015, identifying 15 problems with RiPE and asking for it to be withdrawn.

¹⁴ Chris Havergal, "Is 'academic citizenship' under strain?" *Times Higher Education*, 29/01/2015.

The nature and tone of the dispute was also positive. The UCU did not personalise the campaign: as an EB member said of UCU, “they certainly kept the pressure up,” but did so “with mutual respect.” The UCU’s campaign simply negative or reactive: it was able and willing to offer constructive, evidence-based alternatives (*Improving Research Together* proposal of June 2016), and was re-energised by the dispute. Similarly, the VC, Chris Brink, was willing to engage in attempts to persuade and listen (town hall meetings), and was ultimately prepared to not only change his mind but was humble enough to back down graciously and with dignity. As he said of the RTB dispute in his valedictory address “I don’t believe universities should be safe spaces”, explaining that he thought it was important to have robust engagements and challenge each other in spirit of respect – and the RTB dispute was an example of that.¹⁵

The Newcastle opposition in the round to RTB was not simply reacting against a bad idea; it invited managers and the whole university to envision an environment where reputation is improved not by playing the system, but by trusting its scholars enough to give them autonomy and the resources to be creative and innovative. We also have, in AFRI, a genuine understanding between management and the broader university as an excellent place to move forwards.

8) COMMON UNDERSTANDING MOVING FORWARDS

A major positive outcome of the RTB dispute, and a theme which frequently emerged in interviews, is that post-RTB we have *a common understanding in moving forwards*. This is encapsulated in the Academic Framework for Research Improvement (AFRI), which ended industrial action on June 6 2016. This agreement recognises that funding structures mean it is necessary to be seen to perform well in what we accept are flawed and limited key metric tables, but that we seek to do that by improving research in a collegial and bottom-up, non-coercive manner. It recognises that an uncritical focus on quantitative targets is ‘problematic.’ Scholarly ‘performance’ cannot be artificially managed by a top-down coercive tool, but research is to be improved by creating a conducive working environment to allow creativity, and recruit and retain staff.

9) EXTERNAL INTEREST IN RTB AS EXEMPLARY OF NEOLIBERALISM

There has been widespread external interest in the RTB case, because it is exemplary of the question posed to all UK universities (and, beyond this, internationally) at the start of this report: how to navigate the challenges posed by the demands of performing well in key metric exercises that are inherently flawed and enact profound changes to the nature and practice of academic labour.

In March 2016 Newcastle scholars began collaborating on a research project to examine the impact of RTB, leading to an article in the *THES*. Some of the world’s leading scholars of the meaning and purpose of universities lent their support to the research by joining its advisory board.¹⁶ The above-

¹⁵ Chris Brink, 12/10/16, Lindisfarne Room, Newcastle University.

¹⁶ These included: Martha Nussbaum, the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, and the recipient of a Newcastle Honorary Law Doctorate in 2013; Rowan Williams, Master of Magdalene College and former Archbishop of Canterbury; Stefan Collini, Professor of English Literature and Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge and the country’s leading analyst and public critic of higher education change in the UK; and Dame Marilyn Strathern, former Mistress of Girton College, Britain’s foremost anthropologist, and author of an early key text critical of ‘The Audit culture. Other key authors cited in this report, such as Rosalind Gill and Arild Wæraas, were also board members of the research project. The research project’s launch was covered in the Times Higher Education by Jack Grove, ‘Target led culture in universities analysed in major project,’ 31/03/2016.

mentioned petition on change.org, calling on Chris Brink to withdraw RiPE and adopt a more collegial approach to research improvement, garnered some 2,700 signatories in 3 days. In the week that the industrial action began, the UCU Congress, as mentioned above, passed a solidarity motion recognising the Newcastle issue as “a local dispute of national significance” because of the issues it raised, and since the end of the dispute the local UCU has received various requests for support and advice in similar disputes in other universities. RTB has emerged as a case study of neoliberal Outcomes-Based Performance-Management, analysed in a number of published and forthcoming scholarly articles in the USA and Australia, and presented at a number of overseas conferences. Academics from North America and elsewhere in the UK have already visited to investigate the RTB dispute.

External interest is thus likely to be sustained in the medium term. We thus have a need to get the post-RTB environment under AFRI right, and responsibility to help other universities learn from our experiences. This provides an opportunity for Newcastle to position ourselves as a sector leader in this field.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the wake of the RTB dispute there is a need to rebuild trust, to repair damage, restore reputation, and find different ways to help staff improve research performance. This should not be understood simply as undoing negatives, but as a unique and positive opportunity to improve our research environment, rethink our institution's identity and narrative, and to reposition Newcastle University as a sector leader in progressive and innovative approaches to university management and governance.

The basis for this is the consensus framed by *Academic Framework for Research Improvement* (AFRI) agreement between management and the UCU of June 6, 2016. As the formal document for ending a legal industrial dispute, this remains binding on both the UCU Branch and the Executive Board, irrespective of changes in personnel for both. The June 6 agreement stipulated that this would “be a standing item at JNC”, and must remain so.

Staff and management (who are largely fellow academics) agreed, as the AFRI document put it, that “we want to succeed within certain policy environments and funding structures,” but that “it is problematic to focus exclusively on quantitative targets.” We recognised that “it is necessary to improve research performance of the University” – after all, every scholar wants their research, analysis and presentation of their work to get better over the course of their career. But we agreed that this should be a “collaborative” and “consultative and inclusive” process: improving our research cannot be artificially managed by a top-down, heavy-handed approach, but research is to be improved by creating a “non-coercive culture and approach”, fashioning a conducive working environment to allow creativity, and recruit and retain staff. This provides an excellent basis for moving forwards by rebuilding and reinforcing Newcastle's reputation as a sector-leading, metrics-lite, supportive and collegial environment in which scholars are given the autonomy, resources and trust to work hard, innovate and be creative.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATION: REBRAND WITH A UNIQUE RESEARCH CULTURE AS OUR DIFFERENTIATOR

RTB was a major concern for me over the past year or so, when thinking about a possible move out of Durham. I would have been very hesitant to apply to Newcastle, had RTB still been in place. As it was, by the time the job was advertised, and thanks to the work of Newcastle scholars, RTB had been withdrawn. This made the difference for me, and I went ahead and applied. While of course no institution is perfect, Newcastle has always had a reputation for being a more collegial, supportive and equitable working environment than many of its competitors – and I believe that this underpins its current strong trajectory in terms of academic reputation. The possibility that this culture will be sustained in future has been a major factor in my decision to apply for and then accept the Chair in Human Geography at Newcastle.

Professor Rachel Pain of Durham University, one of the UK's leading social geographers, on her reasons for accepting a Newcastle Chair, May 2017.¹⁷

¹⁷ Personal communication, May 16, 2017. It is worth noting that on a previous occasion when Newcastle had advertised an open chair in human geography, they were unable to appoint at the professorial level. It is also noteworthy that the unsuccessful candidate also mentioned the defeat of RTB as a pull factor to Newcastle.

It is in the DNA of every Russell Group university promotional strategy that it wants to be in the ‘top X’ list of universities, so this is no longer an adequate differentiator of vision. Therefore the **key recommendation** we make is that rather than focus on trying to ascend league tables by gaming the system, the ‘Newcastle brand’ should be marked by the production of a genuinely collegial, supportive, non-coercive, bottom-up, ambitious, and sustainable culture where staff wellbeing is prioritised and in which academics are trusted to be given the freedom, resources, support and autonomy to innovate and be creative. In short, we move from ‘carrot and stick’, not to ‘carrot,’ but to a recognition that academics have sufficient intrinsic motivation and that the goal of managers is to create an environment in which this can flourish. Extensive literature show how metrics-obsessed universities and performance management schemes make employees less happy and less creative.¹⁸ Kirsi-Mari Kallio and Tomi Kallio write that “[t]he motivation to engage in creative, knowledge-intensive work, such as the work carried out at universities, is typically intrinsic,” and therefore outcomes-based performance management “is in conflict with intrinsic motivation and the very essence of the expert work undertaken in universities.”¹⁹ Our interviews bore this out: in criticising RTB and questioning whether any alternative was needed, a senior FMS HoAU said “A happy PI is a productive PI.”²⁰ With the increasing realisation that what HEFCE calls ‘the metric tide’²¹ leads to anxiety, unhappiness, and poor workplace relations,²² Universities UK has recognised the strategic importance of embedding the promotion of mental health and wellbeing across all university activities.²³ Research improvement, reputational rise, and positive performance in key metrics exercises would follow naturally from the fashioning of the type of environments described above, aiding the retention and recruitment of top staff. In so doing, we can build our reputation and develop branding strategies as a sector leader in this regard, rather than identifying positions in league tables for certain parts of the university.

This suggestion emerges both from the empirical evidence of our interviews, and also the broader literature. Wæraas and Solbakk, in discussing a failed Norwegian example, show how university rebranding is inherently problematic. This is because universities are complex and diverse, but also because a shared global understanding of what universities are for makes product differentiation inherently difficult.²⁴ In a recent UNESCO-supported publication, Petter writes that because league

¹⁸ Rosalind Gill. "Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of the Neoliberal University." In *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* (2010), edited by Róisín Ryan-Flood, 228-244. London: Routledge; Burrows, Roger. 2012. "Living with the h-index? Metric assemblages in the contemporary academy." (2012) in *The Sociological Review* 60 (2):355-372.

¹⁹ Kirsi-Mari Kallio, and Tomi J. Kallio. 2014. "Management-by-results and performance measurement in universities – implications for work motivation." *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (4):574-589 (p574).

²⁰ A SAgE HoAU, when asked how senior managers could help them improve the research in their units, answered only half-jokingly: “leave us alone!”

²¹ See footnote 3.

²² Rosalind Gill. "Breaking the Silence: The Hidden Injuries of the Neoliberal University." In: *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections* (2010). Edited by R. Ryan-Flood. London, Routledge: 228-244. See also work by Newcastle scholar Richard Collier, "'Love law, love life': Neoliberalism, wellbeing and gender in the legal profession - the case of the law school" (2014). *Legal Ethics* 17(2): 202-230.

²³ 'New programme to address mental health and wellbeing in universities,' Universities UK, December 2016. Available at: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/New-programme-to-address-mental-health-and-wellbeing-in-universities.aspx>

²⁴ Arild Wæraas, and Marianne N. Solbakk. "Defining the Essence of a University: Lessons from Higher Education Branding," *Higher Education* 57 (2009): 449-62. The authors observe a striking paucity of research into branding of higher education: an observation that remains pertinent, and which the proposed Newcastle Centre for Critical University Studies could address.

table ratings are based on a basket of indicators that privilege the biggest and wealthiest universities, “for all but the most prominent universities, a singular focus on pursuing a higher ranking may be a misguided effort and a distraction from tasks that could both improve the institution and distinguish it more effectively from its competition.”²⁵ The relatively static position of most Russell Group universities in UK REF league tables lends support to this suggestion.²⁶

Petter argues instead that “the way to greatness lies in finding the single differentiator on which an organization can rise above its competitors,” which in the world of higher education is less likely to lie in rankings than in the physical communities, exceptional contributions, or unique expertise of a particular institution. We contend that Newcastle’s way towards research improvement is precisely not by seeking to optimise league table positions, but by developing a genuinely supportive, non-coercive, richly rewarding working culture as our differentiator. We are well placed to do this, because of our history, geography, and culture, research expertise, the lessons we have learnt from the RTB experiment and the networks developed on the back of it, and the AFRI agreement which provides the legal basis for our way forwards. The potential of using this to attract and retain the best staff is illustrated by the words of Professor Rachel Pain at the top of this section.

The above should be clearly formulated in our identity documents and branding, and we also suggest six specific steps to further facilitate it:

1) EACH ACADEMIC UNIT SHOULD IDENTIFY ITS OWN NEEDS TO CREATE THE MOST CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR RESEARCH IMPROVEMENT

The post-RTB consensus is that research improvement must be academic-led, not top-down. Each academic collective should be trusted to hold conversations about how managers can help them create the most conducive environments in which to conduct the best possible research, and managers should respond to these as far as possible. Each unit must be accountable, both internally and to the rest of the university, for what it is doing to improve (where necessary) its research culture. Because the university is diverse, these cultures, whilst having certain commonalities, will look different across our institution and thus the process must be bottom-up, not top-down.

In October 2016 Newcastle UCU issued a document ‘UCU AFRI principles: improving the research process at Newcastle University.’²⁷ This identified ten key principles by which these consultative processes should be guided, including an emphasis on fostering a supportive environment, a focus on improvement not assessment, an insistence that the process be bottom-up (ie not manager-led), equality and diversity auditing, taking a long-term perspective that recognises career cycles, and that all developments are in accordance with academic freedom. Specific models such as that of ‘Communities of Learning,’ pioneered at Newcastle, are explained in the document.

²⁵ Andrew Petter. "Connecting with Communities Vs. Racing for Rankings. Why Community Engagement Is a Better Strategy Than Seeking Higher Rankings," In *Towards a Socially Responsible University: Balancing the Global with the Local*, 429-434. Girona: Global University Network for Innovation, 2017, p.429-30.

²⁶ Jack Grove, “REF: static ranking raises questions about management policies,” *Times Higher Education*, 24/12/2015.

²⁷ Available from UCU website: <http://newcastle.web.ucu.org.uk/files/2017/05/UCU-NCL-AFRI-principles-October-2016.pdf>

2) FULLY IMPLEMENT THE SAN FRANCISCO DECLARATION ON RESEARCH ASSESSMENT (DORA)

DORA was formulated by the editors of some of the world's leading scientific journals at a meeting of the American Society for Cell Biology in San Francisco, 2012. It arose from a growing concern about the misuse of Journal Impact Factors (JIFs) and a desire to ensure that scientific output is measured accurately and evaluated wisely.' Observing that JIFs were designed to help librarians identify journal subscriptions to purchase, not as a measure of the scientific quality of research in a paper, DORA points to a series of well-documented deficiencies of the use of JIFs as a tool of research assessment. Although there are institution and individual-specific suggestions, DORA's general recommendation is that institutions "[d]o not use journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, to assess an individual scientist's contributions, or in hiring, promotion, or funding provision." As of May 2017, DORA has been signed by over 850 organisations (largely scholarly journals, societies and institutions). UK signatories include HEFCE, the Wellcome Trust, and a number of UK universities.

On March 9 UCU wrote to the Vice-Chancellor asking him to sign on behalf of Newcastle University; on March 14 he replied that he had passed this on to Nick Wright, PVC for Research and Innovation; and on May 2 Professor Wright informed Senate that he had signed on behalf of the university, making Newcastle one of the first UK universities to sign up. We wholly welcome this move by the EB as being fully in the spirit of AFRI. What matters now is its implementation. We recommend that one or more suitable committees (possibly of Senate, and HR with the UCU via JNC) are established to monitor progress towards best practice in ensuring that the implications of DORA are understood and its principles applied across the university in hiring, promotion, evaluation and other exercises;²⁸ and also to help Newcastle scholars lead their own fields in promoting its adoption worldwide, for example through their involvement in scholarly journals and societies. In so doing, Newcastle can continue positioning itself as a sector leader in the scientific and humane use of metrics in assessing scholarly research.

3) RESTORE FAITH IN PDR SYSTEM BY NEGOTIATING IT WITH THE UNIONS

EB minutes show that RIPE was to be embedded in the PDR process, despite confusing messages from senior management to the contrary. This damaged trust in the PDR process. Interviews with some HoAU also showed this had led to a wider mistrust of other audit, review and support exercises, such as internal and external quality audits. To restore trust, the PDR process, plus any other exercise which monitors the work of academic or academic-related staff, should from now on be negotiated with the relevant unions, with a goal of reaching a result based on consensus. The PDR title should be changed back from 'Performance and Development Review' to 'Personal Development Review,' which reflects the more supportive vision of AFRI. There are also issues about how reviewers are trained and briefed that need to reflect a new approach.

²⁸ We recommend that a key comment on bibliometrics in *Nature* be consulted in this process: Diana Hicks, and Paul Wouters. "The Leiden Manifesto for Research." *Nature* 520 (2015):429-431.

4) IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND LISTENING

The practical, organisational, moral and intellectual problems of RTB/RiPE were made clear to management by various parts of the University including the professoriate, the UCU, and middle managers. However senior management was slow to listen and governance bodies did not act decisively, a situation not helped by official university websites creating an echo-chamber by providing a somewhat pro-management perspective on the ongoing discussions and debates. In answer to the question “How could the new VC regain trust?” one HoAU in SAgE said simply: “Be open, listen to staff in the university.”

To facilitate this and improve communication in the future, we make three suggestions:

4.1) EXPAND RESEARCHER FORUMS

A positive outcome of the RTB issue was the development of Professorial Forums with the VC. But the VC would benefit from hearing the voices of future professors as well as current ones. This model should be extended to three forums: Advanced Researcher Forum (Professors and Readers), Researcher Forum (Lecturers and Senior Lecturers), and Contract Researcher Forum (temporary, research assistance, zero-hours contract scholars, etc.)

4.2) THE RECOGNISED TRADE UNIONS BE GIVEN SPACE ON STAFF HOME PAGE.

This space would be permanent and clearly visible, shared between the three unions. Content would be submitted in the usual way and subject to the standard processes and regulations (overseen by Corporate Affairs in respect of UK legal, copyright, and other issues).

4.3) PROMOTE BETTER CONSULTATION WITH ACADEMIC UNITS VIA MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

HoAU should be provided with the necessary support and spaces to talk and formulate positions with Academic Units (as per recommendation 1) and with each other in a collegial and bottom up manner. This pertains not just to interactions with EB, but with faculty executive boards, strategy groups, and other pertinent governance structures. One HaSS middle manager spoke of “the problem of fear” Heads of Academic Units had in challenging the VC; another (in FMS) claimed there was a general feeling amongst heads of schools that “we have a leadership that [...] tell[s] us what to do, not discuss[es] things with staff.” One of his SAgE counterparts said, “We’d like to be asked what’s good for us, rather than be told what’s good for us.”

To promote this, and to recognise the invaluable and unique role of middle managers as two-way conduits between academic staff and senior- and faculty-level management, it is crucial that academic staff have a meaningful voice in the selection of the Heads of Unit; ways should be found to address the currently inadequate academic input into selection panels from staff in the units concerned.

4.4 IMPROVE OPERATION OF KEY GOVERNANCE BODIES

The failure to stop prevent RiPE and stop the RTB dispute escalating to the level that it did was a failure of governance that Senate and Council need themselves to address.

Senate didn’t adequately listen to concerns of broader academic staff, and senior management did not listen well to those concerns that were raised in Senate. An August 20 2015 *Newcastle University Report from the Working Group on Governance 2015* observed that “There have been comparatively few occasions in recent years where Senate has steered the Executive decision making process” (p.7). Although that report was released after the RiPE vote in July, RTB was a case where Senate could have acted to rectify this, and needs further reflection on why it failed and how it could better steer the decision making process in the future.

As reported, a senior lay member of the local business community suggested that Council might have failed to stop RiPE because the lay members of council are overwhelmingly drawn from the corporate world. Newcastle is a city which has a higher employment dependence on the public sector than most other parts of the UK; is home to some of the country's most important historic Christian, Muslim and Jewish communities; has been a driver of recent movements like Fair Trade, Citizens UK and the Jubilee Debt Campaign; and has a history of support of progressive global movements like anti-slavery, peace and civil rights. We might thus have expected lay membership of council to include representatives of local trade unions, faith communities, social activists, and alternative economic actors. However, as of May 2017, 11 of the 12 non-academic members of council had corporate/legal backgrounds. It is true that Council must seek the skill set it needs to undertake its work; but a more representative body would have helped it reflect critically on the university's direction during the RTB dispute and listen to a great range of perspectives. Although progress has been made on gender balance with 5/12 current non-academic members being women, action should be taken to ensure greater diversity of experience and skill set.

5) SENIOR MANAGEMENT TO REVIEW ACADEMIC LITERATURE BEFORE EMBARKING ON MAJOR CHANGES.

The prolongation of the RTB dispute was also a failure to listen to the relevant academic literature, and it should be a settled principle that academic managers should consult this thoroughly before embarking on significant future schemes that affect the university. This is particularly the case where especial expertise exists in Newcastle, as was the case for the understanding of Outcomes Based Performance Management in the public services (Toby Lowe, Rob Wilson, Roger Burrows, Richard Collier, and others). The proposed Newcastle Centre for Critical University Studies could assist the EB, Senate and Council, and HR, in this regard.

6) ESTABLISH A NEWCASTLE CENTRE FOR CRITICAL UNIVERSITY STUDIES (NECCUS)

Newcastle academics should establish the world's first inter-disciplinary Centre for Critical University studies. Its purposes would be to help other institutions learn from our experience and, on the back of our early adoption of DORA, position Newcastle as the central research space internationally for scholars wrestling with questions about how to manage universities well in an age of branding and metrics. It would also be well placed to respond to the recent Universities UK call to develop an evidence-base on mental health and wellbeing in higher education. The extensive links of support and interest fostered by RTB give an immediate boost in placing 'NECCUS' at the centre of a string of significant networks drawing in rising and leading scholars.

This time-bound), multi-disciplinary institute would undertake activities including: running conferences and workshops; offering short visiting fellowships or professorships; delivering an annual Lecture (the Chris Brink Lecture?) as part of the Insights series; providing small grants to seed fund research; assisting Newcastle scholars in applying for larger grants to undertake national and international research and host and build networks of scholars; working with HR to gather evidence and study best practice around mental health and wellbeing in HE; helping the university implement DORA; and reflect on its new vision and branding strategies going forwards in the 'Shaping our Vision' process launched by new VC, Chris Day, in 2017.