The conceit of activism in the illiberal university

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Abstract
The popular image of activism in the university involves students and academics campaigning for social justice and resisting the neo-liberalisation of the university. Yet activism has been subtly corporatised through the migration of corporate social responsibility from the private sector into the university, a trend that may be illustrated by reference to the growing influence of research ‘grand challenges’ (GCs). Attracting both government and philanthro-capitalist funding, GCs adopt a socio-political stance based on justice globalism and represent a responsibilisation of academic research interests. Compliance with the rhetoric of GCs and the virtues of inter-disciplinarity have become an article of faith for academics compelled to meet the expectations of research-intensive universities in chasing the prestige and resources associated with large grant capture. The responsibilisation of the efforts of researchers, via GCs, erodes academic ownership of the research agenda and weakens the purpose of the university as an independent think tank: the essence of the Humboldtian ideal. The conceit of corporate activism is that in seeking to solve the world’s problems, the university will inevitably create new ones. Instead, as Flexner argued, it is only by preserving the independence and positive ‘irresponsibility’ of researchers that universities can best serve the world.

Keywords
Activism, grand challenges, academic freedom, responsibilisation, philanthro-capitalism

Introduction
The notion of ‘activism’ is conventionally associated with socially and ethically motivated individuals wishing to bring about change in society – through lobbying, campaigning and protest – seeking to use the power of persuasion to influence a shift in the prevailing
attitudes of society. The typical contemporary image of student activism involves agitating for social, racial and ecological justice and resisting the neo-liberalisation of the university (Cole and Heinecke, 2020; Karter et al., 2019). Student activism is further related to volunteering for humanitarian ends through so-called ‘gap years’, the service-learning movement, and nationwide schemes such as the US Peace Corps established in the 1960s. These provide an extra-curricular outlet for students to volunteer their services, for a limited period of time, in support of international development and social change. From an academic staff perspective activism, in a more limited sense, may include membership of trade unions and participation in industrial action. Other academics define themselves more specifically as activists and seek to bring about change through operating at what they regard as the radical margins of the university, as polemics for particular causes (Livesey, 2013). For activist-academics, political interests can often trump any conventional sense of a search for ‘truth’ through disinterested enquiry. They seek to advocate for communities often perceived to be discriminated against or disadvantaged in some way. This can further influence the purpose of their scholarship gearing it towards informing other activists rather than communicating within elite academic spaces, such as publication in prestigious academic journals. This type of non-compliance with the contemporary demands of academic performativity represents a form of protest against the neo-liberalisation of the university (e.g. Cooper, 2013; Grey, 2013), which Grey (2013: 700) describes in terms of challenging ‘the hegemonic narratives of marketisation and managerialism’.

However, while the popular imagery of activism is about student and staff radicalism as sketched above, the nature of activism in the university has subtly, but quite fundamentally, changed. It has been corporatised through business organisations and universities adopting – and domesticating – many of the causes that have long been associated with pressure groups and individuals who take a radical view of the need for social change. Activism has further become transnational through a focus on global issues such as climate and environmental change. The term ‘corporate citizenship’ is now a mainstream term in the management literature. This corporatisation has migrated into the public sector from the private sector, where the emergence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) over the last 20 years has been mainstreamed into strategic decision-making. As Heath and Potter (2006) argued so persuasively, business has successfully leveraged the counterculture for profit. Its appropriation has been visible since at least the early 1970s when Coca-Cola’s iconic ‘Hilltop’ Television advertisement (‘I’d like to buy the world a coke’) was first aired. It successfully sampled a pro-peace, anti-Vietnam message for profit. More recently, in 2017, when Pepsi sought to do much the same thing in the modern age via a ‘resist’ advertisement – featuring a young female celebrity handing a policeman a Pepsi during a protest rally – it came under fire for racial stereotyping. These are headline-grabbing examples of the appropriation of the counterculture, but it is a trend more widely evident throughout the corporate world in the use of language, marketing and the emergence of philanthro-capitalism. Social activism, as an integral part of this counterculture, has been domesticated as a business value, and organisations seek to capitalise on social consensus around global issues, such as climate change and child poverty. Following some initial resistance to ‘shareholder activism’ (Gillan and Starks, 2000), many large business organisations now embrace collaborative CSR initiatives joining forces with NGOs, trade unions, governments, the UN and the World Bank, as well as schools and universities, on global issues (Utting, 2005). Corporate activism’s entry into the world of higher education has also been influenced in no small measure by the power of philanthro-capitalists, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).
Yet, the exploitation of the counterculture to gain a competitive advantage is not a practice limited to the world of commerce. Universities are just as guilty of trying to domesticate social activism as a marketing tool in ways that are broadly similar. In this paper I will develop this argument mainly by reference to the growing influence of so-called ‘grand challenges’ (GCs) in shaping the university’s research agenda. This has occurred in the UK partly through the government’s Grand Challenges Research Fund and its resulting impact in reshaping institutional strategic research objectives. Academic freedom of enquiry is being undermined by the way in which large-scale funding opportunities are tied to interdisciplinary working in order to address GCs. It directly threatens academic freedom because academics in research-intensive universities are increasingly rewarded and promoted on the basis of their grant capture success and thus must comply with the underlying socio-political philosophy advanced by GCs. They are a significant symbol of the way in which activism has been corporatised within the university endorsing a highly value laden research agenda that threatens academic freedom of enquiry and distorts the historic role of the university to open up rather than close down debate on social and political issues. Drawing on the work of higher education thinkers in the liberal tradition, including Flexner (1930), and the more recent literature concerning neo-liberal governance (e.g. Rose, 1996), it will further be argued that the notion that universities can solve the world’s problems is a conceit that seeks to ‘responsibilise’ academics as a means of governing and controlling the academic profession. Hence, this paper responds to the special issue call for papers that offer an analysis of the practice and policies of the ‘activist university’ but in a manner that critically questions the effects of institutionally endorsed activism.

Justice globalism

In 2003 the BMGF launched a programme entitled ‘Grand Challenges in Global Health’ aimed at improving health and well-being in the developing world. The work of the BMGF set a trend followed by other philanthropists, corporations, governments and, notably for the purposes of this paper, universities. Ambitious lists of ‘grand’ or ‘future’ challenges have proliferated, backed by substantial government funding, such as the UK Department for International Development’s ‘future challenges’ programme launched in 2009 and the £1.5 billion UK Grand Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) established in 2015. This has shifted funds previously allocated as direct aid to developing countries to research development projects led by universities, with GCRF applications required to be aligned to the United Nations’ 17 sustainability development goals. GCRF themes currently include equitable access to sustainable development, sustainable economies and societies and human rights, good governance and social justice.

Universities have joined the GC bandwagon with leading research institutions identifying their own lists of grand challenges and targeting strategic investment for research in response to this agenda. For example, UCL (University College London) is committed to pursuing the following six grand challenges: global health, sustainable cities, cultural understanding, human well-being, justice and equality, and transformative technology. University College Dublin identifies the following four ‘strategic themes’ designed to enable it to ‘rise to the global challenges of the future’: creating a sustainable global society, building a healthy world, transforming through digital technology and empowering humanity (University College Dublin, 2020: 5). University inter-disciplinary research institutes, largely designed to tackle one or more GCs, have proliferated. Institutes for ‘Futures’ research (digital, social
and educational) have been established at the University of Bristol, Edith Cowan University, Edinburgh University and the University of Southern Queensland, while digital futures is commonly cited as a university-wide strategic research theme.

The scale of such challenges typically demands inter-disciplinary co-operation in order to research these global social problems. There is a socio-political dimension to GCs, since they need to be about capturing ‘the popular imagination, and thus political support’ (Gould, 2010: 64). GCs are now part of the everyday language of academe although not the subject of critical scrutiny. They are an integral part of the way in which the UK foreign aid budget has become intertwined with the interests of the neo-liberal university ‘erasing boundaries between research, aid, foreign policy and national security interests; the rise of research entrepreneurialism and grant culture in UK universities...’ (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019: 644). The rhetoric of GCs needs to be understood in the context of the political philosophy that underpins their rise to prominence. This ideology is one of ‘justice globalism’ representing a set of beliefs standing in stark contrast with ‘market globalism’ (Steger et al., 2013). While the former lays stress on the power of communities – rather than corporations or governments – to bring about change in tackling global problems based on a socially left-leaning platform identifying social and ecological inequalities, the latter emphasises the power of the free market to drive down prices and produce income growth based on the principles of Friedmanite economics. Both perspectives represent socio-political projects.

The political ideology that underpins GCs has not hitherto been the subject of explanation or critique. Hence it is important to identify the assumptions that lie beneath the rhetoric of GCs. These rest on justice globalism: a political ideology and a ‘movement’ with a core set of beliefs (Steger et al., 2013). Its origins stem from a critique of neo-liberalism as leading to global crises produced by blind faith in the free market. According to this line of thinking, market globalisation has accelerated inequalities in the distribution of wealth and had an adverse impact on well-being, rather than bringing benefits by driving down consumer prices as contended by market globalism. Justice globalism sees activist communities as critical actors in wrestling control of decision-making from the power of governments and corporations. The importance of ‘people power’ is advanced in place of corporate power and making an alternative world to the free market global economy possible (Steger et al., 2013). Justice globalism trumpets well-being and quality of life above the economic growth model of market globalism, focusing on individuals and communities rather than on nation states. This is all part of the shift from the ‘international’ to the ‘global’.

The issues that shape the social and political agenda of justice globalists include poverty, climate change, conflict, social justice, migration, environmental change, global citizenship, health and ageing, and ‘futures’ (social, urban, digital and educational). Justice globalists are committed to promoting the importance of values such as ‘equality, social justice, diversity, democracy, nonviolence, solidarity, ecological sustainability and planetary citizenship’ (Wilson, 2014: 42). Justice globalists see themselves as cosmopolitans rather than nationalists, driven by a concern about social issues that cross national boundaries (Shapcott, 2007). Philosophically, justice globalism connects closely with the work of John Rawls (1971) and his influential scholarship on distributive justice. The supporters of justice globalism can be found among the intellectual and professional classes – such as lawyers, politicians and academics – symbolised by influential scholar activists such as Naomi Klein, Peter Singer and Susan George.
One of the most high-profile contemporary issues in justice globalism relates to calls for declarations of a ‘climate emergency’ by governments, business organisations and universities in an attempt to highlight the need for urgent action to reverse the effects of environmental damage. Within the last few years, numerous universities have made climate emergency declarations. On 17 April 2019 the University of Bristol became the first UK higher education institution to declare a climate emergency and many others have subsequently followed suit. In 2019 over 7000 schools, colleges and universities from across the world sent a joint statement declaring a climate emergency to the United Nations (O’Malley, 2019). This movement is increasing pressure for change in the schools’ curriculum (e.g. Irwin, 2020), and similar demands are being made with respect to higher education. In a leading article in the *Times Higher Education* published in 2019 (Renouf et al., 2019: np), 11 scholars from higher education institutions across the world called for all universities to declare an ecological and climate emergency in which ‘interdisciplinary teaching and research activities on global environmental challenges, resilience and solutions would be prioritised and invested in.’ The authors further recommend that compliance with their agenda should be reflected in changes to the university curriculum, the way universities are ranked, the attributes of graduates and performance measurements for staff. To question the totalitarian nature of this recommendation might risk an even greater degree of disapproval than that reserved for those who interrogate the uncritical acceptance of education for sustainable development, and face ‘the dismissive air held towards those who do not agree with their analysis, or their ideology’ (Jickling, 2005: 251).

Hence, such proposed changes raise questions about the extent to which academic freedom would be compromised. Yet, such changes have already been made by a number of higher education institutions with little or no opposition and with the hand of philanthro-capitalists in evidence. Stanford University, for example, has embedded a sustainability component in the curriculum for subjects including life sciences, medicine, mathematics, economics, engineering and law. Here, the changes to the curriculum are often linked to significant commercial interests, such as Nike founder Phil Knight who donated $105 million dollars in 2006 for a new business school at Stanford. Knight and Nike’s commitments to sustainability play well on university campuses and serve to boost a corporate image previously tarnished by being associated with accusations of unethical labour practices in its factories (Dewson, 2016). While many staff and students are committed to sustainability as a moral imperative, universities understand more broadly how to brand the institution in order to maximise philanthropic giving.

**Responsibilisation**

Universities are alert to the way in which causes associated with activism have potential to be leveraged to govern with the naive and enthusiastic consent of the academy, counteracting the popular but negative discourse about neo-liberalism and new managerialism. This involves a process known as ‘responsibilisation’: a process, according to Rose (1996: 61), that makes it possible ‘to govern without governing society’, a form of social control that relies on individuals self-regulating.

advanced liberal strategies of rule ask whether it is possible to govern without governing society,

... to govern through the regulated and accountable choices of autonomous agents – citizens,
consumers, parents, employees, managers, investors – and to govern through intensifying and acting upon their allegiance to particular ‘communities’.

This is an explanation of the way in which governmentality – or the art of government – relies on so-called technologies of power, such as responsibilisation. In the neo-liberal frame of governmentality there is a concerted attempt to row back on the concept of a welfare society. This involves the control of the populace through a subtle transfer of responsibility from the state to the individual. To recycle and avoid excessive air travel, for example, are now requirements in order to be considered a ‘responsible’ citizen. These are the ways in which governments seek to encourage self-regulation in line with Rose’s argument. The state shifts ethical responsibility for public health, for example, to the individual. This is about ‘self-responsibility’ (McLeod, 2017: 45) involving the ‘reversal’ of the conventional roles of government and citizen (Peters, 2017). Citizens are told that it is their duty to take more exercise, drink less alcohol, eat a calorie-controlled diet, and so on. This means that health becomes accepted as primarily the responsibility of the individual citizen requiring less government expenditure in the process on front line services. It is about a responsibility-shift for welfare from the state’s health service, on the basis of calls for individuals to take ‘personal responsibility’ and exercise ‘self-care’ (Lemke, 2001: 203).

In a similar vein, it has become an expectation that academics ought to focus their research efforts on tackling the world’s social problems as defined by philanthro-capitalists and government funded organisations such as UNESCO. It is increasingly evident that demonstrating commitment to the climate emergency, and other inter-disciplinary ends of justice globalism, is becoming the responsibility of individual academics through university policies. In the same way it has become the responsibility, perhaps even the duty, of academics to tackle GCs and to be in the vanguard of efforts to bring about the social changes endorsed. Those academics who do not wish to sign up to the GC project are facing the prospect of being ostracised for insufficient commitment to the climate emergency (e.g. flight-shaming, car-shaming, etc.) and are endangering their future career prospects as their opportunities to gain research funding shrinks. Hence, although the GC agenda may give the appearance of being apolitical – as it is not a formal element of state governance, with the funding for addressing them having been transferred to the universities – it is nonetheless an ideological state apparatus (ISA), as conceived by Althusser (2014): a method used by the state to indoctrinate and reinforce control. In an era of ‘competitive accountability’ (Watermeyer, 2019), academics have already been assigned responsibility for replacing the direct, and sometimes indirect, costs of their employment by universities through grant capture. A further expectation is that academics will take responsibility for the capture of large grants that also comply with the justice globalism agenda, as advocated by philanthro-capitalists and universities seeking to build income streams and brand recognition for their institution.

The threat to academic freedom

The ideology of justice globalism means that the role, or perhaps even the new responsibility, of the academic is to be an activist: to demonstrate a passionate commitment to the causes of our times such as sustainable development, the battle against climate change and the fight to end global poverty. What, it might be asked, could possibly be wrong with academics taking up such causes? It needs to be understood, however, that there is a
School of Thought, in the liberal tradition of higher education, that sees activism as a negation of the responsibility of the academic. This literature focuses mainly on the teaching context rather than research, but given the commitment of activist-academics to both aspects of their professional role, it is relevant to consider. Max Weber, for example, was a staunch critic of any attempt to manipulate the academic profession according to the contemporary causes of the day regardless of whether this should be in serving either the political left or right. He was particularly concerned that political views should not be allowed to seep into the classroom:

... the professor should not demand the right as a professor to carry the marshal’s baton of the statesman or the cultural reformer in his knapsack. This, however, is exactly what he does when he uses the unassailability of the academic lecture platform for the expression of political – or cultural-political – sentiments.  
Weber (1917: 50)

Weber’s concerns about political stridency in the lecture theatre were largely centred on the way that it might impact students in limiting their opportunity to develop their own ideas. He considered it ‘in poor taste to mix personal concerns with the specialised analysis of facts’ (Weber, 1917: 49–50), arguing that his principal concern was the effect a lack of impartiality might have on students:

... one does not wish to see the student so influenced by the teacher’s suggestions that he is prevented from solving his problems in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience.  
Weber (1917: 49)

There is, of course, a long history to arguments about whether professors should be, as Weber suggests, politically neutral, or, as others contend, more of an advocate based on professorial authenticity. Nelson argues that he is unambiguous with his students with respect to his socio-political stance: ‘with regard to the historical events and social issues raised by the poems I teach, but I encourage them to agree or disagree as they will’ (Nelson, 2010: 15). His approach, as a literature professor, to the teaching of poetry is based on a belief that ‘all human understanding is culturally and historically constructed’, meaning that he teaches ‘the cultural construction of gender as true, although my students are free to disagree’ (Nelson, 2010: 22). Self-styled activist-academics, such as Livesey (2013) and Grey (2013), operate at the extreme margins of the professor as advocate position by pursuing their socio-political causes as an integral part of their academic identity. Yet, from the perspective of the professor as a neutral broker between competing knowledge claims in the classroom, the long-standing objection to any avowedly partisan stance is that this takes unfair advantage of students who are in a less privileged position of power than that of the lecturer and runs the risk that they will self-censor or lose the opportunity to develop their own independent analysis or independent social and political consciousness. This is a point of view expressed by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) as long ago as 1915.

The teacher ought also to be especially on his guard against taking unfair advantage of the student’s immaturity by indoctrinating him with the teacher’s own opinions before the student has had an opportunity fairly to examine other opinions upon the matters in question, and
before he has sufficient knowledge and ripeness of judgment to be entitled to form any definitive opinion of his own.

AAUP (1915: 298–299)

Activist educators firmly reject this notion of pedagogic neutrality. They seek to bring about a transformation of student attitudes frequently citing community-based action research projects as inspirations for their teaching. Reflective journals are a popular assessment tool where students are required to evidence their personal transformation through confessional writing, demonstrating the impact of their learning through self-conscious displays of both negative (shame, guilt, etc.) and positive emotions (e.g. passion, compassion). Activist educators expect students to demonstrate their emotional commitments through such reflective assignments. These educators see the classroom as the basis for developing a collective consciousness and forging a social movement (e.g. Vanwynsberghe and Moore, 2008). However, the effect of trying to assess a learner’s moral engagement poses serious risks for student academic freedom in the way it demands an emotional performativity that potentially leads to self-censorship and inauthenticity and fails to respect a student’s right to non-indoctrination (Macfarlane, 2017).

Some academics do self-identify as activists, and a moral and intellectual justification for their position is provided by Grey (2013) in terms of a collective challenge to received wisdom, positioning them as distinctive public intellectuals ‘deliberately and consciously dissenting against the status quo, against hegemonic discourses’ (Grey, 2013: 701). In this way, activist-academics ascribe to themselves heroic academic qualities; they are radical, critical, intellectual, anti-positivist, anti-managerial, community-focused and so on. This conceit, that those who take direct action rather than seek other means of influencing academic and public discourse somehow possess superior moral and intellectual qualities, implies that the latter group lack the same degree of social awareness, are insufficiently intellectual or critical in their understandings of the world, and are either compliant with, or, worse still, supporters of the neo-liberal project. There is a further need to be wary of claims to radicalism, since this is a positive self-image that many academics crave. While some activist-academics may be offering a radical critique of conventional wisdom, the mainstreaming of the counterculture through its corporate capture since the 1960s means that some social causes are long-standing orthodoxies. This is illustrated by the way in which the ‘grand challenges’ agenda is becoming a hegemonic discourse in higher education.

Beyond the role of the academic as a teacher, the responsibilisation of university academics in respect to institutionally endorsed activism poses a number of wider questions for academic freedom. The first of these is whether redirecting the work of university researchers around a restricted and normative set of GC themes is eroding their academic freedom to pursue their personal and intellectual research interests. Universities have strategically aligned their GCs with research institutes and internal funding opportunities that replicate the external funding environment. These structures make it increasingly important for academic researchers to direct their research efforts accordingly if they want to benefit from the funding available. Career advancement is linked to grant getting success. It is not enough though for academics to obtain funding. They must obtain large-scale funding that covers full economic costs. This is available for projects that seek to address a grand challenge and for academics prepared to sign up to the ‘save the world’ rhetoric accompanying them. The emphasis on inter-disciplinarity in tackling GCs is significant. It is a phrase that has become ‘a politically useful label’ (Woelert and Millar, 2013: 756), deployed by universities as a
means of satisfying increasing government expectations that higher education will undertake problem-focused and solutions-driven research, reflecting the shift from mode 1 to mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al., 1994). Hence, although GCs may purport to offer a radical, left of centre agenda for social change via inter-disciplinarity, it fits squarely with neo-liberalism inasmuch that universities are offering a stronger focus on ‘real world’ problem solving as opposed to the production of mode 1 disciplinary knowledge.

A second objection to the grand challenges agenda is that universities fall into the trap of institutional narcissism by pursuing the illusory conceit that they can solve the world’s problems. Allied to this point, while academics are now encouraged to claim that their research has ‘impact’, this can only be realistically generated through multi-actor agency and via the involvement of users. GCs are as much a social manifesto for change as a research agenda. This was a trap that Flexner (1930) identified more than 90 years ago arguing that universities are mistaken if they think their role is to solve the world’s problems, as in seeking to solve existing problems they will inevitably create new ones in the process. Instead, Flexner argued that it is only by preserving the independence and positive ‘irresponsibility’ of researchers that universities are best serving the world. The advocacy of specific types of social action can end up compromising the objectivity of the researcher. Over-directing the efforts of academic researchers removes ownership of the research agenda from academics and defeats the purpose of the university as an independent think tank: the essence of the Humboldtian ideal. ‘Useless’ knowledge, that which might appear to have no practical application and is essentially theoretical in nature, is often, ironically, the most ‘useful’ (Flexner, 1939). Without such knowledge practical advances in many areas of life would not have been possible. The contributions of Hertz and Maxwell in the field of magnetism and electricity made radio transmission possible. Alfred Nobel’s mixing nitroglycerine with other substances led to the development of stable explosives for the benefit of mining and other uses connected with warfare that are not regarded in such a positive light. Yet, as Flexner was keen to stress, the use to which scientific discoveries are put is not the responsibility of the academic. According to Flexner’s analysis, this is not part of their legitimate remit.

Flexner’s argument places an emphasis on maintaining an appropriate distance between government, industry and universities. This is not the isolated view of one man but part of mainstream thinking about the role of the university since the nineteenth century. It was the view advocated by von Humboldt (1970) in the 1800s who counselled that governments needed to remember that their intervention acted as a hindrance rather than a help in advancing scientific progress. Von Humboldt’s thinking – which has arguably been the most influential in shaping the modern research-intensive university – is echoed in his other scholarly work focused on the sphere and duties of government, in which he contended that it is important to place boundaries around state power (von Humboldt, 1854). His view was that governments, along with wider society, benefit most in the long-term when they do not seek to tie their socio-political endeavours to the short-term, fashionable causes and concerns of the day. It is a point reinforced by Karl Jaspers in the following acerbic terms:

Politics has a place at the university, not as actual struggle, but as an object of study. Where political struggles invade the university, it is the idea of the university itself which suffers.

Jaspers (1959: 141)
Jaspers emphasised that it was crucial to keep universities and their research work free from political interference for the very practical reason that the search for truth is ‘a long range proposition, on behalf of the nation as a whole’ (Jaspers, 1959: 142). If researchers are forced to meet short-term goals that are shaped by political forces, this will act counter to the public interest and therefore must be resisted. Hence, there is both a democracy argument – academics provide independent voices and disinterested expertise – and a development argument – maintaining scholarly independence ultimately benefits the economy and society – for keeping politics out of university research.

In the liberal tradition of higher education, the importance of separating universities as public bodies from the political domain has been stressed by a distinguished line of thinkers stretching from von Humboldt to Collini (2012). Yet, clearly politics cannot be detached from academic work entirely. Academics have opinions, convictions and passions stemming from their identity that often shape their research and teaching. Individual scholars are perfectly entitled to make their own choices about political beliefs and the causes they decide to support. However, this is their right essentially as private citizens rather than specifically as academics living in a liberal democracy. The AAUP’s 1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure asserted the right of ‘university teachers to express their opinions freely outside the university or engage in political activities in their capacity as citizens’ (AAUP 1915: 292). Academic freedom may be claimed as a protection where opinions are expressed that relate to a scholar’s area of expertise. Invoking academic freedom as a shield for activism and associated actions unrelated to a scholar’s area of expertise is less clear-cut though.

Here a useful distinction can be drawn between activism as an expression of the beliefs and values held by an individual academic and the university as a collective or corporate body. In a liberal democratic context, the right to engage in social and political activism is well established and legitimate as the entitlement of any private citizen. The same cannot be said for the university acting as a collective body. While many, if not most, private business organisations now espouse commitments consistent with justice globalism, a university has responsibilities that formally extend beyond shareholders. These are principally to the unfettered pursuit of the truth and not the ordination of any set of beliefs. Writing shortly after the Second World War, Richard Livingstone (1948: 8) argues that many universities in Russia, Germany and Italy acted ‘like mercenaries’ in the service of Communism and Nazism. Here, the lesson of history is not about choosing the wrong cause to support but the danger of supporting any cause. According to Livingstone (1948: 10) ‘the god worshipped in its shrine is neither utility, nor success nor social progress, nor even goodness, but truth...’ as to do otherwise would result in the ‘sacrifice of truth to edification’. A relevantly similar sentiment is expressed by Talcott Parsons warning against universities making value commitments:

Precisely because the academic system develops generalized cultural and societal resources, it cannot be institutionally committed to the exclusive legitimacy of any particular or specific value ‘commitments’ – however pressing an immediate cause may seem to be.
Parsons (1968: 197)

**Conclusion**

The popularism which has come to characterise European politics over recent years has been critiqued from within academe for the dangers it poses to rational debate and the assessment
of evidence. Yet, the embrace of ostensibly common-sense causes, such as sustainable development and global citizenship, by the university as a collective body is itself a form of popularism. The grand challenges agenda endorses a justice globalism that has become practically an article of faith for universities across the world. The idea of coalescing the world’s leading academics and research-intensive universities around grand challenges is presented as socially responsible. Tackling pressing global issues such as inequality and seeking to dissolve disciplinary boundaries for the common good are claims to the moral high ground. The irony of university activism and GCs is that they have managed to capture the popular support of many academics with liberal and politically left-leaning views who vehemently oppose neo-liberalism. Yet, in enthusiastically supporting the promotion of the GC agenda they are, in effect, becoming willing, but unwitting, neo-liberal subjects of responsibilisation.

The enthusiastic adoption of GCs by universities represents a yet further migration of neo-liberalism from the macro to the meso or institutional level that politicises the research agenda and compromises scientific neutrality. A university needs to be mindful of its duties to protect the academic freedom of all students and staff members regardless of the popularity of the cause to which it is espousing commitment. Universities need to maintain a critical distance from political and social pressures in order to preserve the independence of academic researchers and allow them to flourish most freely and effectively for the benefit of wider society. This means that institutions should exercise considerable caution about endorsing socio-political crusades. No matter how popular such causes might be, endorsement risks shutting down debate. In the liberal tradition, universities should be centres of knowledge production and critical discourse, not campaigning organisations promoting the fashionable causes of the day, however well intentioned. Choosing the latter course presents substantial risks to the academic freedom of staff and students and the independence of universities as knowledge brokers.

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