



Student demonstration against fees and cuts, Aberdeen. Credits: <http://anticuts.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aberdeen-student-left-banner.jpg>

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## Anthropologists witnessing and reshaping the neoliberal academy

Edited by

**Tracey HEATHERINGTON & Filippo M. ZERILLI**

Contributions of

**Virginia R. DOMINGUEZ, Sam BECK, Carl A. MAIDA, Martin A. MILLS, Berardino PALUMBO, Alan SMART, Ger DUIJZINGS, Alexis M. JORDAN & Shaheen M. CHRISTIE, Boone W. SHEAR, Alex KOENSLER & Cristina PAPA, THE RECLAIMING OUR UNIVERSITY MOVEMENT.**

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*Reclaiming our university*

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## Reclaiming Our University

### The University of Aberdeen Manifesto

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**ABSTRACT:** Originating at the University of Aberdeen, Reclaiming Our University is a movement that is running a campaign to reclaim the academic world and reshape it in a more communal sense. The Reclaiming Our University Manifesto sets out the key principles of freedom, trust, education and community on which the University is founded. Further details about the movement and its campaign are available at <https://reclaimingouruniversity.wordpress.com/>.

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§1 We, scholars, students, staff and alumni of the University of Aberdeen, call for fundamental reform of the principles, ethos and organisation of our university, in order (1) that it should be restored to the community to which it belongs and (2) that it can fulfil its civic purpose in a manner appropriate to our times, in the defence of democracy, peaceful coexistence and human flourishing.

§2 We stand at a pivotal moment in the long history of our university, a fork in the path that offers two ways forward. One is to follow the business model of higher education to its logical conclusion, in a competition for students, research funding and ratings that values constant change as an end in itself. The other is to rediscover the civic purpose of the university as a necessary component of the constitution of a democratic society, with the responsibility for educating its citizens and furnishing them with the wisdom and understanding that will enable them to fashion a world fit for future generations to live in.

§3 Under its current regime, this university has committed itself to the business route. Not only does this contravene the university's duty, as a charitable institution, to disseminate knowledge for the public benefit; it also overlooks its primary responsibility for education and scholarship. To take the civic route will require a complete alteration of course. It will mean rebuilding the university from its very foundations. Whether we participate in the community as students, as researchers and teachers, or as administrative or support staff, we are here to promote truth, justice, virtue and liberty.

The kind of university we want is one in which these principles are both thought and taught.

§4 In our university we will:

- Create an environment for free, open-minded and unprejudiced debate, which stands out as a beacon of wisdom, tolerance and humanity.
- Defend our freedom to undertake research and teaching in the pursuit of truth, against the constraints, both internal and external to the institution, which threaten to curtail it.
- Restore the trust that underpins both professionalism and collegiality, by removing the conditions of line and performance management, and of surveillance, which lead to its erosion.
- Bring together research and teaching as complementary aspects of an education that carries a responsibility of care.
- Abstain from the egregious language of business that would divide the university between ‘employers’, ‘employees’ and ‘customers’.
- Restore the governance of the university, and control over its affairs, to the community of scholars, students, staff and alumni to which it rightfully belongs.

### *The university and its purpose*

§5 The primary civic purpose of the university, in a democratic society, is to educate future generations of citizens and to forge the knowledge needed to sustain a just and prosperous world. The university is a place where people of integrity, from all nations, gather in order to learn to think, and think deeply, about the nature of things, about the ways we live, about truth and justice, peace and conflict, freedom and responsibility, the distribution of wealth, health and sustainability, beauty and virtue. They learn to weigh these thoughts against the evidence of experience, and to translate them into policy and practice, systems of law and governance, as well as great works of science, literature and art. These things are the foundations of civilised life. Our university will be a place in which they can be incubated and nurtured.

§6 The university is a centre of academic life. The days when the academy was an ivory tower, wherein intellectual pursuits could be enjoyed in isolation from the practical conduct of life, have long gone. In today’s world, not only are people and ideas moving and meeting on an unprecedented scale, but the colonial hierarchies of knowledge that propped up the academy in

former times have largely imploded. The rise, in their place, of competing economic, political and religious fundamentalisms poses a grave threat to democracy and coexistence. In this increasingly dangerous situation, the academy has a new and pivotal role to play. It is to create and sustain a safe, ecumenical environment of freedom of expression, in which ideas matter, and in which there is room for experiment and dissent, and for open-minded, unprejudiced debate. In our university we will create such an environment.

§7 Our university is not a business. Its goals are academic, not commercial. It is here to foster inquiry, not to extract profit. We are motivated in our scholarship not by incentives of financial gain but by the pride we take in our educational and scholarly work. We are driven by a quest for truth and a passion for learning. Our ambition for the university is not that it should be ranked above others in terms of quantitative indices of performance or productivity, but that it should stand out as a beacon of wisdom, tolerance and humanity.

These are our core values. They are moral and ethical, not instrumental, and cannot be measured on any scale. They rest on four pillars. These are freedom, trust, education and community. Below, we spell out what they mean.

### *Freedom*

§8 Though we speak of academic freedom, this is not a freedom reserved exclusively for academics. It is not the privilege of a scholarly elite, absolving them of any burden of care. It is neither a form of immunity, nor a refuge. It offers no protection, nor can we hide behind it. On the contrary, academic freedom is a form of exposure. It rests upon a willingness to relinquish the comfort of established positions, to take the risk of pushing out into the unknown, where outcomes are uncertain and destinations yet to be mapped.

§9 Academic freedom is exemplary. In everything they do, academics in our university seek to live to the fullest extent a freedom that, in a democratic society, is available to every citizen. Thus academic freedom is not distinct from the freedom of the citizen; it is an intensification of that freedom. No more than the freedom of the citizen, is academic freedom handed to us on a plate. It is a task that falls to us, not an unqualified right to which we are entitled, and we have continually to work at it, whether in our teaching, in our research or in our scholarship. We perform freedom, and thereby exemplify it, in our relations with students, with colleagues and with society at large. It is always work in progress; we can never give up on it and assume that it has been achieved. Academic freedom can never be taken for granted.

§10 The freedom we seek in our university, and wish to defend, is one that confers upon the imagination the right to roam, without fear or favour, unhindered by predetermined aims and objectives. But this right also carries personal, moral and professional responsibilities. We are responsible to our students and to the university community as a whole, and we are responsible for the wider societal and environmental consequences of what we do. We have to trust that members of our academic community, whatever their rank or status, will exercise their freedom wisely. There can be no freedom without trust. Loss of trust is the greatest enemy of academic freedom since it leads to the replacement of autonomy and self-determination with surveillance and control.

§11 Academic freedom is the life-blood of our university. It has to be sustained against multiple threats. Unaccountable regimes of management, monitoring and assessment are currently placing severe constraints on what can be researched or taught, on how work should be presented or published, and on intellectual priorities. These constraints are particularly acute for younger scholars, for whom employment and promotion prospects depend upon compliance. Some constraints come from outside the institution, from government or funding councils over which we have little or no control. In using these external parameters as levers of internal management, the institution is not only exacerbating their effects, but actively undermining the efforts of the scholarly community to defend the freedom on which the proper conduct of academic life depends. In our university, we will restore the freedom of the academic community to govern itself, above all through the re-empowerment of the University Senate.

### *Trust*

§12 Academics are professionals. They have joined the university on the strength of their professional accreditation and competence. This professionalism carries with it an expectation of trust. In our university we will trust academic staff to perform their duties responsibly, with personal and ethical integrity, and in a spirit of service to the community and to the public good. But trust also implies collegiality. Not only do we depend on colleagues to play their part, we also grant them the autonomy to do so. Trust rests on this combination of autonomy and dependency. It is fundamental to scholarship.

§13 As a university we aspire to the highest professional and scholarly standards. We will promote and encourage in one another the attainment of these standards, under the authority of the University Senate. We acknowl-

edge the risk that individuals will not always live up to the standards expected of them. In our university we will put transparent protocols in place to deal with mistakes and failures if they occur. We will not however assume that errors are bound to occur unless such protocols are applied, or that their application is a necessary condition for success. We trust that for the most part, they will not be needed. We are confident that in flourishing communities of scholarship, colleagues will look after one another, and that by maintaining collegial commitment, high professional standards will be upheld without the need to have them continually inspected and monitored.

§14 Trust does not arise of its own accord. It has to be nurtured. It is nurtured by openness and honesty, by matching stated intentions with actions, by striving for fairness and consistency, and by learning from mistakes. Trust calls for personal investment, and sometimes entails setting aside immediate advantage for the sake of the community. The individual costs of doing so are more than offset by collective benefits that trust brings to the day-to-day conduct of academic life. Nevertheless, trust that has taken time to build up can quickly be broken down. It is broken down, above all, by the impositions of what is increasingly known as ‘management’.

§15 Many kinds of management have the potential to erode trust, including ‘line management’ and ‘performance management’. Line management undermines both professionalism and collegiality when it redirects the responsibility and loyalty of every member of staff from the community of colleagues who share a love of their subject and work together in teaching it, to an organisational superior who neither knows the subject nor is accountable to the community. Performance management undermines professionalism in assuming that scholars are not motivated by a desire to advance knowledge in their fields but are responsive only to threats and incentives issued by managers. It undermines collegiality in attaching these threats and incentives to targets that bear no relation to the contribution that individuals make to the communities of scholarship to which they belong. Behind both line management and performance management lies the premise that staff cannot be trusted to perform of their own accord, to the best of their ability. Both are instruments not of support but of control.

§16 The principle of trust applies not only to academic staff. It also applies to students. Students come to the university because they are eager to join with us in our scholarly endeavours and because we hope they will carry the torch of learning to future generations. We trust that they will do their best, according to their abilities. We are convinced that the legitimate aspirations of students are optimally served by demonstrating, in principle and

practice, that learning and scholarship are rewarding in themselves, rather than by defining their education as a regime of testing, geared only to the achievement of measurable results, and implemented through procedures of assessment and verification based on the pretext that students are less than conscientious.

### *Education*

§17 The university is, by definition, an institute of higher education. By education we mean an open-ended process of intellectual growth and discovery. In our university, education covers the activities of both research and teaching. These are inseparable; there cannot be one without the other.

§18 Research is the pursuit of truth. Though the meaning of truth may vary, depending upon a scholar's discipline or philosophy, the call of truth is the same for all. Truth is an aspiration: it is about trying to get things right, whether empirically, conceptually, ethically or aesthetically. Research suspends prejudice, and turns all certainty into questioning. It means to search and search again. Thus research converts every closure into an opening, and every apparent end-point into a new beginning. It is the guarantor that scholarship can carry on. This is why research is a primary responsibility of the academy.

§19 Under the current framework of evaluation, the meaning of research has been corrupted beyond recognition. It has become a game, in which universities and their academic personnel are players. It no longer has to do with critical scholarship and is instead defined by its products, the values of which are measured by conformity to uniform standards of assessment rather than by any appeal to truth. It entails the collection of 'data' and their processing into 'outputs' which, in their application, could have measurable 'impact'. Such a production-line conception of research may have its place in corporate industry where, in an ever more intense competition for dwindling returns, only innovation sells. In our university, however, research will be driven neither by market demand nor by the expectation of novelty. It will be driven rather by curiosity – by the burning desire to find things out. We are curious because we care deeply about the things we study. Care, not impact, is the hallmark of the ethically responsible search for truth. And in our university, care and curiosity will be recognised as two sides of the same coin.

§20 This will be equally true of our teaching. Since research turns all answers into questions, it cannot be taught as if the questions were already answered. Truth is never given in advance; it is rather a horizon of attainment

that ever exceeds our reach. It is not therefore available for transmission, as is implied by models that measure teaching and learning by the achievement of predetermined outcomes. There can be no such outcomes, beyond training in skills of so superficial a nature that their transfer can be achieved and assessed through the completion of tick-box exercises. Teaching is not about the transmission of pre-existent knowledge; it is about guiding students in journeys of growth and self-discovery that they necessarily undertake together.

§21 These are often difficult journeys without fixed end-points, in which both teachers and learners participate. It is the job of a teacher to help and inspire students, to stretch their imaginations, not to make things easy for them. A good teacher is exemplary in the conduct of scholarship, a generous guide and companion for students, and a tireless critic of their work. It is in this sense that teaching, in our university, will be research-led. This does not mean that students receive their knowledge at first rather than second hand. It means, rather, that students will be immersed from the start in an educational environment that is dedicated to the search for truth.

§22 Generosity, open-endedness and criticality are fundamental to all education, whether in teaching or research. But this is not how education is understood by the current regime of university management. In succumbing to the market-driven rhetoric of teaching and learning with its calculus of milestones and measurable outcomes, and in divorcing research as the production of new knowledge from teaching as its dissemination, the university has abandoned its educational mission. Learning has been reduced to the smooth and painless acquisition of information, so that students can obtain good grades with minimal effort and leave as satisfied customers. Teachers, then, become little more than facilitators, tasked with assembling the information to be acquired and delivering it in userfriendly form.

§23 In our university, we will refuse to regard the provision of higher education as a service industry. We will treat our students neither as customers nor as consumers of the 'experiences' we provide. Marketing courses, selling experience and inducing satisfaction are not, in themselves, educational objectives. We aim to recruit and retain students with ambitions to study and to learn, whatever their means and background. We will respect these ambitions, and will support students in their fulfilment. Our task is to give students the intellectual tools and the critical confidence to address the challenges of the contemporary world, not simply to provide them with a passport for future employment and debt relief. In our university, policies of



teaching and learning will be geared to the proper objectives of education: the search for truth, the promotion of tolerance and the pursuit of justice.

### *Community*

§24 Our university is its people: its scholars, its students, its staff and its alumni, coming together in the service of higher education. The university is a community. We are that community.

§25 The university is not just one great community; it is also a collection of smaller communities, made up of scholars, students and staff working in different academic disciplines as well as in associated areas of activity. Many of these are called departments. In our university we will strengthen departments by formally recognising their role in the working of the organisation as a whole. We will acknowledge that they may conduct their affairs in different ways, depending on what is appropriate and practicable for their respective fields, and we will respect and nurture this diversity. We will ensure that departments or their equivalents are adequately represented in the constitution of the university, at all levels of inclusion, with elected representatives at every level. At the most inclusive level, the university will be represented and led by its Senate.

§26 We do not pretend that the university community is a harmonious place, free from conflict and argument. On the contrary, it is a sign of its vitality that disagreements are openly discussed and debated, rather than hidden behind a veneer of consensus that often serves as a disguise for managerial imposition. In our university we will encourage open debate in preference to 'consultations' which, in soliciting opinions, admit no space for critical dialogue. However, we will also seek to replenish the reservoir of goodwill that makes it possible for differences to be resolved.

§27 Management harbours an inherent tendency towards verticality and centralisation. In our university we will counteract both tendencies by instituting a decentralised organisation in which departments or equivalent units are granted, as far as is practicably feasible, the autonomy to run their own affairs, as trusted professionals and informed colleagues. Time and money saved from supporting and responding to managerial functions will be reinvested in teaching and research.

§28 Communities depend on regular face-to-face interaction. We will ensure that scholars, students and staff in our university have the time, opportunities and congenial physical spaces, including common rooms, to meet and interact. We will accordingly seek to reduce the proportion of the work-

ing day that is spent in front of computer screens. IT systems have their uses, and in much of what we do they are indispensable. But overdependence on these systems has pronounced negative effects, inducing isolation, depersonalisation, alienation and even ill-health. It does much to erode the sense of belonging among both staff and students.

§29 More insidiously, corporate IT systems have become instruments of managerial control. In our university we will not allow the requirements of these systems, or the assumptions that underpin their design, to govern the way we conduct our affairs, to restrict what or how we teach, or to limit the practice of our research. They should work for us, not we for them.

§30 Our university will need leaders. They will have a genuine vision for the university as a beacon of scholarship, and will be committed to its core values of wisdom, tolerance and humanity. Our leaders will be part of, and will identify with, the greater community. They will be chosen by the community, not by shadowy committees whose members may have little experience of higher education, nor by firms of head-hunters which have their own business interests at heart. They will be accountable to the constitutional organs of the University, and will be transparently remunerated, like everyone else, at a level commensurate with their experience and responsibility, to be determined by these organs.

§31 As a large and complex organisation committed to the support of academic life, our university will also need administrators. They include registry officers responsible for the recruitment, admission and support of students, finance officers responsible for budgetary oversight, research officers responsible for the administration of grants and awards, and personnel officers with responsibility for staff recruitment, contractual arrangements and welfare, and for ensuring compliance with employment law. We will embed these administrative functions at appropriate levels of organisation, so that those who perform them can play a full part in the communities they support.

§32 We will additionally ensure that the boundary between scholarly and administrative roles remains permeable. We will expect the majority of scholars to undertake some administrative duties, as they do at present, but we will also encourage those whose primary role is administrative to participate, to some degree, in teaching and/or research. Through this sharing of experience, scholars and administrators will be better able to work together.

§33 Equally important to the effective operation of the university are its librarians and curators, IT specialists, secretarial and office staff, estates officers, porters, cleaners, and a host of others. In our university, everyone will be positively valued and respected for the work they do, and for their com-

mitment to the community as a whole. We will not, for that reason, classify as ‘non-academic’ those whose contributions lie primarily beyond the fields of scholarship.

§34 Our university will need leaders, and it will need administrators. It will not need managers. The current regime of management, having seized executive powers over the institution, is acting as if the university were in its exclusive possession. Having arrogated to itself the role of sole employer, management treats those who work for the university as employees or ‘human resources’, to be used for the regime’s own purposes and subjected to its increasingly arbitrary and authoritarian command. At the same time, the sense of community that scholars, staff and students of the university have forged over the years has been reduced to a market brand, designed to attract potential ‘customers’. But the university community is not for hire, nor does it rightfully belong to the regime. It belongs to us. It is our university, and we mean to have it back.

We have the opportunity to rebuild our university. We must seize it now.