

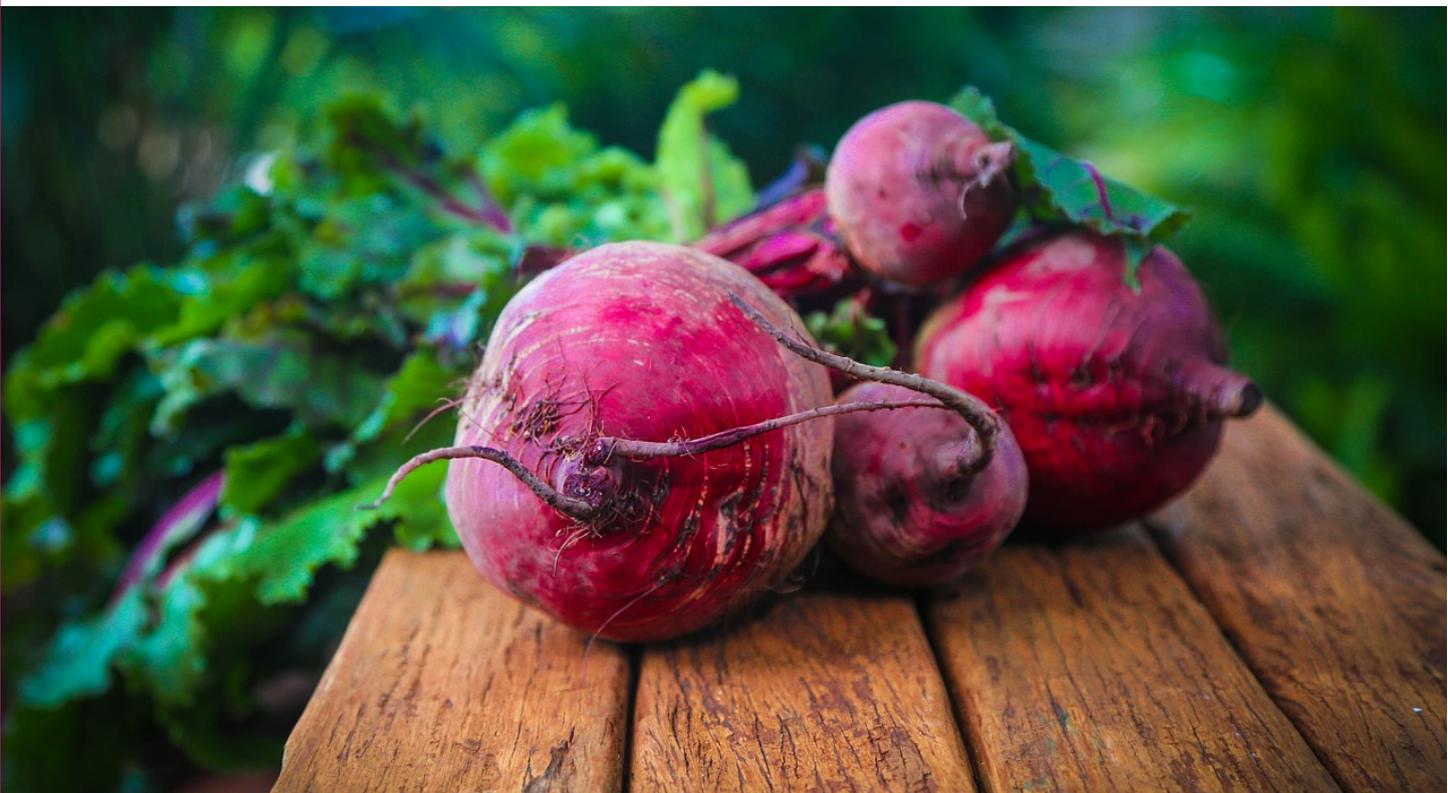
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# AUTOCRATIC LEADERSHIP AND COWBOY MANAGEMENT: THE CASE OF DAVID EASTWOOD AND THE 'POST' NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY

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# Autocratic leadership and cowboy management: the case of David Eastwood and the 'post' neoliberal university

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Readers of USSbriefs will by now be familiar with the questionable governance practices of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS), under which there has been a consistent lack of transparency and accountability. [USSbriefs70](#) notes the longstanding failure of USS executive to serve the interests of its members, instead consistently pandering to the interests of employers and UUK. These accusations were given added weight when Professor Jane Hutton, Trustee of the Scheme and leading statistician, blew the whistle to [The Pensions Regulator](#) on repeated interventions by Professor Sir David Eastwood, Chair of the USS, to prevent Trustees from accessing information on the widely discredited 2017 valuation.

Unfortunately, for [UNISON members currently taking strike action](#) at the University of Birmingham, where David Eastwood is the sitting Vice Chancellor, these revelations come as no surprise. For the first decade of his tenure as Vice Chancellor, prior to 2018, he chaired the remuneration committee that regularly put him among the very highest earners in the sector, and awarded him long-term performance incentives — the latest coming to £80,000 — the objectives associated with which remain shrouded in secrecy. The University of Birmingham was among the 21 employers who refused to respond to the [recent UCU Freedom of Information request](#) that showed the extent of such practices across the sector.

During David Eastwood's tenure as Vice Chancellor, he has also led the dismantling of the democratic structures of University of Birmingham through the marginalisation of the University's annual general meeting and Senate in decision making, [with more than half of the University Senate being members of senior management or being directly nominated by the Vice Chancellor](#). The minutes of Senate are heavily redacted, while minutes of other committees such as the remuneration committee, audit committee, and strategy committees are not made available, with the members of these committees [reportedly hand-picked by David Eastwood himself](#).

In 2018, the University of Birmingham UCU branch also exposed the scandal of David Eastwood's apparent conflict of interests due to his role as director of INTO University Partnerships, a global student recruitment company working with competitor institutions to recruit international students. UCU inquired in January 2018 as to why he had consistently failed to disclose this association with INTO during discussions of international student recruitment at Council, despite his interest being listed as 'director' of INTO on the University's 2015 register of interests. The register was updated within a week of UCU's enquiry, with the relationship to INTO being re-classified as 'non-executive director'. The previous version of the register was deleted and the University's Council subsequently [refused to investigate or address UCU's concerns](#).

The investigations of University of Birmingham UCU branch, however, confirmed that not only was David Eastwood listed as a full director in the accounts of INTO, he was a shareholder, beneficiary of a performance related incentive scheme, and had been involved in setting up the company in 2005. The accusation of misleading Council and failing to disclose his personal interest during key discussions led to calls for him to resign weeks later at the [Vice Chancellor's question time event in February 2018](#). Perhaps he was too busy with the unfolding USS strike to take note.

## **A 'post' neoliberal university?**

All of this holds potentially important lessons for our sector, and bears upon how we understand and conceptualise Higher Education. Many critics have rightly documented the adoption of private sector management techniques, reporting and governance standards, and [marketisation of the sector in recent decades](#). All of which is bound up with strongly internalised discourses of consumerism and managerialism that are operationalised in harsh and often narrow-minded performance management regimes, disciplinary action, casualisation, redundancies, and even trade union victimisation. Indeed, in describing the University of Birmingham to a hostile student audience last year David Eastwood himself repeated the mantra ['it's a university, but run like a business'](#), as if the real problem actually lay with students in thinking of the university as a university.

But this neat characterisation of the neoliberal university as a business, operating under a regime of what is sometimes referred to as [New Public Management](#), does not give the full picture. One recent case in point at the University of Birmingham is the opening of a new overseas campus in Dubai — with a £100m expansion approved in February 2019 with an ambition to recruit up to 4,500 students. A string of similar failed projects in recent years include the [University of Reading losing £27m on its Malaysia campus](#), [UCL closing its campus in Qatar](#), and the [University of Liverpool scrapping plans to open a branch campus in Egypt](#). In the UAE the market is highly competitive and [industry commentators predict](#) large numbers of closures as providers are forced out due to [low student numbers and high operating costs](#).

The decision to open a satellite campus in Dubai was itself shrouded in secrecy, with University of Birmingham staff prohibited from discussing the venture before it was officially launched. Little to no consultation took place, and seemingly little thought was put into the likely consequences for academic freedom, [LGBTQ rights](#), the University's duties under EU law to ensure open competitive tender, or [their responsibilities under UK equalities legislation towards their own staff](#). So why in the neoliberal hell did the University of Birmingham commit to such a project with so little planning?

In short, the Dubai project is an example of vanity management — a high-profile marquee project conducted at the behest of a small number of very senior executives with almost no accountability. They have demonstrated, at best, a poorly thought through post hoc rationalisation that has left University of Birmingham staff scrambling to cover the gaping

legal and logistical cracks in their strategy. The project carries enormous institutional risk and financial shortfalls will need to be entirely cross-subsidised by UK tuition fee income at a time when student services are being cut back with, again, no meaningful consultation with the student body of any kind.

Such examples are far from isolated across the sector and the neoliberal dream is therefore failing, at least in part, on its own terms. Senior management of universities are not rational actors working according to measureable criteria and market mechanisms for the maximisation of institutional efficiency and effectiveness, for profit (surplus) maximisation that can then be re-invested according to market demands. Similarly, corporate governance is failing precisely because universities do not have even the most basic external accountability to shareholders, let alone to the wider public or to their own faculty or student bodies. In truth, Universities under cowboy management have become the little kingdoms of tinpot dictators who have a great deal of scope to make some very bad decisions. And if University of Birmingham's Dubai project fails it will not be senior managers who face further job losses and cut backs.

## Conclusions

While neoliberal market-based reforms clearly dominate the sector and drive decision making in line with the latest global and national league tables, the REF and the TEF, rich and powerful institutions still have a great deal of scope to pick and choose what counts as success and enormous financial reserves to absorb mistakes. Mass casualisation and mass education, in particular, give them the financial security to do so, and as long as they aggressively pursue their market position and their global reputation, the kingdom is theirs to do with as they will. After all, they don't have shareholders to absorb their excess revenues and they couldn't possibly share it with [striking workers demanding a living wage, decent conditions, or an end to outsourcing](#).

But even where institutions face more difficult financial times, we must recognise that the autocratic university model is one where a tiny minority of self-selecting and self-reproducing individuals can and will take crucial and often poorly informed decisions that affect thousands of staff and tens of thousands of students with little or no accountability. If this makes sense in market terms it is likely to be more due to luck than judgment. This model also has potentially dire consequences for core values such as [academic freedom](#), trade union rights, and the vision of the university as a democratic community. Staff at the University of Birmingham regularly see good colleagues forced out under non-disclosure agreements, and trade unionists have been the target of a number of threats of disciplinary action and victimisation.

Whether this constitutes a 'post' neoliberal context remains up for debate, but what is certain is that not all decisions by university executives can be easily reduced to rational, market-based explanations — instead they may just as often be understood as narcissistic, reactionary, and political. And while this is a structural problem of the

autocratic university, which goes beyond individuals, David Eastwood is both the personification of that ideology and one of its most persistent and successful advocates.

### **Correction, 23 September 2019**

A previous version of the article suggested that David Eastwood chaired the University Council. The author has corrected this as David Eastwood chairs the University Senate. Minor typographical errors were corrected by the editorial team at the same time.

*This paper represents the views of the author only. The author believes all information to be reliable and accurate; if any errors are found please contact us so that we can correct them. We welcome discussion of the the points raised and suggest that discussants use Twitter with the hashtag [#USSbriefs81](#); the author will try to respond as appropriate. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#). Minor typographical errors were corrected on 23 September 2019 at 7.00 pm.*