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All change: The rise of 'agility' in university management

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This USSbrief is about agility. This is the management philosophy, ideology, or rationale that is now a fully active force shaping our working lives under the guise of 'change agendas' across British universities.

It is written partly in response to Gail Davies' #USSBriefs66, entitled '[Goodwill hunting after the USS strike](#)'. That brief drew on testimonies from UCU members following the 2018 industrial action, describing a moment when something snapped in universities. The testimonies in #USSBriefs66 are deeply affecting accounts of how members of the university workforce felt that the 'previously implicit contract' between them and the university had been broken. But it appeared from #USSBriefs66 that there was something of a mystery over why this contract had been broken. This resonates with my experience as a UCU representative talking to members.

This brief returns to the 'why' of this broken contract. It argues that the breaking of our social contracts in UK universities has been led by university management, is deliberate, and is ideological. This is contrary to management narratives that suggest changes have been forced on the sector from the outside and so resistance to change is futile. Although this ideology is mostly hidden, traces of it are visible. This brief puts 'agility' in context as an ideology that is in direct opposition to the collective ideal that emerged in the first USS strike, embodied in the hashtag [#WeAreTheUniversity](#).

1. If something snapped, who broke it?

One way of answering the question of 'why' the implicit contract has been broken in Higher Education is that it has been a consequence of the deepening marketisation of HE in the context of neoliberalism. Messaging from university leaders frequently point to marketisation as the reason, or excuse, for the rupturing of these implicit contracts. They argue that changes to pensions, incessant restructuring, and waves of redundancies are acts of necessary pragmatism under difficult circumstances. 'All staff' emails, especially in the wake of the [Augur Report](#), tended to repeat this line, announcing that yet more difficult times were ahead, and that yet more difficult decisions would be forced on universities. Placing the blame for 'difficult decisions' on government policy or global conditions makes some intuitive sense. Both are factors that act on universities and present challenges for strategic planning. Focusing on these external factors positions the breaking of our implicit contracts as an unfortunate consequence of hard decisions that have had to be made.

The cumulative effect of these narratives is to suggest that the university sector has been hit by a series of massive storms that no one could have predicted. The story continues that, to mitigate the consequences of these unexpected storms, we have to change how

we do things. The storms are presented as natural phenomena and the consequences as nobody's fault, making the responses inevitable 'things that have to be done', that are necessary for survival. The role of professional staff, academics and other workers becomes riding out this storm and just accepting the things which 'have to be done', guided by their managers. Helen Scott, Executive Director of Universities Human Resources (UHR), sums up this perspective in her [Wonkhe blog](#): 'well-managed change is needed. This is actually about long-term sustainability — to resist change is to stagnate and to die'.

However, there are problems with the death-by-ecology narrative. The wrecking ball that is contemporary government policy on Higher Education is not a natural phenomenon. It is a consciously designed ideological agenda and, as a wrecking ball, its trajectory has been as eminently predictable as it has been visible. For example, in September 2015, [Jo Johnson](#) (then Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) reiterated the Conservative Party's 2010 manifesto position that '[HE] Providers entering and leaving the market is a sign of healthy competition, and it is something of which we should expect to see more'. Tory policy since at least 2010 has focused on this vision. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is one of the mechanisms introduced to facilitate the closure of some universities. Some universities closing down is, of course, what is implied by the terms 'entering and leaving'.

Equally, internationally, the global trajectories of Higher Education have been apparent since the 'Bologna Process'. This officially started in 1999 as a European initiative to facilitate comparability of university systems across Europe. The aims of the Bologna Process were to facilitate the mobility of students and the university workforce within Europe. This is not necessarily a bad aim given European cultural ideals, but its [remit](#) has now expanded so it emphasises the need to '*continuously adapt* [across European states so that] their higher education systems [are] more compatible and strengthening their quality assurance mechanisms' (emphasis added). Of course, HE institutions are not organisms, and do not adapt; they have to be adapted by someone.

Other external changes, such as the [demographics](#) of the United Kingdom — including the notorious 'demographic dip' in the population of 18-year-olds in recent years — were well-researched, which meant that changes in student numbers would have been relatively predictable for years.

All of these narratives of external change play down the agency of the university itself. This sector is a powerful economic actor, worth approximately [£95 billion per year](#) to the UK economy. With the right will, it could form a powerful sectoral lobby capable of putting up stout resistance to the ideological whims of a Tory government. Individually, universities also still have considerable local autonomy in 'how' things are done. You would thus expect a diversity of approaches to these challenges, based on different perspectives on which 'difficult decisions' must be made.

There is still some optimism by [researchers](#) around the responses to and consequences of change. However, across the sector those working at the grassroots of universities have had a universal and uniform experience of change. These include increased centralisation, increased marketisation, increased workloads, increased stress, poor mental health, decreased autonomy, decreases in pay, decreases in job security, decreases in staff levels — all accompanied by consequential decreases in morale and worsening industrial relations.

These contexts shape how we might consider why the implicit contract between employer and employee has been broken. The breaking of the implicit contract is not accidental: it is, rather, a consequence of deliberate, ideologically driven applications of a 'theory of change' — based around the notion of 'agility' — which has been actively adopted by many universities as a, and in some cases *the*, management strategy.

2. Where is this strong and silent discourse?

It may not be immediately apparent to Higher Education workers that notions of agility underpin management strategy. Given enduringly high workloads, many university staff will not have had time to notice how 'agility', 'agile practices' or notions of 'business agility' have crept into the lexicon. But when you start looking, it is everywhere.

The term now appears regularly in mission statements, 'thought leadership' articles, and strategy documents, and not only in the UK. For example, The [University of the West Indies](#) proclaims its 'agility will create an entrepreneurial university with a diversified revenue base, an improved global presence to ensure economic stability through global expansion, operational efficiencies and financial profitability'. Large universities in the UK like [Oxford](#) position themselves at the forefront of global change, with 'agility' both a method and a driving philosophy for profiting from education. Other UK universities follow. [Lord Mandelson](#) hails the agility and risk-taking at Manchester Metropolitan University.

The implementation of agile practices run throughout an organisation, affecting all staff. The Registrar at University of Exeter explains on one of many [AHUA \(Association of Heads of University Administration\) blogs](#) on change management that 'firstly, we need to address behaviour and mindset. We need training that will help people become more agile (able to adapt quickly in simple ways)'. And the changes wrought by agility are unending. In another [blog](#), there is a telling slip as the motivation for change shifts between the again 'unpredictable externally generated change' and the perhaps more honest assessment that it is the 'HE world [that] is now so fast-moving that longer-term plans will never survive'.

Agility has become what sociologist [Pierre Bourdieu](#) referred to as a 'strong discourse' because of its prevalence. It is akin to the 'strong discourse[s]' of marketisation he refers to in his article on the destruction of collective structures that stand in the way of

neoliberalism. Agility is also often a silent discourse. Its reality as a political agenda is denied or simply unspoken, because the need for institutions to be agile in the face of external change is unquestioned.

3. What happened when business agility met higher education?

The full story of how a concept like agility — which has its ‘theoretical’ origins in complexity science and was originally adopted in the software industry — came to be a rationale for the operational management of universities still needs to be written. While there is an extensive literature, and even more extensive blogging, on the iterations and re-iterations of ‘agility’ as an approach to project management in the software industry, its route into Higher Education is rather more obscure.

Agility appears to have been incorporated into HE by business ‘gurus’, who are sometimes misleadingly referred to as ‘thought leaders’, to become a dominant way of understanding the management of universities. Business agility conceptualises organisations as some form of intelligent system that is either ‘agile’, or not. Business agility can be defined — in as much as a metaphor that borrows words from everyday life can be defined — as the ability of an organisation to adapt quickly to market changes. The purpose of business agility is to ensure a business organisation is permanently at a competitive advantage.

Whether it is a good idea (spoiler: it isn’t) to import uncritically a theory with origins in project management and software development, which has then mutated to other industries via the ‘business guru’ blogosphere, to the management of whole universities is a question for a different brief. But it is worth noting that legally, structurally, socially and in terms of how income is generated, [universities are not businesses](#). It is also worth pointing out that despite the legal, structural, social and organisational fact that universities are not entrepreneurial businesses, university ‘thought leaders’ and managers in UK HE [talk and act as if they were](#).

In the field of Higher Education, [Linda Holbeche](#), author of *The Agile Organisation: How to Build an Innovative, Sustainable and Resilient Business* (2015), has been particularly influential in thinking about the concept of ‘agility’. Holbeche’s work is not the only account of agility in HE, but reviewing her work is useful as a guide to help understand the implications of ‘agility’ as it has been operationalised. Her case for agility in universities starts with the observation that the Higher Education sector is changing. The sectoral landscape is complex, but she suggests three primary drivers of change can be identified. These are:

1. The emergence of artificial intelligence and automated intelligence will change how HE does its work;
2. A global demographic change will change who attends universities;

3. The emergence of a three-tier employment market will change what employers and employees want from employment.

In this framing, the inevitable consequence of these changes is that in the 'university sector, agility and flexibility, professionalisation and specialisation will become key'. While this statement may appear to be an anodyne generality, it is clear that the agility agenda is radical.

For example, Holbeche argues that because we are in a situation of global contextual change, and because this change will continue, the HE workforce needs to change to become 'a flexible, agile workforce in the future'. Further, she argues, 'whilst many [universities] have made recent investments in workforce reform, change is needed to develop a workforce that is sufficiently flexible, specialised and self-renewing to be properly responsive to changing stakeholder expectations'.

As the argument for 'agility' develops in Holbeche's presentations, it becomes clearer that what is proposed is not reform but fundamental change of the working context. Here, 'change is viewed as dynamic stability' and working life is defined by the 'continuous improvement' of individuals in an environment that is 'boundaryless'. It is important to understand that this is not just another argument for flexibility. As Holbeche's development of the argument makes clear, 'agility' is not a synonym for 'flexibility', because 'flexibility' is the capacity to operate with degrees of freedom within fairly rigid structures, whereas 'agility' envisions no such rigid structures.

4. What are the imaginations of the agile university?

There are a myriad ways that the future could be imagined if the principles of 'agility' were fully enacted in HE. For simplicity's sake I will propose just two. One imagination suggests an exciting world of constant creativity and activity where there are no limits. This might be how agility is envisioned by proponents such as Linda Holbeche. It is a working life of doing, of synergies, and of spontaneity. It is where silo-busting workers are supported in their creative endeavours by a management who 'get it'. It is a world of flat hierarchies, of direct action, and of loose ties — and no rules. One reading of an 'agile' environment would be of an ideal — almost an anarcho-syndicalist ideal — that could appeal to academics' notions of autonomy, independence, and individuality.

Another imagination of the 'agile' future is the continuation — into permanence — of the kind of chaos, stress and uncertainty that has been experienced in recent years, as highly regulated and structured UK universities lumber around trying to act as if they were a Silicon Valley start-up. Applied to the HE sector, 'agility' presents those workers at the bottom end of an increasingly hierarchical and managerial system with a working environment that is rather different. This is one where autonomy is the autonomy of having no job security, where independence is the independence of having no ethical

compass other than what could be gotten away with under 'market' rules, and where individuality is the individualism of competing against each other.

There are reasons, beyond those of our lived experience of current agility agendas, to believe the second of these two imaginations of the future is more likely. Both agility advocates and Wonkhe — [in collaboration with management consultancies like KPMG](#) — are clear and unequivocal about what they believe needs to happen in HE. Managers appear to have taken seriously Holbeche's claim that for universities to become 'agile', it is necessary to impose a new 'psychological contract' on the HE workforce. Changing the psychological contract has involved moving away from the mutuality implicit in older contracts, which exchanged job security and career progression for hard work and loyalty. In place is one in which employers expect employees to be 'flexible, high performing and committed' for the organisation, as well as personally 'resilient'. The one-sidedness of this new contract has to be reinforced by telling employees that is what they want. Holbeche's argument includes studies that report the workforce wants this 'psychological contract' to be broken. A significant percentage of those in 'Gen Y' (born between 1980–2000) are said to prioritise 'flexibility', 'prefer[ing] to hold multiple jobs', and desiring an 'entrepreneurial lifestyle'.

If we return to the question of why the implicit contract in HE was broken, we can answer that through the lens of agility. Where agility is espoused — even if it is seldom explained — by university management as a principle for decision-making, the breaking of this implicit contract is deliberate, no matter how many sombre words about 'difficult decisions' are uttered. Where the ideology of agility underpins HE policy, you — the academic and professional workforce — are perceived as not holding the right values: you do not have the right perspective on work.

Agility argues that our long-held views — of education as a human right, of enquiry as a worthwhile enterprise in its own right, of the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake — are outdated. They need to be replaced by the correct view: that this thing we call Higher Education is about selling a commodity, and that preserving an institution so that it can continue to sell that commodity is the only goal. In short, under agility, the Higher Education workforce needs to be remade: not just in terms of changing contractual arrangements but psychologically as well, so that the workforce accepts, and embraces, this 'correct' view.

The USS dispute was, and is, the most visible attempt to break the social and psychological contracts in Higher Education on a national level. Locally, as well, there are indications that the implicit contracts between workforce and management in Higher Education are being deliberately broken. It is evident in the continual changes in local policy and practice that constantly try to nudge the workforce towards other people's notions of 'flexibility'. It is clear in the incessant mania for restructuring that possesses UK Higher Education. And it is not only working terms and conditions, but also the personal, psychological, social, epistemological, and intellectual foundations of the university workforce that are under pressure.

Indeed, the constant change we experience is itself part of the agility agenda: the embedding of 'agility' in HE depends on conditioning us so that the experience of constant change makes us believe that 'change' is inevitable. Agility is an agenda consciously designed to turn us into something other than ourselves. Agility requires us to believe we are powerless to do anything about such changes and all their consequences. The lack of agency, the lack of possibility, the helplessness and hopelessness that such a vision of the future predicts is frightening. But if we understand fully why the breaking of our implicit contracts has happened, we can — as a workforce and as stewards of our own work — organise and act so as to regain some agency and some hope. That is worth fighting for.

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 points raised and suggest that discussants use Twitter with the hashtag [#USSbriefs85](#); the author will try to respond as appropriate. This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).