“Producing Anxiety in the Neoliberal University”

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Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical analysis of the neoliberal production of anxiety in academic faculty members in universities in Northern Europe. The paper focuses on neoliberalization as it is instantiated through audit and ranking systems designed to produce academia as a space of economic efficiency and intensifying competition. We suggest that powerful forms of competition and ranking of academic performance have been developed in Northern Europe. These systems are differentiated and differentiating, and they serve to both index and facilitate the neoliberalization of the academy. Moreover, these audit and ranking systems produce an ongoing sense of anxiety among academic workers. We argue that neoliberalism in the academy is part of a wider system of anxiety production arising as part of the so-called ‘soft governance’ of everything, including life itself, in contemporary late liberalism.
Keywords: Neoliberalism, Higher Education, Geography, Job Stress, Mental Health

Key Messages:
- This article investigates processes of neoliberalization of the academy.
- It argues that neoliberalism entails shifts from exchange to competition, from equality to inequality, and turns academics into human capital.
- It suggests that auditing systems are key mechanisms of neoliberalization and produce unhealthy levels of anxiety and stress in the academy.

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Introduction

As we began writing this paper, 126 senior UK academics published an open letter to the UK government in *The Guardian Online* (Lesnick-Oberstein, *et al.*, 6 July 2015), calling on the newly elected Parliamentary Education Committee to conduct an “urgent investigation” into matters of “grave” concern. We have reproduced a significant portion of that open letter below because it captures a number of the issues we wish to address in this paper.

Government regulations and managerial micro-management are escalating pressures on academics, insisting they function as “small businesses” covering their own costs or generating profits. Highly paid university managers (and even more highly paid “management consultants”) are driving these processes, with little regard for, or understanding of, the teaching and research process in higher education....

*Unprecedented levels of anxiety and stress among both academic and academic-related staff and students abound,* with “obedient” students expecting, and even demanding, hoop-jumping, box-ticking and bean-counting, often terrified by anything new, different, or difficult. (Lesnick-Oberstein, *et al.*, 2015, n.p., emphasis added).
The authors of this open letter touch on a number of key interrelated issues: the rise of the new ‘administrative class’ and its undermining of collegial governance of universities, the rise of systems of audit and assessment as political technologies of governmentality in the universities, and most important for the discussion in this paper, the resultant “unprecedented levels of anxiety and stress among both academic and academic-related staff and students” (Lesnick-Oberstein, et al., 2015, n.p.).

This paper draws on our research experiences of academic audit systems in five jurisdictions — Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (UK). We chose these five jurisdictions because we regularly work in them, and all have advanced forms of formal research assessment and audit systems in place, which we see as hallmarks of a neoliberalizing academia. We chose these particular places also because some are considered to be ‘leading’ in the development of academic audit systems (e.g., Netherlands and UK) while others are thought by many to be unlikely spaces of academic neoliberalism because they are part of the so-called ‘Nordic model’ of social democratic economic and social policy (Denmark, Iceland and Sweden). However, all of these systems engage faculty members directly in varied forms of audit and assessment of academic knowledge production that, we argue, produces anxiety and stress. The purpose of this paper, then, is to investigate the relationship between these neoliberal audit systems and the rising levels of anxiety and ill-health among academic faculty members.
Why might we care about this? Perhaps the recent death of Professor Stefan Grimm of Imperial College, London, provides a particularly graphic example of the impact that rising levels of anxiety and stress are having in the academy. It also illustrates how that stress is linked directly to systems of ‘performance assessment’. Professor Grimm was found dead in his home in September of 2014 after complaining that he was to be fired by Imperial College for failure to meet professorial grant ‘income targets’ of £200,000 per annum as a Principle Investigator (PI) (Colquhoun, 2014; Parr 2014a, 2014b). One month after his death — which was ruled to be a suicide by asphyxiation — an email was sent from Professor Grimm’s Gmail account to colleagues at Imperial College that outlined what he deemed to be his poor treatment. This email stated:

On May 30th ‘13 my boss… came into my office together with his PA and ask[ed] me what grants I had. After I enumerated them I was told that this was not enough and that I had to leave the College within one year – “max” as he said. He made it clear that he was acting on behalf of… the then head of the Department of Medicine, and told me that I would have a meeting with him soon to be sacked. Without any further comment he left my office. It was only then that I realized that he did not even have the courtesy to close the door of my office when he delivered this message. When I turned around the corner I saw a student who seems to have overheard the conversation looking at me in utter horror (quoted in Colquhoun, 2014, n.p.).

The subsequent coroner’s report noted that Professor Grimm had been subjected to long-standing discussions about funding that were “clearly a stressor”, and a senior coroner called Professor Grimm’s death “needless” (cited in Grove, 2015, n.p.).

There are, of course, other signs of the rising levels of “anxiety and stress” amongst university faculty. *The Guardian* newspaper, for example, has put together a collection of more than 40 articles under the title *Mental Health: The University in Crisis* and with
the byline: “Mental health issues have become a growing problem among students and academics. This series will uncover a hidden side to university life” (The Guardian, n.d.). The New York Times recently published an article about the rise of suicide deaths on campus, linking many of these deaths to the ‘culture of perfection’ that predominates in university settings, especially among academic faculty members (Scelfo, 2015). This is not surprising given existing levels of work-related psychological stress in the academy. A 2005 study of work stress in the UK Higher Education sector, for example, found that levels of stress had increased significantly among all staff on a range of axes, and that “the most significant source of stress for all higher education staff (irrespective of category of employee) was job insecurity” (Tytherleigh, et al., 2005: 41; also see: Clarke, et al., 2007). This finding follows on from a survey of academic members of the UK-based Association of University Teachers (representing almost 160,000 academic staff), that found that 93% of its members suffered from work-related stress and 62% from ‘excessive’ strain (cited in Tytherleigh, et al., 2005). Gail Kinman and her colleagues compared levels of psychological distress among academic faculty members in the UK from 1998 and 2004 and they concluded that “the high levels of psychological distress found in the 1998 study are undiminished and exceed those of other professional groups and the population generally” (Kinman, et al., 2006: 15). Other studies have found that academic faculty members are more prone to mental health problems such as psychological distress (Vezina and Gingras, 1996) and affective disorders and stress-related conditions (Wieclaw, et al., 2005). These types of findings now appear to be widespread (e.g., Catano, et al., 2010; Fallon-Hogan, 2013; Gillespie, et al., 2001; Kinman, 1996, 2014; Winefield, et al., 2008a, 2008b; Wright, 2008).
Building on these findings, we make a number of arguments in the rest of this paper regarding the production of anxiety in the contemporary university. We then argue that higher education in Northern Europe has been deeply neoliberalized and that this process is continuing. This is followed by discussions about three key shifts occurring under neoliberalism: the shift from the metaphor of exchange to that of competition as the primary driver of policies; the resultant shift from nominal relations of equality to relations of direct and actual inequality among and between academic faculty; and the shift from conceptualizing the Academic Self as part of larger social groups (e.g., labourers) to conceptualizing the Self as ‘human capital’. These discussions are followed with outlines of how these shifts manifest as the neoliberalizing of the academic audit systems in five jurisdictions in Northern Europe — Denmark, Iceland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom — in order to flesh out our arguments. Our focus on these jurisdictions arises out of our own positioning as researchers living in or having significant research and scholarly ties to the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and the UK. We also believe these places provide useful case studies for understanding the widespread neoliberalization of the academy, and the negative consequences for the health and welfare of academics. We conclude the paper with a discussion that links neoliberalization to the rise of anxiety and mental ill-health in the academy. It is important to note that we do not wish to construct in this paper a binary distinction between a golden past without mental health issues in the academy, versus a neoliberal present that is filled with such problems. We do, however, suggest that the present
neoliberalizing academy can be directly linked to significant increases in anxiety and specific kinds of mental health problems.

**Neoliberalism and the Academy**

Simply defined, the term neoliberalism can be seen as shorthand for what Wendy Brown calls: “a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms” (Brown, 2015: 17). Perhaps more importantly, neoliberal reason has now come to dominate public life, such that it “has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2007: 3). It has thus become both an index and producer of ‘human nature’ itself. In this sense, neoliberal rationality is used to describe the ‘natural condition’ of humans as economically rational beings, *homo-economicus*, at the same time that it produces humans as necessarily *economized* beings (Brown, 2015).

In its bid to economize everything, neoliberalism has deeply affected academia (Berg and Roche, 1997; Castree and Sparke, 2000; Castree, et al, 2006). The most important consequences include:

- reinforcing competition between individual academics, academic departments, academic institutions, academic disciplines and states;
- transforming the academic subject from labourer to human capital;
- favouring the market valuation of academic scholarship;
- fostering short-termism (in grants, in writing, in publishing) so as to be seen as ‘path-breaking’;
• necessitating monitoring and accounting systems to ensure both ‘value-for-money’ and ‘control of control’ for those who fund research and teaching;
• encouraging and facilitating ‘fast policy-transfer’ from centres of calculation — top research universities — to more marginal academic institutions; and
• producing new understandings of local, national and international scales of knowledge production (adapted primarily from Sheppard, 2006; also see Berg, 2006; Brown, 2015).

Many, if not all of these shifts in the academy, and their consequences, have been studied extensively by geographers (e.g., Castree et al. 2006; Larner and LeHeron, 2005; Meyerhoff, et al., 2011; Radice, 2013). A key focus of such work has been the commodification of formerly non-commodified processes in higher education (see, e.g., Larner and LeHeron 2005). A significant number of these studies have thus focused on the transformation of academic knowledge from a ‘use value’ to an ‘exchange value’; in the present context, this is to say that knowledge is not seen as something useful in its own right, but as a means of exchange for something else (e.g. status, ranking, citations, etc.). Such commodification processes, which can work through subtle avenues such as the ‘Harvard’ referencing system that turns knowledge into identifiable commodities (Smith, 2000), are surely important aspects of the neoliberalization of higher education and they clearly require further study and critique.

At the same time, however, we want to present some other consequences of neoliberalization that also need our critical attention, especially in the context of discussions about mental health and the academy. Accordingly, we focus in more detail
on the implications of the neoliberal production of competition (Read, 2009; Brown, 2015), as we find this is having a sustained and significant impact on the mental well-being of academic faculty (and especially junior faculty) members in higher education. It is important to remember in this discussion that whilst neoliberalization plays a key role in these processes, they are always overdetermined by a range of social structures and power relations. Moreover, the specificities of local relationships between ‘actually-existing neoliberalism’ and mental health are always geographically uneven and historically contingent in practice. Our focus here is on identifying the larger sets of tendencies that can be found across a broad range of spaces and places.

The Shift from Exchange to Competition

The key difference between classical liberalism and neoliberalism is a shift in the key operational metaphor from that of ‘exchange’ to that of ‘competition’ (Foucault, 2008; Read, 2009). While both liberalism and neoliberalism share in the construction of humans as homo-economicus — economically rational beings that operate with full knowledge of the economic implications of their actions, and then act in order to maximize their economic returns — the shift from a metaphor of exchange to one of competition has profound effects as, “competition necessitates a constant intervention on the part of the state, not on the market, but on the conditions of the market” (Read, 2009: 28).

It is in this need for constant intervention by the state and its institutions to protect and promote competition that we see some of the most significant impacts in the working lives of academic faculty members. Universities have been forced to follow specific
forms of economic rationality (Berg and Roche, 1997; Castree and Sparke, 2000; Larner and LeHeron, 2005), but perhaps more importantly, they have been subjected to external competitive processes at the same time that they have developed internal systems of competition for faculty.

We suggest that the creation of new and intensified forms of competition have had some of the most significant impacts on the academy in the last two decades or so. Before we proceed with our arguments, however, it is important to emphasis that the academy has always been a highly competitive space, as well as being a space of privilege for many white, straight, middle-class, able-bodied and cis-gendered men (Bagilhole and Goode, 2001). Therefore, we are not suggesting that there existed some golden past where everyone was treated with equal respect in communal settings of cooperation. Nevertheless, we suggest that neoliberalization of the academy has seen the instantiation of more profound kinds and levels of competition than existed previously in higher education, and that there are significant qualitative transformations of the academy arising from this competition.

**The Shift from Equality to Inequality**

The first and perhaps most important of these qualitative transformations is the shift from a system based on a broadly conceived idea of equality to one based on inequality (Brown, 2015). The operational metaphor of exchange necessarily relies on some notion of equality. Once the operational metaphor shifts from exchange to competition, however, inequality becomes a necessary component of relationships between faculty members. This is necessarily so because systems of competition rely on unequal
outcomes (otherwise competition would appear to be pointless). Whilst the older, liberal, academy was a highly competitive space, the kind of competition engendered by liberalism often — but not always — led to winners and non-winners in the academy. In other words, some people were very successful in the liberal academy, whilst others were not as successful, but they were usually not constituted as ‘losers’.

Under neoliberalism, it is now very clear who the losers are: they are the ones who never get tenured or permanent jobs, they are the ones who get fired for lack of ‘productivity’ in a system of constant surveillance and measurement of academic ‘production’, and if they are fortunate enough to avoid precarity, then they are the ones whose salaries stagnate (or drop) in real terms over time.

**The Shift from Labour to Human Capital**

In addition to producing inequality, neoliberalism now produces academic faculty members not as members of a class, labourers, but instead as individuated ‘human capital’ (Read, 2009; Brown, 2015). This transformation has not happened overnight, but is part of much longer transformations in the way that workers are understood over the past 35-40 years. This long term shift in the way that *homo-economicus* is understood — from an exchanging creature to a competing creature — entails a significant and generalized shift in the way that human beings make themselves and are made subjects (Foucault, 2008). The consequence, as Jim Read (2009: 28) notes, is that “salary or wages become the revenue that is earned on an initial investment, an investment in one’s skills or abilities. Any activity that increases the capacity to earn income… is an investment in
human capital.” The end result is that this newly ‘competitive’ *homo-economicus*
becomes, in Foucault’s (2008: 226) words, “an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself.”

Wendy Brown (2015: 109-111) argues that there are a number of important consequences
of this transformation of workers into human capital. First, like all other forms of capital,
human capitals are constrained by ‘markets’. As a result, she claims they must “comport
themselves in ways that will outperform the competition and align themselves with good
assessments about where those markets may be going” (Brown, 2015: 109). Yet, even
when human capitals act appropriately to improve on their investment, there is no
guarantee that ‘markets’ themselves cannot fail, thus leaving human capitals to fail as
well. This is because, in part at least, neoliberalization (which involves the
economization of even everyday life itself through penetrating forms of ‘soft capitalism’;
see Çalışkan and Callon, 2009; Thrift, 2008) transforms both state institutions and
citizens of the state into figures of *financialized firms*. In so doing, neoliberalism
produces a new way of being for citizen-subjects — including citizen-subjects of
academia. No longer are citizens the producers of and subject to group-differentiated
power and interest (say, for example, as workers in a union), but rather the citizen-subject
becomes capital to be invested in and enhanced. Perhaps most importantly, this
reconstitutes the relationship between state institutions (such as public universities) and
citizens (paid and unpaid workers). “As human capital, [citizens] may contribute to or be
a drag on economic growth; they may be invested in or divested from depending on their
potential for GDP enhancement” (Brown, 2015: 110).
As human capital, the subject becomes responsible for itself, but also becomes a completely dispensable element of the state or other institutions. Similarly, as producers of individual human capital, public universities are equally dispensable elements of a neoliberal state that sees higher education as a private good rather than a public one, and if higher education is a private good, then why should the (neoliberal) state bother to fund higher education? This logic underpins the current rounds of disinvestment in higher education in many jurisdictions (see McGettigan, 2015).

The individual citizen-subject also becomes responsibilized for the wider macro-economic success of the state (or the university) even though it has almost no control over the various component processes that go into macro-economic success. Neoliberal individuals and their success as human capital are thus linked directly to the project of economic growth and credit enhancement (Read, 2009; Brown, 2015). More importantly, and even though they have little control over these wider processes, “when individuals, firms, or industries constitute a drag on this good, rather than a contribution to it, they may be legitimately cast off or reconfigured — through downsizing, furloughs, outsourcing, benefits cuts, mandatory job shares, or offshore production relocation” (Brown, 2015: 84). In this way neoliberalism produces in the subject a feeling of constant (and growing) precariousness.

This precariousness is not completely new in Northern Europe where we live and/or work, but the extent of precariousness certainly is growing — at the very least since the capitalist crises of 2008-2011. The obvious result of the capitalist crisis in Iceland, for
example, was a dramatic increase in the size of part-time and adjunct faculty members. At the University of Iceland in 2014, for example, there were 2,443 part-time or casual academic staff compared to only 683 full-time permanent academic staff. In 2012 the part-time and casual academic staff did not even have a contract, and this was not remedied until 1 March 2014 (University of Iceland, 2015a). Precariousness is also now the norm in places like the United States where in 2013 only 26.88 percent of all teaching posts in higher education institutions were tenured or tenure-track (Barnshaw and Duneitz, 2015:13, Figure 4). This precariousness links with these wider trends towards casualization and segregated labour markets, but we argue that there is a qualitative difference in this new form of neoliberal precariousness. It is one that operates much more powerfully in both the affective and somatic registers, through constant feelings of anxiety and physical ailments. Perhaps more importantly, under neoliberalism precarity is purposely created to operate on minds and bodies as a disciplinary and disciplining practice. Ironically, it is often constructed in public discourse as a form of freedom, whereby academic faculty members get to ‘choose’ the form that their careers will take. We argue that this precariousness is inimitable to mental well-being in higher education, and we turn now to outline the specific processes of performance review and audit that are part and parcel of the production of this precariousness.

**Academic Audit Systems in Northern Europe**

The theoretical literature suggests that one of the key ways that ‘competition’ and the resultant inequality has been produced in the academy under neoliberalism is via ranking and audit processes (Berg, 2006; Strathern, 2000). These ranking and audit systems, and
their resultant production of inequality and precarity, have a significant impact on our well-being in higher education.

We work under conditions of surveillance, the new Benthamite Panopticon of the campuses. Our universities provide us with enhanced opportunities to worry about whether we’re ‘performing’ to the right level. Is this research good enough? Is this teaching good enough? Is this public-engagement work valuable enough? Am I showing ‘leadership,’ doing ‘collaborative research,’ applying for enough grants? Oh, yes, and have I got my ‘work-life balance’ right? …The modern university is a breeding ground for worry (O’Gorman, 2015: n.p.).

We draw on examples from Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, The Netherlands, and the UK in order to illustrate the various audit processes in place to produce a very clear and unequal system of winners and losers. We briefly outline the relevant systems in each jurisdiction below, then proceed to theorize their relationship to the production of precariousness and anxiety in the academy.

**Denmark**

The Danish audit system – BFI, *Den Bibliometriske Forskningsindikator* (the Bibliometric Research Indicator) – was introduced in 2009 and is, in the words of the responsible government department, “an element in the performance-based model for the distribution of new basic funding to the universities” (Uddannelses og Forskningsministeriet, 2014). BFI is an outcrop of the then liberal-conservative government’s “globalisation strategy” that, among other things, aimed to make Denmark competitive in the global economy by fostering “World top level universities” (Danish Government, 2006). The system was introduced through a parliament agreement that included the opposition Social Democratic Party and Social-Liberal Party, and this has ensured that the system has survived governmental changes. BFI determines the
distribution of 25% of new basic funding for Danish universities. The rest is distributed according to teaching activity (45%), external funding (20%) and completed doctoral degrees (10%). The system is based on so-called “authority lists” (autoritetslister) that rank journals as either Level 1 or Level 2. Only twenty per cent of journals within a subject group (e.g. “Geography and Development Studies”) can be ranked at the “top” Level 2. Journals that are not on the list do not count in the calculation of annual BFI “points”. Since 2013, book publishers have been ranked according to the same model.

Iceland

The (renamed) Icelandic Evaluation System for Public Higher Education Institutions was developed in 1998 (Sigfúsdóttir, et al., 2005; Þorkelsdóttir, 2011; University of Iceland, 2015b). Perhaps ironically, the system was developed by representatives of the socialist government of Iceland and the faculty unions in Iceland as a way of providing better financial compensation for professors at a time of very low pay in relation to international standards, in return for ‘demonstrable’ research outputs (Þorkelsdóttir, 2011). The Icelandic academic audit system explicitly assesses individual ‘productivity’ and differs from the four other systems that we discuss here in that it directly “rewards individual researchers instead of whole institutions, and does so both in terms of salaries and career advancements” (Þorkelsdóttir, 2011: 37), although it has also been used to compare institutions domestically and to attempt to ‘rationalize’ (i.e., downsize) staffing (Icelandic Parliament, n.d.). In this system, individual scholars gain points for research, teaching, and service, and these point totals (after a defined minimum points are reached) are used to determine a share of a bonus payment system derived from a set-aside pot of money (equal to 12.5% of the total salary costs) given to individuals (Þorkelsdóttir, 2011: pp. 37-
This points system also has a direct (and cumulative) effect on individual career progress, as ‘total’ (career) points are added in a cumulative fashion in order to determine both starting rank and salary in the universities, as well as being used to determine the timing of promotions from lector to docent and then to full professor in the system. Finally, the point system is used to determine when (and whether) individual faculty members are eligible for sabbatical leaves and internal research funding. Failure to obtain so-called ‘power points’ (aflstig, points from publishing in the most highly ranked journals) can result in the revocation of eligibility of individual faculty for both sabbatical leaves and internal research funding. As a result, the Icelandic academic audit system, although designed to leverage higher salaries as part of wage negotiations between the universities and faculty unions, can be seen to be the most intrusive system of neoliberal assessment because of its focus on the individual and its very direct impact on individual academic careers in Iceland (for a complete description of the assessment system, see University of Iceland, 2015b).

**Netherlands**

The Netherlands has had a formal university research audit system in place since 1994, with the current *Standard Evaluation Protocol, 2009-2015* being the fourth iteration of the protocols for evaluation of scientific research in the Netherlands. It follows the protocols of 1994, 1998 and 2003 (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2009). The audit processes are managed by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands, and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research. The *Standard Evaluation Protocol, 2009-2015* has two key objectives:

- Improvement of research quality based on an external peer review, including scientific and societal relevance of research, research policy and
research management.

• Accountability to the board of the research organisation, and towards funding agencies, government and society at large (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2009: 4).

The protocol is not limited to assessment of research itself, but also assesses the wider context and implications of university research: “research management, research policy, research facilities, PhD-training and the societal relevance of research are considered integral parts of the quality of work in an institute and its programmes” (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2009: 4). The reviews involve a ‘self-evaluation’ and an external review, including a site visit once every six years, and an internal mid-term review in between the six-yearly external reviews (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2009). Like all systems of audit, researchers and the institutions to which they belong have aligned themselves with the audit process (Castree, et al., 2006).

Sweden

Sweden in 2009 introduced a performance-based model for resource allocation, which, since 2014, has distributed twenty per cent of block grants to higher education according to publications/citations and external funding, each criterion weighing fifty per cent (Monaco, et al., 2015). But Sweden is still to develop an actual, jurisdiction-wide system for research evaluation. On government request, the Swedish Research Council has mapped experiences from other countries, with particular emphasis on the UK (Quist, et al., 2013), and proposed a research evaluation system, FOKUS (Forskningskvalitetsutvärdering i Sverige, or Research Quality Evaluation in Sweden) (Monaco, et al., 2015). Partly in anticipation of a jurisdiction-wide system, institutions of higher education implement various local auditing systems, which can have significant implications for funding at the department level. At Lund University’s Faculty of Social
Sciences, for instance, funding for research and research education is in 2015 distributed according to number of full-time students (20%), completed doctoral degrees (26%), attraction of external funding (26%) and registered publications (28%) (Samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten, 2014).

**United Kingdom**

The United Kingdom Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) started in 1986, followed by subsequent assessments in 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001, and 2008 (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2008). Following the 2008 RAE, the UK government transformed the RAE into the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), with the first REF assessment completed in 2014 (HEFCE, 2014). The REF is carried out on behalf of the four UK funding councils responsible for research and higher education in the UK: the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (DEL). The key objectives of the REF (and the RAE before it) is to assess research for the following purposes:

- The four higher education funding bodies will use the assessment outcomes to inform the selective allocation of their grant for research to the institutions which they fund, with effect from 2015-16.
- The assessment provides accountability for public investment in research and produces evidence of the benefits of this investment.
- The assessment outcomes provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the higher education (HE) sector and for public information (HEFCE, 2014: n.p).

As the oldest continuous national system of audit and assessment in higher education, the UK RAE/REF has had a significant impact on the development of many other national
assessment systems, including those discussed here (e.g., see the various entries in
Castree, et al., 2006).

On July 1, 2015, the UK government announced plans to introduce a new Teaching
Excellence Framework to assess teaching quality in the higher education sector in the UK
(Morgan, 2015a). Just one week later, the UK Chancellor, George Osborne, announced
that universities with ‘high quality teaching’ (as defined by the soon-to-be-implemented
Teaching Excellence Framework) would be allowed to charge above the current
£9,000.00 maximum tuition fee cap (Morgan, 2015b). This fits perfectly with the wider
economization of higher education in the UK, whereby teaching, research and scholarly
service are valued as commodities (to be exchanged). In the words of David Willetts, the
former Minister for Universities and Science: “unleashing the forces of consumerism is
the best single way we’ve got of restoring high academic standards” (in McGettigan,
2015: 2). His thinking is that making actual course costs obvious for students — by
making them pay for them fully — will “make them think more carefully about their
university choices and make them demand more when they arrive to study” (McGettigan,
2015: 2).

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As evidenced by the previous discussion, all five jurisdictions that we discuss above have
advanced forms of formal research assessment and audit systems in place. These we view
as neoliberal (and neoliberalizing) as the systems engage faculty members directly in the
assessment process through 1) the instantiation of audit-induced ‘competition’ (and the
resulting shift from *equality to inequality*); and, 2) the production of academic workers as
human capital rather than labour. The key question for us, though, is how might we think through the relationship between these audit and assessment processes and the rise in anxiety and ill-health among academic faculty members? Whilst there are many ways to answer this question, size limitations for this paper constrain us to focus our response on the two key outcomes discussed directly above that these audit processes help to bring about. We believe that both of these processes have led to increasing forms and feelings of precariousness experienced by academic faculty members.

**Precariousness and Audit-Induced Competition**

It is very clear that all of the academic audit and performance assessment systems operating in Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, The Netherlands, and the UK have been designed to instantiate systems of competition within and between academic workers. What is particularly interesting to us is the way that these state-level systems of competition have been interpreted by individual institutions that then institute *more intensive* neoliberal policies that serve to increase the precariousness of their academic workers. In this regard, a number of universities that we examined for this paper have developed systems of performance review that extend far beyond those necessary for meeting state-managed performance and audit assessment. One Swedish university, for example, instigated an internal research assessment exercise partly in *anticipation* of the wider state-managed research assessment system. This system was used to allocate a portion of internal funding to departments for research and teaching. Similarly, at least one Dutch university has developed internal ‘performance targets’ for faculty members that ratchet up in intensity every year. Thus meeting performance requirements for the year merely means that the following year a faculty member has to meet more onerous
targets. Many of our UK colleagues have reported on having to participate in ‘Mock RAEs”, ostensibly in order to prepare for the actual RAE/REF, but these are also used as powerful mechanisms for disciplining unruly subjects in the academy.

This type of command and control in academia is more than simply an assault on academic freedom (which surely must involve the freedom to choose where to publish one’s scholarly work), because in both increasing job expectations whilst simultaneously decreasing control over one’s work output, such policies produce significant amounts of what researchers term ‘job strain’ (e.g., Lewchuk, et al., 2003; Taris, et al., 2001) or ‘employment strain’, with demonstrable negative implications for the mental health of workers (Tytherleigh, et al., 2005; Winefield, et al., 2008a). These are operationalized through a series of phenomena that are well-documented sources of job stress and anxiety in the academy. Indeed, as Horton and Tucker (2014: 85) observe:

> academic workplaces are frequently characterized by isolated, individualised working practices; intense workloads and time pressures; long hours and the elision of barriers between work and home; anxieties around job security and contracts (particularly for early career staff); and processes of promotion and performance review that effectively valorise individual productivity, and reward and institutionalise each of the above-listed characteristics.

Arguably, these problematic characteristics of the academic workplace have become both more entrenched and more stressful in recent years, especially when it comes to anxiety induced by job insecurity. A number of UK universities have, for example, developed ‘grant income targets’ as part of performance requirements for faculty members. The infamous case of Imperial College London, discussed earlier in this paper is a case in point. The University and College Union at the University of Birmingham recently held
an ‘indicative strike vote’ in response to the university floating the idea of making ‘grant income’ a core component of contractual obligations for academic staff (Jump, 2015a). Over 80 percent of academic staff indicated they would be willing to strike over: “the imposition of grant capture as a generic duty and disciplinary necessity” (cited in Jump, 2015a: n.p.). According to *Times Higher Education*, grant income targets of one kind or another exist at *one in six* UK universities (Havergal, 2015), although another *Times Higher Education* report suggest that there are “a total of 28 universities – 30 per cent of the [UK] total – that have [grant] targets of some sort” (Jump, 2015c: n.p.).

The consequences for failure to meet these kinds of performance targets may be quite significant, depending on the jurisdiction. In the case of early-career scholars at the Dutch University discussed above, failure to meet performance targets usually results in the loss of the ‘tenure-track’ position. The Danish Research Indicator results have been used in *at least* one Danish university to guide decisions on academic faculty redundancies. In addition to the infamous case of Stefan Grimm discussed earlier, an academic has taken Bristol University to the UK Employment Tribunal after losing her job as a university lecturer in October, 2014, for allegedly, failing to meet ‘grant income’ targets (Jump, 2015b). In the case of the individualized performance assessment of academics in Iceland, failure to publish in specified journals (for so-called ‘power points’) results in withdrawal of eligibility for sabbatical leaves and internal research funding — leading to even greater difficulty for affected faculty members to meet research performance ‘targets’.
It is clear that these processes serve to produce a sense of *instability* among academic faculty members. Perhaps equally important, and just as neoliberal policy is the subject of ‘fast transfer’, so too do understandings of the negative consequences of these policies move quickly along well-travelled networks to ensure that feelings of precariousness move far beyond just those institutions with ever-increasing productivity targets, internal audit systems, and grant ‘income’ expectations. In the age of austerity, stories of the closure of departments, restructuring and job loss travel quickly (and widely) through the academy. They provide ‘proof’ of the new precariousness of human capital in the neoliberal university, and they lead to greater feelings of helplessness, stress and anxiety. These feelings of stress and anxiety are exacerbated by the fact that as human capital, academic faculty members can now be overworked, constantly surveilled, and cast off without support once they have been used up (e.g., Shaw and Ward, 2014) as ‘disposable labour’ (Harvey, 2014).

In this way, the wider higher education sector as a whole is filled with workers feeling ever more anxious for their jobs because of a general sense of worker precariousness that can be found *everywhere at all times* under neoliberalizing regimes. Liz Morrish (2015: n.p.; original emphasis) notes how this is part of a wider human resources “lexicon of journeys, milestones and checkpoints” that ensure that academics are “never allowed to arrive at the promised reward.”

This is a neoliberal academy that has produced constant uncertainty over future employment, it has ratcheted up the effort required to keep one’s employment, it has created an atmosphere of close and constant evaluation, and because it is centred on a
model of competition, it has caused a deterioration of supportive relationships between workers and their institutions. All of these processes lead to feelings of precariousness and stress and the result can only be a rise in levels of anxiety among academic faculty members in the neoliberal university (see e.g., Gill, 2009; Kinman, Jones and Kinman, 2006; Tytherleigh, et al., 2005).

Precariousness and Human Capital

It took more than seven months for the president of Imperial College London to speak directly about the death of Professor Stefan Grimm (discussed earlier in this paper), and she did so only very obliquely in response to a question about Professor Grimm posed by the host of BBC Radio 4’s Today program of April 17, 2015. Professor Gast stated:

Professors are under pressures. They have a lot on their plates. Professors are really like small business owners. They have their own teaching to perform. They have their own research and they have their research funding to look after. They work with teams of post-docs and post graduate students. Then some of them work on translational work and develop entrepreneurial and new companies and spin outs. It’s a very highly competitive world out there (in Carrigan, 2015: n.p., emphasis added; also cited in Parr, 2015: n.p.).

This response is clearly instructive, if not least because of the suggestion that “Professors are really like small business owners”. The small business analogy is a pretty close approximation of some realities of academic life in the current conjuncture, although it would likely be more accurate to say that professors (and other academic faculty) are now human capitals. As we noted earlier, academics must now constantly seek ways to increase their future value, through such things as successful grant applications, peer reviewed publications (in journals with the ‘right’ impact factor), website blog posts, hits on their personalized socio-scholarly media websites (Academia.edu, ResearchGate, or
Google Scholar), paper citations (via Thomson Reuters Citation Indexes, Elsevier Scopus database, or Google Scholar), and various other ‘measures of esteem’ (to use the language of the Research Excellence Framework).

Academics work in universities that no longer envision their primary objective as the production and dissemination of knowledge for its intrinsic use value. Instead, we work in institutions that conceptualize knowledge production as necessarily part of the production of exchange values. In this way, the university “forces us to internalise the creation of value and the extraction of value and the accumulation of value” (Hall, 2014: n.p.). In so doing, academics must necessarily operate like capital to “maximize profits, facilitate endless capital accumulation, and reproduce capitalist class power” (Harvey, 2014: 96-97).

Of course, doing the work of capitalism is alienating, especially as we are workers and not the owners of the means of scholarly production, but that is just one of a number of key problems arising from the neoliberal corporatization of the university and the transformation of faculty members into human capital. We argue that another increasingly significant problem is the expansion of precariousness that comes with this transformation. If human capital is simply something that universities ‘invest’ in so as to improve their future value, they can just as easily decide to divest from human capital as well.
Conclusion

In this paper we have demonstrated how anxiety is generally on the rise among academic faculty members in Northern European universities. We argue that this rise in anxiety must be seen, in part at least, as the result of the neoliberalization of the university, whereby ‘use value’ is being shifted to ‘exchange value’ through competition manifest in particular systems of audit and assessment that underpin it. This shift was explored through two particular manifestations: 1) the instantiation of audit-induced ‘competition’ (and the resulting shift from equality to inequality); and, 2) the shift from viewing academic workers as labour to seeing them as human capital. One way that various forms of competition between workers as human capital is instantiated, is through systems of audit and assessment of academic ‘productivity’. Our exploration of audit systems showed how these shifts produce exceptional pressures, greater job insecurity, and constant demand for results through turning faculty members into individuated human capitals with precarious status. These neoliberal systems of audit and assessment are now completely entrenched in Northern Europe. Moreover, by recasting faculty members as competitive human capital, audit such systems produce unhealthy levels of anxiety and stress in the academy. This paper thus links the rise of anxiety among academic faculty members to neoliberalization of the university, as it is instantiated through audit and ranking systems designed to produce academia as a space of economic efficiency and intensifying competition. In this way neoliberalism in the academy is part of a wider system of anxiety production arising as part of the so-called ‘soft capitalism’ encapsulating everything, including life itself, in contemporary late liberalism.

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