



# Talkin' 'bout a revolution? From quiescence to resistance in the contemporary university

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Helen Bowes-Catton, Jo Brewis ,  
Caroline Clarke , Deborah H Drake,  
Alison Gilmour and Alison Penn

The Open University, UK

## Abstract

In discussing the events leading up to the resignation of the former Open University Vice Chancellor in April 2018, we focus on the enactment of a form of resistance against proposals for the university through a WhatsApp group, enabling rapid information exchange, discussion of tactics and concrete planning for action. We suggest our group – ‘the Hive’ – was unusual because, first, it countered the politically quiescent trend in academia to comply (at least outwardly) with neoliberalisation, and/or only to write about it, as opposed to mounting challenges. Second, the Hive was virtual, comprising various staff categories, including people based off-campus; it operated almost entirely online and many members had never met face-to-face. This for us evokes notions of the multitude. Third, the group exemplifies alternative forms of solidarity and resistance in other ways, being non-hierarchical, highly pluralist and non-exclusionary. Finally, our Hive provided a supportive, caring space for resisters, which we suggest emerged partly through members’ love for the distinctive social mission of The Open University – although our story also provides hope for harnessing similar emotions within other academic institutions.

## Keywords

Love, quiescence, resistance, solidarity, academic neoliberalism, resistance

## Introduction

In this article we speak directly to two themes of this special issue: ‘the micro-emancipatory potential and limits of academic agency, critical performativity and creative resistance to contest higher education (HE) managerialistic “terror”’ and ‘the relationship between individual and collective academic responses to managerialism and identification of the new relationships which may emerge’. We examine our participation in a period of resistance at The Open University (OU),

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### Corresponding author:

Jo Brewis, Department for People and Organisations, Business School, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK.

Email: joanna.brewis@open.ac.uk

which led to the resignation of the Vice Chancellor (VC) on 13 April 2018. Our title conveys our desire to share this story; to detail, explain and analyse some of the internal text and discursive and performative practices that emerged during this very important period in our university's history. The insertion of a question mark is deliberate; we leave it to the reader to decide whether the wider resistance campaign should, or could, be constituted as revolutionary.

Early 2018 saw the coalescing of a wide variety of forces and actions, at several levels throughout the OU, to protest against the 'line of travel' envisaged for the institution by the VC. Our focus is on how some of this collective resistance was enabled through a WhatsApp group<sup>1</sup> of members of the OU branch of the UK academic trade union, the Universities and Colleges Union (hereafter OUBUCU and UCU). The group comprised, at its peak, 70 or so diverse, multi-disciplinary, multi-role and geographically dispersed OU staff. The authors are all members of the group and identify as White cisgender women, but we have different roles in the university. Helen was then an early-career lecturer on a fixed-term contract (now permanent); Jo is a professor; and Caroline and Deborah are senior lecturers. Alison Gilmour is a part-time Associate Lecturer delivering student tuition and assessment, with a full-time post at another university. Alison Penn is a Staff Tutor, who coordinates and oversees Associate Lecturers in a combined academic and managerial role, and an Associate Lecturer herself. The group's pseudonym, the Hive, reflects our experience of it as a focal point of both cooperative and independent action, constantly 'buzzing' with discussion, but also a safe place to return to or swarm out from.

We make no claim around linear cause and effects, so we cannot speculate precisely about the role the Hive played in the VC's departure. We certainly do not intend to construct a grand narrative about Hive members as institutional saviours. Instead, we offer an account of an unusual form of emergent, spontaneous and grass-roots solidarity which demonstrates that cross-functional, non-hierarchical activism across a university, based on collaboration between people who had in many cases never met, is possible and, perhaps, even vital. One key argument is that the Hive's activities were distinctive in being diffuse, informal and almost entirely virtual. Another distinguishing characteristic of the Hive, and the wider resistance to the VC's proposed change programme, lies in the contradiction of the belief that contemporary academic staff are politically quiescent – being inactive or dormant in the face of sectoral changes – and more inclined to either comply with, or at best write about, the increasingly iniquitous demands of the neoliberalised HE sector. It is to this topic that we now turn.

## Academic complicity and quiescence

It has been widely argued that the incorporation of new public management (NPM) into universities from the 1990s onwards has transformed higher education, with its focus on short-term outcomes and narrowly defined measures of success like increased employability and higher graduate salaries (e.g. Deem, 1998; Keenoy, 2003). The effects on the working lives of academics are well documented in the emerging field of 'critical university studies' (e.g. Hall and Bowles, 2016; Morrish, 2018; Petrina and Ross, 2014). Many authors have studied the United Kingdom in this regard, for it represents an extreme case of managerialism, such as the frequent appointment of 'presidential', high-salaried VCs. In England,<sup>2</sup> the introduction of higher and higher student fees has further contributed to the commodification of learning. That said, as Shefer (2019) suggests in the introduction to a volume she co-edited on the neoliberalisation of HE across Europe,

While our different historical and geopolitical contexts clearly present nuanced experiences for us in our different nation-state materialities, we also have much in common given the seamless, 'liquid' flow of globalised institutional frameworks and of higher education in current times. (p. 1)

These developments have reconfigured social relations into more transactional and instrumental practices within universities in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, where students are sold ‘as products’ and staff are treated ‘as machines’ (Sabelis, 2019: 195). Other key issues raised in this literature include work intensification (e.g. Ogbonna and Harris, 2004), the dangers of resistance and voice (e.g. Sparkes, 2007), the vacuity of performance-related criteria (e.g. Darbyshire, 2008; Macdonald and Kam, 2007; Parker, 2014), instrumental career navigation (e.g. Clarke and Knights, 2015) and the growing insecurity surrounding academic life (e.g. Knights and Clarke, 2014).

Despite this voluminous literature, protestations against neoliberalisation by academics – some of us included – are often confined to publishing articles about our working conditions. Many appear resigned to feelings of powerlessness amid the prevailing managerialist forces at work in HE, which engender pessimism and undermine autonomy. There are of course those whose careers have been enhanced by complicity – engaging instrumentally with managerial demands (see, for example, Clarke and Knights, 2015; Sparkes, 2007) – but others seem to feel relatively disempowered in the contemporary university and its apparently irreversible fate. Here we deploy the concept of quiescence to better understand why academics and other university staff are inactive in responding to the NPM agenda. While it is argued that such experiences ‘have often inspired action . . . they can also lead to political quiescence’ (Schneider-Mayerson, 2013: 871). Both are the subject of this article.

Pinder and Harlos (2001) suggest that the dominant emotions of quiescent employees are ‘fear, anger, cynicism, despair and possibly depression’ but they add that one main characteristic is that such workers ‘have not given up’ (p. 350). Quiescence denotes inactivity in a situation where resistance might be expected – that is, where something of value is under threat. As Edelman (2013) puts it, ‘large groups of people [may] remain quiescent under noxiously oppressive conditions and sometimes passionately defend the very social institutions that deprive or degrade them’ (p. 1). Because universities are supposedly sites of critical thinking, this exemplifies what Schneider-Mayerson (2013) calls ‘surprising quiescence’: we seem to have trouble applying what we espouse to our students to our own employment conditions (p. 876). Parker’s (2014) analysis of the ‘top-down’, ‘earth-shattering’ change programme effected by a new Dean at ‘Euro Business School’ (EBS) in the United Kingdom, which met with little overt and no collective resistance, echoes this point, in that

this workplace was a university populated by responsibly autonomous professionals, and . . . a particular group of these people were invested in these critical traditions as well as being members of the relevant trade union. [Therefore] one might have assumed that this was a place in which resistance was more, not less, likely. (p. 290)

In exploring this ‘surprising’ quiescence at EBS, Parker expresses his own surprise that ‘resistance appeared to be limited to exit’ (p. 282). This is an interesting counterpoint for our analysis as, like our case, his study also involved the arrival of a new leader to whose proposed restructuring staff were largely opposed. We return to this at several points in what follows.

Equally, though, such quiescence is not altogether ‘surprising’, insofar as the subjectifying effects of NPM – fatalism, resignation, alienation, defeatism, even denial – act as both a medium and outcome of political inaction, keeping academics ‘in suspense’ while not being able to ‘participate in the symbolic construction of reality’ (Donskis, 2019: 31). These effects are constantly reinforced through a variety of ever-more demanding mechanisms that must be satisfied in relation to grants, teaching and publishing (Macdonald and Kam, 2007). And the dangers of speaking out in academia – as in most occupations – are well established.

Moreover, while quiescence is a process, rather than any final state of self-subordination, it can become increasingly difficult to transform over extensive periods of time. Yet, as our experiences at the OU show, it can always be otherwise, where ‘complementary processes . . . coalesce groups with diverse concerns into a single political force . . . with the intense affect that comes from defence of one’s own identity’ (Edelman, 2013: 12). Quiescence is not like acquiescence, which implies agreement or going along with something: it is a *temporary* state of quietness and inaction, which always contains the potential for action. Later, we show how our quiescence at OU was disrupted, sparking us into action through love as a *form of doing* (hooks, 2016) as we gradually shifted towards explicit resistance. This form of love also resembles Audre Lorde’s conceptualisation of eros: ‘sharing deeply any pursuit with another person’ (cited in Bell and Sinclair, 2014: 269). Bell and Sinclair (2014) provide a series of examples of eros in academia, including ‘the intimacy of collaborative relationships’, which again echoes our experiences of the Hive. We argue later that our love-/eros-as-doing as members of the Hive originated in part in our emotional commitment to the ‘soul’ of OU, and as such is institution-specific. Crucially, though, eros here is ‘an uncontrollable and uncooptable energy and longing’, which ‘seeks transformation and surpassing of existing orders . . . within the neoliberal university, it shows itself in acts of resistance’ (Lund and Tienari, 2019: 98, 100). This clearly suggests that the ‘energy’ of academic eros can be harnessed in other universities undergoing neoliberalisation, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

At the same time, it has been argued that love for one’s job can *increase* quiescence. Brouillette (2013) argues that

our faith that our work offers non-material rewards and is more integral to our identity than a ‘regular’ job would be, makes us ideal employees when the goal of management is to extract our labor’s maximum value at minimum cost.

Elsewhere, academia is described as being predicated on ‘a sacrificial work ethic and an aestheticized long hours culture’ (Gregg, 2009: 480) or as a labour of love (Clarke et al., 2012). So, our quiescence may be fuelled and exacerbated by love, where passion for our work is precisely what can blind us to its tribulations. Here love is co-opted in the service of managerialist goals.

In this article, however, we draw on quiescence and love to illustrate how one group of university staff worked together to overcome the former *because* of the latter, in an effort to help preserve the OU, a distinctive establishment once described as ‘the jewel in the crown of higher education’ (Nigel Forman<sup>3</sup> quoted in Haines, 1998). We identify the particularities about the resistance mounted by the Hive WhatsApp group which might bring hope to those who believe that staff – and students – in the managerialised university have no option other than quiescence. Our analysis also provides a form of management learning pertinent to all VCs and their executive teams. It clarifies how performative managerialist targets and practices routinely misunderstand that ‘the soul of the university is also the question of its essence’ (Brink, 2018: xii); something well worth fighting for.

First, we outline our theoretical framework which draws from Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) on immaterial labour, the network and the multitude and Arendt (as discussed in Allen, 1999) on non-identitarian forms of solidarity. Next is an account of our methodology. Afterwards, we introduce the OU, a unique academic institution. Finally, we offer a particular reading of our love-inspired resistance, before the concluding comments.

## Theoretical framework

Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) theorise the globalisation and neoliberalisation of capitalism, suggesting it presents new possibilities for resistance. They suggest that capitalism regenerated itself

to subdue the political struggles of the 1960s, including the second wave of feminism, student mobilisations, the anti-Vietnam movement and workers' protests. Hardt and Negri propose that these struggles were inspired by new expectations of work, forms of productivity and lifestyles. Those involved rejected traditional capitalist structures of economic and social production, including the military-industrial complex, Fordism, a 9–5 job for life, the nuclear family and wholesale devaluation of 'women's work'. Their movements were predicated on cooperation, communication, flexibility, mobility, knowledge and emotional connection (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 274–275).

Hardt and Negri claim capitalism responded by profoundly reshaping the global economy along post-Fordist lines, shifting towards the service sector as an important source of profit and privileging immaterial labour. Immaterial labourers need not be co-present: their work is informatised, computerised and often performed remotely. It draws on and reproduces social connections, being intensely communicative, cooperative and relational – 'the network becomes its dominant form of organization' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 113). Through this reinvention, they contend, capital appropriated the values of the 1960s struggles in order to tame them.

Hardt and Negri thus assert that the networks of cooperation and communication on which global capitalism is built mirror the 1960s political struggles. And yet, as with earlier incarnations of capitalism, this contains the seeds of its own destruction. It can give rise to networked political organisations, themselves predicated on 'the form of organization of the cooperative and communicative relationships dictated by the immaterial paradigm of production' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 142). Hardt and Negri (2004) refer to these networks as multitudes, because they are made up of 'different creative agents . . . members of the multitude do not have to become the same or renounce their creativity in order to communicate and cooperate with each other' (p. 92).

The multitude, then, is a collection of singular individuals, typically with diverging interests, who converge to appear united, acting together through a shared mission. By extension, its resistance does not depend on workers pre-identifying as such – that is, it is non-identitarian. Instead, multitudes are contingent on, and embedded within, power relations emerging from the relationality of immaterial production: members are always already networked and communicate frequently in their everyday working practices. Neither do multitudes require co-presence: 'the conditions [already] exist for the various types of labor to communicate, collaborate, and become common' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 107). Indeed they are *formed through* collective resistance. Differences between workers, for example, in terms of the kind of work they do or their geographical locations, do not prohibit possibilities for communicating and cooperating politically, and may not even be obvious. Multitudes are also characterised by 'swarm intelligence', which Hardt and Negri (2004: 91) use to describe methods of problem-solving among a dispersed group of people with no authority figure or universal approach. It is social, rather than individual, and grounded in communication.

We also draw on Arendt's political theory which, Allen (1999: 100) argues, offers us a course between the Scylla of fixed or given identity categories (i.e. essentialism) and the Charybdis of endlessly dynamic ways of identifying, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how collective movements develop and realise shared goals. Allen suggests Arendt sees group identity as a dynamic product of collective action, not its precursor. We deploy Allen's (1999) reading here because of her argument that Arendt provides 'a view of power that can enable us to thematize the solidary ties that bind members of social movements together and thus make collective resistance possible'. '[A]n Arendtian account of solidarity is especially appealing because it does not rely on essentialist and, thus, exclusionary notions of group identity' (p. 98): like the multitude, it has significant explanatory traction for us in theorising the type of democratic practices and resistance mounted by the Hive.

Relatedly, Arendt argues that ‘one can only resist in terms of the identity that is under attack’ (cited in Allen, 1999: 108). For her, the variegated contexts we inhabit will, from time to time, mean specific identities are attacked. Discussing her own identification as Jewish, Arendt claims this does not mean identities emanate from essential sameness or a shared history. Instead, she sees Jewishness as something that is necessary for any Jewish person to own, and to privilege whenever they encounter anti-Semitism. For Allen (1999), Arendtian solidarity also means ‘it is possible to resist *in terms of* the identity that is under attack without being a member of the group whose identity is under attack’ (p. 112). Thus, social movements are held together by shared engagements, not common identities and, while always open to internal challenge and revision, these provide each movement with some certainty in moving forward. Power is understood as the human capacity to act collectively, but collectives are only powerful for as long as they act.

The argument that collective political agency is not preformed, nor dependent on or arising from one’s position in wider relations of production, is key to our analysis here, but is of course not unique to Hardt and Negri or Arendt. It is something Marxism has always grappled with. But Hardt and Negri’s concepts of the network, the multitude and swarm intelligence, as well as an Arendtian reading of non-identitarian solidarity, seem to us to enable theoretical clarification of the specific type of resistance – virtual, spontaneous, pluralist, non-hierarchical, a conflation of different perspectives, experiences and expertise manifesting as an informal and loosely coordinated swarm – that we are arguing the Hive exemplifies. They are thus especially useful for our analysis.

Next, our methodology details how we, as Hive members, moved from employees enacting resistance as part of a university-wide challenge to the change programme designed by the VC and his Vice Chancellor’s Executive (VCE), to becoming researchers, analysing the practices of the group to share our story with others.

## Methodology

In this article, we re-examine a series of events using a collective autoethnography: all of us are both ‘subjects’ of the research and generators of some of its data sources (Hayano, 1979). Each of us are ‘full insiders’ working at the OU, and we participated, in differing ways, in the events described. Alvesson (2009) refers to such studies as ‘at-home’ ethnographies, which are ‘especially relevant to research on universities and higher education, as these are the settings in which most researchers work’ (p. 161). We call our approach collective, as opposed to collaborative, because during the resistance we each operated independently, either as individuals or as participants in initiatives based in faculties, departments or OUBUCU and only at times as part of the Hive. This article is a collaborative output, but many of the actions we reflect on were not totally collaborative efforts. In the Hive, we used each other as sounding boards, shared information, posed questions and asked for specific forms of support. Yet, what members did as a result was not strictly co-produced, but rather improvised.

The genesis of this article was organic, emerging from our discussions about events at the OU, not as researchers nor even as research participants, but as employees of an institution undergoing seismic change. Our researcher stance was adopted retrospectively, as we worked to understand how things unfolded and to collectively consider the implications of our own and others’ roles (see Beck et al., 2018; Bell and King, 2010; Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012 for similar collective autoethnographies of academia). The methodology was approved by The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee.

We draw on three data sources. First, we analyse a selection of messages from the Hive WhatsApp group, which was established in order to discuss concerns about the leadership of the OU and explore opportunities for resistance. We secured informed consent from the relevant

members to use all WhatsApp messages quoted here. We have not deposited the WhatsApp discussions in an online archive because to do so would risk members becoming identifiable. Second, we use publicly available documents which describe key ‘plot twists’ as events unfolded. Our third source of data is our autoethnographic recollections of Spring 2018, and the Hive activity in particular, shared and analysed over a period of several months during the development of this article. We hope that the use of the first and third sources in particular, as Shefer (2019) says of her co-edited collection, ‘not only provide anecdotal evidence and richness to the text but also model a project of destabilising dominant academic discourse and institutional practice in which embodiment, emotions, and experience are erased’ (p. 9).

We worked through the data set individually, in small groups and through a series of whole-group Skype calls, conducting iterative, emergent and collectively produced thematic analysis, as we (re-)immersed ourselves in both primary and secondary sources to revisit the narratives-in-action relating to Spring 2018 (Gergen and Gergen, 2006). In our Hive conversations, where we shared information, personal experiences, thoughts and feelings, we were individuals bound together by a desire to protect the soul of an institution we all love from the VC’s change programme. However, the greater depth, coherence and shared understandings that form the agreed narrative of this article only emerged retrospectively, as a result of reflecting on our data. We also used a critical hermeneutic approach (Roberge, 2011), sympathetic to all the experiences we revisited, read about and recounted to each other, but not taking any of them purely at face value. Our analysis was refined through continual collective reflection as we took account of conflicting or minority views. Moreover, since our communications with each other while writing this article have largely been online, our analytic process is to some extent a re-enactment of the practices which made the Hive so distinctive.

Importantly, relations between members of the Hive were, and remain, non-hierarchical: the formal authority of group members in the wider university has little bearing here. This lack of hierarchy was in part a result of the group’s organic genesis – most members didn’t know each other – and our choice of medium – early messages generally displayed mobile numbers but not names. As Caroline recalls, ‘when people messaged something, I had no idea of their discipline or their hierarchical status – which was very emancipating. In this sense it was a very flat structure and it felt like all voices were treated pretty equally’. This relative anonymity was enabled by WhatsApp as it allowed us to interact free from formal authority differentials.

Nonetheless, the group certainly had its internal tensions. Alison Penn, for example, recalls that some aspects of the group were challenging whereas others were more of a double edged sword:

It never seemed to decide anything, that I can recall. But then, that wasn’t its function. Certain people’s views seemed to be considered more important or taken note of. . . I think there was an informal deferring going on<sup>4</sup>. . . The anonymity could be irritating. Unless you had someone’s phone number in your contacts list, you didn’t know who was making points. It took a while to work out, for instance, who was Author 3, Author 2 and Author 1.

Moreover, because not all Hive members knew each other, we also had to take it on faith that others would not use what we ‘said’ there against us at any time. Equally, because of the networks on which the Hive relied for the addition of new members, staff in non-academic roles at the OU were under-represented in its ranks.

However, the defining characteristics of the group – informal, not constituted for any formal type of decision-making, with no explicit objectives other than a sense of the need to work against the direction of travel at the OU as conceived by the VC and his VCE, organic membership growth through word of mouth – probably explain why our interactions (at least as we experienced them)

were largely non-conflictual. Members certainly felt free to disagree with each other – for example, over whether to leak a particular video of the VC to the media, as discussed later – but these disagreements were always constructive and respectful. We suspect anyone who joined the group and found it unhelpful, disagreed with the profound resentment about the change programme or experienced the volume of messages as overwhelming, simply left. It is also very possible, as one of our reviewers suggested, that we are somewhat (although not wholly) uncritical of the Hive because we experienced it as a force for good. However, autoethnographies, collective or individual, almost always have their roots in significant life experiences, and are highly apposite here since they can ‘make visible how people resist ruling relations’ (Lund and Tienari, 2019: 100). Consonant with our epistemological and ontological stance, we regard them not as objective accounts of the truth, but as multiple and recursive interpretations and analyses of events by those who lived through them.

WhatsApp enabled our remote interactions in the sense that it allowed the formation of a group, invitations to people to join and to receive instant responses to messages. As such it created some of the conditions of possibility for the Hive’s discussions: 70 people could not have kept in contact with each other 24 hours a day otherwise, especially since some of us do not work at the OU’s main campus. Those who do, like Helen, Jo, Caroline and Deborah, often work away from the site. As OU staff we are used to online meetings, so we were familiar with using a remote method of communication. However, we also perceived a clear need to act quickly, while being conscious that any method should shield us from the ‘gaze’ of the university – so any OU electronic platform, like Skype for Business or e-mail, would have been inappropriate. Moreover, WhatsApp only requires users to download the app, unlike Facebook where an account is needed. SnapChat and Instagram would not have suited the text-heavy interaction we needed to have. Messages are also end-to-end encrypted, which was important for the discussions characterising the Hive.

We now move to our central focus – a short contextual section about the OU, followed by an analysis of the role of the Hive during its institutional crisis. Here we argue that this group represents a specific, as yet unrecorded mode of resistance in HE.

## **The OU: background and context**

At its foundation in April 1969 the OU challenged the dominant view that university education was only for ‘the few’, based on their ‘natural’ intellectual abilities or the financial means to develop such abilities (Weinren, 2015: 25). Its origins established two enduring cornerstones of the institution. The first was the OU’s social mission to be open to all, regardless of academic qualifications, location or situation, by enabling students to study part-time at home. The second was a commitment to academic rigour and quality assurance, founded on the belief that it could offer the same standard of research-informed education as more established universities. The combination of the OU’s need to prove itself in an educational and political environment that was hostile to its very existence (Daniel, 1996: 193), with a strong commitment to ensuring that HE was accessible to everyone, resulted in a distinctive approach to teaching and learning. We venture to suggest that these cherished values constitute the *very soul* of our institution (Brink, 2018).

The OU established a dispersed but interdependent organisational model, combining a central campus at Walton Hall in Milton Keynes with 13 regional offices. The staff comprised: (a) academics, based at Walton Hall, who largely produced teaching materials and formats; (b) part-time Associate Lecturers, working across the United Kingdom; linked by (c) a network of Staff Tutors across the English regions and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Students and staff were also supported by academic-related and professional services staff (ARPS) across the network, from departments like Human Resource (HR), the library, student recruitment, learning support and so

on. Some of this architecture persists to this day. The OU, originally named the ‘University of the Air’ (Haines, 1998), developed a distinctive ‘blended learning’ pedagogy, combining distance learning (by post, telephone and television, later the Internet) with face-to-face tutorials, day schools and residential schools.

The model proved successful and by 2010 the OU had 263,735 registered students (The Open University, 2010), yet it was also facing increased competition from online providers entering the HE market. In 2012, significant changes in UK HE funding created more challenges when the government announced the end of the teaching grant and increased student fees to finance teaching, with those students in England most badly affected. The consequent 257% hike in fees for OU students wiped out its market for so-called adult ‘leisure learners’ almost overnight. Subsequent responses by OU senior management not only entailed cost reduction measures but also functional centralisation. This was the implementation of NPM ‘solutions’ to a problem manufactured and ‘shaped by larger global capitalist imperatives’ (Shefer, 2019: 3).

### **Towards an erosion of our soul**

Perhaps the first sign of a genuine sea change in institutional direction for the OU was the announcement by VC Martin Bean of the closure of the South East England regional office in March 2014, alongside plans to review the role of the other regional offices. This led to publicly visible staff resistance, including a letter to *The Guardian*, signed by a large number of staff, which argued that such closures would dramatically affect the OU mission and undermine its blended learning model (Donnachie et al., 2014). Shortly afterwards, Martin Bean departed, and his successor was appointed VC in May 2015. In September, he was quoted in the *Financial Times*: ‘This role is not like being a chief executive in a corporate environment. Now, I need to get permission from academics and convince people intellectually. You can’t just lead by comment, you have to engage people’ (Boersma, 2015).

Despite these encouraging words, in the same month the new VC supported a recommendation to close seven of the nine remaining English regional offices, provoking a series of rolling one-day strikes which marked the first ever action by OU staff over a local dispute (Swain, 2015; UCU, 2015). Nonetheless, he embarked on additional reorganisations, like merging seven faculties into four, and incorporating (or co-opting) the four new Executive Deans into his executive team, in contrast to their formerly more independent positions as heads of faculty. They were now accountable for increasingly managerialist VCE decisions and disseminating and promoting these decisions in their faculties, with little opportunity for pushing back. Faculty committees were downgraded to consultative assemblies, echoing the case of EBS, where Parker (2014) notes that school meetings were similarly transformed into ‘information session[s]’, with questions being ‘actively discouraged’ in favour of ‘presentations from senior management’ (p. 285). At the same time, the VC commissioned KPMG to conduct a thorough ‘redesign’ of OU systems and procedures, again something which was seen as highly contentious.

In November 2016, OUBUCU passed a vote of no confidence in the university’s leadership, based on unease about regional office closures and the unwillingness of VCE to consider rank and file staff viewpoints. Soon afterwards, the VC announced the even more controversial Students First Transformation Programme (SFTP), badged as a ‘root and branch review of [the OU’s] work to ensure it is fit to face the growing challenges of the future’ (James, 2017b). It was predicated on declining part-time HE student numbers, alongside ‘solutions’ of increased university agility and innovations to ‘improve’ student experience (James, 2017a, 2017b). SFTP was billed as a project to transform the OU from the ‘University of the Air’ into the ‘University of the Cloud’, supporting the development of ‘digital citizens’ (James, 2017a).

Although for some months it was unclear precisely what SFTP's impact was intended to be, in June 2017 the VC announced in *The Guardian* that the institution needed to save £100 million from an annual budget of £420 million, thus presaging staff redundancies (Weale, 2017). This 'burning platform' of apparently unsustainable finances again echoes what happened at EBS, where staff were told the school was failing financially despite generating an annual surplus of circa £20 million and coming fourth in the relevant unit of assessment for grant awards in the national Research Assessment Excellence exercise in 2008<sup>5</sup> (Parker, 2014). That autumn, more clues to our VC's intentions emerged in a public lecture he gave at Durham University, entitled 'The end of the fortress university'. This framed the role of universities exclusively in terms of employability, stressing the need for a narrower curriculum and smaller credit modules. It also promoted 'digital engagement' to address the perceived competitive threat of online platforms like LinkedIn or Facebook using data about users to team up with 'innovative universities to offer global collaborative provision' (Horrocks, 2017: 8).

## From quiescence to resistance

By the start of 2018, OU staff morale was – unsurprisingly – very low indeed. Not only was there alarm about possible job losses, there was also genuine terror in parts of the organisation that the very mission of the OU – what we previously described as its soul (Brink, 2018) – was in mortal danger. At the same time, more explicit critique of the senior management narrative was emerging, focused not only on the scale and speed of change but also the management style adopted by VCE and particularly by the VC himself. Those who were resistant, including the authors, were not oblivious to the difficult external environment within which the institution operates: rather they were not at all convinced by his strategies to address this.

Despite the VC's penchant for announcing major changes publicly rather than to his staff, there was still a reluctance among staff to openly voice their concerns. In January 2018, *Guardian* journalist Peter Wilby commented in a profile of the VC that 'a protest letter to the *Guardian* signed by more than 100 staff [about his proposals] was never sent (because, as one lecturer told me, "there's an intense loyalty to the OU which, to some colleagues, is like a religion")'. This unsent letter is a good example not only of love for our university but also Edelman's (2013) conceptualisation of quiescence, where large numbers of people 'passionately defend the very social institutions that deprive or degrade them' (p. 1). Furthermore, it seems to reflect how academics can be 'complacent in watching the new post-truth spirit develop, complicit in facilitating it, and compliant in accommodating its consequences' (Brink, 2018: xv). However, this quiescence was soon to rupture.

Early 2018 also marked a period of industrial action over the USS<sup>6</sup> (Universities Superannuation Scheme) pension scheme in the wider UK HE sector. The longest national strike ever mounted by UK academic staff saw large numbers turning out to picket lines, coupled with unprecedented support from students. The *Times Higher Education* described this action as resistance to 'the tightening grip of managerialism, marketisation and ministerial control within institutions' (Grove, 2018). OUBUCU members took to using Twitter and WhatsApp to communicate with one another during the strike. The way the strike underscored the value of collective action as well as using social media in a fast-moving environment, coupled with the VC's hard-line stance on USS, partly created the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the wider resistance, with the Hive being just one element thereof.

Against this backdrop, three additional plot twists triggered more concerted internal resistance to the VC's programme of 'transformation', illustrating how quiescence always contains the potential for action. First, at an internal question-and-answer (Q and A) session on 20 February, the VC

declared in a shocking emotional display, ‘I’m trying to save the place. Who do you think I am? A monster? Just driven by business? I came here because I care. I really care. And this place may fail’ (quoted in Turner, 2018). At this meeting, he reiterated the apparent problem of the £100 million deficit. As Alison Penn remarks, ‘this made many staff wonder what he knew that we didn’t’. Later, Hive members described his comments as both combative and indicative of a leadership style that was insensitive to staff facing very high levels of uncertainty.

Following the publication of a *Guardian* article in March where the proposed staff cuts were outlined (Taylor, 2018), we also debated whether the video of the Q and A session should be shared with the media, given how the VC came across in what was later dubbed ‘Meltdowngate’. Some supported leaking it to force either his resignation or a dismissal, whereas others suggested we had to engage with him ‘rationally’ and ‘responsibly’. One member added that not leaking it demonstrated the extent of the love staff have for the OU: in removing the VC by releasing such a powerful ‘sting’, we could have killed the very institution we love and sought to protect by also destroying public faith in it. Nonetheless, in April the video was leaked to *The Telegraph* by an unknown source (Turner, 2018), three days after the OU Council<sup>7</sup> met to decide whether the VC should remain in post. Given that 85 OU staff, including many Hive members, waited in the rain to speak to and lobby arriving Council members prior to this meeting, we are confident the leak was not from anyone in the Hive.

Second, the day after Meltdowngate, the VC gave evidence to the ‘Value for money in higher education inquiry’ Parliamentary Education Committee (2018). Rejecting a suggestion about regulation of VCs’ remuneration packages, he stated,

I do not think that is appropriate because of the diversity that has been described and the different needs of each institution. The Open University, as a result of this dramatic fall of 60% in part-time study, is facing some of the most convulsive changes. We are going to have to carry out the largest restructuring redundancy programme ever in UK university history as a result of this fall in part time [students], and the university, not me, needs to decide on making sure that it has appropriate leadership to be able to handle that.

Again, this prompted outrage among the Hive, and elsewhere, given the suggestion that his £360,000 salary was appropriate because the VC needed to make so many staff redundant, as well as the fact that we learned about the ‘largest restructuring programme ever’ through this medium.

Third, an internal challenge was mounted against the frequently deployed discourse of terror surrounding the £100 million ‘deficit’. A financial analysis, written and circulated internally, challenged the true extent of the ‘financial crisis’ (Knowles, 2018), suggesting its net current assets at the time would allow the OU to continue to operate for 276 days without any further income – 50% more than the actual target of 180 days. The potency of quantophrenic claims like the ‘deficit’ has oppressive effects, because it is usually hard, if not impossible, to disprove them. Yet, with his academic expertise, Knowles managed to puncture the VC’s insistent but inaccurate narrative, along with a great deal of his credibility.

The VC later performed an unacknowledged narrative hop, saying publicly that his proposed changes were not financially driven but to do with improving student experience. Responding to UCU regional official Lydia Richards during an interview in late March on Radio 4’s (2018) Today programme, he said ‘They aren’t cuts, they’re reprioritising. They’re about investing in the future of the Open University . . . it’s not for a financial crisis, it’s to choose to do the right things’. Host Sarah Montague then pressed him: ‘one of the criticisms that has been made by lecturers is that . . . with these plans you are reducing the Open University to a digital content provider’. He answered, ‘This is about collaborative, shared, social learning’.

## The Hive: activity and refuge

To reiterate, the Hive had no explicitly stated aim beyond resisting the change programme at the OU, which members contested from multiple perspectives. Between being set up on 17 March and 13 April, when the VC resigned, there were over 7000 separate messages from the 70 members, illustrating an intense and fast-moving set of events. Metaphorically speaking, our Hive was similar to those housing bees. It provided a space for members to communicate what they had learned from scanning the environment, including different parts of the OU and the wider public domain; to pollinate ideas, strategies and actions; to sense check our own activities (e.g. how to tweet about the relevant events); and to alleviate the risk of what is known in bee circles as ‘colony collapse order’. This happens when most worker bees decamp from a colony, leaving only the queen and a handful of nurse bees to look after any immature bees, meaning the colony eventually disappears. What began as a virtual arena for discussion developed into a multidisciplinary space for solidarity and refuge, where members would receive emotional and intellectual nourishment before leaving again. Almost at any time of day or night, the Hive could come alive with a fast and furious ‘buzz’ of messages.

The existence of this virtual group also flew in the face of senior management claims about staff’s unwillingness to work across ‘siloes’ and adopt more digitalised methods of learning delivery; a tactic typically deployed by change management agents to discredit resisters as ‘dinosaurs’ which turns on ‘discounting the past and claiming that anyone who is against change is either self-interested or doesn’t understand the “real world”’ (Parker, 2014: 281). Our interpretation is that any challenge to wholesale technological reinvention is often much less ‘an indictment of resistance to change’ and much more an ‘affirmation of enduring value’ (Brink, 2018: xii) – in our case, the OU’s unique blended learning model.

Three main themes emerge from our analysis of the Hive and its part in the VC’s resignation in mid-April. First, we explore how one specific development further motivated us to resist the proposed change programme, deploying Allen’s (1999) reading of Arendt on non-identitarian solidarity. Second, we turn to the processes of resistance, exploring how coordination and collaboration in the Hive meant it became a multitude, following Hardt and Negri (2004). Finally, we examine how the Hive was driven by solidarity amid the fear about proposed changes while maintaining its concomitant function of providing mutual care, protection and support. Here we return to love as a key constituent of academic labour, as discussed earlier.

## The alarm pheromone: curriculum cuts, job losses and ‘bloody well teaching’

Within hives, bees release pheromones<sup>8</sup> to respond to what is happening to them, which sets the ‘mood’ for the whole colony. Humans can relate to the alarm pheromone, released when there is danger from an intruder and a worker bee is preparing to sting. This signals an imminent need for defence to other bees. Relatedly, in March 2018, members of our Hive shared rumours about the scale of planned curriculum cuts and the aforementioned potential redundancies of up to 40%, as well as internal VCE disquiet about these developments. On the 21st, the cuts were formally reported to staff, accompanied by suggested reductions in the number of OU degree programmes from 112 to 71. A document leaked to *The Guardian* announced a voluntary severance programme for staff and details of the intended management approach (Taylor, 2018), whereby our alarm pheromones were triggered at the highest level. Next, on 22 March, the VC held a filmed Q and A session with students, where he replied to one question as follows:

The people who work here [at Walton Hall] should be bloody well teaching, they should be teaching directly . . . It's ridiculous that they're spoken about as teaching when they are writing, that's not teaching. And they used to teach in residential [schools] and this university has allowed . . . academics to get away with not being teachers for decades. (Quoted in Turner, 2018)

This hostility towards academics revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the OU's original, and sustained, blended learning model, a stinging provocation that provided a further catalyst for resistance to both the VC and his change programme. Hive reactions included the following messages:

I don't think we should underestimate the fury this statement will cause across the OU academic community. I was at a [departmental] briefing, and all the academics wanted to talk about it. This is good, useful energy for our cause.

It's the trifecta – arrogant, condescending, and betraying a fundamental lack of understanding of the organisation he seeks to lead.

We contend that the VC's comments about academics not 'bloody well teaching' generated an example of Arendt's (as discussed by Allen, 1999) non-essentialist solidarity and resistance which are, nevertheless, forms of identity-based mobilisation. Despite many Hive members not being academics, discussions coalesced around this identity, precisely because it was under attack. Here our divergent interests spontaneously converged into a single focus, to defend our institution from an attack on its very soul, specifically the pedagogical model which has made it distinctive since its inception. Moreover, as the constant 'buzzing' of messages suggests, this was very much a continual endeavour, not a stable or inherent property that could be finally secured.

### **The Hive as a multitude**

As we have suggested, the most significant aspects of the way the group functioned between March and April 2018 were scanning the environment, sharing information on unfolding events and exploring strategies. Information included links to documents, tweets, press articles and broadcasts of internal staff meetings. For example, at the peak of the crisis in late-March, one member messaged, 'This just in from a colleague: "Apparently Emergency VCE meeting still in session as I leave campus". Quote: "it's in the balance"'. Another aspect of the Hive's resistance was its contribution to the breaking down of institutional silos, both to work cooperatively and as a form of safety in numbers in order to survive. Divisions between academics and ARPS, faculties and academic and non-academic units, which had hardened through senior management's divisive restructuring efforts, were being weakened, as we metamorphosed into a 'super organism', a bee term that describes how an entire colony working in harmony exceeds the sum of its individual parts. Members repeatedly expressed how much they valued making connections across the OU, resolving to keep them 'in peace time' (Caroline).

There was also a strong sense of the power within a community of experts collaborating, as Helen recalls,

I remember saying 'This is what happens when you piss off a university' like, the FBL<sup>9</sup> dudes were all over the management aspect of it, the psychologists were analysing the fuck out of the discourse, the historians were helping us locate it all in the context of past struggles.

Building on these connections, members worked together quickly and effectively by marshalling appropriate expertise as events unfolded. For example, one member, who also serves on the OU's Senate,<sup>10</sup> wrote,

I wonder if anyone/a group of people on this list might like to write something addressed to members of [S]enate urging people . . . to take action? [At Senate] there's . . . nowhere near the strength of feeling or great reasoned arguments and evidence that is coming across on here.

As noted earlier, one aspect of the neoliberalisation of HE is academia's 'sacrificial work ethic and . . . aestheticized long hours culture' (Gregg, 2009: 480). Here, this exploitative practice was usefully turned back on itself: the Hive was rarely fully asleep, so messages were frequently exchanged between us worker bees during 'unsociable' hours. As Caroline recalls, 'it was a snowball that got bigger and bigger and seemed to have a momentum of its own. I remember even on a Friday and Saturday night people were still at it!' Members also supported each other in developing personal, group and OUBUCU social media strategies, primarily via Twitter, offering practical advice such as how to maximise impact through the use of hashtags. One example was '#savetheOU is one. . . what do you think? It seems quite good for getting the "OU is a national treasure" brigade on board?'

Here we see the Hive operating as a multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004). First, it was formed on the basis of, and to some extent depended on, WhatsApp to bring us all 'together' in real-time – it was fundamentally communicative and cooperative in its ethos and operations, as well as being virtual. Second, the Hive was, and still is,<sup>11</sup> a disparate group of academics from all four OU faculties and ARPS. To reiterate, many of us did not know each other 'in real life' – many still don't. But our virtual coordination allowed us to work together in different ways without 'becom[ing] the same' (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 92). There was disagreement on some quite fundamental issues, but we continued to work together because of our shared goal of derailing the imminent threat of the VCE change project. Third, Hive members have been co-present on just three occasions – one at an event before the Council lobby on 9 April 2018; once at the lobby; and, as the Hive, after the VC had resigned, when we met to celebrate in mid-April. As such, our group identity was formed through our resistant practices.

Fourth, the relative invisibility of job roles and hierarchical positions, as discussed in our methodology, meant many of the differences between us were not obvious. Fifth, we definitely detect a swarm intelligence (another metaphor taken from the behaviour of bees) at work in the Hive. As geographically dispersed members, our communicative tactics depended on tacit knowledge gained from the USS strike; the intensely cooperative and democratic character of the group; its focus on problem-solving via collective intelligence; and the release of 'alarm pheromones' to set the mood. All of these factors coalesced to render our Hive a networked political organisation, which emerged from our membership of the community of OU employees.

## **Fear, terror, care and love**

SFTP in particular generated profound fear, even terror, among OU staff, but also evoked a strong desire to ensure the institution's demise did not take place on our metaphorical 'watch'. Individual concerns for job security were balanced against a group commitment to resist the senior management change project as much as we could. Hive members often discussed their fear that their efforts to save the OU might cost them their jobs. For example,

Is there a way of getting hold of a [i]st of who is on this group? Also, who has admin access to it to add people[?] I love the OU and want to save it but I've promised my partner . . . that I won't risk getting the sack over this.

The response was a series of messages explaining how to delete one's own messages as well as checking to see who the members were (at least those whose numbers were attached to a name). The group administrator also suggested, 'If I share the numbers could I ask who the people are and I then have a full list of members? I think that is important for clarity and so that everyone knows the audience?' As Alison Penn comments, 'There was a screening going on – in the end [the administrator] took to consulting with the group about allowing new members. Not exactly hierarchy, but certainly not a free for all'. Here she refers to the extent to which the group practised gatekeeping, reminiscent of the guard bee who inspects every new entrant to the hive.

This sense of institutional guardianship translated into an ethic of love expressed not only towards the university but which we experienced as powerful emotional bonds with one another, as members of the wider 'OU family' that includes our founders, alumni and future students. Our post hoc reflections are illustrative of this loving engagement:

There is nothing like the OU and many of us have strong affective bonds with it i.e. I got my first degree here. It felt to me like when the dam was about to break: people were saying – 'look my child has been bullied enough – stop right now before permanent and irreversible damage is done'. It was absolutely the case that people were prepared to lose their jobs to preserve the institution, so collective identity and the cause became more important than personal career. (Caroline)

This struck me forcibly. I remember tweeting about seeing the OU as my country. Feeling part, for the first time, of a group of people that were prepared to fight, sacrifice, be exiled for the good of something bigger than ourselves. People did talk about the possible cost of action in career terms. (Helen)

A bee stings only as a last resort in order to protect the colony, for this will cause its death. This is reminiscent of the potential price of our activism, a sacrificial act that we were willing, but terrified of having, to make. Our intense fear is evident in the exchanges on the group in the week running up to the VC's resignation. Despite an OUBUCU vote of no confidence in him on the 5th (Slawson, 2018), in the very early hours of the 9th, the Hive swarmed in on two unexpected articles in that day's *Daily Mail* (Clark, 2018; Harris, 2018), one of which (Clark) caused particular concern because of its supportive stance towards the VC's programme. Hive exchanges about possible responses continued until 3.20 a.m., recommencing at 6 a.m. Later, many of us attended the Council meeting lobby. Awaiting the outcome, nerves continued to run high, such as a message on 10 April: 'This is worse than election night – no bloody exit poll! Still respect to Council for not leaking I guess'.

During this period, messages to the Hive evidence both our fears and the sense of safety and trust within our virtual multitude, illustrated by numerous requests for others to confirm that tweets were appropriate. Members responded with positive affirmation and active support, like retweeting to reduce individual vulnerability. For example, one message from 9th April, at 1.22 a.m., reads, 'pl[ea]se can you check my tweets are considered and acceptable[?]'. This was confirmed 10 minutes later by the wider colony: 'I think the tweet on the [Clark *Daily Mail*] article is good'. The immediate response reads 'Phew. I don't feel like I'm thinking straight'. As events intensified, there was also increased endorsement of self-care and encouragement to colleagues not to lose heart. Hive exchanges provided vital emotional nourishment, as in the following:

Hi [I]'ve posted to [T]witter. The storm starts . . . By the way to [T]witter team I take full responsibility. [Name] and I agreed but my call. I don't expect any comeback because we are careful and responsible, but I'll take it if there is.

Shoulder to shoulder[,] don't you worry you won't be on your own.

Similarly,

We're actually going to win. It may be a lot sloggier than expected (ok, not a word) but we're gonna win  
 . . . .

I agree . . . that it is heartening and inspiring how after months of sustained, often behind the scenes struggles, this has erupted into a mass movement that is uniting our entire community.

We believe the solidarity we built is partly a function of the OU culture where we work in (often virtual) teams all the time. Our social mission of 'providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential' (The Open University, n.d.) likewise holds us together and motivates us to put our students first. Indeed our commitment to each other as members of the Hive, like a super organism, seems to exceed our love for our work as identified by Gregg (2009), Clarke et al. (2012) and Brouillette (2013). We make this claim because (a) not all Hive members are academics – several are ARPS and (b) our love is for the soul of the institution *as well as* the work we do within it. Our sense that the OU was worth fighting for because of its distinctiveness not only propelled our resistance per se, but also provided some of the basis for our emotional connections with each other, what Bell and Sinclair (2014) describe as a fusion of 'heart and mind, body and breath' (p. 269).

In addition, what we describe as love in the context of the Hive is love as a verb or an action – not a noun or a feeling. Peck (cited in hooks, 2016) encapsulates this: 'Love is as love does. Love is an act of will – namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love' (pp. 4–5). Joining the group, continuing as a member and caring for each other as exemplified in the messages above seems to us to conform to this version of love as *doing*, or *in action*. It involves 'showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate' (hooks, 2016: 101). This is also unique given that Hive members often 'did love' for colleagues whom they did not know personally in our virtual community. As Kiriakos and Tienari (2018), also following hooks, note,

Love helps us to accept our vulnerability, to be brave, and to uphold a willingness to stand up for ourselves and for those we care about. Love engenders hope . . . The practice of love, then, is revolutionary; it embodies a struggle for justice and freedom. (p. 269)

## Conclusion

This article has analysed an unusual form of academic resistance, a small part of the wider resistance to the structural changes being proposed by one UK university's Vice Chancellor, to foreground the two themes of this special issue which we have sought to address. Mobilising Arendt's non-essentialist reading of identity, presented by Allen (1999), allowed us to develop the theme of solidarity emerging through collective action as opposed to being its necessary precursor. Arendt's insistence on historical specificity is also important because of its focus on the specific identifications that might be under attack at any given moment. We then drew on Hardt's and Negri's (2000, 2004) theorising of specific forms of resistance to global capitalism. The concepts of multitude, network and swarm intelligence proved useful given their de-emphasising of co-presence, the focus on difference and lack of hierarchy (there was no Queen Bee), and the formation of identity *through* resistance. All of these characterise the activities of the Hive.

Of course in the context of an ever-more commercialised HE sector, in the UK as elsewhere, the question might be asked (and our reviewers did), as to whether any of the proposals for change

mounted by the OU VCE actually amounted to anything terrifying and, similarly, whether these were qualitatively different from the ubiquitous managerialist ‘reform’ programmes at other universities. Here we suggest the following. The way in which the VCE – and the VC perhaps especially – went about these proposals showed a remarkable lack of understanding of the OU’s defining characteristics. A key example is the VC’s remarks about OU academics not ‘bloody well teaching’. His defence of his salary as justified because he needed to make so many people redundant also exemplifies his failure to empathise with staff. The VC’s narrative hop from justifying the changes as needed to address the supposed £100 million deficit to an explanation about improving student experience further illustrates how extraordinary this series of events was. Finally, we want to re-emphasise that what makes the OU unique among UK universities is its social mission. Those of us who work here arguably harbour a ‘deep and strong affection’ (Clarke et al., 2012: 9) for the institution, perhaps more than we have had with former employers, or is typical in HE.

Overall, then, we feel there is something particular to this series of events and why it was experienced by many of us as both terrifying and disruptive to our quiescence. What then is its relevance for those working in other universities? Despite the specificities of our focal case, we believe our successful collective action could happen at campus-based universities both within and outside of the United Kingdom. Our discussion of the form of resistance we mounted via the Hive is especially significant here. The same is true of the various forms of academic eros discussed by Bell and Sinclair (2014) and Lund and Tienari (2019). Indeed, we hope our story will serve as an important antidote to jolt others out of voluntary servitude, defeatism and quiescence regarding the managerialism that is so rife in academia. Perhaps it might even act as a cautionary tale of (management) learning for future university VCs and senior managers, in demonstrating how academics always have the potential, knowledge and resources to act otherwise, to release their sting in order to protect what they regard as valuable, and to assemble a ‘narrative of political transformation’ (Schneider- Mayerson, 2013: 877). The potential for such transformational effects, as the question mark in our title suggests, remains to be seen. But perhaps most important of all is the message of our Hive being productive; an example of academics *doing* rather than just writing. If there is sufficient appetite elsewhere to taste the sweet nectar of resistance, this can be harnessed to ensure that positive outcomes always remain among many possible futures.

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Please note that the order of authors is alphabetical, rather than signifying anything about our respective authorial contributions.

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### ORCID iDs

Jo Brewis  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7617-331X>

Caroline Clarke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5737-2946>

### Notes

1. WhatsApp is a messaging application, commonly accessed on mobile devices. The app enables private multimedia messaging between groups of people. The group ‘owner’ can add members via their mobile phone numbers.
2. The effects in Scotland and Wales are mitigated by a decision not to invoke the same level of fees for their own citizens.

3. The UK Higher Education Minister in 1992.
4. Referring here to more active members of OUBUCU.
5. The precursor to the Research Excellence Framework.
6. The Universities Superannuation Scheme, the pension scheme for staff in the pre-1992 HE sector.
7. The OU's overall governing body.
8. Pheromones are chemical substances which set off a response in other species members.
9. The Faculty of Business and Law.
10. The OU's governing academic body.
11. The group continues to operate. At the time of writing it is providing us with a space to discuss the personal and professional implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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