A developing lack of trust in higher education (HE), in the UK and beyond, has emerged in recent years. In this paper, causal factors are identified, drawing on research findings from 2001-09, which indicate a loss of the essentially human side of the higher education experience. Challenges to liberal collegial university values were identified in data emerging from a survey of nearly 300 academic staff, in which 72 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that ‘higher education has lost its role as conscience and critic of society’ (Bone and McNay, 2006: 76), while 78 per cent confirmed their fears of sanctions in a bully and blame organisation culture, a de-humanising systems emphasis and a bureaucracy that promotes ‘satisficing’ conformity at threshold levels, not innovation and development (McNay, 2008).

Increasingly, neo-managerialist controls and an audit culture erode the freedoms of academic professionals in universities, while policy and regulatory functions have multiplied, couched in the consumerist language of the market and controlled by administrative managers (McNay, 2007). A lack
of communication between leaders and led, governors and governed, and administrators and those they are supposed to support, is compounded by lack of openness in non-learning cultures. The inconsistencies that have arisen from gaps between rhetoric and reality include self-exemption by leaders from rulings applied to others and growing inequalities in the hierarchy. The psychological contract within HEIs has changed as loss of trust has, arguably, accelerated: why is this, and what are the remedies, if any?

Discussion

It is nearly ten years since Onora O’Neill discussed a growing loss of trust in public life in her Reith lectures in 2002; a loss which she identified was ironically linked with an increasing culture of accountability and suspicion:

In the New World of accountability, conscientious professionals often find that the public claim to mistrust them - but the public still demand their services. Claims of mistrust are poor reward for meeting requirements that allegedly embody higher standards of public accountability..... The pursuit of ever more perfect accountability provides citizens and consumers, patients and parents with more information, more comparisons more complaints systems; but it also builds a culture of suspicion, low morale and may ultimately lead to professional cynicism, and then we would have grounds for public mistrust (O’Neill, 2002).

If anything, the situation regarding distrust and over-zealous accountability in public life has deteriorated since then. Just as research findings from general public surveys demonstrate a lack of trust in politicians, so this is reciprocated in the fact that politicians do not trust citizens: the UK has more observation cameras to monitor its people than the rest of Europe in total. Within this surveillance society now imposed upon us, government does not trust higher education to carry out its functions, nor do leaders within HE tend to trust their staff without continuous monitoring and scrutiny to performance targets. Loss of trust in higher education, between the governors and the governed, or even in any communication between the two levels, mirrors that change in the lived world experience. Hence the tenor of the times is McGregor Theory X (McGregor, 1960) related to the neo-conservative agenda: the stick and a financial carrot are the motivators, while performance indicators and a target culture are the solution for everything – that is a culture now crumbling, I think. I hope.

The credit crunch is not only financial. Its root causes were moral and ethical. In the crunch, greedy exploitation of resource power finally imploded as power tended to corrupt. There are similar kinds of moral issues in higher education, too, final crunch issues, some of them triggered by financial imperatives. There were also issues of probity in use of information and its concealment. That is true in other moral issues in public life linked indirectly to the current downturn, now exposed, such as MPs’ expenses and police aggression. Findings from research on values in higher education indicate
that 78 per cent of respondents felt a fear of sanctions and found the systems emphasis in higher education de-humanising. Conformist data-driven quality mechanisms were linked to the organisational power culture of the corporation and the system imperatives of the bureaucracy (McNay, 2007). Much of that relates to values brought to HE. As the findings from research on values demonstrates (Bone and McNay, 2006; McNay, 2007), respondents perceived a gulf between different levels in the hierarchy, between leaders and ‘followers’, which made for lack of trust of the other, and resistance by followers to the direction being taken by the leaders in a management culture of control and relative abuse of power.

Finally, this presentation notes that a lack of trust is compounded by lack of communication. Earlier governance research (McNay, 2002) shows the operational gap within New Public Management (NPM) where members of the academic community are excluded from decisions in the executive culture and not even kept informed of what decisions have been taken. The governors do not hear/listen/tell and the governed are left in the darkness of suspicion. Leaders do not inform, never mind inspire.

Those, then, are some of the crunch challenges for higher education arising from a number of challenges to trust and leadership in higher education in the downturn, including complex dilemmas of surveillance and suspicion relating to scientific and technological advances. Academics are the people doing university research and much of the development work that advances knowledge and capacity, but do we any longer have the moral authority to be a critic and conscience of society? Or have HEIs been contaminated by trends in the wider world, where senior manager salaries increase at a faster rate than those of the managed, for example? Compare the gap between CEO salaries in further and higher education and the staff average. It has increased, and inequality breeds discontent, whatever the provision at the bottom. In Cuba, where the gap between the bottom decile and the top is much narrower than here, unity between different levels is much more possible. As the psychological contract within HEIs has changed, loss of trust in and within higher education in the UK has accelerated: what are the remedies for a restoration of trust in academic leadership, if any?

REFERENCES


