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# [Commentary] The NPM University: A Satirical Examination of New Public Management in Higher Education, Drawing Lessons from a Fictional Norwegian Institution

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## Abstract

This brief commentary presents a satirical critique of New Public Management (NPM) practices in higher education, using a fictional university in Norway as a case study. Drawing parallels with Soviet-era production methods, we explore the implications of applying industrial management tactics to academic settings. Through a humorous lens, we discuss how such approaches can lead to a dilution of academic standards and integrity, evidenced by tactics such as lowering student assessment criteria to artificially boost pass rates and employing superficial methods to enhance institutional reputations. This analysis aims to provoke thoughtful reflection on current educational policies and their long-term impacts on academic quality, university governance, and policy formulation. We critically examine the metrics-driven approach to educational success and its consequences on teaching quality and academic freedom. By engaging with themes such as accountability in education, marketization of higher education, and the commodification of learning, this concise contribution invites a broader discussion on the sustainability of NPM strategies in nurturing genuine educational excellence.

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Like other universities, NPM faces the problem of students failing exams and not finishing degrees. This is a problem not only for the students, but also for the university as we are only paid for students that pass. The easy way out, which our NPM University always chooses, is to lower requirements. This is clearly a win-win solution, as teachers can boast of how their pedagogical methods succeed and students can take pleasure in excellent grades. The university can show that its programs are suited for all, whether they study full-time, part-time or not at all. The mantra is "no fucking F," or -- officially -- "no-one left behind."

Okay, we admit that we have received some low scores in the national survey on student satisfaction. We have now addressed this problem. This year we received top scores. Did we change the program? No! Did we improve teaching? No! A much simpler method is to address the problem directly, which we always encourage at NPM. We have invited well-known headhunters to meet our students at beer-and-pizza parties, where they tell everyone how important it is for their future career that their alma mater, NPM University, receives top scores. Problem solved.

Teaching quality is important. At NPM, all our courses are based on the state of the art within the respective fields, which is easily achieved by copying curriculum and course descriptions from world-class universities. At the beginning of each course we tell students that this will require hard work. Then we cautiously skip all the tough parts. In the final lecture, we tell the students that we are impressed with what a good job they have done and how exceptional they are. Not unexpectedly, this results in good feedback, especially as most students will be rewarded with an excellent grade.

In order to focus on teaching, the Ministry has allowed universities to introduce the title of "merited teacher", a distinction that also offers a better salary. As we all know, it is very difficult to determine whether someone is a good teacher or not. The positive feedback from students may be a result of using the strategy above, simplifying the curriculum and

complementing the students, and negative feedback may be given to a dedicated teacher who really tries to teach the tough parts. Instead, we expect that the qualification of merited teacher will be based on everything that we can count, producing learning material, pedagogical experiments, and publications on teaching methods.

At NPM we ensure that most of our teachers are "merited" by simply including them in our ongoing pedagogical experiments, where the idea is to publish a minimum number of papers with a maximum number of authors. An additional benefit of these experiments is that they enable us to reduce resources used for teaching, for example by introducing lecture-free courses, asking students to teach their peers, also letting students grade each other. Flipping the classroom has saved a lot of time as teachers do not have to prepare. At NPM, students follow videos on the net and most lectures are replaced with Q&A sessions.

It is important for the European Union to reinforce the idea of being European. This is partly achieved by student exchange, where students spend a term or two at a university in another EU country. Our minister of education has expressed a desire that 50 percent of students participate in such exchange, up from 16 percent today. Since NPM University is eager to fulfill everything that comes from the government, we are prioritizing exchange. However, there is a drawback. While the Ministry also pays us for students that are on exchange, the payment is something less than for a student who passes all exams at NPM. The good thing is that the exchange payment is independent of the credits, if any, that the students receive abroad.

Thus we test every student at the start of the term. Do we send out the best since these will benefit the most from an exchange? Of course not, we keep the best students at NPM as we can expect that these will pass all courses, and thus give us full reimbursement from the government. Instead, we send out the worst students. Our experience shows that these will give us much better value as exchange students than if they had stayed at NPM and tried to pass exams.

We are already fulfilling the minister's expectation of including half of the students in these programs. In fact, we would like to send out all of them -- this could reduce expenses as we can skip teaching a semester or two. Of course, we must also admit students from abroad, but these are invited into the classes that we are already offering. As long as there is room in the auditorium, this has no cost. By the way, we find that we raise our image by having too small auditoriums. When students have to sit on the floor or on the stairs, it gives the impression that this is an important and popular class, sought after by many. After noting this effect, the board of NPM has put aside all plans for new buildings.

NPM also excels internationally. Our strategy is to arrange international conferences, inviting well-known researchers from many countries. By using attractive locations, first-class hotels, letting speakers bring their spouses, offering many activities, and -- not least -- covering all their expenses, we succeed in getting excellent feedback on all university rankings.

Research is a problem for NPM; it is time-consuming and even if the Ministry pays us for every scientific publication, the amounts are small. Still, in order to maintain our position as a research university, it is important that we can present a good number of publications every year. We achieve this by "buying" professors from abroad. No, they do not have to stay at NPM. As long as they also include NPM in all their publications we are satisfied. There is currently no limit on the

number of professors who want an adjunct position at NPM; that is, who agree to receive a salary just by adding NPM to the address field of their publications.

But what about quality? Quality? We cannot see that this is included in any measurement.

*We are strong supporters of the idea of free higher education as implemented in Norway -- no tuition, scholarships, and inexpensive student loans to all. With the previously used model of fixed university budgets, one could maintain quality; it was economically feasible to fail students and there was no need to submit unfinished research papers to mediocre journals just to be counted. The negative side of such a system is that there were few incentives to become more efficient. Thus, politicians embraced the ideas from NPM, trying to create a "market" by rewarding output. But, while we can agree with the motivation, both our NPM University and the Soviet tractor factories show that a singular focus on measuring output must result in lower quality.*

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## References

1. <sup>^</sup>K. A. Olsen and K. K. Haugen. *Gode tider for new public management-universitetet (in Norwegian)*. <https://khrono.no/tellekantsystemet-finansiering-finansieringssystem/gode-tider-for-new-public-management-universitetet/243614> Khrono, net newspaper for 10 Norwegian academic insitutions, including OsloMet and UIB.