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## How to cite this publication

Please cite the final published version:

Pianezzi, D., Nørreklit, H., & Cinquini, L. (2020). Academia after virtue: An Inquiry into the Moral Character(s) of Academics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 167(3), 571-588. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04185-w>

## Publication metadata

<b>Title:</b>	Academia after virtue: An Inquiry into the Moral Character(s) of Academics
<b>Author(s):</b>	Pianezzi, D., Nørreklit, H., & Cinquini, L.
<b>Journal:</b>	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>
<b>DOI/Link:</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04185-w">10.1007/s10551-019-04185-w</a>
<b>Document version:</b>	Accepted manuscript (post-print)

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## ACADEMIA AFTER VIRTUE?

### AN INQUIRY INTO THE MORAL CHARACTER(S) OF ACADEMICS

Daniela Pianezzi · Hanne Nørreklit · Lino Cinquini

#### Abstract

An extensive literature has focused on the impact of New Public Management (NPM) oriented structural changes on academics' practice and identity. These critical studies have been deterministic concluding that NPM inevitably leads to a degeneration of academics' ethos and values. Drawing from the moral philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre, we argue that previous analyses have overlooked the moral agency of the academics and their role in 'moralizing' and consequently shaping the ethical nature of their practices. The paper provides a new theoretical understanding of NPM oriented reforms in light of the virtue ethics approach, thereby directing the attention to the moral character and moral agency of academics. Our analysis of interviews collected in the business department of a Danish university provides an example of how individuals have divergent ethical understandings of these structural changes and enact/resist pre-defined social roles in different ways. While in some cases the NPM agenda of the institutions has triggered internal moral conflict and a crisis of moral character, in other cases the new logic resonates with academics' values and evaluative standards. Partially departing from the theoretical ground of MacIntyre (1981), we conclude that academics can play a crucial role in shaping the morality of NPM oriented institutions and in transforming these settings into suitable contexts for the cultivation of virtues.

Keywords: NPM, performance, university, moral character, moral agency, identity.

## 1. Introduction

Since the early 1980s when governments started embarking upon programs of economic rationalization in the name of increasing market competition and state downsizing, the performativity of academic assessment tools has attracted the attention of the literature (Churchman, 2002; Humphrey et al., 1995; Nagy and Robb, 2008; Roberts, 2004). A number of studies have argued that new public management–inspired reform initiatives have proved to be detrimental in several aspects when translated in the academic realm (Christopher, 2012; Craig et al., 2014; Humphrey and Gendron, 2015; Roberts, 2004; Parker, 2002; Vesty et al., 2018). In particular, the diffusion of performance measurement mechanisms has led to the appearance of the so-called “academic performer” (Gendron, 2008, 97). This new identity is a result of the disciplinary power of journal and universities’ rankings which provide a normative horizon within which professional recognition takes place. Previous scholars have argued that the academic performer exhibits a tendency to superficiality, conformity, and opportunism (Humphrey and Gendron, 2015; Gendron, 2008). For instance, new researchers seem to focus more and more on short-term and low-risk research projects to secure publications, thus bringing about intellectual stagnation (Gendron, 2008) and a gradual reduction of scientific innovation.

Changes occurring in the governance of universities are said to compound this transformation (Christopher, 2012; Roberts, 2004). New governance practices have seen the rise of a new managerial class, whose commercial and corporate aspirations seem to conflict with the spirit of collegiality and autonomy characterizing the traditional mission and aim of public institutions (Christopher, 2012). With the diffusion of this managerialist attitude in universities’ hierarchy, academics are believed to become more prone to the adoption of an entrepreneurial ethos. Rather than acting as a “conscience and critic of society” (Nagy and Robb, 2008, 1422), they are transformed into ‘cogs’ of the modern corporate university driven by values such as “financial viability, vocational relevance, industry relationships, market share, public profile, and customer/client responsiveness” (Parker, 2002, 612).

Challenging this deterministic account, recent studies have argued that, rather than be victims at the mercy of structural changes, academics have actively engaged with various forms of open and covert strategies of resistance (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Kalfa et al., 2018; Teelken, 2012; Leathwood and Read, 2013). However, these forms of resistance have been mainly of ideological nature and at the individual level (Anderson, 2008). In most of the cases, academic resistance has resulted at best in a

symbolic compliance, leaving unaltered the existing state of affair (Kalfa et al., 2018). To this day, the reasons for this minimal resistance have remained largely unexplored (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). We propose here that, when investigating the impact of NPM logic and the resistance to it, existing studies have mainly overlooked the moral agency of individuals, i.e. the way in which individuals develop an ethical understanding of changes and how this understanding, in turn, influences how they enact pre-defined social roles or resist to them.

Drawing from the virtue ethics approach theorized by the philosopher MacIntyre, we propose that deeper insights into the process of transformation of academia can be gained by focusing on how academics ethically interpret and react to NPM institutional changes in relation to their identity and their practice. By providing a new theoretical understanding that privileges attention to the moral character of academics at the interplay between social role and identity, this paper contributes to previous studies that have analysed NPM in academia (Christopher, 2012; Roberts, 2004; Parker, 2002; Humphrey and Gendron, 2015; Craig et al., 2014; Humphrey et al., 1995) and academic resistance to it (Kalfa et al., 2018; Bristow et al., 2017; Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Anderson, 2008). The moral philosophy of MacIntyre offers the analytical lenses to investigate this complex relation between academia as an institution, the academic practice and the way in which academics understand their moral character and exercise their moral agency accordingly.

The analysis of the narratives of academics collected in the business department of a Danish university supports our theoretical argument by offering an example of alternative moral understandings of academics' identity and institutional changes. While some individuals experience a tension and moral conflict engendered by the new requirements of their professional role, other participants subscribe to the normative and evaluative standards embodied in the NPM discourse as these resonate with their morality and values. Rather than be conceived as a source of internal moral conflict, the new performance measurement mechanisms are conceived as moralizing technologies that, if well used, can make the academic practice more virtuous. The third form of morality characterizes those individuals that partially disregard the evaluative standards of the role they are called upon to play by privileging their moral system *qua* individuals. While these examples cannot be comprehensive of all the ways in which individuals construct their moral character, they can offer a sound explanation of why collective and radical resistance to NPM changes in universities has remained relatively uncommon and opens the way for future studies on this topic.

The following section offers an overview of previous studies that have explored the nature and impact of NPM in academia and academics' reaction to it. We then provide an outline of the MacIntyre's virtue ethics approach and an overview of the methodology adopted in the study. It follows a section with the narrative analysis of anonymous interviews collected in an organizational unit of business studies at a Danish public university. The last section draws the conclusions, underlining the theoretical contributions of the study.

## **2. The impact of NPM on the role of the academics and their mobilisation of resistance**

A substantive corpus of studies has investigated the changes that have transformed the nature and aspirations of the academic profession in the last decades (Christopher, 2012; Roberts, 2004; Parker, 2002; Humphrey and Gendron, 2015; Craig et al., 2014). Scholars have argued that, following NPM oriented reforms, universities have been placed in the profit-oriented market (Kristensen, 2011; Kenney, 1987) thus opening the way to the commercialization and commodification of education. The latter becomes a product among others to be exchanged and consumed (Natale and Doran, 2012) with the price of this "marketization process" (Natale and Doran, 2012; Boyce, 2002) being firstly paid by the students, who risk becoming the customers of the new knowledge industry (Nagy and Robb, 2008; Parker, 2002).

These transformations of universities into "highly entrepreneurial, customer focussed and revenue seeking enterprises" (Parker, 2002) have been combined with a rhetoric of efficiency and accountability (Natale and Doran, 2012) which has pushed universities to mimic private sector practices and values (Kenney, 1987). Changes in the governance system of universities that were expected to solve the shortcomings of a traditional bureaucratic system, such as rigidity, lack of accountability and its subordination to particular interests (Parker, 2002), have been said to exhibit analogous pitfalls, offering only the appearance of a more decentralized and accountable model. Critical scholars have argued that what the universities have witnessed is a political and administrative shift with collegial control being replaced or partially reshaped by a form of bureaucratic vertical evaluation and control (Craig et al., 2014; Christopher, 2012; Roberts, 2004). It follows that, under the umbrella of the NPM reform, the traditional democratic collegial consultative model has given way to the diffusion of managerialism and of a performance mentality in the university sphere (Roberts, 2004).

In this emerging context hinged upon top-down bureaucratic control, students' evaluations of modules, citation metrics, journal and universities' rankings act have been described as powerful disciplinary mechanisms (Gendron, 2015; Espeland and Sauder, 2016). "When measured on the basis of outcomes, we find our naked and exposed self at stake" (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). Thus publishing and teaching are increasingly becoming processes of identity construction (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). Performance management systems are believed to instill norms and values in individuals' mindset, they do not only describe but also prescribe (Hoskin, 1996, 1986). Their power ultimately lies in their ability to produce an ethical system that comes to define the normative horizon governing professional life (Jackall, 2010; Kerssens-van Drongelen and Fisscher, 2003; Niven and Healy, 2016).

Thus, the impact of NPM on academic identity and practice has been often described through the Foucauldian lens of *subjectivation* with reference to the performative power of performance systems in the new corporate academia (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Humphrey and Gendron, 2015; Gendron, 2015; Gendron, 2008; Clarke and Knights, 2015). For instance, a performance indicator such as the number of publications has become a case in point of how performance systems have come to define academic normative standards, i.e. who can be defined as a good researcher and who is not (Gendron, 2008). Analogously, the diffusion of citation indexes such as Google Scholar, the Web of Science, and Scopus has radically transformed the access and evaluation of academic information promoting an individualistic approach to the research endeavor. This approach is fuelled by a culture of self-branding (Vallas et al., 2018) embedded in the increasing construction of public identities in systems such as Research Gate, Google Scholar Citation Profile and ORCID.

This prominent role given to "numeracy" (Roberts, 2004) in turns is said to encourage instrumental behaviors which elevates what can be measured and compared, i.e. publications, while rendering invisible other aspects that resist quantification and yet offer a qualitative understanding of the social contribution of research. Thus, "publication rather than research is merely a means to a very instrumental end" (Hopwood, 2008), such as career progression and professional prestige, thus defining individualism and competition as a key for success (Kenney, 1987; Natale and Doran, 2012; Gendron, 2008). Horvath (1995) has framed this phenomenon in terms of a substitution of an 'ethics of excellence' with an 'ethics of effectiveness', an ethics which promotes personal achievement with little or no focus on the social benefits deriving from it. Along the same line, Moosa (2018) argues that this phenomenon currently labelled as "Publish or Perish" (POP) has adverse consequences for individuals, academia and the progress of human knowledge, in term of quality of research and

dissemination of knowledge, growth of journal industry, changing and fractional authorship pattern, research misconduct behaviours and the well-being of academics.

In this scenario, critical scholars have called for “new forms of subjectivity” (Humphrey & Gendron, 2015) through the refusal of the individuality imposed by the NPM discourse. Accordingly, recent studies have focused on the (lack of) academic resistance to NPM (Kalfa et al., 2018; Bristow et al., 2017; Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Anderson, 2008). In her analysis of Australian universities, Anderson (2008) describes academics as “intrinsically motivated by the nature of academic work” and “inured to critique”, hence devoted to resisting the dictates of managerialism in defense of their “academic autonomy” (p. 259). Academic resistance, she argues, assumes various forms, ranging from refusal to participate in students evaluations, to avoidance by declining managerial requests, to minimal compliance. Resistance is often enacted through ‘hidden transcripts’, “the ‘low-profile stratagems’ that comprise the weapons of the weak” (Anderson, 2008) and only rarely in the form of overt resistance.

Along the same line, Bristow et al. (2017) identify three types of narratives, i.e. diplomatic, combative and idealistic, each of them expressing a dialectical rather than a binary opposition between resistance and compliance. Love and cynicism, compliance and resistance coexist in the same gesture (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). Clarke et al. (2012) describe “mental distancing, disengagement and cynicism” (p. 13) as strategies enacted by academics to address the ongoing metamorphosis of unconditional love for the profession into pragmatic love.

These and other studies (Teelken, 2012; Leathwood and Read, 2013) unveil open and covert strategies of academic resistance while at the same time uncovering the lack of collective and impactful resistance. For instance, some academics “explain that they felt that their protests were fruitless, and somewhat embarrassing, to their colleagues, and, ultimately, to themselves” (Anderson, 2008). Clarke et al. (2012) notice that resistance “was always enacted individually rather than collectively”. Worthington and Hodgson (2005) explain that many academics resisted mainly through their academic writings, pointing to the exclusively ideological character of this form of resistance. Thus, what is interesting in this scenario is the lack of collective and impactful resistance to NPM and the tendency of academics to openly or secretly comply with managerialism and the logic of performance.

“How come there has been so little resistance and so much compliance?” (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016). While extensive studies have investigated the impact of NPM and resistance to it, the reasons for

compliance have gained scant attention in the literature. The few existing studies (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Bristow et al., 2017; Kalfa et al., 2018) suggest that academics have started seeing their practice as a 'game' that must be played. Thus, they become at the same time subjected to the discipline of NPM and their active producers. By accepting the rules of the game and even by gaming the system (Espeland and Sauder, 2016), academics confirm that it is a game worth playing. The Bourdesian lenses have helped scholars in the interpretation of this phenomenon by shedding light on the self-interest of academics in securing and accumulating capitals, careerism thus becoming the other face of managerialism (Kalfa et al., 2018; Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Clarke and Knights, 2015).

Contributing to this debate, we propose here that the reasons for (lack of) resistance to the NPM discourse and its impact on academics' identity can be explored in the realm of morality. Rather than seeing academics as 'subject' to the NPM discourse or players in a game of rent-seeking, we describe them as moral characters endowed with different ethical understandings of their identity, of their practice and of the institutional changes they experience.

### **3. MacIntyre on institutions, practice, and moral character**

For our analysis, we draw on philosophical thoughts of ethics. In particular, we consider MacIntyre's concept of moral character and institution-practice dichotomy as appropriate. Through the lenses of these concepts, we can investigate the role of academics' moral character in relation to NPM oriented institutional changes. The two theoretical concepts of moral character and practice-institution dichotomy are further explained in the following.

#### *Practice and institution dichotomy*

An extensive literature has analyzed the role of ethics in organizations (Jackall, 2010; Moore, 2015; Chun 2005; Bright et al. 2006). Recently, the virtue ethics' approach has been recognized as a valuable alternative to the dominant utilitarian view of business practice (Sison et al., 2012; Collier, 1998; Dawson and Bartholomew, 2003; Sinnicks, 2017, 2014; McPherson, 2013; West, 2017). Dating back to the Aristotelian tradition, the originality of this approach lies in its focus on the moral individual rather than on the morality of a single action (Collier, 1998; Dawson and Bartholomew, 2003). According to this approach, ethics should be primarily concerned with how people become good people and how their moral character determines their actions.



Contributing to this moral philosophy, MacIntyre (1981) argues that the moral character of an individual is shaped through the exercise of practice and the latter does not happen in isolation but within a given community with its tradition and values (MacIntyre, 1981). Each practice has a teleological and honorific dimension, meaning that a practice is defined by its *telos*, which is the orientation of virtues to the purposes of a human activity and honor is given to the people that excel in this practice (MacIntyre, 1981). The notion of practice is described by MacIntyre as follows:

“A coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 187).

MacIntyre provides an example of practice: chess. To excel in chess, players need to practice, learn from other players, and in this learning process not only they gain what MacIntyre defines as ‘internal goods’, such as for example “strategic imagination” and “competitive intensity” (MacIntyre 1981:188), but they also acquire specific virtues, such as diligence and patience. Thus, individuals acquire virtues through practice and, in this process, they can gain internal goods (Sinnicks 2017, 2014; McPherson, 2013). Furthermore, the community as a whole, and not only the single individual that performs the practice, benefits from the virtuous exercise of this practice (Collier, 1998; Dawson and Bartholomew, 2003).

While internal goods are unique to the practice, not of finite supply and intangible (Dobson, 2009), there exist other goods such as money, power and prestige that possess the opposite characteristics of being limited and hence someone’s property and object of competition (MacIntyre, 1981, pp. 190-191; Dobson, 2009; Moore, 2002). At the interplay of this distinction between internal and external goods, MacIntyre develops his practice-institutions dichotomy (Horvath, 1995; Moore, 2015; Wang et al., 2016). External goods are external to the practice, yet useful to sustain it: they represent the kind of goods that are generally pursued by institutions (Beadle, 2013). The latter house the practice and are necessary for its survival. For instance, practices such as teaching and research are fostered and protected by the university institution, in distributing and pursuing goods such as money, power and status ensures the independence of the practice and its survival over time in society.

In this sense, “external goods genuinely are goods” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 196), but there can be cases in which the achievement of these goods can be a “potential stumbling block” (*Ibidem*) for the achievement of internal goods and the cultivation of virtues. Therefore, MacIntyre explains that a tension may arise between practice and institutions because “the ideals and creativity of the practice is always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 194). The vulnerability of the practice to the corrupting effects of institutions, in turn, ultimately lies in the integrity of the practice, which “causally requires the exercise of the virtues by at least some of the individuals who embody it in their activities” (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 195). Thus, in MacIntyre’s view, both the integrity of the practice and the well-functioning of the institutions depend on the moral character of individuals, i.e. their exercise of moral agency vis-à-vis their identity and social role.

### *The moral character*

In his work of 1981, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, MacIntyre theorizes the notion of ‘moral character’ at the interplay between ethics, identity, and social role. Compared to others concepts introduced in previous management and organizational studies, such as organizational self (Driver, 2006), professional role identity (Chreim et al., 2007), multiple selves (Elster, 1987), the concept of ‘moral character’ encompasses two crucial elements that characterize MacIntyre’s theory.

First, it explicitly points out the normative dimension of identity, i.e. while defining/discovering who they are, individuals define and discover who they *should* be. Second, the word ‘character’ clarifies that the process of identity construction is a collective one. The role that individuals occupy in a society defines their identities. Thus, the character of an individual is inextricably linked to the role that (s)he occupies in a given community and to the tradition that over history has defined the normative standards (i.e. who they *should* be) to which these social roles are expected to conform (Horvath, 1995). In this respect, a moral character refers to “a very special type of social role which places a certain kind of moral constraint on the personality of those who inhabit them in a way in which many other social roles do not” (MacIntyre, 1981, 27). Thus, the notion of moral character presupposes a fusion of social role and identity.

MacIntyre (1981) clarifies the distinctive characteristic of a moral character as follows:

“the requirements of a character are imposed from the outside, from the way in which others regard and use characters to understand and to evaluate themselves [...] Hence the demand is that in this type of case role and personality be fused. Social type and psychological type are required to coincide” (29)

In the case of many social roles, such as that of “a dentist or that of a garbage collector” (MacIntyre, 1981, 27), an individual may embody moral beliefs which can be his/her own and be other than the beliefs (s)he embodies *qua* role player. On the contrary, moral characters are a type of social role that acquires a moral significance and, hence, requires and presupposes a continuity between the moral beliefs of an individual *qua* individual and *qua* role players. Individuals inhabiting these roles are “able to discharge this function precisely because they incorporated moral and metaphysical theories and claims”.

Among the examples of moral characters, MacIntyre (1981) includes the moral character of the Professor as an example of a social role which furnishes the members of a community with a cultural and moral ideal. In this respect, the critique of NPM developed in the existing literature resonates with this understanding of the academic profession in terms of a moral character by pointing out how traditional virtues such as collegiality, scientific freedom, critical knowledge, and integrity have been replaced by new virtues such as prestige, individualism, competition, and personal ambition, thus radically reshaping the system of normative ideals and virtues that individuals inhabiting this social role are required to embody, i.e. academics’ moral character.

Our analysis complements these analyses of the moral character of the academic as portrayed in NPM oriented practice and institutions with a new focus on the way in which individuals reflect on their moral character and enact it. In his later work, *Social Structures and Their Threats to Moral Agency* (1999), MacIntyre explains that even if individuals constantly evaluate themselves against specific normative and evaluative standards that are produced by external structures, these standards are also partially an expression of the actor’s inner reflexivity. The moral agency of an individual expresses precisely the individuals’ ability to understand moral identity as something distinct and irreducible to the role they inhabit in society. An individual becomes a moral agent whenever (s)he rationally and critically scrutinizes the normative and evaluative standards of the social role (s)he is called upon to play. This critical questioning can result in a conflict or tension between the system of morality that an individual follows *qua* individual and the standards that an individual must possess *qua* role player, thus making difficult for an individual to enact his/her moral character.

At the same time, whenever “the elements of potential and actual conflict are missing” there is a risk of “compartmentalization” (MacIntyre, 1999, 321), the condition of an individual which obeys to competing normative and evaluative standards governing the roles (s)he inhabits and his/her personal identity (Horvath, 1995; MacIntyre, 1999). This “ethical schizophrenia” (Moore, 2002), in turn, prevents the cultivation of important virtues such as integrity and constancy, which consist in an ability to preserve the same moral character across different social spheres (i.e. integrity) and over time (i.e. constancy) (McPherson, 2013). In cases as such, the individuals cannot make sense of themselves as a narrative unity and a moral character (Moore, 2015; Collier, 1998; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Drawing from this theoretical framework which links the practice-institution dichotomy with academics’ moral character, the following sections will explore academics’ moral understanding of recent institutional changes in relation to their identity and practice.

#### **4. Research Method**

##### *The subject of the study*

For our study, we chose a Danish public-funded university that in line with the recent trends observed in most of the European universities has seen the implementation of NPM oriented reforms and witnessed important changes (see next section). Denmark has been considered a “reluctant reformer because of less cultural compatibility” (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007, 5), hence the Danish context has received little attention in NPM critical studies predominantly focused on sites in which the enactment of NPM has become more evident, such as the UK. On the contrary, Denmark represents an interesting case for the analysis of academics’ moral character in relation to these institutional changes as, in spite of cultural incompatibility, it is the Scandinavian country that has introduced the most radical NPM oriented reforms (Schmidt and Langberg, 2007).

##### *Research approach*

The ambition of our research is not to test a hypothesis or an a-priori theory or model (Yin, 2017), but to gain a deep understanding of the particular types of moral engagement and model of thinking that govern individual academics in their daily practices. Given this aim, the research approach adopted in this paper is explorative in nature. Consequently, an important dimension of the study was to obtain insights into how the academics relate their moral character to the performance evaluation mechanisms adopted by the case university.

Drawing from MacIntyre (1981), we argue that individuals understand and create their activities and identity through narratives and thereby they are authors and characters of the drama that they live (MacIntyre, 1981). Human practices are organised around the wholeness of the language and the activity it is woven into (Wittgenstein 1953, §7); i.e. language use, thoughts, and actions are linked together. Thus, when imagining a certain type of narrative we imagine a certain form of life (Wittgenstein 1953, §23) and a person's self-narrative says something about the engaged and embodied human beings understanding of his/her existence and actions (Ricoeur, 1984). Furthermore, the story of the individual is always part of the story of the community to which (s)he belongs, and individuals and collective narratives are constitutive elements of social traditions (MacIntyre 1981).

In view of that, we analysed the self-narratives of academics and the moral character(s) these narratives unfold. Our explorative method involves interaction, reflection and conceptualization (Arbnor and Bjerke 1997, p. 16; Norreklit, 1986). We collected the data primarily through interactive and in-depth interviews, which, at least partially, enabled the capturing of the academics' complex way of perceiving and thinking about their moral engagement and thinking in relation to the practice of performance evaluation at their university. Analyzing the interviews, we as researchers alternated between interacting and reflecting over the collected material with an aim to develop solid concepts capturing the different types of moral characters. Below, we explain in more details, how the data was collected and analyzed.

### *Data collection*

Data for the analysis were collected by one of the authors, who spent three months in a Danish university. During the stay, the author interacted with researchers employed at an organizational unit of business studies. Following a snowballing method (Blaxter et al., 2001) in which (s)he asked participants to provide additional names on colleagues who might (dis)agree with them, the author made 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 8 associate professors, 1 associate lecturer, 2 Ph.D. students, 1 assistant researcher, 2 full professors, and 1 associate professor and union representative. Also, the author collecting the material participated in informal conversations with the participants and in organizational meetings. During the data collection, it was specified that both the identity of the university and of the participants would have been kept anonymous and confidential so that the participants could express freely their opinion.

The sample was not intended to be representative of the academic community but aimed at capturing specific instances of moral character and including different moral views on the changes implemented. In this process, we assumed to be not self-evident what individuals believe ethically relevant for their identity construction, thus adopting a “more open-minded efforts to explore the more vital aspects how people define and re-define themselves” (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, 1190). Overall, throughout the data collection process, we were concerned about obtaining both in-depth insights into the individual academic’s view and breath in perspectives. Thus, we continued the interviewing until theoretical saturation occurred (Guest et al., 2006).

The focus of our data collection was specifically addressed at investigating how the participants related their moral characters to performance evaluation mechanisms mainly introduced in three specific areas, i.e. funding, teaching, and research. The questions in the semi-structured interview were organized into three sections, with each section investigating one of the three main performance areas. The interviewees were required to express their opinion about the recent performance-driven institutional changes and to explain the impact that these changes are having on their practice and moral self-understanding. By asking the participants to reflect on their own practice and moral character following the NPM changes we transformed the interview into “‘a site for identity work’ in which the interviewee’s identity is situationally constructed and reconstructed through the interaction with the interviewer” (Carollo and Guerci, 2017). Also, the interviewees were all allowed some freedom to explain their perspectives on the performance evaluation mechanisms. The interactive form of interviewing made it possible, through dialogue, to be open to the individual academic’s experiences and thinking. Moreover, the form made it possible to question certain responses in greater depth to fully capture the complexity of the issue. All interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, and were digitally recorded and fully transcribed to be analysed.

#### *Data analysis*

Our analysis of the narratives aimed at unveiling the moral character of academics in relation to the academic practices of teaching and research and to the changes that have interested the academic institution. Informed by MacIntyre’s theoretical lenses (1981; 1999) we aimed to conceptualise the moral characters of our participants.

Each interview was first analysed as a “narrative unity” (MacIntyre, 1981), with an effort to gain an overall understanding of the participant’s moral (self)understanding. In a first stage, we isolated the passages in which the participants were reflecting on their moral character in relation to the organizational context, to their practice, and to the institutional changes. Following previous studies

on identities (Carollo and Guerci, 2017; Harding et al., 2014; Harding, 2008), we focused on the participants' use of personal pronouns for self/other-references. For instance, we identified organizational context with the pronoun 'they' referring mainly to colleagues and the management. Additionally, we coded the text parts in relation to the three performance areas explored in the study: funding, teaching, and research.

The second stage of data analysis consisted in the investigation of these passages with a focus on the evaluative and normative standards that the participants were ascribing to their role in the 'corporate' university and those virtues and standards they were ascribed to their own identity. We looked at how the academics were describing the normative ideals of their work practice in relation to funding, teaching, and research, the institutional roles they are placed in relation to these three areas, and their action on handling the gap between their normative standards and the role ascribed to them. In so doing, we also detected whether the participants were referring to a moral conflict or tension between these roles and their identity and how they were shaping their practice in reaction to a perceived gap, if any, between the normativity of the institution and their own moral beliefs, thus enacting their moral character in a distinctive way.

In a third final stage of analysis, we compared the narratives of our participants to find differences and similarities between the academics' way of understanding their identity, roles and action. This led us to the identification of three main types of moral characters, each with a particular moral understanding of NPM: the fragmented moral character, the unitary moral character, and the embodied moral character. We then reflected on the implications of the co-existence of these three moral characters for the collective and radical resistance to NPM changes in universities.

### *Generalisation*

The aim of our study is to conceptualise the particular types of moral engagement and model of thinking that govern individual academics in their daily practices. This is important as the dynamics of modern practice, including university practices, necessitate a continuous change of existing concepts as well as the creation of new concepts. Concepts are by their nature inherently concerned with establishing general perspectives. Hence, in that respect, our results can reasonably be extended to other academic contexts. However, our conceptual development is based on the specific conditions of our case, thus partially constraining its application in other contexts. Procedures of human practice might not pass unchanged across time and space, and hence the application of our conceptual findings should be used in reflective interaction with the specific practice. For such purpose, in the following

sections, we explain the specific conditions of our case and reflect on whether these can be found in other situations (Payne and Williams, 2005; Nørreklit, Nørreklit and Mitchell, 2016).

## 5. Case Analysis

### 5.1 Practice- institution dichotomy: the context of change

Radical changes have interested the Danish universities in the last decades. In particular, the 2003 University Act marked the beginning of a new era in the spirit of the NPM trend. The reform was considered the most extensive reform since 1479, the year of the foundation of Copenhagen University. The changes implemented concerned three main areas: the governance structure, the allocation of funding, and the performance management system of the university (Kristensen et al., 2011).

The first important transformation concerned the governance structure that was radically transformed by establishing new 'boards', with the majority of external members, in place of the senates and the faculty councils, the former university governing bodies. The Senate was the highest university authority since the foundations of the first universities in the 12<sup>TH</sup> century. Universities were born as self-organized organizations of students and teachers, from which the name *university* to indicate a number of persons associated into a body. Accordingly, the members of the Senate and faculty councils were elected by the students, the technical administrative staff and the faculty which had respectively the 25%, 25% and 50% of the seats in the Senate (Sorensen, 2015).

This republican model was radically changed in 2003. The highest authority of the new model is a board whose majority of the members are external and "must have experience with management, organization and finance, including the evaluation of budgets and accounts" (The University Act, Ministry of Science, Innovation and Higher Education, 25 March 2013). These members are elected by the Minister of Science while academic representatives are a minority. The president of the board is selected among the external members and the board in turns appoints the rector and down to deans and head of departments (Sorensen, 2015). According to many academics, this institutional change replaced the normative ideal of the university as a democratic space with a new normative ideal that values hierarchical accountability and efficiency above collegiality and independence (Schmidt and Langberg, 2007).



The peculiarity of this model compared to analogous models introduced in other European universities is the fact that these boards exercise a substantial control over the resources of the university as they are in a contractual relationship with the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Technology. Indeed, following the 2003 reform, Danish universities have acquired the new legal status of “self-owning institutions” which can enter as a party into a contract with the Ministry. Accordingly, in 2007 ‘public sector consultancy’ was introduced as a new university task. While since the 1970 Danish universities were state institutions under the supervision of the Ministry, with the 2003 reform “the state still owns universities, and they are still part of the public administration, but now universities had to separate their property and capital as their own within the state’s capital” (Wright and Boden, 2011, p. 92). In other words, the burden of securing external goods for sustaining the academic practice was partially shifted from the Ministry to every single university. With the later reform of 2011, the control exercised by the board and the rector was further extended to include a decision about the organization of the academic units and the authority to be given to the management of these units, i.e. deans and head of the department (Degn and Sorehsen, 2015).

The board, on the other hand, was made accountable to the Ministry through development contracts which represented an important steering mechanism since their first introduction in 1999 and changed the practice-institution dynamics in important ways. Development contracts are agreements about future performance setting goals to be achieved. As a payoff of the ‘autonomy’ gained, universities are expected “to demonstrate value for money by regularly documenting and evaluating institutional efforts” (Nielsen, 2017). Starting from 2004, these contracts have increasingly focused on quantitative targets and output indicators, such as the number of graduate students, the attraction of external funding etc. (Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation, 2011). Because of these changes, educational funding is nowadays almost fully allocated on the base of performance mechanisms in Denmark (European Commission, 2018) which offers the most extensive case of use of performance-based funding allocation mechanism for education in Europe (EUA, 2015).

Funding for education is separated from research funding and are allocated on the base of a ‘taximeter’ system which establishes a certain rate for each student that passes the exams, while no funding is allocated for students who fail their exams or do not take exams (OECD, 2006). In addition, the universities receive a completion bonus every time a student completes the degree inside the standard time limit (European Commission, 2018). Analogously, for every student going abroad or every international student enrolled universities receive a fixed amount of 5,000 DKK (around 670 €) (EUA, 2015). Along the same line, the widely debated Danish government’s Study Progress Reform of 2015 aimed at speeding up the time students take to graduate from university in order to have

relevant cost saving and more tax revenue. If the targets are not reached, the universities lose funding for education (University of Copenhagen, 2016). The sustainability of the institution and the survival of the practice are thus caught in a vicious circle in which students passing exams secure external goods for the university. More and more pressure is thus being put on academics in terms of their ability to accelerate the academic achievements of their students with the risk that the need to secure external goods will act as a “stumbling block” (MacIntyre, 2007 [1981], p. 196) for the cultivation of virtues and the pursuit of teaching’s internal goods.

With respect to research funding, there has been a shift from basic to external funding, from free research to strategic research, and from smaller to larger grants (Aagaard, 2011). The basic research grant share went from 84 percent in 1980 to 56 percent in 2010 (NIFU, 2014). Before 2010, all new research funds were distributed according to a 50-40-10-model, based on the education funding (50 %), the ability to attract external research funding (40 %) and the production of Ph.D. thesis (10 %); in 2010, research publishing has been also introduced in the model (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014). Currently, external funding count 20%, majority of which is funded by national private non-profit organizations (Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation, 2014) which are becoming a crucial funder for universities (they accounted for 8% in 2005 and increased to 12% in 2015; NIFU, 2018). Furthermore, 25% of funding is allocated based on the publication data from the Danish bibliometric research indicator and the remaining 10% is linked to the number of completed PhDs (European Commission, 2018).

The Danish bibliometric research indicator (BFI) was introduced in 2009 following the merge of the existing 12 universities and 13 research institutes into 8 new universities and 4 research institute (Degn and Sorensen, 2015). The BFI “is used to allocate funding based on the distribution of publications that are scientific, peer-reviewed and published in a channel included in the BFI lists” (Ministry website). The list of publication channels (i.e. journals, series etc.) was developed and is revised on an annual base by members of sixty-eight field-specific committees appointed by the Rector College’s Executive Committee (Nielsen, 2017). The channels are classified as either top 20% (level two) or below (level one) taking into consideration journal impact factors, peer-review process, rejection rates etc., in the first case they are weighted three times more than the level one journals. All the research outputs of each university are registered in a database called PURE (PUplication Research) and funding are allocated on the base of the registered publications ‘valued’ on the base of the BFI list (Kristensen et al., 2011).

Despite the model being used to evaluate the performance of universities at aggregated levels, there is a trickle-down effect, where externally evoked quantitative objectives that are targeted at an entire institution, are translated into measurable objectives that are deployed further down in the organizational structures within the various departments, and eventually on the individual researcher. The 2005 memorandum and the latest *Job Structure for Academic Staff at Universities 2013* provide the management of universities with the flexibility to specify the job content and the requirements for the different positions (NIFU, 2018). In spite of this flexibility, the criteria of recruitment reflect the same output-based criteria that regulate the contractual relationship between the board and the Ministry. For instance, the assessment criteria for the appointment of a full professor include “participation in, and initiation of, externally funded research projects” (Copenhagen Business School website), the number of publications through the best publication outlets within the research field (Aarhus university website), “experience and qualifications with regard to dissemination of research, and engagement with the wider public, the media and the wider public” (University of Copenhagen website), and “good management skills: she/he will be active, decisive, transparent, charismatic and a good communicator” (Aalborg University). Thus, the structural changes that have taken place in the last decades have come to shape also the idea of academic excellence by redefining normative and evaluative standards in light of the new virtues of independence, autonomy, and competition.

## **5.2 Narrative analysis of academics’ moral character**

The participants that took part in the study showed a different moral understanding of the above described institutional changes. For some, NPM is a source of internal moral conflict, thereby they perceive a risk of compartmentalization. Others are able to overcome the division between the self, characteristic of compartmentalization, by informing their role with the values and virtues they possess *qua* individuals. For them, NPM enhances self-understanding rather than being a source of moral conflict. A third group seems to have internalized the normative and evaluative standards of the role they inhabit and perceive NPM as an opportunity to redefine academics’ moral character in accordance with virtues of fairness and distributive justice. Below we offer a description of these characters through the analysis of academics’ narratives.

### *NPM as a source of moral conflict: the fragmented moral character*

MacIntyre suggests that institutional changes can trigger a conflict between two moral systems, which is “that of the established social order with its assignments of roles and responsibilities and those developed within those milieus in which that assignment has been put to the question” (1999).

Accordingly, some participants argue that the corporate university has triggered a crisis of moral character due to the emergence of normative ideals that are in conflict with those ideals that they ascribe to the academic tradition.

For instance, during the interview, an assistant professor explained:

“For me a conflict of interest is something that...I was in a profession and *I had a certain identity because I am a professional in that field because I have a certain set of values*. So, for me as a teacher, I have an idea of *what I think a good teacher should be*, as a researcher I have an idea and some criteria about *what a good researcher should be* [...] So, conflict of interest would appear now in which somehow by context or conditions I am forced to do something that would be within an incoherent window of values” (Interview n. 10; emphasis added).

The participant here perceives evaluative and normative standards embodied in the corporate university as conflictual with the set of values developed within the milieus that have come to define her professional identity. For instance, she describes a situation in which she had been suggested by other colleagues and superiors to change her teaching approach to address negative evaluations provided by the students on her module and she felt this was incoherent with her mode of practice:

“I had a hint sent to me that I *should* not make students feel uncomfortable, so they assess how comfortable they are. But *it has nothing to do with learning* [...] the advice was given to me that “if you want to make the course nice and smooth *you just need to manage their emotions and try to make them feel comfortable and as secure as possible*”. In my view, having uncertainty is part of life and it is a part of learning [...] my course become reduced because in order to provide the security you need to cut off the details because uncertainty comes out of details” (Interview n. 10; emphasis added).

In this quote, she contests an idea of teaching that is linked with an ability to *manage emotions* and making students *feel comfortable*. In her own understanding, complexity and discomfort are key characteristics of the learning process and she finds this purpose being sacrificed to expediency. This perception of moral identity as distinct from the requirement of the pre-defined role she inhabits triggers an internal moral conflict in her. Commenting on an episode in which she was planning to make some changes on the module she was teaching, she explained:

So, the thought came to my mind and I must actively reason it out, so I thought to myself "yes, it will affect [the evaluation] in one way or another, but *this is not something I should take into consideration*". It was an active thing, if I was *acting on the impulse* maybe If I would let myself carried away, maybe I will start negotiating the course and I think that is not the way to do it, yeah, it is there I can't say it is not there at least on the back of my head even though *I will not let myself guide it, it influences in a cautious way*. (Interview 10)

She describes an internal dialogue in which she places the requirements of her role under critical scrutiny, elaborates a moral judgment and then exercises her moral agency accordingly. This same type of moral reflexivity guides her in critically evaluating and (re)acting to the increasing pressure to get external funding:

it does not fit with my idea about professional identity as an educator, but I can't ignore it. It is part of the way things are developing and you don't like it that is one thing, but you can't ignore it. Even though *I am saying no it should not be, it shouldn't, it shouldn't... I can't stop it from happening*. It is about mobilizing the counter-discourse, it comes to that. The ability to mobilize a discourse that is solid enough to build resistance [...] if you have someone that is pushing you *to become a fundraiser from being an educator*, you would say now I am spending time on what? am I spending time about writing a research project that fits the company? am I writing a research project that fits research? it changes you become slowly--- it comes to a risk of *becoming a consultant* rather than a researcher. (Interview 10)

According to this participant, NPM reforms have asked academics to play multiple social roles that, in her view, obey to different evaluative standards, hence leading to a compartmentalization of morality (MacIntyre, 1999). She argues that her internal moral conflict originates from a tension between the multiple social roles, such as that of the consultant and of the fundraiser, that she is called upon to play and her self-understanding *qua* educator. However, while in the case of teaching evaluation, she could see a space for the exercise of moral agency, in this case, this assistant professor feels powerless in changing the existing state of affair in the absence of a broader mobilization of a counter-discourse that can neutralize the ongoing process of transformation of professional identity.

The introduction of 'public consultancy' as a new mission for the university and the institutional pressure to engage more with private and non-governmental actors is equally perceived as ethically controversial by this assistant professor due to a mismatch between the virtues which, in her view,

define these competing social roles, such as the professional confidentiality expected from consultants and the parrhesia, a virtue that the participant perceives as constitutive of the academic practice. For instance, she explains that “as a consultant, you are open to the politics of the company [...] they (companies) will try to use you as a lever to advance their own political agenda”. This challenge is described again in terms of compartmentalization and of internal moral conflict: “what I question is the ability of the person to make a split personality. I don’t see myself being able to do that [...] I don’t have that clarity of the mind”.

Similar ethical conflicts and crises of identities were described by other participants, which also conceive performance-based funding and performance appraisals as ethically controversial. Thus an associate professor commented that “research is reduced to a sort of economic function which is problematic” as in the case of some researchers who “felt that they need to provide some sort of results because their unit was financed by the ministry and if they didn't provide the correct results they were in trouble, then they will not be funded”, this to him is an “example where research to a high degree is framed” (Interview n. 8). In his view, “there is an economic discourse that identifies growth, economic growth as basically the most important thing we do” and this paradigm needs to change eventually “otherwise we have to die”.

Another teaching associate professor explains his difficulty in doing what he perceives as his own moral duty while the practice adopted in the social context he inhabits obeys to different standards:

“I came here, and all the professors reminded me that it was very important that *they [the students] get their degree because if they didn't the department will lose money*. They really said that. Quite straightforward. I think when I am evaluating these people, I am in a very conflicting situation. I have my job to do a proper evaluation and, even to stop some of being a bachelor, that is a part of my job, you know. *But my colleagues next door said they must pass because we don't get the funding here*” (Interview n. 5).

Also, this associate professor argues that by doing consultancy he will find himself “being drawn from many kinds of different sights” and that this will “corrupt your role as a consultant and your role as a researcher too” and he concludes that these should be distinct social roles:

“If you want to be a very good researcher, you must stay in the field, and you must join the international community. And if you have pushed away because the government wants to do the

new research you might leave the field, and you will be like a butterfly flying around just to pick the honey, whereas there is a lot of it but not being a good researcher in your field” (Interview n. 5).

According to this participant, the achievement of the internal goods and of the virtues of the academic practice (to be a *good* researcher) is being somehow undermined by a tendency to privilege external goods, i.e. the (m)oney. Thus, in his view, the institution is corrupting the practice by redirecting its attention to external goods. The same sort of “corrupting effect” (MacIntyre 2007 [1981], 194) is perceived by another participant in relation to teaching:

we've long moved past the point where we do things that have a positive side effect for the students learning [...] it's all about how we can make things and push things so that students create a register. Just a little sooner. So instead of giving them five months to write a better thesis, I think they now have four months. It's only for administrative political reasons. It has nothing to do with, you know, their learning, quite the contrary [...] you see universities struggle with this to take away some of their money. (Interview n. 14; emphasis added)

Overall, the narratives of these participants reveal an internal moral struggle arising from critical questioning and challenging the evaluative and normative standards of the role(s) they are called upon to play. They often explain their moral conflict in terms of a tension between role and identity. For instance, they refer to the role of the consultant as a sort of ‘antidentity’, as a negative source of identification.

Interestingly, in one case, we were informed by a participant of a subsequent decision to leave the academic field and join a non-profit organization. While we can have only a limited understanding of the reasons at the base of this choice, we can reasonably argue that these internal moral conflicts may have contributed to the participant’s decision to redefine her/his professional identity and social role.

#### *NPM as a source of reflexivity: the unitary moral character*

Several of the participants shared analogous ethical concerns in relation to the evaluative and normative requirements of the corporate university. However, they explained that this moral judgment doesn’t trigger an internal moral conflict, but enhances their reflexivity. These participants exhibit “an understanding of themselves as having a substantive identity independent of their roles and as having responsibilities that do not derive from those roles, so overcoming divisions within the

self, imposed by “compartmentalization” (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 15). An associate lecturer, for example, comments on the performance-based funding for education as follows:

I think that the stream of money from the ministry to university to our department is so far away from why I pass. So, I think, and I have been talking to some colleagues about it: do you just pass people to get funded or what? and of course they said of course not, I mean we *should* have *our standards* of passing people and not pass them in order to---, of course not [...] I think we never thought about passing somebody just to make them pass or whatever (Interview n. 2)

This participant explains how his moral agency was partially shaped and reinforced through the dialogue with other colleagues. Social relationships are critical for individuals to acquire confidence in elaborating moral judgment and in rational deliberation (MacIntyre, 1999). Analogously, an associate professor explained: “you need to feel your job, and I think this comes from the network that you see people are doing the same things, you can be inspired” (Interview n. 7). These participants feel that the milieu they inhabit sustains rather than constraining their understanding of themselves, hence facilitating the enactment of the role predefined by the academic institution through modes of practices that resonate with their morality *qua* individuals. Rather than describing an internal tension and conflict, this participant describes his daily practice focusing on the positive experience of teaching as follows:

the joy for me to teach is not about having students feed me with nice evaluation, the joy is to teach and having the student to understand while I teach the course...and I kind of know if they are with me, you can see through their eyes [...] The joy is about teaching during the course and not just about having a nice evaluation (Interview n. 2)

Despite performance-based allocation of educational funding and the performance evaluation by the students are perceived by some participants as ethically controversial, the corrupting effect on the practice is limited by a social milieu that allows the individuals “to understand themselves accountable to others in respect of the human virtues and not just in respect of their role-performances” (MacIntyre, 1999, 321). An assistant professor concluded very straightforward: “if I know or if I feel that a teaching method is the best way of teaching them this topic then disregarded what they would write in the evaluations. I would not think about that. Because you know I am the expert, the one who knows the field” (Interview n. 12). The exercise of this moral agency is also exemplified by another participant as follows:



I don't care, still. I know that I think about it, if I must give a student zero, I think about it, but I am very harsh with that. I have heard colleagues talking about giving them a 7 instead of a 4, but it is very few colleagues that speak in this way. We hadn't had this regulation for a long time in fact. *We don't need to know a lot about how we get this money*, it is very important that we look at *the criteria of what is an excellent student and what is a good student*, it is important to make sure that we are doing *our work*, *our job is not to make sure that department get any funding from the state*. (Interview n. 7)

When reflecting on the institutional-led orientation towards more consultancy and external funding, this associate professor exhibits this same moral confidence in the possibility of individuals to remain faithful to their own ethical understanding of practices in spite of the changing nature of the academic institution. For instance, as it was the case with the first type of participants, he acknowledges the ethical challenges which can arise when dealing with research projects aligned with the interest of external and private parties, nevertheless, this doesn't trigger a crisis or internal tensions between conflictual moral systems. These challenges are instead perceived as occasions for cultivating virtues of integrity and constancy through the exercise of moral agency. Thus, this associate professor comments: "I know that I have a *very strong ethical standard myself*, so I am not afraid, I can imagine being in a situation where I would feel pressured because of what they [external funders] want, and I know I will not perform in that direction" (Interview n. 7). An associate professor also commented on the importance of professional integrity when dealing with strategic research externally funded by saying: "if I conclude that they [external funders] may not like (the results), I still can publish and work with my results if that's the conclusion that I have reached. So, I need...I need to have that sort of *research professional identity intact*" (Interview n. 11). Along the same lines, a professor with 40 years of experience in academia commented:

I see a large difference between consultancy and research. I'm not very sort of religious in my views about stuff [...] I think *we should trust people very much*. It's probably that most people researcher will be able to balance that of course; it is different. But fundamentally I mean it could probably enrich people. So, I have no more problems; I don't see any big problems with it *if we're dealing with decent non-corrupt researchers*. (Interview n. 13)

These participants show a confidence in the possibility of a continuity between their morality *qua* individuals and the way in which they play their professional role, thus exhibiting a unitary, rather than a fragmented, moral character. It is this confidence that allows them to shape their practice in

accordance with their personal values and moral agency, thus avoiding the internal tensions deriving from compartmentalization.

Similarly, commenting on the impact of the Danish bibliometric research indicator on his practice, another participant explained:

I have decided for myself that I would not let myself be rolled into the circus about having, at nearly any price, specific publications in specific journals. But that's a personal choice that I have made. But of course, I still have research ambitions, but it's not, it's not just because the system tells me to [...] It works best for me if I can sort of see the relevance of the research that I'm doing [...] it's always constant improvement or constant adjustment to where I'm aiming (Interview n. 11)

Thus, also in relation to research performance, these participants see a possibility of shaping their practice and the ethical nature of institutional changes in a way that resonates with the set of virtues and values they subscribe *qua* individuals inhabiting a specific social and political milieu.

Interestingly, one of these participants decided to move to another university several months after our interview. Again, in spite of the fact that personal factors could have influenced this decision, we can presumably argue that this participant has preferred an organizational space more in sync with his personal way of enacting the academic moral character.

#### *NPM as a moralizing technology: the embodied moral character*

The moral approaches to institutional changes and self-understanding described in the previous two sections were not shared by all the participants. Among these, there were academics that didn't perceive some of these changes as ethically controversial and only partially called into question the authority of the normative and evaluative standards embodied in the NPM logic. Their critiques of these changes were not driven by an internal moral conflict or by a perceived potential ethical tension arising from the implementation of these changes. On the contrary, these critiques mostly aimed at improving the mechanisms of performance-based funding and performance appraisal without overturning their main assumptions. For instance, an associate professor criticized the performance evaluation system as follows:

There have been a lot of reports in the system where I can report in; students can report in, the chair of the Ph.D. school can report in and then it goes to the dean level, that is in the case if you deviate negatively. But if you deviate positively, for example, I was your supervisor, and I was so good supervising you that you get appointed at Harvard, will I be getting any money for that? NO. And some of us have been asking for this; I am expected to do an excellent work while I am not...I am not earning one cent (Interview n. 9)

This participant suggests a more extensive use of monetary rewarding mechanisms to value academics' practice and motivate their work. Thus, in his account, a fair distribution of external goods, such as money, can create the conditions for the achievement of internal goods and for the improvement of the practice, here framed within a domain of reward and punishment. The following quote shows how this associate professor has internalized the logic of performance-based funding and call for a quantification of other domains that have not yet been included in the evaluation system:

I don't think that the quality and the quantity of publication should be the only ones. I think that it [the performance evaluation system] should include things like how helpful you are in the community locally and worldwide, how do you help other researchers, are you able to create research meetings, so there are many things for which *I am not rewarded*. (Interview n. 9)

Analogously, when commenting on the performance evaluation system in the research area, this participant proposes to extend the performance-based funding to the individual level as follows:

"I think for instance another way would be like you have in France [where] you get a direct bonus to say ten thousand euros if you get a publication in this journal. That would be significant, some of the money the university gets go to me, not to other people" (Interview n. 9).

The increasing prominence given to the achievement of external goods in this scenario, rather than triggering moral conflicts or crisis identity, leads to conflict between academics to secure more funding:

"there are also some internal positions on how to distribute different subjects between departments and when you move five researchers from one department to another department you will also move five positions or six positions, you will also move funding related to maybe one million Euro [...] we call it a duck fight...someone gets hurts in the process not officially but

mentally and financially [...] we are both interested in the same money and money can only go once so it will be a conflict of interest” (Interview n. 1)

Even if the elements of a potential and actual internal moral conflict were missing (MacIntyre, 1999, 321), these critiques were not placed in an amoral sphere but were instead framed in ethical terms. The potentialities and limitations of NPM were often being seen by these participants in light of the virtue of fairness. These participants expect the distribution of external goods such as money, power, and prestige, to obey to rules of fairness and distributive justice. The reflection of another interviewee echoes this perspective:

“in February there has been an evaluation survey where we all evaluated the organization, our leaders etc. and to the question ‘do you know the indicators according to which your job is evaluated? Most of the people said no because it is not clear, but these people are the same people that then are not in favour of having these indicators because all know that once there is a clear indicator...eh you need to work in that direction, so the classic excuse is ‘eh but if you put an indicator you orient our activity in that direction but...the truth that I hear is ‘if you set the indicator and I do not reach the target I give a bad impression [...] whenever there is an indicator our head think about reward but also punishment” (Interview n. 15)

This type of reflection was often coupled with a generally positive evaluation of the increasing exposition of their identities to the consultancy logic. For example, an associate professor described consultancy as an opportunity to “get background knowledge” and “a lot of ideas about what is pragmatic”. Along the same line, another participant commented on the blurred line between consultancy and research suggesting that “some of those who have their own little business or work as consultant maybe they gain from that, so their experience outside university can be a contribution to the university” because in his account these type of conflict “can be negative, but can also be positive”.

In the participants’ view, once external goods have become a constitutive part of the academic practice they also have the potential to moralize this practice. Thus, these participants shift the focus from the pressure and potential moral conflict triggered by performance evaluation systems to their moral potential in shaping the evaluative and normative standards of the academic role and consequently the moral character of individuals. Rather than be perceived as ethically controversial, NPM oriented mechanisms are perceived as moralizing tools which can make the academic practice

more virtuous. For instance, a participant argues that having in place a performance evaluation system with clear indicators ensure fairness in the process of career advancement and public selection:

“it is becoming more transparent. it was not very transparent in the old days [...] I think it can be more transparent, but it is getting better [...] if it is clear what they are looking for then it will be easier to know where you should apply for. I think that is important and I think what is also important is that we are now getting the professorship with the committee member must be external, all of them, which means that they should be as objective as possible [...] So, having clear criteria and having committee members from outside there is objectivity” (Interview n. 3).

Along the same line, another associate professor provides the example of the new job requirements and career structure introduced for becoming an associate professor in line with the NPM logic. He explains that the new contracts formalize a series of requirements in terms of teaching and research performance which the candidate agrees to meet to get promoted, thus at the end of the period the candidate receives an assessment and then can be or not be promoted. This system does not force the candidate to take part in another open competition and at the same time “it is more objective”, “it is more sort of in accordance with public sector fairness and openness” and more importantly reduces the role of “dirty politics” in the process (Interview n. 14). Another participant describing his own recruitment process commented:

“I would prefer to have clear standards [...] on the contrary, I applied but, are 3 A stars publications enough for becoming full professor?...it was written that there will be given attention to these issues and that you need to be a leader in the field, but what does it mean to be a leader? ...it is not written ‘to be a leader means that...for example, you should be in the 5% of quotations in your field [...] the problem is to find a list of right indicators” (Interview n. 15).

Overall, these participants show a positive attitude towards NPM partially motivated by an ethical understanding of the recent institutional changes as an opportunity to reshape their moral character in line with the virtues promoted by the corporate academia. This approach, like the previous, unveils important dynamics characterizing the construction of the academic moral character. Despite exhibiting an instrumental and utilitarian approach to the practice that somehow subverts the relation between internal goods and external goods with the latter acquiring increasing prominence, this

embodied moral character is entwined with a specific form of morality which can potentially transform the emerging scenario into a suitable context for the cultivation of virtues.

This group included mainly academics that were previously or are currently occupying managerial positions and academics with a previous experience of many years working as business consultants, hence, we assume, more accustomed not only to the use of NPM oriented mechanisms but also to their promotion in the academic realm.

### *Summary*

Our analysis reveals that the moral characters of the academics are endowed with different ethical understandings of their identity, role, practice and of the institutional changes they experience. The positions of the analysed participants differed in both the ways in which they morally conceptualized the NPM phenomenon and in terms of the way in which they related their own moral character to this ethical understanding. While in some cases the academics perceived their moral character as fragmented and vulnerable to the risk of compartmentalization, others perceived their moral character as a narrative unity. In one case, because of an ability to characterize their social role in pathways that resonate with their own identity, in the second case because of an embodiment of the evaluative and normative standards promoted by the corporate university. Thus, for some participants, the NPM technologies of power and discipline were being positively framed as triggers of an “ethical and aesthetic self-formation process” (Clarke and Knights, 2015, 1869).

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

Drawing on MacIntyre (1981; 1999), this paper has investigated the moral character of academics in relation to their practice and to the NPM changes that have shaped the academic institution in the last decades.

Our explorative analysis showed that moral deliberation around NPM is a contested terrain and allowed us to identify three main types of moral character, each presenting a specific understanding of NPM: the fragmented, the unitary and the embodied moral character. This conceptualization sheds light on the plurality of moral understandings of NPM among our participants and on the distinctive ways in which they enact the moral character promoted by the corporate university.

Some participants exhibit a fragmented moral character and face an internal moral conflict, others interpret and actualize the institutional changes by informing their practice with their own personal morality and virtues (e.g. by failing students in spite of the material interest in passing them), thus avoiding a compartmentalization of their morality. To a third group of participants, the managerialist turn appears associated with a form of morality beneficial in reducing the “dirty politics” that, in their view, have characterized the ‘traditional’ academia, hence their practice and moral character embody the normative standards of competition, prestige and ambition promoted by the corporate university.

While MacIntyre (1999) argues that the lack of internal moral conflict denotes a diminished moral agency, we suggest a conceptualization of these three approaches as instances of types of moral characters which exhibit different, yet equally valid, forms of morality in relation to practice and tradition. Thus, applying the MacIntyre’s theorization of the institution-practice dichotomy and of moral character for our analysis has led us to reach conclusions that partially challenge MacIntyre’s normative view.

In this respect, MacIntyre’s theory has been criticized for paradoxically recognizing the centrality of the moral agency of individuals while at the same time anchoring this agency to the tradition of inherited practice (Hoekema, 2017; Kulenović, 2008). His moral philosophy rejects the (Kantian) possibility to appeal to a universal reason in moral deliberation while at the same time taking the distance from post-modern relativism. Thus, in his view, matters of morality are not about truth or falsehood, rather our moral judgments distill and *should* distill the conceptions of the good, telos and virtues from the particular, historically situated tradition that we inhabit. However, our analysis indicates that this tradition-centered conceptualization of morality constitutes a conceptual shortcoming in his work.

Indeed, by conceptualizing the development of a practice in terms of an incremental advancement within a given tradition, MacIntyre is not able to account for cases of radical changes of practice that challenge an existing tradition - with its own definition of *good* and excellence - without risking to portray these changes as inherently bad or without falling, despite his aspirations, in the trap of relativism. The ideological arguments underpinning much of the debate on NPM (Roberts, 2003; Nagy and Robb, 2008; Christopher, 2012) fall into a similar pitfall by counterpoising what has been portrayed as the ‘tradition’ of academia, with its own set of virtues and normative ideals, to the NPM model, described as inherently bad and corrupting of the academic morality.

Critics of NPM have argued that the business world/NPM inspired context are somehow unsuitable for the cultivation of virtues (Beadle 2002; Dobson 1997). Along the same line, the NPM reform of

university is said to reorient the telos, the purpose of the university, and, with the telos, the pursuit of the practice and the moral character of academics (Churchman, 2002; Humphrey et al., 1995; Nagy and Robb, 2008; Roberts, 2004; Gendron, 2008). According to these studies, rather than be conceived as a democratic space that promotes scientific freedom, collegiality and the diffusion of a critical knowledge for the emancipation of society (Nagy and Robb, 2008, 1422), the university has been transformed into a “highly entrepreneurial, customer focussed and revenue seeking enterprises” (Parker, 2002). Thus, the main ideological critique has concerned the normative and evaluative dimension of the new corporate university and its corrupting effects on academics.

Our paper suggests that “this separation of morality and management is neither necessary nor desirable” (Holt, 2006, 1659) as it overlooks the ability of individuals to ‘moralize’ certain (business-like) institutions by shaping their practices toward the cultivation of virtues and values. We suggest here that the transformation of academia into “the realm of fact, the realm of means, the realm of measurable effectiveness” (MacIntyre, 1981) does not *per se* preclude the possibility of virtue and ethical practice. The morality of the practice ultimately lies in the morality of those who exercise it. Accordingly, rather than taking the (im)(a)morality of NPM as a given along with a predefinition of the purposes or goodness of academia and of ‘the’ academic, this study decided to put at the forefront of the analysis the moral understanding that academics have of NPM and their construction of the academic moral character.

By describing the academics as moral characters with the agency and responsibility for shaping the morality of their practice, the paper moved beyond the dominating research stream which sees academics as ‘subject’ to the NPM discourse or players in a game of rent-seeking (Espeland and Sauder, 2016; Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Humphrey and Gendron, 2015; Gendron, 2015; Gendron, 2008; Clarke and Knights, 2015),. Whilst recent studies have focused on academics’ resistance (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Bristow et al., 2017; Kalfa et al., 2018), the moral agency of academics has been under-addressed in this critical literature. Even while debating the performativity of NPM inspired changes, not much has been said about the reasons behind compliance and resistance enacted by academics in their daily practice and, when the focus has been redirected to the dialectic of resistance and compliance, these analyses have usually fallen outside the domain of morality or framed compliance as a self-interested choice aimed at securing capitals that nothing has to do with the supposedly ‘pure’ and disinterested nature of the profession (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Clarke and Knights, 2015).



Thus, our analysis contributes to these previous studies in two important ways. Firstly, the concept of moral character helped us to shed light on the too often neglected ethical nature of the academic profession. Previous conceptualizations, such as organizational self (Driver, 2006), professional role identity (Chreim et al., 2007), and multiple selves (Elster, 1987), cannot capture the intertwined relation between ethics, identity, and social role which characterizes the academic experience. By providing insights into the way in which this relation is lived by some academics, our analysis shares with MacIntyre (1981) a call for reflection on the *telos* and goods that we, academics, wish to achieve in our practice and institutions. However, in disagreement with MacIntyre's theory that risks to define the goodness of a practice in terms of conformity to a given tradition, we suggest that this reflection should be placed at the center of a rational debate that can lead to a positive transformation of our practice by accommodating conflicting (moral) claims, such as those expressed by our participants.

The second contribution of this study lies in the suggestion that the lack of collective and impactful resistance to NPM might be also due to a disagreement over the moral nature and implications of NPM changes. Dialectics of resistance and compliance may often result from different ethical standpoints. The latter in turn unveils the conflict between competing views, such as those described by Churchman (2002) as conservative, liberal humanist, and critical post-modern. In our case, it is worth noticing that, in spite of the fragmentation felt by some of our participants, their reflections reveal at least that the corporate space occupied by the new academia satisfy the material and moral aspirations of many.

We have made our study in a single case of a European university. Although practices differ in space and time, it is reasonable to presume that analogous forms of moralities may characterize academics working in other countries and in other disciplines. Hence, we suggest undertaking an analysis of the moral character of academics in relation to their practice and to the NPM changes in other university contexts. Also, we advocate a quality study of how the different types of moralities interact and influence each other. Finally, future studies might explore quantitatively whether the distribution of the types of moralities influences the level of academic resistance.

## **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Ethical approval:** “All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.”

**Informed consent:** “Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.”

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