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Corporate culture: protect idea factories

It is unsurprising that universities have adopted corporate culture (Nature 540, 315; 2016), but surprising that they select such archaic models.

Universities corporatize because they must raise funds through teaching, research and commercialization. They need to publish research results openly, even though public funds don't cover full production costs.

Universities are the only social institutions set up specifically to produce ideas, and this is their most valuable societal role. Schools teach, governments collect data, firms patent inventions — and they all use ideas created by universities. Governments demand innovation, but reward income, not ideas.

Many universities have copied the manufacturing models of the 1950s. Power has shifted from academics to administrators. Academics are treated as interchangeable and replaceable, and performance is set through production quotas. Whereas academics judge peers by ideas, administrators count only cash. Knowledge enterprises such as Google and Facebook, by contrast, recognize that ideas need an encouraging and creative psychological environment.

Universities are idea factories. Current corporatization approaches emphasize the factory rather than the ideas. As governments curtail science, investing in ideas will be a winning strategy. Vice-chancellors and education ministers, please listen.

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