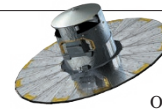


# THIS WEEK

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## A creeping corporate culture

*The trend of turning universities into businesses is limiting research freedoms in traditionally liberal Scandinavian institutes. It is time for scientists to regain lost ground.*

The current craze for all things *hygge* — a Danish word for general well-being, used by outsiders to sell everything from comforting cookbooks to comfortable cardigans — neatly summarizes the world's impression of Scandinavia.

From academia to civil society, many have long viewed this cluster of countries in northern Europe as a haven. The Nordic economic model, a combination of social market economy with lavish government expenditure, has guaranteed social peace, affordable higher education and — key for scientists — freedom to do research. Not for them the creeping trend of academic capitalism, with universities and researchers pressured by politicians to produce more than scholarly output.

But over the past decade, scientists in Scandinavia have seen corporate culture gaining ground. Researchers everywhere should be alarmed that the trend has spread so far — and academic leaders should take steps to regain some of the lost ground.

There was little *hygge* on show last month, for example, when the University of Copenhagen fired seismologist Hans Thybo, president of the European Geosciences Union. The official explanation for Thybo's dismissal — his alleged use of private e-mail for work, and telling a postdoc that it is legitimate to openly criticize university management — seems petty in the extreme. More than 1,000 scientists from across the world agree and have signed a petition, launched after *Nature* had reported about the case, to ask the university management to reverse its decision and reinstate Thybo. It should sincerely consider doing so. Denmark's leading university risks a nosedive in its global reputation if it is unable to produce more convincing grounds for parting ways with one of its best scientists. Thybo, an internationally esteemed geophysicist, experienced expedition leader and gifted teacher and supervisor, is held in high regard by colleagues, postdocs and students. But his unquestioned success in solid Earth science — funded, among other sources, by the oil and gas industry — failed to impress research managers who were apparently more concerned about his style and personal idiosyncrasies.

In many ways, the case symbolizes a growing power struggle and fuels an atmosphere of disconcertion and mistrust that was previously unknown in Denmark's academia. In 2003, the country introduced a law that requires the majority of members on university governing boards to be non-academics. Robbing researchers and students of the chance to decide on the matters they know best, the resulting hierarchical governing structure has raised real and repeated concerns over the freedom of research. Long-standing discontent has now surfaced, and the past couple of years have seen several scholars and scientists clashing head-on with business-orientated university managers.

It is of course desirable, and in the public interest, that universities produce innovation and jobs as well as beautiful science and lofty discourse. But corporate research managers must understand that the art of science starts with a tinge of intuition that is not easily commensurable with the textbook logic of managers and business administrators. Universities cannot exist without a degree of organization and prudent

allocation of finite material resources. But science depends on generous creative freedom and a sound measure of intellectual rebelliousness.

The Thybo case resonates because Danish science is already under pressure. In 2015, the country's newly elected centre-right government announced substantial cuts to funding for research and higher-education institutes. At the University of Copenhagen, more than 500 staff will lose their jobs. Harsh economic realities must not be an excuse to get rid of respected researchers who fail to please corporate-minded managers. And for a cautionary tale of what can go wrong with the arrival of business thinking in academia, Danish policymakers need only look to their neighbours in Sweden. At the prestigious Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, the substitution of scientific leadership by a mostly non-academic management has been blamed for mishandling cases of scientific fraud committed by medical researcher Paolo Macchiarini.

An obsession with accountability through metrics and excessive evaluation is already driving many scientists to distraction, not only in Scandinavia. But if corporate culture also means that scientists are fastidiously scrutinized in their every move, it is a threat to the profession and very pursuit of science.

As populism gains ground on both sides of the Atlantic (see page 317), courage and intellectual honesty are more valuable than ever. Corporate identity might work for a university as a marketing concept — but it offers little incentive for independent minds to speak out and make conclusions. In 1968, students across Europe forcefully revolted against conservative professors and academic institutions that had not changed for centuries. This time around, the threat is the colonization of universities by overzealous business types. ■

**“Corporate culture is a threat to the profession and very pursuit of science.”**

## Protection at risk

*Donald Trump's choice for head of the US environment agency is dismaying.*

The bad news just keeps on coming. At the end of last week, reports surfaced of an intimidating exercise at the US Department of Energy, with staff asked to identify and name scientists and others who have attended UN climate conferences and helped to plan policy. Such a request — often associated with purges conducted by nascent authoritarians — bodes ill for honest intellectual inquiry at the department and in the wider US government.

There may be an innocent explanation. The e-mails and