L&R
Lex et Ratio Ltd

Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia

Fiduciary Breach and the Case for a Pedagogy of Openness

PETER KAHL

L&R
Lex et Ratio Ltd

Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia

Fiduciary Breach and the Case for a Pedagogy of Openness

An interdisciplinary study of substitutive visibility, epistemic monarchism, and the pedagogy of openness in higher education.

PETER KAHL

19 June 2025

Lex et Ratio Ltd

First published in Great Britain by Peter Kahl on 19 June 2025.
2nd edition published by Lex et Ratio Ltd on 23 August 2025.

About the Publisher

Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics. Our work integrates legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies for public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

In this essay I introduce the concept of *substitutive visibility* to describe the displacement of distributed epistemic labour by the centralised image of executive authority in universities, and develop the related concept of *epistemic monarchism* to capture the representational regime that results when such substitution becomes systemic. I also propose a *pedagogy of openness* as a normative alternative to the pedagogy of authority embedded in executive-centred branding, extending fiduciary openness into the pedagogical and representational domain. I argue that these practices are not neutral features of branding but mechanisms of *epistemic clientelism*, whereby recognition is converted into a clientelist 'currency' and appropriated as symbolic capital for institutional leadership. Drawing on fiduciary theory, I show that substitutive visibility and epistemic monarchism constitute breaches of the duties of loyalty, openness, and care owed by universities as fiduciary custodians of epistemic trust. Through analogy to fiduciary case law, I demonstrate that the misallocation of epistemic credit mirrors the misappropriation of trust property. I further situate these breaches within the framework of epistemic injustice, showing how testimonial and contributory injustices are compounded by executive-centred branding. To address these distortions, I propose a programme of reform grounded in fiduciary openness: epistemic audits, fiduciary reporting, ombudspersons for representational equity, redistributive practices, and the cultivation of resistant imagination. Taken together, these measures resist the reduction of knowledge to charisma and restore the university's legitimacy as a custodian of the epistemic commons.

Keywords

substitutive visibility, epistemic monarchism, pedagogy of openness, epistemic clientelism, fiduciary duty, fiduciary openness, epistemic trust, epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice, contributory injustice, epistemic democracy, fiduciary breach, academic branding, epistemic commons, governance reform, representational equity, resistant imagination

•

Table of Contents

Statement of Originality and Contribution

This essay contributes to the expanding discourse on epistemic justice and fiduciary governance in higher education by introducing and developing three linked concepts: *substitutive visibility*, *epistemic monarchism*, and *pedagogy of openness*. I argue that the centring of executive figures in university communications — particularly through portraits accompanying ranking announcements — is not a neutral act of representation but a fiduciary and epistemic distortion.

The originality of this essay lies in three areas:

1. **Conceptual innovation**: I introduce *substitutive visibility* as a mechanism of epistemic clientelism and develop the related concept of *epistemic monarchism* to describe the representational regime that emerges when executive substitution becomes systemic. I further propose a *pedagogy of openness* as a normative alternative to the pedagogy of authority generated by executive-centred branding. This term extends fiduciary openness into the pedagogical and representational sphere, arguing that institutional communications — no less than curricula — teach publics how knowledge is produced and who is recognised as its author. As I argued elsewhere, academic hierarchies transform epistemic contributions into tokens that are redeemed through patronage-like exchanges {Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025)}. Substitutive visibility exemplifies this logic by showing how executive visibility functions as a clientelist 'currency'; epistemic monarchism captures the systemic concentration of authority into a singular image; and pedagogy of openness provides the normative framework for resisting this closure.

2. **Integration with fiduciary theory**: I situate representational practices within the framework of fiduciary governance. As I argued elsewhere, fiduciary actors in epistemic institutions owe duties of loyalty, openness, and care to their communities {Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025)}. Substitutive visibility and epistemic monarchism breach these duties by misallocating epistemic credit, obscuring distributed labour, and centralising symbolic authority. A pedagogy of openness offers a fiduciary corrective by demanding transparent, equitable recognition.

3. **Contribution to epistemic justice scholarship**: By engaging Miranda Fricker's account of testimonial injustice {Fricker 2007}, Kristie Dotson's notion of contributory injustice {Dotson 2014}, and Elizabeth Anderson's conception of epistemic democracy {Anderson 2006}, I extend the analysis of epistemic oppression from curriculum and pedagogy into the representational and visual domain of institutional communication.

Taken together, these contributions offer a novel synthesis of fiduciary law, epistemic justice, and institutional representation. The essay also calls for reforms — including epistemic audits of branding materials, fiduciary reports, ombudspersons for representational equity, and redistribution of symbolic capital — to restore universities' status as fiduciary custodians of the epistemic commons.

Research Significance

The significance of this essay lies in repositioning academic branding as a site of fiduciary and epistemic governance. By introducing *substitutive visibility* and *epistemic monarchism*, I move beyond symbolic critique to demonstrate how executive-centred representation functions as both a mechanism of clientelist exchange and a systemic regime of authority. These concepts allow me to show that branding practices are not merely aesthetic

but materially redistribute epistemic credit, concentrating symbolic capital in ways that breach fiduciary duties of loyalty, openness, and care.

In doing so, this essay complements and expands the framework I articulated elsewhere, where universities are conceptualised as fiduciary custodians of epistemic trust {Kahl, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia: Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Epistemic Justice in Higher Education* (2025)}. By situating executive-centred visibility within this fiduciary–epistemic architecture, I advance the claim that representational practices must be recognised as legally and ethically accountable.

This contribution strengthens the broader governance project of reconceptualising higher education institutions as fiduciary actors whose duties encompass recognition, openness, and distributive justice in the epistemic domain. By foregrounding *substitutive visibility* and *epistemic monarchism*, I extend the scope of epistemic justice scholarship into the visual and representational practices of universities, offering both diagnostic clarity and normative direction for reform.

1. From Commons to Charisma

Universities, traditionally imagined as custodians of the epistemic commons, were once defined by their fiduciary role as stewards of knowledge for the benefit of students, staff, and the wider public {Kahl, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia: Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Epistemic Justice in Higher Education* (2025)}. The Humboldtian model emphasised plurality, autonomy, and the co-production of knowledge {Collini 2012}. Today, however, this fiduciary conception has been eclipsed by managerialism, rankings, and the logic of branding. League tables, once silent numbers, now appear as performative declarations accompanied by portraits of Vice-Chancellors. What should be collective achievements of the epistemic community are refracted through executive charisma.

I introduce here the concept of *substitutive visibility* to describe this phenomenon: the systematic displacement of distributed epistemic authorship by the face of managerial authority. Visual communication in academia is not epistemically innocent. As Foucault argued, 'regimes of visibility' structure both the circulation of power and the conditions under which truth claims are accepted {Foucault 1977}. When the leader's image replaces the distributed body of contributors, epistemic recognition is distorted, and credit is funnelled upward.

This practice is not merely symbolic but a structured mechanism. As I argued elsewhere, academic hierarchies often transform epistemic contributions into tokens that are redeemed through patronage-like exchanges {Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory: Power Dynamics and the Delegation of Epistemic Agency in Academia* (2025)}. Substitutive visibility exemplifies this logic:

1. **Production**: epistemic labour is generated by distributed actors across research, teaching, and community engagement.
2. **Substitution**: these contributions are visually displaced by the image of the executive.
3. **Conversion**: the substituted image is leveraged as institutional capital to attract donors, boost rankings, or secure political legitimacy.
4. **Dependence**: contributors' recognition becomes contingent on its mediation through the leader's charisma.

In this sequence, the executive face becomes the clientelist 'currency' through which recognition flows {Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025)}. This compounds what Miranda Fricker describes as testimonial injustice, a

credibility deficit imposed on knowers based on identity or institutional positioning {Fricker 2007}, and what Kristie Dotson terms contributory injustice, where marginalised knowers are structurally excluded from intelligibility within dominant epistemic frameworks {Dotson 2014}.

From a governance perspective, the practice is a breach of fiduciary duty. As I argued elsewhere, fiduciary actors in epistemic institutions owe duties of loyalty, openness, and care to their communities {Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness: A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Framework for Corporate Governance* (2025)}. Likewise, I have characterised universities as fiduciary custodians of epistemic trust {Kahl, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (2025)}. To substitute collective achievement with executive visibility is to misallocate epistemic credit, conceal distributed labour, and reconfigure the epistemic commons into a hierarchy of perception.

Thus, substitutive visibility is not an incidental artefact of branding but an epistemic distortion with fiduciary consequences. It restructures credit and credibility, embedding clientelist dependency within the university's representational order and corroding the fiduciary legitimacy of the institution.

2. Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Distortion

Visual communication in academic institutions is never epistemically neutral. As Foucault observed, 'regimes of visibility' govern the circulation of power and the production of truth claims {Foucault 1977}. When universities announce achievements — for example, publishing improved rankings — the choice to frame these achievements through the face of a Vice-Chancellor rather than through the collective body of students, staff, and researchers exemplifies what I term substitutive visibility. The phenomenon occurs when distributed epistemic labour is displaced and re-presented through a centralised managerial image.

2.1 Substitutive Visibility as Phenomenon

Substitutive visibility is most clearly seen in institutional branding. A press release that accompanies a league table result with a photograph of the Vice-Chancellor performs a representational substitution: what is ostensibly the achievement of an epistemic community is instead refracted through the charisma of one individual. This is not an isolated aesthetic choice but a recurring institutional pattern that shapes how epistemic credit is perceived, allocated, and circulated.

2.2 The Clientelist Mechanism

As I argued elsewhere, academic hierarchies often transform epistemic contributions into tokens that are redeemed through patronage-like exchanges {Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory: Power Dynamics and the Delegation of Epistemic Agency in Academia* (2025)}. Substitutive visibility exemplifies this logic.

The process unfolds in four stages:

1. **Production**: knowledge is generated through distributed labour.
2. **Substitution**: these contributions are visually displaced by the executive image.
3. **Conversion**: the substituted image is leveraged to attract donors, enhance rankings, or secure political legitimacy.

4. **Dependence**: contributors' epistemic recognition becomes contingent on its mediation through the leader's face.

The executive's charisma thus becomes a 'currency' of clientelism — a token that converts collective epistemic resources into personalised symbolic capital.

2.3 Fiduciary Breach by Analogy

This practice amounts to more than symbolic distortion: it is a breach of fiduciary openness. As I argued elsewhere, fiduciary actors in epistemic institutions owe duties of loyalty, care, and openness to their epistemic communities {Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness: A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Framework for Corporate Governance* (2025)}. Likewise, I have characterised universities as fiduciary custodians of epistemic trust, with correlative obligations to students, staff, and the public {Kahl, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia: Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Epistemic Justice in Higher Education* (2025)}. By substituting collective credit with personal visibility, universities fail to discharge these duties.

The analogy with fiduciary case law helps illustrate the point. In *Keech v Sandford* (1726), a fiduciary was prohibited from appropriating trust property for personal use; epistemic labour, too, is a form of trust property, and its diversion into personalised recognition mirrors this misappropriation. In *Boardman v Phipps* [1967], the misuse of information or opportunity by a fiduciary constituted a breach; the university executive's use of institutional achievements for personal visibility is structurally comparable. And as *Bristol & West BS v Mothew* [1996] confirmed, the core of fiduciary duty is loyalty — the duty not to prefer one's own interests over those of the beneficiary. Substitutive visibility contravenes this principle by funnelling collective credit upwards into personal image.

2.4 Epistemic Consequences

From the perspective of epistemic justice, this representational breach compounds injustice. As Fricker observes, testimonial injustice arises when credibility is unjustly downgraded {Fricker 2007}. Dotson's notion of contributory injustice captures the further harm: marginalised knowers are structurally excluded from intelligibility within dominant interpretive frameworks {Dotson 2014}. Substitutive visibility generates both forms of injustice. By denying distributed actors direct recognition, it not only silences their contributions but renders them intelligible only through the mediation of executive charisma.

In sum, substitutive visibility (phenomenon) operates through epistemic clientelism (framework) and culminates in fiduciary breach (evaluation). It is not a cosmetic artefact of branding but a structural distortion of epistemic trust: the commons of knowledge is converted into a theatre of the executive face.

3. Fiduciary Duties in an Epistemic Institution

Epistemic credit — the recognition of intellectual contributions — should be understood as a fiduciary asset. Like financial capital, it is generated collectively, entrusted to the institution, and must be allocated for the benefit of contributors and the wider epistemic community. As I argued elsewhere, fiduciary actors in epistemic institutions are bound to distribute such assets equitably and to protect them from misappropriation {Kahl,

Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness: A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Framework for Corporate Governance (2025)}.

When epistemic credit is diverted into personalised recognition — for instance, when the achievements of a university are represented primarily through the face of its Vice-Chancellor — the institution ceases to treat credit as a fiduciary asset and begins to appropriate it as symbolic capital for the executive. This undermines the fiduciary principle that trustees must act for the benefit of their beneficiaries.

3.2 Mapping the Duties

As I have argued elsewhere, fiduciary duties in epistemic institutions can be distilled into three core obligations {Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025)}:

- **Loyalty**: the obligation not to divert epistemic assets for personal or sectional benefit.
- **Openness**: the duty to allocate recognition transparently and equitably.
- **Care**: the responsibility to safeguard epistemic trust from distortions that compromise its integrity.

Practices of substitutive visibility violate all three. Loyalty is breached when executives appropriate credit for collective labour. Openness is denied when recognition is funnelled through the image of a single individual. Care is abdicated when the epistemic commons is distorted into a hierarchy of perception.

3.3 Fiduciary Breach by Analogy to Case Law

The fiduciary dimensions of substitutive visibility are clarified when examined against established case law. In *Keech v Sandford* (1726), the fiduciary was barred from exploiting trust property for personal benefit; epistemic credit, similarly, is a trust property of the academic community, and its diversion into executive charisma is a structural equivalent of such misappropriation. In *Boardman v Phipps* [1967], fiduciaries were held liable for exploiting opportunities arising from their position; likewise, when executives use institutional achievements to enhance their own visibility or donor appeal, they exploit fiduciary opportunities. And as Millett LJ affirmed in *Bristol & West BS v Mothew* [1996], the essence of fiduciary duty is loyalty — the duty not to place oneself in a position where personal interest conflicts with that of the beneficiary. Substitutive visibility breaches this principle by privileging executive image over the collective interest of contributors.

3.4 Interdependence of Fiduciary Breach and Epistemic Injustice

Fiduciary breach and epistemic injustice are not parallel but deeply intertwined. Misallocation of epistemic credit produces testimonial injustice, as the credibility of contributors is unjustly downgraded {Fricker 2007}. It also produces contributory injustice, as marginalised knowers become intelligible only through the mediation of dominant executive imagery {Dotson 2014}. Thus, what appears as a representational breach in fiduciary terms is simultaneously an epistemic injustice in distributive terms. The fiduciary and the epistemic perspectives converge in diagnosing the same harm.

3.5 Towards Remedies

If universities are to honour their fiduciary role, they must adopt governance practices that make fiduciary openness operational. Remedies could include:

- **Epistemic audits** of communications and branding materials to ensure equitable allocation of recognition.
- **Annual fiduciary reports** detailing how epistemic credit is attributed and distributed.
- **Institutional ombudspersons** tasked with monitoring representational equity.
- **Statutory clarification** of universities' fiduciary duties as epistemic custodians.

Such measures would anchor fiduciary obligations in institutional practice, reinforcing universities' legitimacy as custodians of epistemic trust {Kahl, Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia (2025)}.

In sum, universities' fiduciary duties are not metaphors but binding obligations grounded in their role as stewards of the epistemic commons. Epistemic credit, as a fiduciary asset, must be distributed with loyalty, openness, and care. When collective credit is converted into executive visibility, fiduciary breach and epistemic injustice occur in tandem. The cult of personality in academia is thus not a cosmetic issue of branding but a structural failure of fiduciary governance.

4. Epistemic Violence Through Branding

Branding practices in higher education are often presented as benign instruments of communication. Yet branding is never epistemically innocent. It shapes what counts as legitimate knowledge, who is rendered visible, and how authority is distributed. When institutional marketing reduces the university's public image to rankings, citations, or employability scores, accompanied by the portrait of an executive, it enacts a subtle but pervasive form of epistemic violence.

As I argued elsewhere, epistemic violence occurs when dominant frameworks of representation delegitimise or erase alternative epistemic practices {Kahl, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia: Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Epistemic Justice in Higher Education* (2025)}. In this context, branding silences modes of knowledge that resist quantification — including Indigenous epistemologies, critical theory, and community-engaged research. The effect is not loud exclusion but quiet effacement: a narrowing of epistemic possibility masked as institutional excellence.

4.1 Branding as Clientelist Exchange

Branding regimes reproduce the logic of epistemic clientelism. As I argued elsewhere, clientelism in academia functions by exchanging epistemic agency for recognition and authority {Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory: Power Dynamics and the Delegation of Epistemic Agency in Academia* (2025)}. When universities construct their identity around the image of a Vice-Chancellor, they transform recognition into a clientelist 'currency'. Epistemic labour is appropriated, funnelled through executive visibility, and converted into symbolic capital to attract donors, enhance rankings, or secure political patronage. Contributors' recognition becomes contingent upon mediation by the executive face.

4.2 Fiduciary Misuse of Epistemic Assets

From a governance perspective, branding in this mode constitutes a misuse of fiduciary assets. Epistemic credit is a resource entrusted to the institution for equitable allocation. As I argued elsewhere, fiduciary actors in epistemic institutions owe duties of loyalty, openness, and care {Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness: A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Framework for Corporate Governance* (2025)}. When branding practices convert distributed epistemic labour into personalised executive capital, these duties are breached.

The analogy to fiduciary case law clarifies the gravity of this misuse. In *Keech v Sandford* (1726), the fiduciary was barred from using trust property for personal gain. In *Boardman v Phipps* [1967], fiduciaries were held liable for exploiting opportunities arising from their position. And in *Bristol & West BS v Mothew* [1996], Millett LJ emphasised that the essence of fiduciary duty is loyalty. By analogy, when universities appropriate epistemic credit for branding that centres executive visibility, they exploit fiduciary opportunities and divert trust assets for personalised gain. Branding is therefore not simply a matter of optics but a breach of fiduciary obligation.

4.3 Epistemic Consequences

The epistemic consequences of branding-as-substitution are profound. Testimonial injustice occurs as the credibility of contributors is systematically downgraded {Fricker 2007}. Contributory injustice arises as marginalised epistemic practices are excluded from visibility {Dotson 2014}. Branding that centralises executive charisma collapses plurality into singularity, reducing the institution's epistemic diversity to a managerial face. What is lost is not only nuance but entire epistemic worlds.

4.4 Resistant Imagination and Institutional Responsibility

Resistance to epistemic violence requires cultivating what José Medina calls 'resistant imagination' — institutional sensibilities that make space for dissensus, opacity, and alternative epistemic paradigms {Medina 2013}. Universities, as fiduciary custodians of epistemic trust, have a responsibility to resist branding logics that aestheticise power and reduce excellence to executive visibility. Institutional communication, no less than curriculum, is pedagogical: both must reflect epistemic plurality.

In sum, branding is not merely strategic communication. It is an epistemic practice that can produce violence when it substitutes executive visibility for distributed labour, clientelist exchange for open recognition, and fiduciary stewardship for appropriation. To defend the university as an epistemic institution is to expose the fiduciary breaches and injustices embedded in branding, and to reimagine communication as a site of epistemic democracy rather than executive theatre.

5. Against Epistemic Monarchism

The repeated centring of executive figures in academic representation produces what I call *epistemic monarchism*: an institutional regime in which authority is aestheticised, centralised, and personalised. In such a regime, knowledge is not represented as the outcome of collective labour but as the achievement of a singular face. The institution is thereby reconstituted as a symbolic monarchy, with the Vice-Chancellor or President functioning as its sovereign image.

As I argued elsewhere, neoliberal universities are prone to pedagogical practices that privilege authority over collectivity and centralisation over dialogue {Kahl, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia: Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Epistemic Justice in Higher Education* (2025)}. This tendency undermines the fiduciary role of the institution, which is to act as custodian of epistemic trust and to distribute recognition equitably. Epistemic monarchism instead embeds hierarchy and spectacle at the heart of institutional communication.

5.1 Pedagogy of Authority versus Pedagogy of Openness

Antonia Darder, drawing on Freire, warned against the authorial tendencies of neoliberal education and called instead for a liberatory pedagogy grounded in dialogue and plurality {Darder 2017}. Institutional communication, no less than curriculum, has a pedagogical dimension. When universities consistently display the face of their Vice-Chancellor as the emblem of institutional achievement, they reproduce a pedagogy of authority: teaching publics to equate knowledge with centralised leadership rather than with distributed epistemic communities.

Against this, I argue for what might be termed a *pedagogy of openness*. As I argued elsewhere, fiduciary openness requires that institutions make transparent not only their decision-making but also the representational practices through which epistemic credit is allocated {Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness: A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Framework for Corporate Governance* (2025)}. A pedagogy of openness means that institutions must reflect, in their self-image, the plurality of contributors — students, faculty, community partners — who sustain the epistemic commons.

5.2 Epistemic Monarchism as Fiduciary Breach

The centring of executive authority in institutional self-representation breaches the fiduciary duties of loyalty, openness, and care. Loyalty is compromised when collective epistemic assets are diverted to enhance the image of a leader. Openness is denied when contributors' visibility is filtered through executive charisma. Care is abdicated when institutional communication becomes a theatre of hierarchy rather than a commons of recognition.

As I argued elsewhere, universities that fail to resist epistemic monarchism betray their fiduciary role as custodians of epistemic trust {Kahl, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (2025)}. The monarchic mode of representation reduces fiduciary stewardship to personal spectacle, corroding public trust in the institution's epistemic integrity.

5.3 Towards Representational Plurality

To counter epistemic monarchism, universities must reconfigure their representational practices. This means:

- **Featuring collaborative teams** in communications, not just executives.
- **Highlighting student voices** alongside faculty achievements.
- **Commissioning portraits** of community educators, adjunct staff, and peer mentors as part of the institution's self-image.
- **Embedding epistemic audits** of branding materials to expose erasures and imbalances.

Such measures are not cosmetic but fiduciary: they operationalise the duty of openness in the domain of representation. By redistributing symbolic capital, institutions affirm their commitment to epistemic democracy and resist the reduction of knowledge to monarchy.

In sum, epistemic monarchism is the culmination of substitutive visibility: a representational regime that collapses collective credit into a singular face. To resist it is to recover the fiduciary role of the university as custodian of epistemic trust and to cultivate a pedagogy of openness. The self-image of the institution, no less than its curriculum, must embody plurality rather than authority, dialogue rather than centralisation, commons rather than monarchy.

6. Counterarguments Considered

The critique of substitutive visibility and epistemic monarchism must anticipate objections. It may be said that executive-centred representation is not distortion but necessity — that institutions require visible leadership, particularly in moments of uncertainty. Others will argue that centring the Vice-Chancellor is pragmatic: it humanises abstract achievements, satisfies donor expectations, or projects stability to external audiences.

These arguments cannot be dismissed outright. Visibility itself is not inherently unjust. A university without recognisable leadership may appear faceless or incoherent. Yet fiduciary and epistemic justice frameworks demonstrate that the issue is not leadership visibility per se, but its substitution for collective credit.

6.1 Leadership Visibility versus Substitution

Leadership visibility is not in tension with epistemic democracy if it coexists with distributed recognition. As I argued elsewhere, fiduciary openness requires transparency in how epistemic contributions are attributed and represented {Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025)}. The breach arises when executive visibility displaces the contributions of others, thereby converting collective achievement into personal charisma. The fiduciary wrong lies in exclusivity, not in visibility itself.

6.2 Donor Expectations and Fiduciary Priority

Another objection appeals to donor expectations: philanthropy, it is said, requires a visible leader to embody institutional success. Yet fiduciary doctrine rejects privileging one class of beneficiaries over another. In *Cowan v Scargill* [1985], fiduciaries were reminded that their duty is to act in the best interests of beneficiaries as a whole, not a select group. Similarly, universities are fiduciary custodians of epistemic trust; their duty runs to students, staff, and the public, not to donors as private patrons {Kahl, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (2025)}. To sacrifice equitable recognition in favour of donor appeasement is to misallocate epistemic credit — a fiduciary breach in the allocation of trust assets.

Consider, for example, a university fundraising campaign in which the Vice-Chancellor is prominently featured as the institution's 'face', while faculty and student contributions are rendered invisible. This strategy may appeal to donors by personalising achievement, but it distorts fiduciary stewardship: epistemic labour is converted into executive capital for instrumental ends.

6.3 Trust, Crisis, and Charismatic Authority

A further objection is that in times of crisis — financial instability, political scrutiny, or scandal — centralising executive visibility fosters trust. Max Weber long ago observed that charisma often functions as a form of crisis authority, securing legitimacy when institutional routines falter {Weber 1978}. Yet trust generated through charisma is fragile. Habermas, writing on legitimation crises, argued that authority secured through spectacle cannot substitute for institutional legitimacy grounded in transparency and reciprocity {Habermas 1975}. By substituting collective achievement with executive charisma, universities seek a short-term affective bond at the cost of long-term fiduciary legitimacy.

As I argued elsewhere, epistemic trust is secured not through centralisation but through openness: recognition distributed across the epistemic community fosters the durable legitimacy that charismatic substitution cannot {Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025)}.

6.4 Towards Balanced Representation

The real question is not whether leaders should be visible, but whether their visibility eclipses others. Fiduciary openness requires representational balance. Executive visibility should supplement, not replace, the recognition of distributed contributors. Institutional communication must codify this principle as part of fiduciary practice: leaders may be visible, but the epistemic commons must remain in view.

In sum, the strongest objections — donor expectations, crisis legitimacy, the need for visible leadership — highlight genuine institutional pressures. Yet fiduciary and epistemic frameworks reveal that substitution, not visibility, is the harm. Fiduciary law prohibits privileging select constituencies at the expense of others; sociological analysis shows that charisma in crisis cannot sustain durable legitimacy. To reconcile leadership with fiduciary duty, universities must enshrine representational balance, ensuring that executive visibility is contextualised within, and never substituted for, the plurality of epistemic labour.

7. Reimagining Institutional Representation

If substitutive visibility and epistemic monarchism are symptoms of fiduciary breach, then reform must be directed at how universities represent themselves. Self-image is never neutral: it teaches publics what knowledge is, who produces it, and how authority is distributed. To preserve fiduciary legitimacy, representation must be reconfigured so that executive visibility supplements, rather than substitutes for, collective labour.

7.1 Epistemic Audits: Diagnosis

As I argued elsewhere, fiduciary openness requires mechanisms of accountability that extend to representational practices {Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025)}. An epistemic audit is one such mechanism. Borrowing from audit practices in finance, an epistemic audit would diagnose whether credit is equitably allocated in communications. It might involve:

- reviewing proportions of images and narratives featuring executives versus students, faculty, adjunct staff, and community partners;

- identifying structural absences (eg, research assistants, non-academic staff);
- evaluating whether marginalised epistemic practices are represented.

Audits could be conducted annually, ideally by independent panels, with results published. Their function is diagnostic: exposing imbalances so they can be corrected.

7.2 Fiduciary Reporting: Disclosure

Audit must be complemented by disclosure. Fiduciary law requires trustees to keep and render accounts of how trust assets are used. Similarly, directors are subject to statutory reporting duties under the Companies Act. Universities should adopt an analogous practice: an annual fiduciary report on representation. This report would disclose how epistemic credit was allocated in communications, explain choices, and set measurable targets for improvement. Transparency ensures that fiduciary openness is not rhetorical but operational.

7.3 Ombudspersons: Oversight

Diagnosis and disclosure require oversight. Fiduciary duties include impartiality: trustees must not favour one beneficiary class over another. Applied to universities, this means representation must not consistently privilege executives over contributors. An ombudsperson for representational equity — or a small oversight committee — would safeguard this principle. Their role would be to:

- review branding campaigns before publication;
- investigate complaints from those whose contributions were misrepresented or erased;
- recommend corrective action.

Such oversight bodies institutionalise fiduciary openness and make it enforceable.

7.4 Redistributing Symbolic Capital: Practice

Practical measures are also needed to redistribute representational credit. Universities could:

- feature collaborative teams and not only executives in press releases;
- highlight student voices and community partnerships alongside faculty achievements;
- commission portraits of adjunct staff, early-career researchers, and peer mentors;
- pair league table announcements with narratives of collective endeavour rather than executive declarations.

These practices operationalise the fiduciary duty of loyalty by ensuring that epistemic credit is not diverted into executive charisma but remains equitably distributed.

7.5 Resistant Imagination: Culture

Finally, reform requires cultural transformation. José Medina's concept of 'resistant imagination' calls for cultivating institutional sensibilities that embrace dissensus and epistemic plurality {Medina 2013}. In practical terms, this might involve:

- deliberately platforming dissenting voices in institutional communications;
- showcasing achievements that resist quantification, such as community-engaged or Indigenous research;
- highlighting narratives that complicate, rather than simplify, the university's identity.

Such practices ensure that representation embodies humility and plurality. They move beyond compliance toward a culture of fiduciary openness.

In sum, reform requires a layered approach: epistemic audits for diagnosis, fiduciary reports for disclosure, ombudspersons for oversight, redistributive practices for equity, and resistant imagination for culture. Together these measures reconfigure representation as a fiduciary practice. They transform branding from a theatre of charisma into a commons of plurality, restoring universities' legitimacy as custodians of epistemic trust.

8. Conclusion: Refusing the Theatre of the Face

The cult of personality in academia is not an incidental artefact of branding. It is a symptom of deeper epistemic and fiduciary distortions. Through substitutive visibility, collective epistemic labour is displaced and refracted through executive charisma. This is not merely symbolic distortion but a mechanism of epistemic clientelism, in which recognition is converted into a clientelist 'currency' and exchanged for institutional legitimacy. The result is epistemic monarchism: a regime in which the university represents itself as the face of one, rather than the voice of many.

As I argued elsewhere, universities are fiduciary custodians of epistemic trust {Kahl, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (2025)}. Their duties of loyalty, openness, and care require that epistemic credit be equitably distributed and never diverted for personal gain {Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025)}. Substitutive visibility breaches these duties. The analogy to fiduciary law is clear: in *Keech v Sandford* (1726), the fiduciary was strictly prohibited from appropriating trust property for personal use; in *Boardman v Phipps* [1967], fiduciaries were liable for exploiting opportunities arising from their position; and in *Bristol & West BS v Mothew* [1996], the essence of fiduciary duty was defined as loyalty, the prohibition against preferring one's own interests over those of the beneficiary. Executive-centred branding constitutes a structural parallel to these breaches: epistemic credit, entrusted to the institution, is misallocated as symbolic capital for the leader.

The epistemic consequences are no less severe. Testimonial injustice arises when contributors' credibility is downgraded {Fricker 2007}; contributory injustice occurs when marginalised knowers are rendered visible only through executive mediation {Dotson 2014}. What appears as a breach of fiduciary openness is also a form of epistemic violence: entire ways of knowing are silenced, effaced, or subsumed under the theatre of charisma.

This essay has advanced a programme of reform to resist these distortions: epistemic audits to diagnose representational imbalance; fiduciary reports to disclose how epistemic credit is allocated; ombudspersons to provide oversight; redistributive practices to ensure plurality in communications; and resistant imagination to embed a culture of openness. Together, these reforms translate fiduciary duty from moral aspiration into

enforceable governance practice. They aim not to eliminate executive visibility but to contextualise it within a pluralist order, ensuring that leaders are visible without being sovereign.

Future research must explore how such fiduciary duties might be codified in statutory law or regulatory frameworks, and how comparative jurisdictions conceptualise representational accountability in universities. The legal architecture for fiduciary openness remains underdeveloped. Embedding representational equity into governance structures is the next challenge if universities are to resist the enclosure of knowledge into charisma.

To defend the university as an epistemic institution is to refuse the theatre of the face. The university's image must not be a stage for charisma but a commons of recognition. Our portraits must become polyphonic, reflecting the plurality of contributors who sustain the epistemic enterprise. Only then can universities discharge their fiduciary obligations, resist epistemic injustice, and remain legitimate custodians of the knowledge commons.

•

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Legislation

Companies Act 2006

Case law

Boardman v Phipps [1967] 2 AC 46 (HL)

Bristol and West Building Society v Mothew [1996] EWCA Civ 533, [1998] Ch 1

Cowan v Scargill [1985] Ch 270 (Ch)

Keech v Sandford (1726) Sel Cas Ch 61, 25 ER 223

Secondary Sources

Books & Journals

Anderson E, *The Epistemology of Democracy* (OUP 2006)

Collini S, *What Are Universities For?* (Penguin 2012)

Darder A, *The Student Guide to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Bloomsbury Academic 2018)

Dotson K, 'Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression' (2014) 28(2) *Social Epistemology* 115-138

Foucault M, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Alan Sheridan tr, Vintage Books 1995)

Fricker M, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (OUP 2007)

Habermas J, *Legitimation Crisis* (McCarthy T tr, Polity Press 1976)

Medina J, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (OUP 2013)

Weber M, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Roth G and Wittich C eds, University of California Press 1978)

Author's Works

Peter Kahl, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness: A Cross-Cultural and Interdisciplinary Framework for Corporate Governance* (2nd edn, Lex et Ratio Ltd, 2025) <https://github.com/Peter-Kahl/Directors-Epistemic-Duties-and-Fiduciary-Openness> accessed 22 August 2025

Peter Kahl, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory: Power Dynamics and the Delegation of Epistemic Agency in Academia* (3rd edn, Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025) <https://github.com/Peter-Kahl/Epistemic-Clientelism-Theory> accessed 22 August 2025

Peter Kahl, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia: Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Epistemic Justice in Higher Education* (2nd edn, Lex et Ratio Ltd 2025) <https://github.com/Peter-Kahl/Epistemic-Justice-and-Institutional-Responsibility-in-Academia> accessed 22 August 2025

•

Author Contact

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1616-4843>
Email: <peter.kahl@juris.vc>
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-kahl-law/>
GitHub: <https://github.com/Peter-Kahl>
PhilPapers: <https://philpeople.org/profiles/peter-kahl>
Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=z-yfRRYAAAAJ>
Blog: <https://pkahl.substack.com/>

•

Cite this work

Peter Kahl, *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia: Fiduciary Breach and the Case for a Pedagogy of Openness* (2nd edn, Lex et Ratio Ltd, 2025) <https://github.com/Peter-Kahl/Substitutive-Visibility-and-Epistemic-Monarchism-in-Academia>

•

Revision History

Edition	Description of Changes	Epistemic Impact	Date
—	Published as *The Cult of Personality in Academia: A Breach of Epistemic and Fiduciary Duty*. Developed critique of executive-centred branding in higher education as a breach of fiduciary duty and a form of epistemic injustice.	None	2025-06-19
2	Retitled *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia: Fiduciary Breach and the Case for a Pedagogy of Openness*. Substantive revisions include: 1. Introduction of *substitutive visibility, epistemic monarchism*, and *pedagogy of openness* as conceptual innovations. 2. Integration of author's later works on fiduciary openness, epistemic justice, and epistemic clientelism. 3. Expanded use of fiduciary case law analogies (*Keech v Sandford*, *Boardman v Phipps, Mothew, Cowan v Scargill*). 4. Strengthened reform programme: epistemic audits, fiduciary reporting, ombudspersons, redistributive practices, resistant imagination. 5. Revised Statement of Originality and Contribution and Research Significance. 6. Addition of abstract, keywords, SEO description, and updated bibliography.	The revisions sharpen the essay's epistemic impact by reframing executive-centred branding through the newly introduced concepts of *substitutive visibility, epistemic monarchism*, and *pedagogy of openness*, integrating fiduciary governance and epistemic injustice into a unified framework, and expanding reform proposals into enforceable fiduciary practices. This elevates the work from critique to a normative, governance-based theory of institutional representation.	2025-08-23

•