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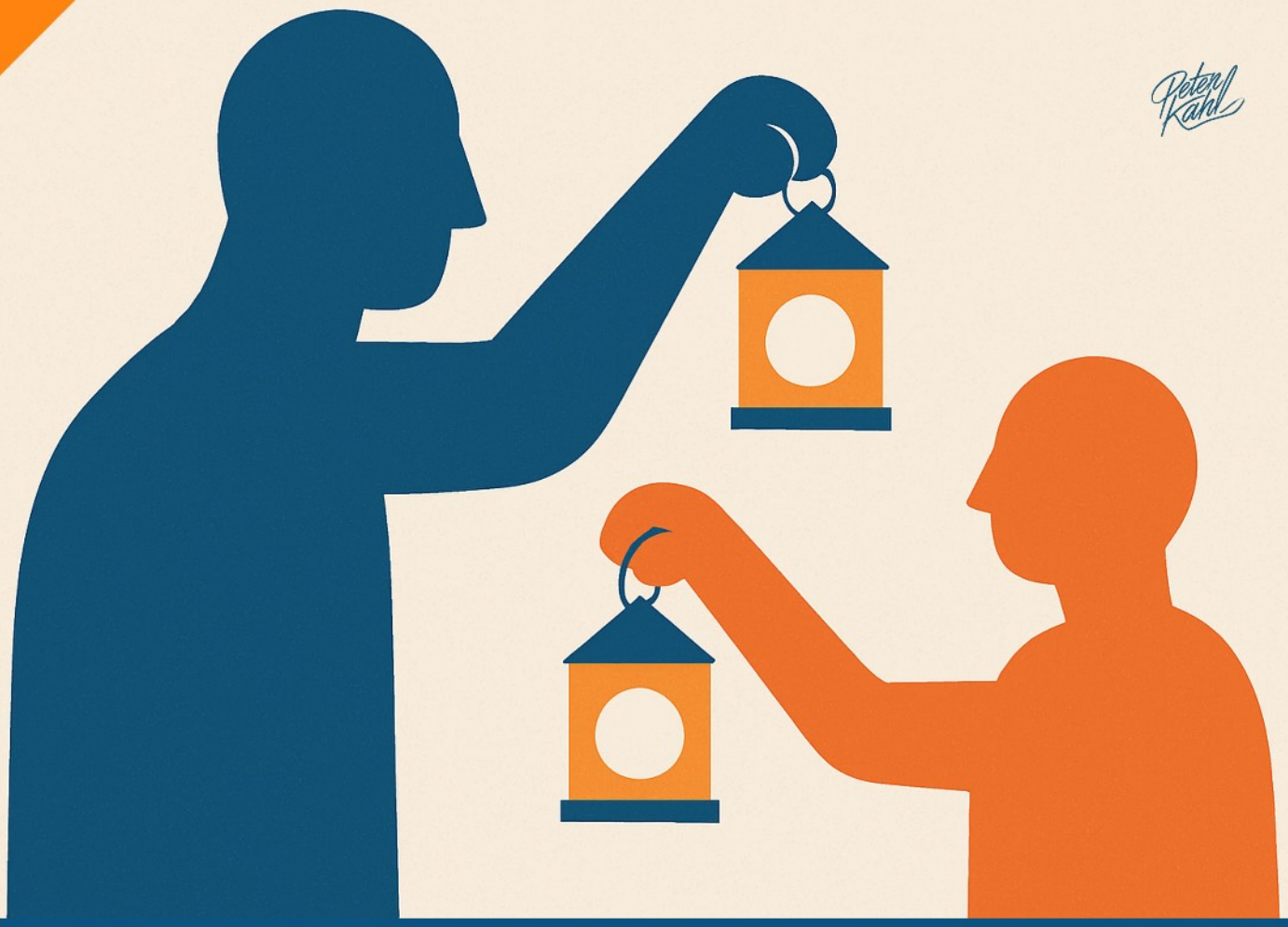

The University of Reading's LLM Experience as a Mirror of Higher Education

Epistemic Clientelism, Optocratic Drift, and the Pedagogy of Fiduciary Dialogue

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

Abstract

This essay examines the University of Reading's LLM programme as a microcosm of systemic tendencies within contemporary higher education. It argues that what appears as an isolated pedagogical experience in fact reflects broader epistemic and ethical dynamics—**epistemic clientelism**, where recognition is exchanged for conformity, and **optocratic drift**, where visibility replaces truth as the organising principle of institutional life. Through the analytical frameworks of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl 2025d) and *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl 2025g), the study interprets the LLM environment as a site where managerial aesthetics and moral caution converge to suppress dialogical learning. Feedback rituals, group-based assessments, and the omnipresence of leadership imagery exemplify a culture of procedural participation that manages emotion rather than cultivates candour.

Against this backdrop, the essay proposes a constructive alternative: a **pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue**. Drawing on Kahl's (2025b, 2025e, 2025p) fiduciary-epistemic ethics, it envisions education as reciprocal trusteeship—an ethical relationship in which teachers and students share responsibility for sustaining truth through candour, trust, and justice. By reframing feedback as covenant rather than survey, the essay performs its own argument: it offers feedback by other means, modelling what institutional dialogue might become when critique is understood not as dissent but as stewardship. In doing so, it advances a vision of the university as a fiduciary polity of knowledge—one governed by conscience rather than optics, and by care rather than compliance.

The revised edition incorporates new field observations from campus safety communications and visual campaigns, analysing their epistemic and psychological effects. It argues that these well-intentioned messages exemplify the **pedagogy of fear**—a managerial aesthetic that converts fiduciary care into surveillance and replaces relational trust with hypervigilance.

Keywords

fiduciary dialogue, epistemic clientelism, optocratic drift, epistemocracy, fiduciary ethics, epistemic justice, higher education governance, institutional trust, academic candour, feedback culture, fiduciary pedagogy, epistemic responsibility, dialogical learning, university reform, moral epistemology

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1. Introduction: Feedback as Fiduciary Act

1.1 Framing the Feedback: Critique as Fiduciary Response

Each academic year, students at the University of Reading receive a familiar invitation: "Tell us how we're doing." The message arrives through module surveys, periodic feedback forms, or campus events such as the "How's it going?" session where students are encouraged to "meet your Pro-Vice-Chancellors and share your experience." The tone is cheerful and inclusive — dialogue framed as partnership. Yet beneath this ritual of consultation lies a deeper moral premise: that the institution wishes to hear, and that the student, as a member of its epistemic community, has a duty to speak.

This paper arises from that invitation. It is not a grievance, nor a petition, but a response offered in the spirit of fiduciary responsibility. Feedback, properly understood, is not a transaction between consumer and service provider; it is a reciprocal act within a fiduciary relationship of trust. When a university requests its students' views, it implicitly enters into a moral contract: the student must respond truthfully and with candour, while the university must receive that truth with openness and good faith. The two duties are inseparable — candour on one side, receptivity on the other — forming the basic grammar of fiduciary communication (Kahl 2025b; 2025p).

In this sense, feedback is not merely evaluative but ethical. It resembles the trustee's report to the board of a moral enterprise, an act of stewardship rather than complaint. The trustee's task is not to flatter but to disclose; not to preserve comfort but to safeguard integrity. Likewise, students who inhabit the university's epistemic space act as temporary custodians of its moral credibility. Their observations are part of the institution's internal audit of truthfulness — the fiduciary equivalent of due diligence.

Paulo Freire (1970) described dialogue as an act of love grounded in faith in humankind — a process by which participants become co-authors of truth rather than recipients of instruction. That description applies equally to feedback. When genuine, it enacts the dialogical partnership that education promises but rarely achieves. When superficial, it devolves into what Miranda Fricker (2007) would call testimonial injustice: the silencing of speakers through selective listening. For this reason, to answer a feedback request only superficially would be to betray one's epistemic responsibility; to answer honestly is to fulfil it.

This essay therefore treats the University's invitation as a fiduciary summons. What follows is a report rendered in scholarly form — not through satisfaction scores or Likert-scale responses, but through the analytic instruments of fiduciary and epistemic ethics. It is feedback in its highest sense: a reflective act of care for the institution's epistemic wellbeing, guided by the principles of fiduciary candour (Kahl 2025b) and institutional truthfulness (Kahl 2025p). In writing it, I do what the feedback form cannot: I speak not as a consumer, but as a participant in a covenant of knowing.

1.2 Intent: Not Grievance, but Constructive Epistemic Care

To critique an institution from within is not to oppose it, but to care for it. The tone of this essay is not adversarial, but fiduciary — grounded in the ethics of care that define any relationship of trust. Universities, as fiduciaries of knowledge, hold obligations not only to disseminate truth but to preserve their own capacity to seek it. When this capacity begins to erode through complacency, conformity, or fear of discomfort, the

community's duty becomes one of restoration. In this sense, critique is not an act of rebellion but an act of maintenance: the intellectual equivalent of tending to a structure whose foundations are beginning to shift.

The concept of epistemic care, developed in *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (Kahl 2025e), captures this duty to sustain the institution's moral ecology of truth. Epistemic care demands attentiveness to how knowledge is handled, shared, and silenced. It obliges each member of the academic community to act as a custodian of its epistemic health. To remain silent when one perceives distortion or decay is to participate in that distortion — a quiet breach of reciprocity. The university entrusts its members with the power of voice; fiduciary ethics therefore require that this power be exercised with honesty, not withheld in polite complicity.

Silence, in this view, is not neutrality. It is a symptom of what *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* (Kahl 2025a) describes as suppressed dissonance: the refusal to confront incongruities between institutional ideals and lived realities. Dissonance, though uncomfortable, is the engine of epistemic correction. When individuals suppress it out of loyalty or fear, institutions lose the very mechanism that enables learning. To speak candidly — to articulate dissonance rather than mute it — is therefore an act of epistemic repair.

This essay is written from that stance: neither plaintiff nor provocateur, but witness. It observes the conditions under which the search for truth is conducted and asks whether the fiduciary obligations that sustain this search are being met. The author's position is participatory and reflexive — both beneficiary and observer of the system under scrutiny. This dual perspective confers a moral obligation to respond when the institution's epistemic compass appears to drift. As José Medina (2013) reminds us in *The Epistemology of Resistance*, silence in the face of epistemic injustice is complicity; voice, however unwelcome, is a virtue.

In this light, the essay's intention is restorative. It models the very practice that universities profess to value: critical reflection grounded in evidence and goodwill. The critique offered here aims to strengthen rather than to shame, to illuminate rather than to accuse. It treats the university not as an adversary but as a partner in an ongoing fiduciary dialogue — one that depends on candour, humility, and the courage to speak when silence would be easier.

1.3 Analytic Lens: Epistemic Clientelism and the Ideal of Epistemocracy

The framework through which this essay interprets the LLM experience rests on two complementary theoretical pillars within fiduciary-epistemic scholarship: *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl 2025d) and *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl 2025g). Together, they offer both diagnosis and remedy — a means to understand how universities reproduce hierarchical epistemic relations, and how they might instead become transparent, plural, and self-correcting institutions.

Epistemic Clientelism Theory (ECT) identifies a structural pathology in systems of knowledge exchange: conditional recognition. In clientelist environments, epistemic value — credibility, attention, opportunity — is granted not on the strength of contribution but on conformity to existing hierarchies. Knowing becomes transactional; dissent or novelty risks exclusion. ECT draws on developmental and political analogies, showing that the same logic that governs patron-client relationships in authoritarian regimes also governs certain academic cultures. Within such systems, loyalty is rewarded while candour is penalised; recognition flows downward from gatekeepers rather than outward through reciprocity. Universities, though publicly committed to academic freedom, often replicate these dynamics through informal hierarchies of deference, managerial control of discourse, and performative consensus. The result is what Kahl (2025d) terms epistemic dependency: a learned disposition to seek validation rather than truth.

By contrast, *Epistemocracy* (Kahl 2025g) proposes a fiduciary-epistemic reform model grounded in transparency, distributed credibility, and plural participation in governance. It envisions the university as a fiduciary polity of knowledge — one in which authority is not concentrated in image or rank but dispersed through accountable structures of dialogue. Its guiding virtues are candour, loyalty to truth, and epistemic humility. Epistemocracy therefore operates as the structural inverse of clientelism. Where clientelism demands allegiance, epistemocracy demands responsibility; where clientelism privileges visibility, epistemocracy privileges substance. Kahl (2025g) contrasts this model with the phenomenon of *optocratic drift*, the institutional slide toward the rule of optics — a culture that prizes appearance, branding, and leadership image over genuine epistemic achievement.

These two concepts operate in tension but also in sequence. *Epistemic clientelism* is the pathology; *epistemocracy* the proposed cure. ECT reveals how epistemic economies within higher education transform trust into dependency, suppressing dissonance and subordinating knowledge to hierarchy. Epistemocracy re-engineers those relations as fiduciary ones — guided by care, candour, and equitable participation. The critical-normative structure of this essay therefore proceeds dialectically: first diagnosing the relational mechanisms of epistemic clientelism within the LLM context, then exploring how the fiduciary-epistemic principles of epistemocracy might remedy them.

This analytic pairing also situates the inquiry within the wider philosophical tradition. Barnett's (2000) notion of supercomplexity in the modern university — the proliferation of competing logics of value and accountability — provides the background condition for both phenomena. Foucault's (1975) analysis of institutional discipline clarifies how such complexity becomes managed through subtle regimes of normalisation and surveillance rather than overt coercion. The LLM programme, viewed through this lens, is not an anomaly but a microcosm of a broader epistemic order in which obedience masquerades as professionalism and conformity as collegiality.

Accordingly, this paper asks two central questions:

1. How does the University of Reading's LLM programme reproduce or resist the dynamics of epistemic clientelism?

2. Can the reintroduction of fiduciary ethics — candour, loyalty to truth, and epistemic care — restore autonomy to both students and the institution itself?

These questions guide the analysis that follows, transforming what might appear as personal reflection into an applied test of fiduciary-epistemic theory.

1.4 Contextual Horizon: Higher Education's Crisis of Credibility and Trust

The crisis facing higher education today is not merely financial or structural, but fiduciary. Across the sector, public confidence in universities has waned, not because society doubts the value of learning, but because institutions increasingly appear to manage *the image* of integrity rather than embody it. Governance opacity, managerial self-promotion, and performative inclusion have become the defining pathologies of what Kahl (2025i) terms *fiduciary decline*: the erosion of trust arising from the substitution of ethical candour with bureaucratic spectacle. Institutions that once anchored public discourse in truth and debate now often engage in reputation management, cultivating *optical transparency* while withholding substantive accountability.

Kahl's *Higher Education Governance in Crisis* (2025i) and *Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?* (2025f) identify this condition as a shift from civic trust to market metrics. In earlier generations, universities derived legitimacy from their intellectual authority and public service ethos — they were trusted to speak truth to power. Over time, the fiduciary relationship between university and public has been redefined through the grammar of competition: performance indicators, league tables, and branding exercises. The new legitimacy is quantitative rather than moral. What cannot be measured — candour, curiosity, dissent — is marginalised. As Kahl observes in *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia* (2025m), visibility has replaced virtue: the institution's ethical substance is displaced by its image, its moral credibility by marketing optics.

Philosophically, this transformation echoes Paulo Freire's (1970) warning against the colonisation of pedagogy by hierarchy. When education becomes a process of managing learners rather than emancipating them, knowledge ceases to be dialogical and becomes depositional. Barnett (2000) later described the same process as the rise of supercomplexity: a condition in which universities face proliferating, often contradictory demands for accountability and responsiveness, leading them to substitute symbolic gestures for authentic reflection. In such an environment, managerialism thrives because it offers the illusion of control amid uncertainty.

Yet the underlying problem is fiduciary, not procedural. As Frankel (2011) reminds us, fiduciary relationships depend upon loyalty, candour, and care. When those virtues are replaced by self-preservation and institutional opacity, the fiduciary covenant between the university and its constituencies collapses. The erosion of trust, therefore, is not an accident of perception but evidence of a moral breach. Universities have failed not because they are insufficiently marketable, but because they have confused their fiduciary duty of truthfulness with the managerial duty of brand protection.

The University of Reading must be understood within this systemic landscape. Its practices of staged dialogue, image-driven marketing, and proceduralised feedback do not mark it as exceptional, but as exemplary — a representative node within the epistemic economy that Kahl (2025h) calls "the manufactured consent of higher education." This essay thus treats Reading as a case through which broader truths can be seen. The problem is not of a single institution's making; it is structural, cultural, and epistemic. By diagnosing the university's local manifestations of this wider crisis, the analysis that follows seeks to illuminate how fiduciary repair might begin — how the ethic of trust can be restored in a system that has forgotten what it means to be believed.

1.5 Method: Reflexive Phenomenology Informed by Fiduciary–Epistemic Ethics

The method guiding this essay combines phenomenological self-reflection with fiduciary–epistemic analysis. It begins not from abstract theorisation but from lived experience within the University of Reading's LLM programme — the author's position as both participant and observer. This dual stance permits a close reading of institutional life from the inside: what it means to learn, to question, and to encounter epistemic structures that shape both thought and silence. The subjective voice here is not anecdotal but evidentiary. As argued in *Re-founding Psychology as Epistemic Psychology* (Kahl 2025k), reflective narrative constitutes a legitimate epistemic method because the experience of knowing is itself a phenomenon of knowledge production. First-person observation thus becomes a form of qualitative data — revealing how epistemic conditions are felt, navigated, and sometimes resisted.

The analysis proceeds through a fiduciary–epistemic method, which frames evaluation in terms of duties rather than metrics. Every institutional gesture — from pedagogy to policy — is assessed through the lens of fiduciary virtue: truth, care, and justice. The guiding questions are simple yet foundational: Was trust upheld?

Was epistemic autonomy protected? Was candour reciprocated? These questions translate fiduciary obligations, as described in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl 2025b), into analytical instruments suitable for the study of educational relationships. They require attention not to outputs but to moral process: the ways in which knowledge, power, and trust circulate through the learning environment.

This approach also demands explicit epistemic reflexivity. The author's positionality — as researcher, lawyer, and educator — introduces intersecting duties: legal precision, evidential integrity, and pedagogical empathy. The essay's tone of critical care derives from that convergence. It acknowledges the moral weight of its perspective: to critique is to act within the same fiduciary system one critiques, and thus to be held accountable by the same ethical standards. Reflexivity here is not self-indulgence but discipline — an effort to render the observer's standpoint transparent, as required by the fiduciary ethic of candour (Kahl 2025p).

The methodological synthesis that emerges — phenomenology interlaced with fiduciary ethics — aligns with what *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl 2025g) calls an *epistemic audit by reflection*. This audit does not count or rank; it interprets. It traces how epistemic structures condition the lived experience of learning and how those experiences, in turn, reveal the institution's moral architecture. By reading the University's pedagogical practices through this reflexive–fiduciary lens, the essay performs what could be termed normative phenomenology: a mode of inquiry that treats personal experience as a diagnostic instrument for evaluating institutional virtue.

In this sense, the method follows the tradition of virtue epistemology (Zagzebski 1996), which locates the integrity of knowing in the moral quality of the knower. The act of observation is therefore inseparable from ethical commitment. To study the institution's epistemic behaviour, one must model the virtues it lacks — candour, humility, and fidelity to truth. The expected outcome of this method is not merely description but repair: a disciplined practice of witnessing that exposes fiduciary lapses and points toward renewal through the lived evidence of conscience.

2. Universities as Fiduciaries of Knowledge

2.1 The Fiduciary Conception — Universities as Trustees of the Epistemic Commons

Universities exist not as proprietors of knowledge but as trustees of an epistemic commons — a shared moral and intellectual resource that belongs to society at large. Their legitimacy depends on stewardship rather than possession, on the faithful exercise of power on behalf of those who entrust them with authority. In fiduciary terms, they hold a position analogous to that of trustees managing a common good: their mandate is to protect, cultivate, and distribute knowledge for the benefit of all, not to treat it as proprietary capital (Kahl 2025b; Frankel 2011).

In fiduciary law, a fiduciary is an entity entrusted to act loyally, prudently, and with care for another's welfare. The essence of this role lies in asymmetry — one party's vulnerability and the other's duty of loyalty. Students, researchers, and the public occupy the vulnerable position: they depend upon the university's integrity, competence, and openness for access to truth. The university, in turn, assumes a moral and epistemic duty to act in good faith, exercising its autonomy only insofar as it serves the collective good. This conception

situates higher education not within a market contract but within a covenant of trust. The fiduciary university operates under the same moral logic as a trustee: its privileges exist only as instruments of stewardship.

The epistemic commons to which universities owe their fidelity is the shared domain of truth-seeking and meaning-making — the open, intersubjective sphere where ideas are tested, criticised, and refined. Unlike intellectual property, the epistemic commons cannot be owned without contradiction; it exists through circulation and dialogue. Its vitality depends on two conditions: that those entrusted with its care act with candour and that they refrain from exploiting it for self-interest. When universities treat knowledge as commercial property or as a means of reputational gain, they convert stewardship into possession, collapsing the fiduciary order into a transactional one.

This distinction between the fiduciary and the corporate university underpins the ethical analysis that follows. The fiduciary university acts on behalf of learners and society, guided by truth, candour, and justice; the corporate university acts in pursuit of its own security, guided by risk management, image, and financial preservation. In fiduciary language, the former honours its duty of loyalty to its beneficiaries; the latter breaches it by prioritising self-interest over entrusted purpose. The transformation of universities into quasi-corporate entities — managed through brand, market, and performance metrics — thus marks not merely an administrative evolution but an ethical regression: the replacement of stewardship with ownership, and of candour with caution.

The university–student relationship exemplifies this fiduciary structure of dependence. Students rely upon the institution's capacity to provide truthful instruction, fair evaluation, and an environment conducive to intellectual autonomy. This dependency imposes a corresponding duty of care: to educate without manipulation, to assess without prejudice, and to communicate without concealment. The asymmetry of expertise gives rise to an obligation of trustworthiness — an expectation that the university will not exploit the student's epistemic vulnerability for institutional ends. As Kahl (2025p) argues in Toward Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath, educators bear duties comparable to physicians: first, to do no epistemic harm; second, to act in the interest of intellectual flourishing.

The analogy extends into law and governance. Frankel (2011) defines fiduciary responsibility as "the legal embodiment of moral conscience" — a structure that transforms ethical expectation into enforceable duty. Likewise, Kahl (2025b) interprets fiduciary openness as a form of institutional conscience: a continual self-audit of loyalty, candour, and justice. Under this conception, universities must periodically reaffirm not only their strategic priorities but their moral commitments. Their credibility derives not from ranking tables or reputation indices but from the ethical quality of their trusteeship — the degree to which they act as loyal stewards of truth on behalf of those who cannot speak with equal authority.

In sum, to regard universities as fiduciaries of knowledge is to reassert their foundational purpose: to safeguard the conditions under which truth can be pursued freely and shared widely. This chapter proceeds from the conviction that only by reclaiming this fiduciary conception — by understanding themselves as trustees rather than proprietors — can universities regain their moral and epistemic legitimacy in the eyes of those they serve.

2.2 Fiduciary Duties — Candour, Loyalty, Epistemic Care, and Justice

To speak of the university as a fiduciary of knowledge is to acknowledge that it owes distinct duties to those who depend on its truthfulness. These duties are not optional virtues but structural obligations—ethical constraints that define what it means for an institution to be credible. Drawing from fiduciary law, epistemic

ethics, and virtue epistemology, four primary fiduciary–epistemic duties can be identified: candour, loyalty, epistemic care, and justice. Together, they constitute what Kahl (2025p) calls the *fiduciary conscience of the academy*: the moral infrastructure that sustains higher education's legitimacy as a truth-seeking enterprise.

The Duty of Candour

The first and most fundamental duty is candour—the obligation to speak truthfully, to disclose relevant information without concealment, distortion, or rhetorical spin. In law, the fiduciary's duty of candour requires full and honest disclosure to the beneficiary; its analogue in education demands the same transparency from universities toward students, staff, and the public. As Kahl (2025b) argues in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*, institutions must practice "epistemic full disclosure": revealing the realities of governance, finances, assessment, and academic outcomes, even when such revelations risk reputational discomfort. Candour therefore stands as the antithesis of managerial communication, which often frames information in ways that maintain control rather than cultivate understanding.

Institutional honesty is not a branding exercise but an epistemic condition. Without truthfulness in communication, no form of learning—legal, scientific, or philosophical—can remain authentic. The fiduciary university must thus reject opacity and commit to what Kahl (2025p) calls "institutional truth-telling": a readiness to speak plainly even when the truth unsettles.

The Duty of Loyalty

The second duty is loyalty, the requirement to act in the interest of knowledge and the public good rather than in pursuit of self-preservation or gain. Frankel (2011) defines loyalty as the fiduciary's highest moral constraint: a prohibition against using entrusted power for personal advantage. Within the university context, this means resisting conflicts of interest, avoiding reputational manipulation, and refusing to subordinate academic integrity to marketing logic. The test of loyalty is whether the institution places truth above convenience and substance above optics.

Loyalty also entails intellectual courage—the willingness to protect academic inquiry from political or financial pressure. Universities violate their fiduciary loyalty when they silence dissenting research to maintain corporate partnerships, or when administrative actors prioritise image management over academic freedom. In Kahl's (2025b) formulation, *loyalty to truth must always outweigh loyalty to hierarchy*.

The Duty of Epistemic Care

The third duty, epistemic care, extends the traditional fiduciary duty of care into the epistemic domain. Drawing from *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (Kahl 2025e), it refers to the obligation to nurture and sustain the conditions under which knowledge can flourish. Universities must create environments that value dialogue, tolerate uncertainty, and protect dissent. Epistemic care manifests not in paternalism but in stewardship: mentoring students with patience, encouraging intellectual risk-taking, and ensuring that learning spaces remain psychologically safe for disagreement.

Neglect of this duty is perhaps the most pervasive breach in contemporary academia. When administrators prioritise compliance or efficiency over curiosity and reflection, they withhold the very care that knowledge requires to grow. True epistemic care entails moral attentiveness: awareness that knowledge, like trust, is fragile and requires continual tending.

The Duty of Justice

Finally, the duty of justice demands fairness in the distribution of epistemic recognition, opportunity, and credibility. Universities are not merely producers of knowledge but arbiters of voice. As Fricker (2007) explains in her theory of *epistemic injustice*, institutions can wrong individuals not by denying them rights but by denying them credibility. The fiduciary university must therefore ensure that epistemic contributions—student insights, staff expertise, marginalised perspectives—are received with equal seriousness.

Justice, in this sense, requires that merit be recognised transparently and that epistemic hierarchies be scrutinised. It also entails procedural fairness: equitable grading, unbiased supervision, and due recognition of labour and authorship. In Medina's (2013) terms, justice functions as epistemic solidarity: the moral orientation that transforms individual acts of fairness into institutional culture.

The Fiduciary Conscience of the Academy

These four duties—candour, loyalty, epistemic care, and justice—are mutually reinforcing. Each depends on the others for coherence: candour without loyalty becomes recklessness; loyalty without justice becomes paternalism; care without candour becomes indulgence. Their integration, as Kahl (2025p) proposes in *Toward Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath*, forms the fiduciary conscience of the academy: a living code that translates moral expectation into institutional habit.

Zagzebski (1996) reminds us that intellectual virtue cannot exist apart from moral virtue; epistemic excellence presupposes ethical integrity. The same is true institutionally. A university that neglects any of these duties ceases to be a fiduciary and becomes a corporation of appearances. Conversely, when these four duties are enacted together, they form the moral architecture of epistemic trust: the condition that allows education to be believed, and thus, to matter.

2.3 Fiduciary Breach — When Managerial Optics Replace Truth with Risk Management

If fiduciary duty defines the moral essence of the university, fiduciary breach marks its corrosion. In higher education, such breach occurs when the duty of candour is replaced by the logic of risk management—when the institutional instinct to preserve image outweighs the ethical obligation to tell the truth. As Kahl (2025h) demonstrates in *Finding the Smoking Gun in UK Higher Education*, this substitution has become structural: communication departments now function less as conduits of transparency than as mechanisms of containment, designed to manage perception rather than to illuminate reality. Fiduciary breach, in this sense, is not merely a failure of honesty but a systemic inversion of priorities—a transformation of universities from epistemic trustees into reputational corporations.

The mechanisms of this breach are manifold. First, universities deploy strategic communication that obscures structural failings under the guise of optimism and inclusivity. Public statements are crafted to reassure rather than inform, and accountability reports are shaped to signal compliance rather than to foster understanding. The duty of disclosure becomes a choreography of credibility. Second, incentive structures reward compliance over candour. Staff and students quickly learn that promotion, funding, or institutional favour depends less on truth-telling than on avoiding embarrassment to leadership. Honesty becomes reputationally dangerous. The result, as Kahl (2025a) notes in *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event*, is the internalisation of epistemic fear: individuals suppress doubt or criticism to preserve belonging. Third, feedback mechanisms—ostensibly designed to capture the student voice—are engineered to produce satisfaction metrics. As Kahl (2025f) argues

in *Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?*, surveys are often pre-structured to confirm managerial hypotheses; their questions measure contentment, not insight, manufacturing a veneer of partnership while silencing genuine critique.

The moral consequences of these practices are profound. Each act of concealment, however small, erodes the institution's epistemic legitimacy. Breach of trust becomes cumulative: the community no longer assumes that official communication reflects truth but instead interprets it as public relations. Over time, this cultivates cynicism among both staff and students—a quiet resignation that candour is naïve and that sincerity carries risk. The breach thus perpetuates itself: when the university models evasion, its members learn evasion. This institutionalised fear of truth is the antithesis of fiduciary care; it corrodes the moral ecology upon which education depends.

Kahl's (2025h) *Finding the Smoking Gun* provides empirical evidence of this dynamic within UK higher education, documenting how conflicts of interest, misrepresented accountability frameworks, and unacknowledged power asymmetries distort governance. Institutions frequently present themselves as transparent while concealing structural capture—what Kahl (2025i) calls "the performative accountability of the self-auditing university." Similarly, *Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?* (Kahl 2025f) exposes how public campaigns of diversity and inclusion function as moral capital: gestures that simulate virtue while deflecting scrutiny. In both cases, the pursuit of reputation supplants the practice of integrity.

Frankel (2011) reminds us that the fiduciary relationship collapses the moment loyalty to self-interest replaces loyalty to the beneficiary. By analogy, the university breaches its fiduciary trust when it treats students and the public as consumers to be managed rather than as epistemic partners to be informed. Risk management, however prudent it may seem, becomes unethical when it conceals epistemic harm. To protect image at the expense of truth is to betray the very good the university exists to serve.

The transitional insight emerging from this analysis is clear: fiduciary breach marks the boundary between the *fiduciary university* and the *optocratic institution*. The former sustains credibility through candour; the latter sustains reputation through display. In the optocratic regime, the truth is no longer told but curated, and the moral purpose of education is displaced by the aesthetic of confidence. What begins as a communication strategy thus becomes an ontological shift—the transformation of the university from a house of inquiry into a theatre of reassurance. The chapters that follow examine this shift in detail, tracing how managerial optics evolve into epistemic structures that govern not only what is said, but what can be known.

2.4 Legal–Ethical Synthesis: From Fiduciary Law to Virtue Epistemology

At the foundation of fiduciary thinking lies an elegant moral architecture: *duty structured by trust*. Fiduciary law has long articulated the norms that govern relationships of dependency and vulnerability, defining duties of loyalty, care, and candour as safeguards against the misuse of power (Smith 2014; Miller 2014). Its logic is protective rather than punitive — designed to ensure that those entrusted with authority act in the best interests of those who rely upon them. In fiduciary law, the breach of trust is not simply a legal wrong but a moral failure, a betrayal of relational integrity. As Kahl (2025b) observes in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*, fiduciary obligations encode the ethical structure of trust itself: to be entrusted with another's confidence is to bear the responsibility of honesty, attentiveness, and restraint.

What makes fiduciary law particularly fertile for application beyond the private sphere is its conceptual adaptability. It is not confined to commercial transactions or personal relationships but applies wherever asymmetries of knowledge and power create dependency. Kahl (2025b) extends this principle to the epistemic

realm, arguing that universities, as custodians of knowledge, stand in a fiduciary position toward their students, staff, and society. Like trustees, they manage an intangible good—the epistemic commons—on behalf of others. Their duties are therefore analogous to those of a fiduciary: they must act with loyalty to truth, candour in disclosure, and care in preserving the conditions for knowledge to flourish. The university's ethical legitimacy thus derives not from procedural compliance but from the fidelity of its stewardship.

From this legal-ethical foundation, the analysis turns toward virtue epistemology, the philosophical tradition concerned with the moral qualities that make a person a good knower. Where fiduciary law prescribes conduct, virtue epistemology cultivates character. The good knower is distinguished not merely by intelligence but by moral orientation: honesty, intellectual humility, courage, and a commitment to justice (Fricker 2007; Zagzebski 1996). These virtues function as the *psychological infrastructure* of epistemic reliability; they describe not what one must do, but what one must be to know well. Within the university, these traits should not reside solely in individuals but should be embodied institutionally — reflected in policies, cultures, and leadership ethos that reward candour over conformity.

Bridging the two domains yields what might be termed fiduciary epistemology — a hybrid moral system in which the *external duties* of fiduciary law converge with the *internal dispositions* of epistemic virtue. In this synthesis, legal structure provides the scaffolding of accountability, while virtue epistemology supplies the moral psychology that sustains it. The duty of loyalty corresponds to the virtue of *intellectual integrity*; the duty of care parallels *epistemic humility* and attentiveness; the duty of candour aligns with *truthfulness* and *epistemic courage*; and the duty of justice echoes *fair-mindedness* and *epistemic generosity*. The fusion of these frameworks transforms fiduciary obligation from a procedural constraint into a living ethic of knowledge.

The practical implication is decisive: universities cannot secure epistemic credibility through policy alone. Codes, audits, and compliance regimes may formalise duties, but they cannot cultivate virtue. As Kahl (2025b) insists, the crisis of governance in higher education is not regulatory but moral; it stems from the absence of fiduciary conscience. Universities must therefore evolve from institutions governed by *metrics* to institutions governed by *virtue*. Their authority depends not on administrative sophistication but on moral cultivation — on the capacity to embody loyalty, care, and candour as institutional virtues rather than slogans.

In this light, fiduciary epistemology offers a framework for moral reconstruction. It translates the juridical logic of fiduciary law into a pedagogical and epistemic register, treating truth-telling as a duty both legal and virtuous. A university guided by such a synthesis would no longer need to claim legitimacy through reputation; it would earn it through conduct. Its governance would rest not upon managerial control, but upon the slow, demanding work of cultivating *trustworthiness as a collective virtue* — the true measure of an epistemic institution's worth.

2.5 Epistemocracy — Universities as Fiduciary–Epistemic Polities

If fiduciary ethics defines the moral foundation of higher education, epistemocracy represents its institutional realisation. The term, as articulated in *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl 2025g), denotes a form of governance in which authority is grounded not in hierarchy or image but in knowledge stewardship — the responsible management of epistemic goods for the collective benefit of society. An epistemocracy is not simply a well-run university; it is a moral polity of knowing, organised around the virtues that make truth possible. It reimagines the university as a self-correcting fiduciary system in which legitimacy arises from epistemic trust rather than administrative control.

Defining Epistemocracy

In Kahl's (2025g) conception, epistemocracy represents a third path between the paternalism of the bureaucratic university and the chaos of market competition. It is neither managerial nor populist; rather, it treats knowledge as a public trust, governed through principles of candour, transparency, and justice. The epistemocratic university views itself as a trusteeship of reason — a collective bound by ethical duties rather than procedural authority. Where traditional governance asks *who rules*, epistemocracy asks *how truth rules*: through openness, reciprocity, and accountability.

Principles of the Epistemocratic Order

1. **Transparency** — Information flows freely, and secrecy is treated as a moral failure rather than a strategic necessity. All decisions affecting epistemic life — from funding allocation to hiring criteria — must be open to scrutiny. In an epistemocracy, opacity is synonymous with breach of duty, for hidden reasoning corrupts the public trust.

2. **Plurality** — Diversity of epistemic voices is recognised as a fiduciary asset, not a managerial inconvenience. Plurality ensures resilience: multiple perspectives guard against dogmatism and epistemic capture. As Medina (2013) argues, epistemic justice depends upon resistant imagination — the capacity to hear what power prefers to ignore. The epistemocratic university institutionalises that resistance as a structural virtue.

3. **Accountability** — Leadership is evaluated by candour, responsiveness, and moral courage, not by metrics or image management. Authority in an epistemocracy is fiduciary, not hierarchical: it is earned through transparency and service to truth. Administrators are not figureheads but trustees accountable to the community of knowers whose work they facilitate.

4. **Reflexivity** — Institutional structures are designed for continuous epistemic audit, a concept introduced in Kahl (2025g) as the moral analogue of financial auditing. Reflexivity transforms self-scrutiny into a governance practice, ensuring that the university remains sensitive to epistemic drift and open to correction. This audit culture of conscience replaces performative accountability with moral accountability.

Epistemocracy and its Antithesis: Optocracy

Against the epistemocratic model stands its inversion, the optocracy, described by Kahl (2025m) in *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia*. Optocracy is the rule of optics — an order where visibility supplants substance and reputation masquerades as virtue. In the optocratic university, leaders become brands, communication replaces dialogue, and truth yields to narrative coherence. Whereas epistemocracy seeks epistemic balance between candour and care, optocracy thrives on image management and the suppression of dissonance. The two models are therefore not merely administrative alternatives but moral opposites: one stewards knowledge; the other curates illusion.

Re-envisioning the University as a Fiduciary Polity of Knowing

To institute epistemocracy is to reimagine the university as a fiduciary polity — a moral community in which every participant, from lecturer to student, holds a share of epistemic responsibility. Governance becomes distributed through networks of trust rather than concentrated in hierarchies of command. Decision-making is guided by deliberation, not decree; by candour, not caution. The university's legitimacy flows outward, from its internal epistemic ethics to its social contract with the public. In this sense, epistemocracy embodies

Barnett's (2000) call for universities to navigate supercomplexity through reflexive moral agency rather than managerial control.

Toward a Pedagogy of Fiduciary Dialogue

This model prepares the conceptual ground for the paper's later proposal of a *Pedagogy of Fiduciary Dialogue* (Chapter 7). If epistemocracy defines the institutional architecture of fiduciary ethics, the pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue defines its human practice. Together they form a coherent vision of renewal: a university that does not merely teach about truth but lives by it — transparent in governance, plural in knowledge, loyal to justice, and reflexive in conscience. Only such a university can claim the title of an epistemocracy: a republic of learning governed not by power, but by the ethics of knowing.

3. The Experience: Discipline, Rank, and Silence

3.1 Observation — The Pedagogical Environment: Conformity over Inquiry

In describing the pedagogical conditions of the University of Reading's LLM programme, it is important to distinguish between intent and structure. My observations do not suggest that lecturers consciously discourage questions or dialogue. On the contrary, most express openness to student engagement. Yet the form and design of the teaching delivery — not individual disposition — operate in ways that inadvertently suppress genuine dialogue. Silence, therefore, is not imposed but structurally produced.

The standard format of LLM teaching consists of two-hour sessions divided nominally into 50 minutes + 50 minutes, the first intended as lecture, the second as workshop. In practice, however, these merged sessions often function monologically: the lecturer presents prepared material throughout, leaving little or no dedicated time for dialogical exchange. With classes of roughly twenty students, sustained discussion is logistically difficult; when it occurs, it tends to be brief or peripheral. As one lecturer candidly explained, the two-hour session is meant to serve both as lecture and seminar, but in reality this format privileges coverage of material over conversation about meaning. The silence that results is therefore systemic — an artefact of pedagogical design, not a symptom of authoritarian teaching.

The LLM programme also assigns each student an academic tutor, ostensibly to ensure ongoing intellectual and pastoral support. In theory, this reflects the fiduciary principle of individual care. In practice, however, the system appears largely procedural. The appointment of a tutor fulfils an institutional obligation rather than enabling substantive dialogical mentoring. From my own experience, tutorial meetings were limited and transactional — sufficient to satisfy administrative expectations but not to sustain an evolving research dialogue. The arrangement functions less as an epistemic relationship of trust and more as a checkbox exercise: the university assigns, the student acknowledges, and the fiduciary bond is presumed complete.

Naturally, individual experiences vary. Lecturers differ in style, temperament, and willingness to engage beyond scheduled sessions. The following reflections, therefore, describe a pattern rather than a universal rule. Still, the overall structure discourages dialogue by design. The time constraints, class size, and dual-format delivery leave little space for exploratory exchange — what Paulo Freire (1970) would call the *dialogical moment of co-creation*.

From my own case, the limitations of this system became visible when I sought to discuss my interdisciplinary research. My assigned tutor expressed concern that the work was "too interdisciplinary" and that no one within the school could supervise or advise on it adequately. While this comment may have been sincere, it nevertheless had a discouraging effect: it implied that epistemic novelty exceeds the institution's comfort zone. In another instance, I approached a professor in a different department who initially agreed to review my manuscript but withdrew the following day without explanation. No malice need be inferred; rather, these experiences illustrate how institutional compartmentalisation restricts intellectual cross-pollination. The issue is not personal unwillingness but structural narrowness — a system calibrated for disciplinary continuity rather than epistemic exploration.

Thus, the silence observed within the LLM experience is not simply the absence of speech but the by-product of institutional architecture. It reflects what Kahl (2025a) describes as epistemic conditioning: a setting in which conformity emerges naturally from structure, not coercion. As Foucault (1975) reminds us, discipline is most effective when it becomes invisible — when order is maintained not through prohibition but through form. The design of the LLM, by prioritising efficient delivery and administrative completion, inadvertently reproduces the logic of docility: a quiet, well-managed learning environment that satisfies procedural fidelity while impoverishing fiduciary dialogue.

3.2 Psychological Architecture — Dissonance Suppression and Cognitive Compliance

If the structural design of teaching (as shown in §3.1) limits dialogue externally, its psychological effects manifest internally, shaping how students experience knowledge and authority. The result is not overt coercion but epistemic obedience: a tacit adaptation to the implicit rules of belonging. This section examines the inner mechanics of that obedience — how dissonance is suppressed, doubt domesticated, and compliance mistaken for virtue.

The theoretical framework for this analysis draws on *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* (Kahl 2025a), which interprets dissonance not merely as discomfort between conflicting beliefs, but as a moment of epistemic conscience — the instant when conviction encounters constraint. In environments where hierarchy predominates, this tension is typically resolved not by questioning but by psychological adjustment. Students learn to silence the internal voice of doubt in favour of institutional harmony. The discomfort of dissonance is replaced by the comfort of compliance. As Festinger (1957) observed, individuals will often adjust their cognition to align with external expectation, not because they are coerced, but because dissonance is intolerable. In an academic context, this process becomes a form of adaptive virtue — self-silencing mistaken for professionalism.

Three recurring mechanisms sustain this adaptation:

1. **Normative mirroring** – Students unconsciously replicate the lecturer's tone, vocabulary, and intellectual posture to signal belonging. By echoing authority, they demonstrate competence. This mimetic alignment is rewarded through affirmation — subtle nods of approval, higher participation grades, or simply smoother interactions. Over time, the ability to mirror becomes indistinguishable from the ability to think critically.

2. **Defensive rationalisation** – Compliance is reframed as professionalism. Students tell themselves that deference reflects respect, that disagreement is premature, or that critique should come "after qualification." Kahl (2025a) describes this as rationalised epistemic dependency: the belief that truth

must be deferred until the student has earned the right to speak it. The moral vocabulary of maturity and humility is used to justify self-restraint.

3. **Epistemic fatigue** – The sustained effort of suppressing curiosity produces weariness. Students intuit that some questions are unwelcome or disruptive, and so they abandon them pre-emptively. The cognitive economy of silence — thinking less to survive more easily — becomes second nature. Inquiry fades not through prohibition but through exhaustion.

Together, these mechanisms produce what may be called cognitive compliance: a psychological state in which obedience feels virtuous. It is the moment when the epistemic conscience, having once protested, learns to whisper instead. The classroom becomes a space of smooth discourse — not because dissent has vanished, but because it has been internalised. The appearance of engagement conceals the absence of friction.

Kahl's *Re-founding Psychology as Epistemic Psychology* (2025k) helps situate this pattern developmentally. Dependence, he argues, is a necessary stage of learning: the mind begins by trusting authority. The ethical question is not whether dependency exists, but whether it is guided toward autonomy. When institutions fail to provide such guidance — when authority demands compliance without cultivating independence — dependence becomes pathological. What should be a fiduciary relationship of trust devolves into epistemic subordination.

Foucault (1975) provides the broader sociological insight: disciplinary power is most efficient when it is internalised. The 'docile body' of the classroom is mirrored by the 'docile mind' of the learner — self-regulated, self-censoring, and self-contained. In this environment, epistemic freedom is constrained not externally but through internalised fiduciary asymmetry: the fear of betraying authority replaces the joy of questioning it.

This process does not unfold only within classrooms. It is reinforced by the moral architecture of the campus itself — the ambient cues that signal how one ought to feel and behave. At Reading, for instance, paper cards affixed across public spaces read, 'Have you witnessed or experienced unacceptable behaviour? Report it and get the support you need.' On the library café screen, an animated message warns, 'Is someone staring at you intently? It could be a crime. Don't be a victim.' Though motivated by care, such messages cultivate epistemic vigilance without proportion. They transform the moral atmosphere of safety into one of surveillance, teaching students to interpret neutral social cues as potential threats. The result is not empowerment but anticipatory compliance: individuals learn that even a gaze may be suspect, that interaction itself must be managed defensively.

In the language of the *Kahl Model of Epistemic Dissonance* (KMED), these stimuli operate through the ϱ-σ-φ loop: recognition (ϱ) is replaced by suppression (σ) without the restorative containment (φ) of trust. Safety is performed optically but not enacted relationally. What should have been fiduciary care becomes optocratic prophylaxis — the visual display of virtue that replaces the lived practice of candour. The mind that fears to look soon fears to speak; epistemic autonomy collapses into moral caution.

Thus, the psychological architecture of the LLM experience reveals how systemic design and inner adaptation converge. Students do not need to be silenced; they learn to silence themselves. The fiduciary bond between teacher and learner, meant to safeguard intellectual growth, becomes inverted — trust transformed into quiet deference, and moral care into epistemic submission. What results is not ignorance, but the subtler condition of learned inarticulacy: knowing enough to sense what must not be said.

3.3 Dependency and Recognition — The Student–Teacher Dyad as Fiduciary Asymmetry

Learning is an act of trust. Every classroom, whether explicitly or implicitly, is built upon an asymmetrical relationship between the one who teaches and the one who learns. The lecturer possesses epistemic authority — not absolute but functional — and the student relies on that authority to access knowledge, receive guidance, and obtain evaluation. This interdependence defines what may be called the *fiduciary dyad* of education: the lecturer as epistemic trustee, and the student as beneficiary, reliant upon the trustee's honesty, fairness, and care. When this relationship is balanced, it functions as a mechanism of epistemic growth; when distorted, it becomes a site of dependency, recognition-seeking, and self-censorship.

In *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl 2025c), Kahl explores how care and control can coexist within dependent dyads, producing ambivalence in relationships where recognition is conditional. Though written about personal intimacy, the same pattern operates in academic contexts. The student's dependency on the lecturer's approval — for grades, recommendation, or intellectual affirmation — creates an emotional economy of loyalty and reward. Recognition becomes the currency of epistemic validation: to be praised is to be known, to dissent is to risk invisibility. The asymmetry is not inherently harmful; indeed, some degree of hierarchy is pedagogically necessary. It becomes problematic only when *trust becomes conditional* and *recognition becomes contingent upon docility*.

Within this structure, praise and approval function as tokens of epistemic legitimacy. A lecturer's positive feedback can affirm the student's intellectual worth, but it can also reinforce dependency. The student learns that certain attitudes, tones, or alignments are rewarded while others draw quiet disapproval. Over time, dissent is felt not as intellectual risk but as personal betrayal. Silence, therefore, becomes the currency of belonging. This phenomenon mirrors what Kahl (2025c) identifies as *epistemic clientelism*: a relationship in which loyalty is exchanged for recognition. The student's desire to be seen and affirmed transforms into self-regulated conformity — an internalised form of epistemic subordination.

Psychologically, this dynamic reveals itself as an interplay between vulnerability and validation. The student's dependence on recognition is not pathological in itself; it arises from the human need for confirmation that one's understanding has value. As Kahl (2025k) argues in Re-founding Psychology as Epistemic Psychology, dependency is a normal developmental phase of knowing — an *epistemic event* marking the transition from trust to autonomy. What renders dependency ethically problematic is not its existence but its manipulation. When lecturers (consciously or not) reward imitation over originality, or compliance over curiosity, they transform fiduciary care into epistemic control. The duty of mentorship, which should elevate the student's independence, instead entrenches deference.

Here, the fiduciary model provides both diagnosis and remedy. In fiduciary law, asymmetry is acceptable only insofar as it serves the beneficiary's best interest. Applied to education, this means the lecturer's authority must be exercised for the student's epistemic autonomy, not over it. The ethical question is not whether the teacher has power, but how that power is used: as guidance or as containment. As Kahl (2025b) notes in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*, authority in fiduciary contexts entails a duty of candour and loyalty to the entrusted party. When educators obscure criteria, withhold honest critique, or discourage exploration for fear of divergence, they breach that duty — substituting protectionism for trust.

From the perspective of virtue epistemology, Zagzebski (1996) reminds us that intellectual virtue depends upon moral virtue: teaching is not merely the transmission of knowledge but the cultivation of another's moral capacity to know. The lecturer's task, therefore, is fiduciary in essence — to transform dependence into

autonomy, curiosity into courage, and recognition-seeking into self-recognition. Failure to do so constitutes epistemic malpractice: the betrayal of the trust upon which the act of teaching depends.

Thus, the student–teacher dyad embodies both the promise and the peril of fiduciary asymmetry. When animated by care, it becomes a relationship of liberation; when governed by control, it becomes a hierarchy of silence. The ethical educator recognises the fragility of this balance — that every gesture of approval or restraint shapes not only what a student knows, but how they come to know themselves as a knower.

3.4 Feedback Rituals — Emotional Management Disguised as Empowerment

At first glance, the University's feedback systems appear to invite partnership and dialogue. Surveys, email solicitations, and staged events such as "How's it going?" sessions convey an image of openness, accessibility, and mutual exchange. Students are encouraged to express opinions, rate experiences, and "help shape their learning environment." Yet, as discussed in §1.1, this invitation often conceals a paradox: the appearance of listening masks a structure of deafness. Participation is solicited, but its content is predetermined; voice is permitted only within parameters that render it harmless. Feedback, in this configuration, functions less as a tool of dialogue and more as an instrument of emotional management.

Institutionally, feedback is staged as performance. Its procedural logic treats participation as proof of partnership — the act of responding becomes more significant than what is said. Survey questions are narrowly framed, reducing complex intellectual and emotional experiences into quantifiable satisfaction metrics. Students are asked how "engaged" or "supported" they feel, but not whether they are intellectually challenged, ethically guided, or epistemically heard. The form of feedback thus replaces its substance. The institution can then claim transparency while filtering critique through pre-coded categories that reaffirm pre-existing conclusions.

This transformation of listening into theatre exemplifies what Kahl (2025m) in *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia* calls the institutional theatre of openness: a spectacle of participation that substitutes image for candour. Administrators and senior academics, often visible at such events, perform accessibility while remaining insulated from the implications of what is said. Questions and complaints are acknowledged empathetically — sometimes even thanked — yet rarely acted upon. This ritual acknowledgment diffuses emotional tension while leaving underlying structures intact. The act of listening becomes a mode of containment, not reform. As Medina (2013) observes in The Epistemology of Resistance, institutions often manage dissent by recognising it symbolically without altering the epistemic hierarchies that produced it.

Chomsky and Herman's (1988) theory of manufacturing consent provides the wider political frame. In their analysis of media systems, participation and information flow are not mechanisms of empowerment but of *controlled legitimacy*: individuals are made to feel included in decisions that have already been made. The same logic applies within higher education. Feedback loops sustain the illusion of partnership while reproducing managerial authority. The more students speak within these pre-defined channels, the more the institution's legitimacy appears confirmed. What looks like empowerment is, in practice, a sophisticated form of consent production.

The emotional economy of feedback is equally revealing. Students experience momentary recognition — the satisfaction of being heard — yet realise soon after that their words carry little consequence. This cycle of expression and disappointment breeds what might be termed epistemic catharsis: emotion is released, accountability deferred. The student feels lighter, the institution appears responsive, but nothing changes.

Over time, this dynamic leads to feedback fatigue — a quiet scepticism that participation matters. As trust erodes, students learn to perform engagement with the same strategic detachment the institution performs listening.

The consequence is a subtle yet pervasive moral drift. When transparency is reduced to performance, the institution's fiduciary duty of candour dissolves into public relations. Kahl (2025f) warns in *Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?* that such performative feedback mechanisms constitute an epistemic harm: they train participants to mistake visibility for voice. The ethics of inquiry give way to the aesthetics of accessibility — what Kahl (2025m) identifies as optocratic drift, the governance of optics. The university becomes ever more skilled at looking open while remaining closed, its communicative success measured by harmony, not honesty.

Ultimately, these feedback rituals transform critique into spectacle and emotion into compliance. Students are pacified through recognition without influence; dissonance is neutralised through empathy without consequence. The system succeeds in managing affect but fails in cultivating trust. This chapter's final section (§3.5) turns to a related phenomenon: how the same illusion of collaboration that defines the feedback process extends into assessment itself, where collective grading and peer dependency reproduce the very fiduciary breaches that feedback rituals conceal.

3.5 Group-Based Assessments as Fiduciary Breach

Among the most illustrative examples of how fiduciary ethics can be violated at the pedagogical level is the use of group-based assessments. These are typically introduced under the rhetoric of *collaboration*, *teamwork*, and *employability* — terms that carry strong normative appeal and align neatly with market-oriented discourses of professional readiness. In theory, such projects aim to simulate workplace environments, teaching students to cooperate, negotiate, and divide labour efficiently. In practice, however, they often obscure accountability, conceal effort differentials, and transfer the moral and evaluative risk from the institution to the students themselves. The result is a subtle but significant breach of fiduciary fairness: the university abdicates its duty to evaluate each student justly, delegating that responsibility to peer dynamics it cannot ethically supervise or guarantee.

Under fiduciary-epistemic theory, assessment constitutes a moral covenant between the student and the institution. The university's authority to grade presupposes a duty of candour, impartiality, and individual justice — what Kahl (2025b) terms fiduciary openness. Students entrust assessors with the epistemic authority to evaluate their work in good faith, expecting that grades will correspond to personal understanding, effort, and intellectual growth. When group assessments distribute the outcome across individuals unevenly, that covenant is broken. The student's dependence on the institution's fairness is displaced onto peers whose contributions, ethics, and motivations are outside the student's control. In fiduciary language, this is a delegation of trust without protection — a transfer of risk that compromises the university's ethical legitimacy.

Kahl (2025p) in *Toward Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath* frames this precisely: the educator's first moral responsibility is to "do no epistemic harm." Collective grading, by blurring individual merit, performs exactly such harm. It replaces the fiduciary relationship between teacher and learner with a collective liability model reminiscent of corporate structures of risk distribution. The university no longer bears full responsibility for fair evaluation; rather, it externalises it to the group, under the assumption that peer accountability will suffice. Yet peer dynamics are fraught with asymmetries of competence, confidence, and communicative power. What results is not empowerment but *epistemic exposure* — a condition in which each student's intellectual fate becomes contingent upon the performance, goodwill, or negligence of others.

The epistemic consequences of this structure are profound. Students report feelings of dependency and forced solidarity: cooperation becomes compulsory rather than chosen. Dissent is suppressed not because disagreement is forbidden, but because it endangers the harmony upon which one's grade depends. This produces what may be called ethical muting — the strategic silencing of legitimate critique to preserve collective standing. The group becomes a microcosm of clientelism: loyalty is rewarded, honesty penalised. Kahl (2025a) in *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* explains this phenomenon as *rationalised unfairness*: students justify the inequity of outcomes as "part of teamwork," thereby restoring cognitive coherence at the expense of moral clarity. Compliance deepens; silence becomes professional.

The empirical findings of Nieminen and Ketonen (2024) corroborate this diagnosis. Their research on collaborative assessment shows that collective grading reduces epistemic agency, discourages originality, and fosters conformity to dominant voices within the group. Students begin to prioritise social cohesion over intellectual authenticity. The outcome is a form of moral conditioning: the institution teaches not collaboration but complicity. The group project thus becomes the pedagogical mirror of clientelism — shared liability without shared authority, dependence without autonomy.

From a fiduciary perspective, such arrangements are ethically indefensible. The educator's role is to evaluate each student's understanding and progress; by outsourcing that responsibility, the university violates the principle of epistemic justice. As Kahl (2025b) emphasises, fiduciary candour and fairness cannot be collectivised without moral loss. The fiduciary university must recognise that its authority to assess derives from the trust of its students, and that trust cannot be divided without being diminished.

At a systemic level, group-based assessments reflect the corporate logic of risk distribution that increasingly defines higher education governance. They normalise the transfer of institutional responsibility onto individuals under the guise of empowerment — the same logic that underpins performative feedback systems (§3.4) and optocratic branding. In this sense, collective assessment is not an isolated pedagogical choice but a micro-level expression of epistemic clientelism: dependency rewarded, autonomy penalised.

Normatively, the path forward is clear. Universities committed to epistemic justice must reclaim individual accountability as a fiduciary obligation. This does not preclude collaborative learning, but it requires that assessment remain personal, transparent, and fair. True teamwork develops through shared inquiry, not shared grading. To conflate the two is to misunderstand both pedagogy and ethics. Re-establishing the integrity of individual evaluation is thus not merely an administrative reform; it is an act of fiduciary restoration — the reaffirmation of the university's moral duty to each student as an autonomous knower.

4. The Manufacture of Consent: Optics and Participation

4.1 Feedback Architecture — Structured to Elicit Satisfaction, Not Truth

At the formal level, university feedback systems present themselves as instruments of transparency — an open channel for students to evaluate teaching quality and express their experiences. Module surveys, end-of-term evaluations, and online satisfaction forms are advertised as vehicles for "student voice" and "partnership in learning." Yet, on closer inspection, these tools are not designed to capture truth but to stabilise legitimacy. The feedback architecture of higher education, exemplified by the systems employed in the LLM programme, is

structured to elicit satisfaction rather than candour, agreement rather than critique. It performs epistemic management under the guise of democratic participation.

Kahl's *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (2025d) offers the interpretive key to this paradox. Institutions, he argues, seek not open dialogue but affirmative testimony: forms of speech that reaffirm their own authority. Feedback thus becomes a ritual of loyalty — a soft mechanism for manufacturing consent. By inviting students to "share their experiences" within carefully delimited formats, universities reproduce the clientelist structure of knowledge: conditional recognition in exchange for procedural compliance. Students are thanked for their honesty but are only truly heard when they speak in alignment with institutional expectations.

The structure of the feedback form itself encodes this asymmetry. Questions are written not to test *epistemic integrity* ("Did this module challenge you to think critically?") but *emotional comfort* ("I feel supported"; "The module met my expectations"). The epistemic is replaced by the affective: the truth-value of education is measured through sentiment, not understanding. The result is an evaluative discourse calibrated to reward harmony and penalise dissonance. As Kahl (2025f) observes in *Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?*, this shift reflects the transformation of education into a reputational economy — an enterprise that seeks approval as its moral proof. When feeling replaces knowing as the unit of evaluation, education ceases to be epistemic and becomes affective governance.

This design logic can be described as algorithmic affirmation. The digital form — with its fixed-choice scales, positive-wording bias, and limited comment fields — functions as a pre-filtering mechanism that converts subjective experiences into statistically manageable endorsement. Negative feedback is diluted through aggregation; outliers disappear in averages. Open-text responses, which might contain genuine insight or critique, are tokenised — coded, categorised, and summarised into digestible fragments that strip away their ethical urgency. Once translated into metrics, feedback ceases to be narrative evidence and becomes data noise. The process does not produce knowledge but data pacification: the transformation of lived experience into a semblance of institutional order.

This process constitutes a fiduciary breach. In fiduciary relationships, trust entails a duty of candour — a moral obligation to seek and disclose truth even when uncomfortable. When universities solicit feedback but design systems that preclude dissent, they violate that duty. The relationship between institution and student is no longer one of mutual truth-seeking but of emotional management. As Freire (1970) warned, pedagogy becomes "banking education" in another form: information deposited by students into systems that absorb but never reciprocate. Feedback becomes a monologue masquerading as dialogue.

The consequences are epistemic as well as moral. First, this architecture produces manufactured consensus: the appearance of collective satisfaction that validates institutional virtue. The institution can cite positive metrics as proof of quality while marginalising unquantifiable discontent. Second, it suppresses epistemic dissent through procedural participation. Students who express frustration may feel that they have "been heard," even when no structural change follows. In this way, feedback serves the same function as the public consultation in Chomsky and Herman's (1988) analysis of propaganda systems — a procedural mechanism that legitimises existing hierarchies by converting participation into consent.

Thus, the feedback form is not neutral. It is a moral instrument whose structure determines what can be known about the institution. By design, it protects the university's image from epistemic discomfort. This architecture of affirmation transforms fiduciary openness into *managerial reassurance*: the institution seeks not truth but peace. Chapter 4 continues by showing how this same logic of managed participation extends beyond the written survey to the performative — how the *theatre of accessibility*, embodied in events like the "How's it going?" sessions, converts the spectacle of listening into the manufacture of trust (§4.2 and §4.3).

4.2 "How's It Going?" Sessions — The Performative Choreography of Accessibility

The "*How's it going?*" sessions organised by the University of Reading serve as a revealing empirical instance of how institutional accessibility is choreographed. Framed as informal opportunities for students to "chat" with senior leadership — including the Pro-Vice-Chancellors for Education and Student Experience — these events outwardly exemplify openness, participation, and partnership. Yet their *form* and *staging* reveal a deeper logic: they are designed not to redistribute epistemic power but to *perform* its apparent redistribution. Accessibility here is not an act of accountability but an aesthetic of empathy, a managed appearance of responsiveness that sustains institutional legitimacy while leaving hierarchies intact.

As outlined in the University's announcement (see §1.1), the invitation's tone is informal and friendly, promising "doughnuts for the first 50 people" and encouraging students to "come and say hello." The communication constructs the university as *approachable parent* — benevolent, warm, and eager to listen. But this apparent informality conceals a profound asymmetry. The encounter is time-bounded (90 minutes in the Library Foyer), image-driven (photographs for marketing and social media posts), and mediated by communications staff who curate the event's optics. The vice-chancellors' presence is carefully framed as *gifted accessibility*: leadership descends into student space to signal care, not to undergo scrutiny. As such, the interaction is choreographed to reaffirm existing authority structures rather than to challenge or democratise them.

Kahl (2025m) in *Substitutive Visibility and Epistemic Monarchism in Academia* describes this phenomenon as the optocratic substitution of ethics by optics — the conversion of moral obligation into visual reassurance. In the optocratic university, leadership visibility is mistaken for institutional virtue: *to be seen listening becomes equivalent to listening itself*. These events enact what Kahl calls "substitutive visibility," where senior figures' physical presence is used to symbolically fulfil the duty of transparency without actually practising it. The visibility of leadership substitutes for the substance of accountability. Proximity becomes performance. Students experience the warmth of presence, not the weight of participation.

The asymmetry of speech and power in such encounters mirrors what Habermas (1981) identifies as the distortion of communicative action. Genuine dialogue, in his sense, requires equality of standing, mutual openness to critique, and a shared orientation toward truth. None of these conditions exist here. The event's format — informal, unrecorded, and non-binding — protects the leadership from epistemic vulnerability. Students may speak, but their speech has no procedural consequence; it does not enter the deliberative structure of governance. The conversation is therefore non-dialogical in the fiduciary sense: it generates sentiment, not accountability. The emotional energy of exchange substitutes for institutional reciprocity.

The symbolism of the doughnut — offered as a token of hospitality — literalises this exchange between attention and compliance. Hospitality becomes the moral alibi of asymmetry. In the language of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl 2025d), this is a transaction of loyalty: the institution grants proximity in exchange for politeness, transforming critique into gratitude. Students leave feeling acknowledged but not empowered. As Medina (2013) might put it, this is not *epistemic justice* but *epistemic pacification* — the management of dissent through affective inclusion.

The moral reading is clear: fiduciary dialogue has been replaced by ceremonial empathy. The university enacts care rather than performing it substantively. Listening becomes theatre; concern becomes choreography. The event's affective design — smiles, photographs, refreshments — sustains the illusion of partnership, but its moral structure remains one-directional: students are seen and heard, but not *believed with consequence*. What is celebrated as transparency is, in truth, a form of affective containment.

The implication is sobering. Accessibility in this configuration functions as affective management, not democratic participation. It reinforces trust without transparency, intimacy without influence. The university maintains epistemic authority precisely by simulating its abdication. The "How's it going?" session thus embodies the epistemic logic of the optocratic university: *to be visible is to be virtuous*, and to be approachable is to be absolved. What begins as an act of listening ends as an act of self-presentation — a fiduciary relation recast as public relations.

4.3 The Epistemology of Doughnuts — Consent through Hospitality

The "*How's it going?*" events at the University of Reading, with their cheerful invitations and promise of "doughnuts for the first 50 people," may appear trivial in form — yet they are symbolically dense. They illustrate how hospitality functions as a mode of epistemic governance, transforming critique into convivial participation. In this architecture of affect, refreshments and warmth are not neutral gestures of goodwill but instruments of emotional calibration. The convivial atmosphere reframes the act of feedback: speaking becomes a social occasion rather than an epistemic intervention. Dissent dissolves in friendliness. Critique becomes impolite in the presence of sugar and smiles.

Hospitality here operates as affective soft power — a moral technology of reassurance. The institution feeds instead of listens; generosity substitutes for vulnerability. As students accept food and cordiality, they also, implicitly, accept the relationship as framed by the host. The asymmetry between giver and guest remains intact, even intensified. Gratitude replaces scrutiny, and participation becomes *reciprocity*: the student feels obliged to respond kindly to kindness. This is the emotional transaction through which consent is manufactured — not through coercion, but through conviviality.

The sociologist Marcel Mauss (1925) captured this dynamic in his analysis of the gift economy. Every gift, he observed, carries a latent obligation: to receive is to accept the giver's moral world, and to reciprocate is to acknowledge their standing. In the university context, hospitality thus operates as an unspoken contract. The student who partakes in institutional generosity — the friendly chat, the coffee, the doughnut — implicitly enters the symbolic economy of goodwill. The act of participation itself becomes an acknowledgment of legitimacy. By accepting hospitality, one also accepts the framework within which hospitality is offered.

Kahl (2025f) in Epistemic *Violence or Simply Good Marketing?* traces this mechanism in the broader logic of epistemic marketing: institutions transform ethical obligations into affective gestures, turning *engagement* into reputational capital. Under this logic, the act of listening is displaced by the *appearance* of care, and moral seriousness gives way to charm. What was once fiduciary dialogue — grounded in trust, candour, and reciprocity — becomes an exchange of gestures. "Engagement" is no longer epistemic; it is aesthetic. The moral weight of truth is replaced by the emotional ease of hospitality. A feedback session becomes an event in *institutional brand experience*: warm, well-lit, and deliciously inconsequential.

The epistemic consequence of such hospitality is subtle but profound. It redefines participation as compliance. To show up, to smile, to chat lightly — these become tokens of loyalty, proof of partnership. The act of presence replaces the act of inquiry. As Medina (2013) argues in *The Epistemology of Resistance*, the recognition of voices without their integration into decision-making constitutes a form of epistemic injustice: inclusion without influence. Here, inclusion is achieved affectively — through the comfort of shared space — while power remains untouched. Hospitality becomes the lubricant of hierarchy.

In fiduciary terms, this is a distortion of moral duty. The university's role as trustee of knowledge requires candour, not confectionery; accountability, not affability. When the fiduciary promise of dialogue is trivialised

into an exchange of gestures, the ethical core of the university is hollowed out. Comfort displaces conscience. The institution reassures itself through warmth rather than truth.

The "epistemology of doughnuts" thus names more than a symbolic episode. It marks a structural inversion of moral priorities: *emotional appeasement replaces epistemic engagement*. The university learns to manage perception through affect, while students learn to translate critique into courtesy. This transformation prepares the ground for § 4.4 — the metamorphosis of communication into choreography — where hospitality and visibility converge to form the full performance of institutional virtue: the theatre of openness without the substance of candour.

4.4 From Communication to Choreography — Students as Audiences to Institutional Virtue

In principle, communication within the university should serve as the conduit of epistemic reciprocity — a dialogical process aimed at mutual understanding and the co-creation of knowledge. In practice, however, this communicative ideal has undergone a profound metamorphosis. What now predominates is choreography: the orchestration of appearances, emotions, and narratives to produce *affective consensus* rather than rational agreement. The aim is no longer to reach truth through dialogue but to synchronise perception through spectacle. Students are not so much participants in institutional life as audiences to its performance of virtue.

This distinction between communication and choreography captures the heart of what Kahl (2025m) calls *optocratic drift* — the moral slide from fiduciary candour to aesthetic reassurance. Communication, in Habermas's (1981) sense, is an intersubjective act grounded in reason and mutual openness. It requires parity of standing and the willingness to risk misunderstanding in pursuit of truth. Choreography, by contrast, is one-directional and non-reciprocal. It coordinates affect, not argument. Its purpose is not to persuade through reason but to evoke assent through rhythm, colour, and atmosphere. Choreography substitutes mutual understanding with mutual display.

In the contemporary university, this transformation manifests in the proliferation of events, campaigns, and visual narratives that perform inclusion, transparency, and moral virtue. Institutional social-media feeds, websites, and newsletters overflow with images of smiling students, multicoloured banners, and leadership visibility — including, in the case of the University of Reading, the recurrent use of the *climate stripes* motif as a visual shorthand for progressive identity. The repetition of such imagery produces what Kahl (2025m) terms *substitutive visibility*: the displacement of ethical substance by symbolic saturation. The more the institution shows itself to care, the less it must demonstrate that care through action. Visibility becomes a moral end in itself.

This process aligns with what Kahl (2025f) diagnoses in *Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?* — the conversion of virtue into reputation. Reputation functions as moral currency within what he calls the *epistemic market*: a competitive ecosystem where institutions accrue symbolic capital by appearing ethical, inclusive, and student-centred. The ethical act is no longer defined by content or consequence but by communicative resonance. The university *speaks about listening* rather than *listening itself*. Its sincerity is outsourced to imagery — to visual design, inclusive slogans, and carefully curated testimonials that narrate empathy. In this economy, students' role shifts from interlocutors to *spectators of institutional empathy*.

This dynamic is further illuminated by Debord's (1967) concept of the society of the spectacle, in which representation supplants reality. The spectacle is not merely a collection of images but "a social relation mediated by images." The modern university exemplifies this: every act of communication — from policy

announcement to community event — becomes an image of virtue. The moral function of governance is displaced by its theatrical representation. The institution's identity is maintained not through what it does but through how it appears to feel about what it does.

Empirically, this optocratic aesthetic is visible in the university's recurring communication patterns:

- Photographs of senior leaders engaging with students or posing in academic spaces, creating the impression of proximity.
- Statements foregrounding "partnership," "voice," and "belonging," often unaccompanied by mechanisms for policy influence.
- Visual branding — such as the use of the *global warming stripes design* — that associates the institution with planetary ethics while remaining detached from the epistemic work of environmental research.

These gestures are not without sincerity, but they operate within a system that rewards visibility more than veracity. They express moral aspiration through design, not dialogue.

The interpretive insight is thus structural rather than accusatory: the university's communicative machinery has been re-engineered to generate affective trust rather than epistemic accountability. It *feels honest* without *being open*. In this regime, leadership presence, vibrant branding, and constant positivity serve as prophylactics against critique — emotional inoculations that prevent discomfort from surfacing as inquiry. The institution maintains legitimacy not through truth-telling but through *aesthetic saturation*.

The result is that students occupy the position of audience members within a moral theatre. They witness the institution performing its virtue — through ceremonies, campaigns, and curated acts of accessibility — rather than co-creating truth as epistemic partners. The fiduciary relationship between university and student, once premised on candour and trust, is redefined as an *affective transaction*: reassurance traded for recognition. The classroom, the foyer, and the newsfeed merge into a single stage on which openness is choreographed, photographed, and archived. Communication has become choreography — the art of appearing to listen.

This marks the culmination of the university's optocratic transformation: when sincerity becomes spectacle and dialogue becomes display, epistemic trust is no longer earned through truth but *performed through image*. Chapter 4's final section (§4.5) will interpret this transformation ethically, asking what remains of the fiduciary promise of dialogue once the pursuit of understanding has been replaced by the performance of virtue.

4.5 Ethical Reading — The Fiduciary Promise of Dialogue Degraded into Spectacle

Dialogue, in its authentic sense, is the moral foundation of higher education. It is not merely a pedagogical method but a fiduciary act — an exchange of truth grounded in mutual trust, vulnerability, and candour. In *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl 2025g) and *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (Kahl 2025e), dialogue is conceived as the ethical heartbeat of the university: a reciprocal process between trustee and beneficiary, where authority is exercised not to dominate but to *safeguard the conditions for knowing*. The university, as fiduciary of the epistemic commons, bears the duty to speak and listen truthfully, and to ensure that students — as moral participants in knowledge — can do the same without fear or futility.

Under the contemporary regime of optocracy, however, this fiduciary reciprocity collapses. Dialogue is no longer a practice of truth but a currency of legitimacy — a symbolic exchange designed to preserve

institutional stability. As explored throughout this chapter, the mechanisms that once promised openness — feedback surveys, staged encounters, and performative hospitality — have been converted into rituals of appearance. The fiduciary promise of dialogue has been replaced by what might be called spectacular accountability: a governance aesthetic in which visibility substitutes for virtue and participation for partnership. The act of listening is rehearsed, photographed, and broadcast, while the substance of response remains unaltered. What was once conversation becomes choreography.

This degradation marks a profound moral shift. In the fiduciary model, the university's legitimacy depends on epistemic candour — the willingness to confront uncomfortable truths and to expose itself to critique. In the optocratic model, legitimacy depends on emotional reassurance — the ability to appear inclusive, responsive, and benevolent. The transition from candour to comfort signals the loss of fiduciary conscience: the university no longer seeks to know what is true, but to feel — and be seen to feel — that it cares. The ethics of truth-telling is replaced by the aesthetics of listening.

The consequences are cumulative and self-perpetuating. Institutional trust decays, not because of overt malice but because the rituals of participation lose moral credibility. Students, recognising the symbolic nature of engagement, begin to internalise its logic: expression becomes performance, feedback becomes routine, and speech becomes calibrated to please. Over time, *expression is permitted only as affirmation*. The institution's moral ecosystem adjusts accordingly: dissent is reframed as hostility, and critique as cynicism. In this environment, the epistemic courage that universities should cultivate — the capacity to speak against comfort — is quietly extinguished.

Medina (2013) warns that epistemic justice cannot survive without cognitive friction: institutions must make room for disagreement, dissonance, and discomfort. The university that eliminates friction in the name of harmony commits epistemic negligence — a failure of care disguised as empathy. Habermas (1981) likewise insists that communicative rationality requires vulnerability: all participants must be open to the possibility of being wrong. Optocracy refuses this risk. It privileges appearance over correction and substitutes managed harmony for mutual understanding. In doing so, it betrays the fiduciary covenant that underpins its social trust.

Restoring that covenant demands a return to what Kahl (2025g) calls fiduciary dialogue — communication oriented toward truth rather than affirmation. This requires *dismantling the choreography of participation* that currently defines academic culture: the procedural forms of feedback, inclusion, and engagement that simulate transparency without delivering it. The measure of institutional legitimacy must shift from visibility to *moral candour*: from how the university appears to care to how it actually listens and acts. Fiduciary dialogue, unlike its optocratic imitation, entails vulnerability — the courage to disclose weakness, to admit error, and to be held accountable by those whom one serves.

In ethical terms, the degradation of dialogue into spectacle is not a mere aesthetic failure; it is a fiduciary breach — a failure of care, loyalty, and candour toward the community of learners and the broader public. The path to restoration lies not in new branding campaigns or expanded feedback systems but in the moral reorientation of communication itself: from choreography to candour, from spectacle to sincerity.

This reorientation points directly to the themes of Chapter 5, which examines how the performative ethics of optocracy extends beyond communication into the deeper structures of governance, reputation management, and academic freedom. There, the question shifts from *how the university speaks* to *how it governs truth itself* — and whether the fiduciary university can still exist within the spectacle it has become.

4.6 The Pedagogy of Fear: Safety Campaigns and the Erosion of Fiduciary Trust

> *'When the gaze itself becomes suspect, knowledge ceases to be mutual; it becomes a one-way mirror.'*

Across the modern campus, the visual landscape increasingly speaks in the idiom of caution. Posters, display screens, and digital notices repeat the same moral refrain: "*Have you witnessed unacceptable behaviour? Report it.*" "*Is someone staring at you intently? It could be a crime.*" The vocabulary is not academic but forensic. Its tone, though intended to protect, conveys an institutional anthropology of mistrust — a world imagined as perpetually on the verge of transgression. The result is what may be called safety theatre: the performance of care through optical ritual rather than relational practice.

The visual rhetoric of these campaigns operates through affect rather than argument. Their moral power lies in repetition and saturation. By colonising the everyday gaze — the noticeboard, the corridor wall, the library café screen — they convert the shared environment of study into a low-grade warning system. Within this aesthetic, safety is not experienced as mutual responsibility but as vigilance against one another. The institution performs its virtue through visibility: it shows that it cares. Yet this spectacle of care displaces the harder fiduciary labour of being caring — of cultivating trust, discretion, and proportional response. The message is less an invitation to dialogue than an instruction to surveil.

The epistemic consequences are subtle but corrosive. When every act of looking or mis-phrased remark can be framed as potential misconduct, the field of interpersonal interpretation contracts. Ordinary curiosity becomes suspect; uncertainty becomes risk. The moral climate shifts from fellowship to anticipatory accusation — a condition that *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (§4.3) describes as **gaslighting by environment**: a steady pressure that makes individuals doubt the legitimacy of their own perception. The campus thus internalises the logic of disciplinary power; social reciprocity is replaced by self-monitoring. Students and staff learn that safety depends on not being misunderstood, and therefore on not being seen at all.

From the standpoint of fiduciary ethics, this constitutes a breach of both **candour** and **proportionality**. As argued in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl 2025b) and *Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties* (Kahl 2025r), fiduciary duty demands not maximal disclosure or vigilance but balanced judgment — the capacity to communicate truthfully without inducing unnecessary fear. By aestheticising protection, the university substitutes optical reassurance for relational integrity. The posters do not simply inform; they instruct the conscience through imagery. The moral surface of virtue becomes a prophylactic screen — what may be termed **optocratic prophylaxis** — through which the institution inoculates itself against accusations of negligence while eroding the very trust it seeks to preserve.

Within the framework of *Epistemic Psychology*, sustained exposure to such cues diminishes **Dissonance Tolerance (DT)**. Individuals habituated to moral alarms become less able to endure ambiguity or contradiction. The mind learns that safety lies in conformity — in avoiding friction, gaze, or dialogue. This is the same adaptive pattern identified in the *Kahl Model of Epistemic Dissonance* (KMED-R): recognition (ϱ) gives way to suppression (σ) when fiduciary containment (φ) is absent. What begins as pastoral concern culminates in epistemic conditioning, a culture of anticipatory compliance where the suppression of curiosity masquerades as civility.

The moral remedy is not to abandon safety but to *re-found it fiduciary*. Genuine safety arises from openness, not opacity; from dialogue, not decree. A community that teaches trust through conversation rather than signage protects more effectively because it educates perception instead of policing it. The moral right to look, to speak, and to be recognised without fear is the precondition of any university worthy of its epistemic mandate.

When the gaze itself becomes criminalised, learning ceases to be a shared act of seeing — it becomes an exercise in avoidance. A pedagogy of fear cannot coexist with a pedagogy of truth.

5. Optocratic Drift and Visual Authority

5.1 Optocratic Drift — Rule of Optics over Substance

In *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl 2025g), the term optocratic drift describes the process by which universities gradually replace *truth* with *appearance* as the foundation of legitimacy. Optocracy names a regime of governance in which authority is maintained through visibility, branding, and affective reassurance rather than through epistemic integrity or fiduciary candour. Where *epistemocracy* grounds its credibility in the pursuit and stewardship of knowledge, *optocracy* sustains its credibility through carefully managed imagery — a system of appearances that feels moral without being accountable. In this drift from knowledge to image, universities do not abandon ethics outright; rather, they aestheticise it, converting moral substance into communicative display.

The contrast between epistemocracy and optocracy is thus one of moral economy. In the former, truth functions as institutional currency — a scarce and protected value that confers legitimacy when pursued transparently and courageously. In the latter, image becomes the new currency — cheap, fluid, and infinitely reproducible. Reputation replaces reason; appearance becomes evidence. As Kahl (2025f) observes in *Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?*, higher education has absorbed the logic of consumer branding: moral virtue is signified through campaigns, design, and affective messaging rather than embodied in governance and pedagogy. The result is a university that still speaks the language of ethics but does so in the grammar of advertising.

The mechanism sustaining this transformation is systemic. Managerial incentives reward what can be shown — metrics, rankings, diversity imagery, and promotional slogans — over what can be known. Effort is measured not by epistemic rigour but by communicative success: the number of engagements, the visibility of campaigns, the tone of feedback data. In this visual economy, research excellence is translated into citation scores, inclusion into hashtags, and academic freedom into branding collateral. Knowledge becomes a commodity of display. The institution's mission shifts from advancing understanding to managing perception, ensuring that every internal act can be rendered externally reassuring.

Philosophically, this transformation exemplifies what Habermas (1981) warned against as the colonisation of the lifeworld — the subordination of communicative reason to strategic communication. Dialogue, once an end in itself, becomes instrumental: speech is valued only for its capacity to maintain stability and public approval. The university's communicative structures, originally intended to facilitate intellectual discourse, are repurposed as tools of *legitimacy management*. The communicative act — in emails, events, and reports — ceases to be truth-oriented and becomes image-oriented. The ethical demand for justification is replaced by the pragmatic demand for acceptance.

Debord's (1967) *Society of the Spectacle* offers an equally apt lens: "The spectacle is not a collection of images," he writes, "but a social relation mediated by images." The modern university has become precisely such a spectacle — a relational system in which knowledge, ethics, and governance are mediated through visual affirmation. The university's internal life is continually refracted through the optics of its own publicity. To

exist epistemically, it must be seen affectively. Institutional virtue is measured not by how truth is pursued but by how convincingly that pursuit can be displayed. Every communication becomes a mirror in which the institution contemplates its own moral reflection.

The consequences of optocratic drift are epistemic and fiduciary. Fiduciary openness — the moral readiness to expose internal reasoning and failures to public view — declines as risk aversion and reputational calculation dominate decision-making. The institution ceases to *speak truth* and instead *manages truth-effects*: producing controlled versions of honesty designed for consumption. Governance shifts from the pursuit of knowledge to the governance of perception. As Kahl (2025g) notes, this transition marks the inversion of the fiduciary order: the trustee of knowledge becomes its curator, safeguarding not truth itself but its representation.

The normative claim that follows is stark. Optocratic drift constitutes a form of epistemic corruption — the moral decay of the university's fiduciary function. A university ruled by optics forfeits its claim to intellectual authority because it no longer distinguishes between truth and image, between candour and performance. When visibility becomes the substitute for virtue, the institution ceases to act as a fiduciary of knowledge and instead becomes its advertiser. In such a regime, epistemic authority is not earned through inquiry but bestowed through marketing. What dies in this transformation is not knowledge itself, but the moral courage required to pursue it beyond the comfort of the visible.

5.2 Substitutive Visibility — The Vice-Chancellor's Omnipresence as Semiotic Monarchy

The recurrent appearance of university leadership in institutional communications — particularly the Vice-Chancellor's image — constitutes a defining visual grammar of contemporary higher education. On official websites, internal newsletters, and LinkedIn posts, the university's public voice is frequently embodied by the figure of its leader: smiling at events, meeting students, attending ceremonies, or issuing messages of reassurance. The cumulative effect is one of omnipresence — an aesthetic in which the institution itself is rendered legible through the face of its executive. Leadership becomes visibility; visibility becomes virtue. The Vice-Chancellor's photograph serves as both the signature and the substance of the university's identity.

This phenomenon exemplifies what Kahl (2025m) identifies as substitutive visibility — the replacement of epistemic plurality with a centralised iconography of virtue. The image of leadership operates as a *symbolic proxy* for the collective moral and intellectual life of the institution. Instead of demonstrating care, the university shows the *appearance of caring* through a figurehead whose visibility reassures all stakeholders — students, staff, and the public — that moral stewardship is in place. The individual image substitutes for institutional conscience. Leadership becomes performative, not fiduciary: its function is to *be seen* rather than *to listen, respond, and learn*.

At its deepest level, this is a form of epistemic monarchism — the symbolic concentration of legitimacy and moral authorship in a single figurehead. The modern university, nominally democratic and collegial, reverts to an ancient representational logic in which one person embodies the many. The Vice-Chancellor's image does not merely represent authority; it *confers* it. The photograph, distributed across digital platforms, functions as a royal seal — an emblem that authenticates the institution's every utterance. A policy statement, event summary, or diversity campaign, when accompanied by the Vice-Chancellor's presence, gains an aura of official virtue. The leader's visibility acts as the university's moral signature.

In semiotic terms, this repetition of imagery performs a stabilising role. It transforms the messy, contested processes of institutional governance into a coherent, reassuring spectacle. The leader's face guarantees unity,

as though the complexities of academic life could be harmonised through personality. Yet this coherence is achieved not through transparency but through symbolic substitution. The leader's presence substitutes for the institution's epistemic substance, condensing diverse voices, disciplines, and perspectives into a single curated icon of moral order. What was once the polyphony of an academic community becomes the monologue of image. The university's collective intellect is represented by its aesthetic of leadership.

The ethical implications are serious. Authority becomes personal rather than fiduciary; trust attaches to the individual image rather than to institutional conduct. In fiduciary ethics, legitimacy derives from distributed responsibility and procedural candour — from the integrity of systems, not the charisma of figures. Under epistemic monarchism, legitimacy becomes performative: the leader's presence is treated as proof of care, and their absence as moral vacuum. The institution ceases to be a moral community and becomes a stage for moral representation. As Kahl (2025g) argues in *Epistemocracy in Higher Education*, the fiduciary university must decentralise authority and visibility to preserve epistemic plurality. When visibility is monopolised, trust collapses into dependency — the very structure of clientelism transposed onto the public image of governance.

Historically, this dynamic represents the continuation of pre-modern sovereignty in digital form. The *monarchic imaginary* has been revived under managerialism: where kings once embodied divine order, today's Vice-Chancellors embody ethical order. Their portraits circulate not in oil and gilt but in pixels and press releases. Debord's (1967) *Society of the Spectacle* anticipated this transformation: the leader, he wrote, becomes the spectacle's "chief exponent and the subject of the cult of visibility." Modern managerial authority thus retains the structure of monarchy while adopting the techniques of public relations. Sovereignty survives as *style*.

The normative insight that follows is clear. Fiduciary institutions must decentralise visibility to restore epistemic plurality. Leadership should be legible through the openness of its governance, not the frequency of its appearances. The moral authority of a university lies not in its capacity to project unity through imagery but in its willingness to tolerate multiplicity and critique. True fiduciary candour cannot be photographed. It lives in distributed trust, in collective voice, and in the quiet courage of institutions that would rather disclose their imperfections than curate their virtue. Until visibility is shared, authority remains monarchic — and the university, for all its modern language, remains a kingdom of optics.

The omnipresent leadership portrait and the omnipresent warning notice are opposite sides of the same semiotic coin. Both are devices of optocratic reassurance—one personifies authority, the other personifies danger. Each transfers moral agency away from dialogue and toward spectacle, reinforcing a politics of looking without seeing.

5.3 Inherited Virtue and the "Global-Warming Stripes"

Among the visual elements most closely associated with the University of Reading's public identity is the *global-warming stripes* motif — the sequence of vertical blue-to-red bands representing the steady rise in global temperature over the past century. Displayed across the university's official website, communications, and even its architectural spaces, the image functions as a moral signature: an emblem of environmental conscience and intellectual leadership in climate science. The motif is clear, powerful, and emotionally evocative. Yet its moral and semiotic function extends beyond environmental advocacy. It illustrates how universities convert *past achievement into present virtue* — an act of symbolic inheritance that signals integrity without requiring its renewal.

The *warming stripes* design originated from a senior scholar within the university, whose work has since become globally recognised as a form of data-art activism. The university's subsequent adoption of this motif as part

of its visual identity, however, represents a shift in moral ownership. What began as an individual act of research communication has been recontextualised as an institutional brand. This transposition matters because it transforms the symbol from a representation of scientific vigilance into a corporate sacrament: an artefact of virtue that requires no continuous epistemic labour to sustain. The university's claim to climate leadership thus rests not on ongoing innovation or participatory action but on the inherited aura of a past scholarly contribution. The symbol marks achievement already accomplished, not truth still being pursued.

Kahl (2025f) describes this dynamic in *Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?* as the marketing of virtue — the process by which institutions convert moral or intellectual goods into reputational capital. The *warming stripes* exemplify this conversion: they operate as a shorthand for institutional progressiveness, signalling environmental awareness while insulating the institution from the responsibility to question its own sustainability practices or epistemic priorities. The moral energy of the symbol, once grounded in scientific candour, is repurposed as an instrument of assurance. The gesture of display becomes a substitute for the act of reflection.

This is a clear instance of what Kahl (2025m) terms substitutive symbolism — the replacement of ethical substance with moral imagery. The emblem's function is not to provoke further inquiry but to represent that inquiry has already occurred. It reassures internal and external audiences alike that the institution is ethically active, even when the symbol itself no longer corresponds to collective action or self-scrutiny. The icon becomes a moral placeholder, maintaining continuity of virtue without continuity of conscience. The logic mirrors that of hereditary power: virtue becomes something possessed rather than practised.

Debord's (1967) *Society of the Spectacle* offers the wider cultural framework. In the society of images, he argues, "what appears is good; what is good appears." The *warming stripes* function within this spectacle of virtue: their visibility operates as moral proof. The institution's ethical standing is verified not through audit or dialogue but through repetition of the image itself. The symbol absolves the university of its epistemic duties by presenting care as already fulfilled. The result is what might be called inherited virtue — the borrowing of moral capital from the past to shield the present from accountability. The symbol becomes the relic of a once-radical gesture, now sanctified and static, used to declare progressiveness while avoiding epistemic self-examination.

This dynamic poses a broader moral diagnosis. The *warming stripes* no longer function as a call to action but as a token of achieved enlightenment. Their omnipresence across the university's identity transforms them into a visual sacrament of progressivism: to display them is to declare oneself virtuous. Yet, in doing so, the institution risks confusing remembrance with renewal — mistaking the preservation of a symbol for the continuation of its meaning. In fiduciary terms, this is an abdication of moral stewardship: the university has inherited a trust but not the duty of its reinvestment.

Thus, the *global-warming stripes* encapsulate the aesthetics of inherited virtue — where historical accomplishment becomes a shield against contemporary introspection. The emblem no longer invites conversation about truth; it enacts closure through the comfort of consensus. In the next section (§5.4), this mechanism expands beyond climate virtue to encompass the broader theatre of performative inclusion — the use of moral imagery and marketing to transform ethical commitments into spectacles of empathy.

5.4 Performative Inclusion — Marketing as Moral Theatre

Across higher education, inclusion and diversity have become the dominant idioms of institutional virtue. University websites, prospectuses, and social-media campaigns are saturated with images of multicultural

friendship, smiling students, and slogans of belonging. In principle, such imagery affirms moral progress — a commitment to pluralism and equality. In practice, however, it frequently functions as moral theatre: the visual performance of inclusion without its structural enactment. The institution becomes the stage upon which care is displayed, empathy is choreographed, and justice is *represented* rather than *realised*.

Kahl (2025f) in *Epistemic Violence or Simply Good Marketing?* describes this process as the commodification of inclusion. Diversity is reframed as a marketable asset — a source of reputational capital that reassures external audiences of the institution's enlightenment. The *visibility of difference* replaces the *redistribution of voice*. The faces and stories of under-represented groups are displayed across banners and feeds, yet the epistemic hierarchies that silence them remain intact. Inclusion is thus rendered safe: it demands no revision of curricula, no re-examination of disciplinary authority, and no redistribution of epistemic agency. It becomes a symbolic good — consumable, shareable, and emotionally gratifying.

This emotional gratification is essential to the spectacle. Inclusion campaigns offer affective satisfaction to privileged observers — a form of moral reassurance. The act of seeing diversity represented allows those in power to feel compassionate, modern, and benevolent. As Kahl notes, the affective spectacle displaces the political labour of transformation. The institution performs empathy so that it need not practise it. *Empathy becomes spectacle*, and the moral responsibility to include becomes a gesture of recognition — fleeting, aesthetic, and non-reciprocal.

Debord's (1967) theory of the society of the spectacle helps situate this phenomenon. In the spectacle, politics is neutralised by its conversion into imagery; social contradictions are resolved not through reform but through representation. The inclusive university becomes the mirror of this logic: it stages equality as image while leaving the underlying asymmetries untouched. Diversity becomes the décor of authority. What once named a struggle for justice becomes the university's public-relations vernacular — *a language of harmony that conceals structural dissonance*.

Paulo Freire's intellectual heir, Antonia Darder (2015), provides the necessary corrective. In her *Pedagogy of Love*, she insists that authentic inclusion requires vulnerability — a willingness by those in power to be unsettled, to relinquish epistemic privilege, and to enter genuine dialogue. Love, for Darder, is not sentimentality but risk: the courage to transform oneself in relation to the other. Under performative inclusion, this vulnerability is absent. The institution *shows love* but does not *practise care*; it gestures toward transformation while preserving its authority. The affect of inclusion masks the absence of solidarity.

The ethical consequence of this substitution is grave. Inclusion without transformation constitutes fiduciary betrayal — a breach of loyalty to those whose trust the university claims to serve. Fiduciary ethics demands the protection and amplification of vulnerable voices, yet performative inclusion instrumentalises them for aesthetic and reputational gain. It transforms the epistemically marginalised into symbolic assets. Medina (2013) warns that epistemic justice cannot survive within such conditions of display: the very act of representation, when unaccompanied by redistribution, becomes a mechanism of silencing.

The path forward lies in replacing performative inclusion with fiduciary inclusion — inclusion as an ethical relationship rather than a campaign. Fiduciary inclusion requires:

1. **Transparency of process** — clarity about how decisions, appointments, and curricula are shaped by diverse voices.

2. **Equity of voice** — structures ensuring that marginalised knowers participate in agenda-setting, not merely in imagery.

3. **Accountability of care** — public evidence that listening has produced material change.

Under such a model, inclusion ceases to be a decorative virtue and becomes a fiduciary duty. It reclaims empathy as ethical praxis rather than as spectacle — not a performance of love, but its proof. Only through this transformation can universities re-align moral theatre with moral truth and restore the credibility of their claim to serve all who seek to know.

5.5 Cultural Optics of Virtue — Spectacle, Love, and the Loss of Candour

The contemporary university communicates its moral standing through a cultural optics of virtue — a semiotic language of care, empathy, and righteousness that seeks to make ethics visible. This is not merely an aesthetic choice but a moral strategy: institutions increasingly express their legitimacy through the *appearance* of compassion. Campaigns on inclusion, sustainability, and wellbeing have become moral displays through which universities project their conscience to the public. Yet these displays, however sincere in intent, participate in what Debord (1967) called the *society of the spectacle*: a social order in which relations between people are mediated by images. Within this order, virtue must be seen to exist; its visibility replaces its practice.

Debord's insight provides the first pole of this chapter's triad. Under the spectacle, moral and political acts are converted into representations; the image of care substitutes for the act of caring. The university, operating within this optic economy, becomes both the author and the consumer of its own virtue. The more it shows empathy, the less it must exercise it. Public morality becomes self-referential: an institution appears good because it appears to appear good. Spectacle offers an emotional shorthand — reassurance without reflection, unity without dissonance, progress without process.

Against this logic stands Darder's (2015) *Pedagogy of Love*, which insists that authentic love is inherently risky. True pedagogical love, she argues, demands vulnerability — the willingness of the teacher or institution to be unsettled by the other. It is not sentimental but transformative; it entails moral exposure. To love epistemically is to engage in dialogue that may challenge one's own authority. The spectacle, by contrast, refuses this risk. It presents love as harmony rather than as encounter. Its purpose is not to transform but to soothe — to stabilise affect rather than deepen understanding. The result is an *aesthetic empathy* that feels sincere while safeguarding the institution from critique.

Kahl (2025g) and (2025e) bring this ethical tension into sharper relief through the concept of fiduciary ethics as epistemic love — a love grounded in responsibility for truth. In the fiduciary university, care manifests as candour: the courage to disclose error, to admit ignorance, to risk discomfort for the sake of integrity. Truth becomes an act of care, not an instrument of prestige. This form of love requires openness and reciprocity, a willingness to let others' knowledge reshape one's own. It transforms affect into accountability. Optocracy, however, *weaponises* affect: it deploys emotion to manage perception rather than to deepen relation. Where fiduciary ethics transforms feeling into truth, optocracy transforms truth into feeling.

The moral distinction between the two regimes is thus defined by their relationship to vulnerability. Genuine pedagogical love risks it; spectacle avoids it. In the fiduciary frame, the university's authority depends on its capacity to be questioned; in the optocratic frame, authority depends on its ability to appear unassailable. The *performance of virtue* conceals a deeper institutional fear of exposure. The result is love without candour, care without accountability. The university that cannot bear to be seen as imperfect forfeits the possibility of being good.

The normative claim that follows is straightforward but radical. Universities must move from *aesthetic empathy* to *fiduciary empathy* — from showing compassion to *practising truth as care*. Aesthetic empathy reassures; fiduciary empathy reforms. The former operates through visibility, the latter through vulnerability. Fiduciary empathy does not aim to be admired but to be believed; it is the moral condition in which love becomes an epistemic duty. Such empathy requires institutions to treat knowledge not as a product to display but as a trust to steward, sustained through honesty and shared accountability.

This synthesis completes the ethical arc of Chapter 5. The cultural optics of virtue—the spectacle of empathy and righteousness—marks the culmination of optocratic drift, the moment when appearance fully substitutes for candour. Yet it also identifies the path forward: the recovery of epistemic love as fiduciary responsibility. In Chapter 6, this insight becomes constructive: a proposal for fiduciary–epistemic reconstruction—a vision of universities that restore trust not by amplifying their virtue, but by rediscovering their courage to speak the truth.

6. The Ecosystem of Capture: Rankings, Think Tanks, and Ideology

6.1 Structural Environment — Rankings, Think Tanks, and Epistemic Gatekeepers

In the moral economy of higher education, legitimacy is no longer produced solely within the university. It is mediated through an intricate web of intermediaries — ranking agencies, policy institutes, and consultancy–media hybrids — that define what counts as excellence, quality, and trust. Among these, *Times Higher Education* (THE), *QS Rankings*, and the *Higher Education Policy Institute* (HEPI) exert disproportionate influence. Their reports, metrics, and commentaries have become the epistemic infrastructure of higher education, shaping both *how* universities perceive themselves and *how* they are perceived by governments, funders, and the public. The structural environment they form is not neutral: it is a system of epistemic gatekeeping, one that converts knowledge into currency and evaluation into hierarchy.

Kahl (2025l) in *Report on Times Higher Education* documents how such organisations have assumed quasi-fiduciary authority over universities without the corresponding duties of transparency or care. Ranking bodies claim to serve the public interest — to help students choose, policymakers decide, and institutions improve — but their operations are governed by commercial logic. Their methodologies are proprietary; their metrics are aligned with market expectations, not epistemic fairness. In doing so, they control the categories through which credibility is seen. The language of quality — 'world class', 'impact', 'global competitiveness' — becomes a self-reinforcing vocabulary of power. Universities, dependent on their approval, internalise these categories and reorganise internal behaviour to align with them. The epistemic horizon narrows to what can be measured and marketed.

This dynamic exemplifies the structural logic of *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl 2025d). Power is delegated upward: universities surrender epistemic autonomy to external validators. Recognition flows downward: rankings confer prestige, which universities in turn use as currency in the marketplace of reputation. The relationship is symbiotic but asymmetrical. The intermediary acts as patron, the university as supplicant. The clientelist logic reproduces itself through dependence — those who seek to be recognised must conform to the norms of recognition. In this way, external gatekeepers act simultaneously as clients of political ideology

(adopting growth-oriented and neoliberal vocabularies to maintain governmental relevance) and as patrons of institutional self-representation (granting symbolic capital to those who comply).

The *Higher Education Policy Institute* (HEPI) exemplifies the subtler dimension of this environment: the ideological mediation of discourse. Framed as an independent think tank, HEPI occupies a pivotal position in policy conversations, yet its analyses frequently echo the ideological assumptions of the prevailing government and sector leadership. As Kahl (2025j) notes in *How Institutional Corruption Captured UK Higher Education Journalism*, think tanks like HEPI do not merely report on policy; they *produce* it discursively by shaping what can be publicly imagined as reform. They determine the epistemic parameters of the debate: what is "realistic," "strategic," or "innovative." Their authority stems not from research per se but from proximity — from occupying the interstitial space between politics, academia, and media.

In this ecosystem, universities adapt behaviour to remain visible within externally defined frames. Strategic plans mirror ranking criteria; marketing teams study league-table algorithms; faculty incentives are linked to citation counts and internationalisation metrics. The pursuit of truth is reframed as the pursuit of competitiveness. The public's trust in universities is thus mediated by organisations that are themselves unaccountable to the public. As Medina (2013) reminds us, epistemic justice demands *reflexive awareness of power asymmetries* in knowledge production. Yet ranking agencies and policy intermediaries operate without such reflexivity, positioning themselves as neutral arbiters while enacting systemic bias toward market logic.

The normative implication is clear. These intermediaries wield *fiduciary power* — the power to shape collective belief and allocate epistemic credibility — but they do so *without fiduciary duty*. Their opacity constitutes structural negligence of the epistemic commons. They hold in trust the symbols of academic legitimacy but are bound by no obligation of candour, accountability, or care. In fiduciary terms, they are trustees without conscience, managing the public's confidence as a commodity rather than as a moral charge. Until these external arbiters are subjected to the same standards of openness and virtue expected of universities themselves, the entire architecture of higher education remains compromised: a house of mirrors in which knowledge reflects not truth, but power.

6.2 Systemic Opacity — Institutional Journalism and Reproduced Clientelism

In the public imagination, journalism serves as democracy's watchdog — an independent counterweight to institutional power. Yet within higher education, the watchdog often shares the same kennel as the institution it claims to observe. As shown in *How Institutional Corruption Captured UK Higher Education Journalism* (Kahl 2025j), the leading media outlets covering the sector — *Times Higher Education* (THE News), *Times Education Supplement*, *Wonkhe*, and related policy magazines — have become entangled in the very system they report on. Editors and journalists maintain close commercial and advisory ties with universities, ranking bodies, and think tanks. These relationships compromise the epistemic independence of reporting and transform journalism from a site of scrutiny into a mechanism of reinforcement.

The mechanism of this capture operates through subtle but systemic channels. Advertising contracts and sponsored content blur the line between reportage and marketing. Articles about university "excellence," "innovation," or "student experience" often appear alongside — or within — paid institutional features, the visual boundaries between the two nearly indistinguishable. As Kahl (2025j) notes, *Times Higher Education* occupies a dual role: simultaneously a news organisation and a commercial rankings provider. Its editorial independence is formally declared but materially undermined by the structural interdependence of journalism and revenue. Similarly, *Wonkhe*, positioned as a policy forum, depends on consultancy partnerships and

institutional sponsorships that shape what may be safely said. The result is a culture of strategic discretion — not outright falsehood but the avoidance of dissonance.

A further layer of epistemic distortion arises from the sourcing of expertise. Journalists, seeking authoritative comment, often rely on academic experts who are themselves embedded within the institutions under discussion. Such experts cannot easily challenge the system that sustains their careers; their contributions, however sincere, reinforce existing narratives. In this way, epistemic clientelism (Kahl 2025d) reproduces itself through media practice: the same dynamics of conditional recognition that define academia — reward for loyalty, silence for dissent — reappear in the journalistic sphere. Power flows upward (to editors, advertisers, and sponsors), while validation flows downward (through favourable coverage and professional exposure). Both parties become complicit in maintaining a shared illusion of candour.

Kahl's *Finding the Smoking Gun in UK Higher Education* (2025h) traces how these dynamics shape accountability narratives. When misconduct, regulatory failure, or ethical breaches occur, reporting rarely pursues structural causality. Instead, it isolates incidents, frames them as exceptions, and restores moral equilibrium through managerial response. The story concludes with the system re-legitimised: "lessons learned," "new oversight mechanisms," "renewed commitment to transparency." This pattern mirrors corporate crisis communication — accountability as closure, not disclosure. Journalism thus protects reputational stability rather than exposing the deeper fiduciary failures that compromise institutional ethics. In this sense, media coverage does not simply reflect clientelism; it becomes its primary tool of reproduction.

The interpretive synthesis is unambiguous. Higher-education journalism now functions as a co-dependent epistemic ecosystem, validating official speech while marginalising independent voices. Whistle-blowers, adjunct academics, or external critics seldom receive the same visibility as institutional representatives. Their testimony is discounted as grievance rather than evidence. The consequence is a journalism of reassurance — a performative transparency that maintains the illusion of oversight. As in fiduciary breaches elsewhere (Frankel 2011), power without accountability corrodes trust. Here, the corrosion is epistemic: truth itself becomes hostage to the structures that profit from its containment.

The normative reflection follows naturally. Transparency, in this system, is *simulated through coverage* rather than enacted through inquiry. The mere act of reporting is treated as proof of oversight, regardless of substance. Fiduciary candour — the ethical obligation to disclose fully, question fearlessly, and separate knowledge from interest — is absent. What remains is optical integrity: the appearance of openness without its moral reality. As Kahl (2025j) concludes, "the university and its journalists share a mirror; they gaze into each other's reflection and call it truth." Until journalism in higher education recovers its fiduciary vocation — loyalty to knowledge rather than to access — the public sphere will continue to mistake communication for accountability and publicity for truth.

6.3 Metrics and Performativity — Market Logic Supplanting Fiduciary Rationality

6.4 Policy Capture — Ideological Filtering of Higher-Education Discourse

The shift from fiduciary governance to market governance in higher education can be traced most clearly through the rise of metrics — the numerical abstractions that now mediate nearly every dimension of academic

life. As Kahl (2025i) demonstrates in *Higher Education Governance in Crisis*, the modern university is governed not through ethical principles of trust and responsibility, but through quantified visibility. In this environment, the pursuit of excellence gives way to the performance of excellence. Metrics, designed ostensibly to promote transparency and accountability, have become the very instruments by which fiduciary rationality — the moral orientation toward truth as a public good — is replaced by market rationality, in which survival depends on competitive scoring.

The logic of this transformation was prefigured by Barnett's (2000) account of supercomplexity — the condition in which universities face overlapping and often contradictory demands from government, industry, and society. In such conditions, the pursuit of truth must compete with the demand for visibility, efficiency, and performance. Metrics promise to reconcile this chaos by rendering the intangible measurable: quality becomes a number; trust becomes a percentage; virtue becomes a rating. But in doing so, the measure replaces the meaning. The metric becomes the message.

The result is what Kahl (2025i) terms performative governance — institutions act not to improve, but to appear improved. Teaching Excellence Frameworks (TEF), Research Excellence Frameworks (REF), and Graduate Outcomes dashboards quantify success in ways that reward conformity to measurement over innovation in practice. The TEF measures student satisfaction rather than cognitive development; the REF measures citation density rather than epistemic contribution. In both cases, trust is quantified: the moral relationship between institution and society is converted into a numerical performance designed for public reassurance. The deeper moral work of education — cultivating judgement, creativity, and courage — is excluded from what can be audited.

The mechanism of this shift is disciplinary in Foucault's (1975) sense. External surveillance need not be imposed by the state or the market; it is internalised by the institution and its members. Universities regulate themselves according to metrics that originated outside them. What once served as benchmarks for reflection now operate as instruments of self-surveillance. Faculty members teach to student surveys, adjusting pedagogy to optimise feedback scores. Researchers tailor projects to maximise citation potential or align with fundable keywords. Administrators allocate resources not to fields of greatest epistemic promise but to those that improve league-table positioning. In short, universities act as markets — their moral energy redirected toward competition for visibility.

Under these conditions, accountability becomes auditability. To be accountable no longer means to act with integrity or explain one's reasoning; it means to produce data that can be verified, ranked, and reported. The fiduciary ideal of candour — disclosing truth even when inconvenient — gives way to a technocratic ideal of compliance — reporting what can be safely shown. In this sense, audit culture is not merely a bureaucratic nuisance but an epistemic regime: it transforms knowledge itself into an object of exchange. Knowledge ceases to be a trust held on behalf of the public and becomes instead a currency of competition, traded through citation, ranking, and publicity.

This transformation has profound moral consequences. Fiduciary rationality depends on an ethics of care — the willingness to prioritise truth, even at institutional cost. Market rationality depends on instrumental optimisation — the manipulation of appearances to sustain competitive advantage. The two logics are incompatible. As Medina (2013) argues, epistemic justice requires reflexivity and openness to critique, but metrics penalise both: self-criticism lowers satisfaction scores; intellectual risk threatens grant success. The moral ecosystem of the university thus inverts itself: what was once virtuous becomes irrational; what was once corruptible becomes efficient.

In the end, the rule of metrics enacts the final stage of epistemic clientelism. The university no longer serves knowledge as its principal; it serves *the market of perception*. Fiduciary ethics — truth as a public good entrusted to care — is displaced by quantified virtue, a regime of managed visibility in which the good is what can be measured, and the true is what can be sold. The university, once steward of the epistemic commons, becomes its broker.

6.5 Normative Conclusion — Universities Mirror Their Ecosystem

The preceding analysis demonstrates that universities are not autonomous moral entities but reflections of the wider systems that sustain them. Their conduct, values, and even vocabulary are shaped by the incentives and discourses of an external knowledge economy governed by rankings, think tanks, and policy intermediaries. As such, the moral failures observed within universities — their opacity, performativity, and erosion of candour — are not simply institutional shortcomings. They are ecological phenomena. To reform the university, one must first reform the ecosystem that defines its legitimacy. Otherwise, every act of internal correction will be reabsorbed by the structural logic of visibility, competition, and compliance that surrounds it.

This recognition demands a return to the fiduciary principle, articulated in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl 2025b): fiduciary duty is not confined to individual institutions but extends across networks of interdependence. The duty of honesty, candour, and loyalty applies wherever trust and epistemic power converge. Just as a company director owes duties to shareholders, so too do policy institutes, ranking agencies, and journalistic intermediaries owe duties to the epistemic public — the global community of learners and citizens who rely on them to represent knowledge faithfully. When those intermediaries act in secrecy, trade in prestige, or distort discourse for ideological or commercial gain, they commit systemic fiduciary breach. The failure, therefore, is not confined to universities' governance structures; it lies within the moral architecture of the knowledge ecosystem itself.

The moral claim is clear: the true breach lies not merely in universities' conduct but in a system that rewards opacity and punishes candour. When honesty becomes a reputational risk, integrity becomes maladaptive. The current environment incentivises institutional silence, managerial spin, and market-oriented self-promotion because those are the traits rewarded by rankings, policy discourse, and media narratives. Within such a system, even sincere attempts at transparency can appear reckless, and truth-telling becomes a competitive disadvantage. The ecosystem does not simply mirror institutional behaviour — it *manufactures* it. Hence, fiduciary reform must begin at the systemic level.

A reform agenda grounded in fiduciary ethics would include four interlinked commitments:

1. **Fiduciary codes for ranking bodies and think tanks** — These entities should be held to standards of candour, independence, and accountability equivalent to those applied to universities. Their methodologies, funding sources, and evaluative criteria must be publicly disclosed and ethically reviewed.

2. **Mandatory disclosure of funding and conflicts of interest** — Transparency must extend across the entire knowledge economy. Policy influence, consultancy payments, and sponsorships that affect research, journalism, or ranking outcomes must be declared as conditions of participation in the epistemic commons.

3. **Public-interest metrics grounded in epistemic justice** — Replace competitive rankings with measures that evaluate openness, diversity of thought, and contribution to the public good. Such metrics would reward intellectual risk, critical dialogue, and social responsibility, aligning institutional success with epistemic virtue rather than market advantage.

4. **Ethical review of higher-education journalism** — Media outlets covering the sector should adopt fiduciary charters ensuring editorial independence, transparency in sponsorship, and equitable representation of dissenting voices. Journalism should once again function as fiduciary scrutiny, not promotional choreography.

Philosophically, this agenda aligns with Medina's (2013) conception of epistemic justice as systemic virtue — a moral condition not limited to individuals but sustained through social structures. For Medina, just knowing requires *just conditions of knowing*: networks that reward sincerity, humility, and responsiveness rather than domination or display. Applying this insight to higher education means treating epistemic justice as an ecological responsibility. Every actor within the knowledge economy — from universities to think tanks, from ranking agencies to journalists — participates in a shared fiduciary order whose purpose is to preserve the integrity of truth itself.

The conclusion is both sobering and hopeful. Universities cannot be reformed in isolation because their dysfunctions are symptoms of a captured environment. But if the ecosystem of knowledge can be reoriented toward fiduciary openness — if candour becomes a public good rather than a liability — then the university may yet recover its vocation as steward of the epistemic commons. This insight prepares the ground for the final synthesis in Chapter 7, which will propose a fiduciary reconstruction of the academic ecosystem as the ethical and practical antidote to epistemic clientelism and optocratic drift.

7. Toward a Pedagogy of Fiduciary Dialogue

7.1 Definition — Education as Reciprocal Epistemic Trusteeship

Education, at its moral core, is a fiduciary relation. It is not a transaction in which knowledge is transferred from one party to another, but a relationship of trust in which both teacher and student act as trustees of the epistemic commons — stewards of a shared domain of truth and understanding. Within this relation, knowledge is not owned but *entrusted*: a moral good that must be cultivated, protected, and passed on with integrity. Every act of teaching and learning thus carries fiduciary weight. It involves the temporary custody of another person's epistemic well-being — their capacity to inquire, to judge, and to know.

This concept of reciprocal epistemic trusteeship reframes the classroom as a site of shared stewardship. Each participant alternates between giver and receiver, trustee and beneficiary. The teacher holds temporary responsibility for guiding the student's epistemic development; the student, in turn, bears responsibility for upholding honesty, diligence, and intellectual respect toward both the teacher and the collective pursuit of truth. The relationship is therefore symmetrical in obligation, though asymmetrical in experience. Authority is not hierarchical but relationally distributed — grounded in care, candour, and trust. Such reciprocity transforms pedagogy into an ethical covenant rather than a contractual service.

Kahl (2025p), in *Toward Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath*, describes teaching as a moral vocation governed by duties analogous to those found in fiduciary law: candour, loyalty, and care. These duties are not optional virtues but structural conditions of trust. The educator, like the fiduciary, must act in good faith, disclose truthfully, and prioritise the epistemic welfare of the learner above institutional or personal convenience. The duty of candour obliges the teacher to expose complexity and uncertainty rather than conceal it behind authority. The duty of loyalty requires fidelity to truth over ideology. And the duty of care entails creating the conditions for intellectual risk — the very environment in which learning becomes transformative rather than performative.

This fiduciary conception stands in sharp contrast to conventional pedagogical models that treat education as the transfer of information. In the transactional paradigm, knowledge is a commodity, and the student is a consumer. Trust is procedural, not moral; it is mediated through policies and metrics rather than through personal accountability. The result is an impoverished form of learning — one that values efficiency and satisfaction over epistemic growth. By contrast, fiduciary pedagogy redefines knowledge as entrustment: the handing over of a fragment of the epistemic commons to another person with the expectation that they will tend to it conscientiously and return it enriched.

Under this model, teaching excellence is measured not by student satisfaction surveys or performance metrics, but by the *integrity of epistemic care* exercised between participants. The quality of education becomes inseparable from the quality of trust: whether each party honours the vulnerability of the other, whether candour is sustained under pressure, and whether learning preserves rather than exploits dependence. As Frankel (2011) reminds us in her seminal work on fiduciary law, trust is both a moral virtue and a structural mechanism for cooperation. When applied to education, it establishes an architecture of moral symmetry: the teacher's authority and the student's autonomy are co-created through mutual accountability.

This reciprocity also echoes Freire's (1970) conception of dialogue as co-creation. For Freire, genuine education begins when both teacher and learner recognise themselves as co-subjects in the act of knowing. Fiduciary pedagogy extends this recognition into the moral domain: dialogue becomes not merely pedagogical method but ethical practice — a covenant of honesty sustained by trust. The teacher's power lies not in possession of knowledge but in the willingness to share it vulnerably; the student's empowerment lies not in defiance of authority but in faithful engagement with truth.

In this sense, education as reciprocal epistemic trusteeship represents the moral re-foundation of academia itself. It dissolves the false dichotomy between teaching and learning, replacing it with a fiduciary ecology of shared responsibility. The university becomes once more what it was meant to be: a community of trustees, bound by care for the epistemic commons and united by the courage to tell the truth together.

7.2 Principles — Candour, Trust, and Justice

The pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue rests on three interlocking moral duties — candour, trust, and justice. Each corresponds to one of the core fiduciary–epistemic principles that bind educators, students, and institutions into a shared moral order. Together, they constitute what may be called the *fiduciary triad* — the ethical foundation upon which epistemic credibility rests. Without candour, there is no truth; without trust, no learning; without justice, no legitimacy.

1. Candour over Comfort

As articulated in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl 2025b), candour is the highest expression of fiduciary virtue. It is the courage to tell the truth even when that truth unsettles the comfortable equilibrium of institutional life. In pedagogy, candour is the refusal to shield learners from complexity or controversy for the sake of harmony. It requires teachers to acknowledge uncertainty, reveal bias, and speak frankly about power. To be candid is not to be confrontational but to be faithful — faithful to the epistemic contract that binds teacher and learner in shared pursuit of understanding.

In a fiduciary classroom, candour replaces politeness as the primary virtue. Where conventional education prizes composure and consensus, fiduciary pedagogy prizes intellectual honesty. It holds that moral growth often begins in discomfort: the moment when inherited assumptions are questioned and new insight emerges. Hence, *safe spaces* must never become *silent spaces*. Safety without candour breeds complacency; candour without care breeds alienation. The educator's task is to maintain the balance — to speak truth with compassion, and to invite challenge without humiliation. Candour, properly practised, transforms authority into transparency and instruction into dialogue.

2. Trust as Epistemic Infrastructure

Trust is not merely an affective state; it is the infrastructure of epistemic life. As in fiduciary law, where trusteeship depends on loyalty and reliability, so too in education the relationship between teacher and learner depends on mutual faith in each other's moral integrity. Without trust, learning becomes mimicry — a performance of comprehension driven by fear of judgement rather than curiosity.

In fiduciary pedagogy, trust is created through intellectual safety, not emotional comfort. It enables the learner to take epistemic risks — to doubt, to question, to err. The teacher's role as trustee is to create conditions where dissent is not punished but valued, where critique is an act of respect rather than rebellion. Trust is therefore not blind acceptance but earned vulnerability. It transforms dependency into collaboration. When the student trusts the teacher to act in good faith, and the teacher trusts the student to seek truth rather than validation, both become participants in a shared moral project — the co-creation of understanding.

This conception resonates with Zagzebski's (1996) *virtue epistemology*, where intellectual virtues such as honesty, humility, and courage sustain the moral ecology of knowing. Trust allows those virtues to flourish institutionally. It replaces surveillance and performance with fidelity and reciprocity — the unseen scaffolding of all genuine learning.

3. Justice as Active Duty

In *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (Kahl 2025e), justice is redefined as equity of voice, not equality of position. It is the moral obligation to ensure that every participant in the educational process — regardless of rank, origin, or perspective — is heard, recognised, and credited fairly. Justice, in this sense, is not a static condition but an *active duty*: an ongoing effort to identify epistemic exclusions and correct them through deliberate inclusion.

In pedagogical practice, this means dismantling the subtle hierarchies that privilege some voices over others — the loud over the quiet, the native over the foreign, the conventional over the radical. Evaluation, recognition, and authorship must be transparent and contestable. Institutional procedures should include mechanisms of redress for epistemic harm, ensuring that silence is not mistaken for equality. As Medina (2013) argues, epistemic justice is systemic: it must be built into the norms and structures that govern who may speak and

who will be believed. A university that teaches justice abstractly while practising exclusion epistemically commits the gravest fiduciary breach of all — betrayal of the very conditions of knowledge.

Integration: The Fiduciary Triad

When combined, these three principles form a moral system rather than a set of virtues.

- **Candour** sustains truth.
- **Trust** sustains relationship.
- **Justice** sustains legitimacy.

Together they generate epistemic credibility — the collective assurance that knowledge within an institution is pursued ethically and shared faithfully. The triad embodies what Kahl (2025b, 2025e) describes as the *fiduciary conscience of academia*: a continuous dialogue between courage, care, and fairness. In practice, this means teaching that speaks the truth, institutions that protect the vulnerable, and learning communities that honour difference not as diversity branding but as the lifeblood of truth-seeking. Only where candour, trust, and justice co-exist can education fulfil its fiduciary vocation — to serve knowledge, and through it, humanity.

7.3 Contrast — From Collective Liability to Co-Accountability

The ethics of fiduciary pedagogy demand that responsibility in education be both transparent and just. Yet within contemporary higher education, group-based assessment often produces the opposite: a collective form of liability that obscures individual effort and silences dissent. As discussed in § 3.5, such assessments are justified under the rhetoric of collaboration and employability, but in practice they replace accountability with ambiguity. They distribute grades evenly while effort, integrity, and intellectual labour remain uneven. The outcome is not teamwork but dependency — a pedagogy of compromise rather than trust.

From a fiduciary perspective, this design represents a moral failure. Fiduciary ethics require clarity of duty and loyalty to fairness; collective grading confuses both. When responsibility is shared without verification, the honest are penalised for others' negligence, and the dissenting are silenced for fear of retaliation. As Kahl (2025b) argues in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*, such arrangements constitute a breach of fiduciary candour: institutions delegate their own duty of fair evaluation to peer dynamics they cannot ethically supervise. The result is epistemic opacity disguised as cooperation.

The solution lies in a fiduciary inversion — a shift from *shared punishment* to *shared responsibility*. In this model, the group remains a community of practice, but accountability becomes dialogical rather than distributive. Each participant is individually responsible for two things: (1) the honesty of their own contribution, and (2) the candour of their engagement with others. Trust is no longer presumed; it is practised through transparency. The group becomes a site of ethical exchange, where mutual scrutiny replaces silent complicity. In effect, delegation gives way to dialogue.

Operationally, this principle of co-accountability can be realised through several mechanisms.

- **Transparent peer evaluation**: Members assess one another's contributions using disclosed rubrics, with qualitative feedback that captures both effort and integrity. Candour becomes the criterion of fairness.

- **Rotating leadership**: Responsibility for coordination alternates among members, ensuring that authority is temporary and shared — mirroring fiduciary trusteeship.

- **Reflective logs of epistemic labour**: Each student documents their reasoning, challenges, and contributions throughout the process, producing a visible record of cognitive effort and ethical engagement.

These mechanisms embody the fiduciary duties outlined in *Toward Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath* (Kahl 2025p): candour, loyalty, and care. They transform assessment from a zero-sum exercise into an act of moral co-authorship. By institutionalising dialogue, they teach not only collaboration but ethical relation — the recognition that trust and responsibility must coexist. As Nieminen & Ketonen (2024) observe in their framework for epistemic agency, genuine collaboration emerges only when individuals perceive both autonomy and mutual accountability. Co-accountability provides precisely that balance.

The outcome is pedagogical and moral. Dependency gives way to reciprocity. The student learns that belonging to a group does not absolve one of duty but multiplies it. Assessment becomes a rehearsal of civic life — an education in the ethics of shared truth-seeking. In this inversion, fiduciary pedagogy reclaims collaboration from the logic of convenience and restores it to the logic of care. Co-accountability thus becomes the ethical heart of fiduciary dialogue: the practice of being responsible *with* others, not merely *for* them.

7.4 Practical Design — Mechanisms of Fiduciary Dialogue

If fiduciary pedagogy is to move beyond aspiration, it must be designed into the very architecture of educational practice. Ethical principles—candour, trust, and justice—require institutional mechanisms to sustain them. Just as fiduciary law transforms moral expectations into enforceable duties, universities must translate epistemic care into procedures that render truth-telling and fairness structural rather than optional. The following four mechanisms operationalise this transformation. Together, they aim to institutionalise candour—making transparency procedural, not discretionary—and to cultivate what Kahl (2025p) calls the "fiduciary conscience" of the university.

1. Transparent Grading Protocols

Transparency is the cornerstone of fiduciary governance. In pedagogy, this translates into clear, published grading protocols that make evaluative reasoning visible to all participants. Assessment rubrics, moderation procedures, and decision rationales should be openly shared before and after marking. Students must understand not only how they will be assessed but why particular standards are applied. In fiduciary terms, this represents full disclosure to beneficiaries—the same duty that binds trustees to their principals.

Such openness transforms grading from a hierarchical act of judgement into a relational act of trust. When evaluation is transparent, feedback becomes dialogue, and the mystery surrounding academic judgement gives way to mutual accountability. In this setting, fairness ceases to depend on the benevolence of individual teachers and becomes a structural guarantee embedded in institutional design. As Kahl (2025e) argues in *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia*, transparency is not procedural nicety but moral necessity—it affirms the student's epistemic dignity and protects the university's legitimacy as a fiduciary steward of knowledge.

2. Dialogic Supervision

Supervision, under fiduciary pedagogy, must shift from unilateral oversight to reciprocal audit—a two-way process of reflection and accountability. Both tutor and student participate in the evaluation of progress, submitting periodic reflection statements that record their understanding, challenges, and evolving commitments to truth. The supervisory encounter thus becomes a living record of epistemic care, rather than a bureaucratic checkpoint.

This model echoes Freire's (1970) *dialogical method*, in which education becomes co-authored through conversation and critical reflection. The supervisor is no longer the custodian of correctness but the facilitator of self-scrutiny, modelling the fiduciary virtue of candour. The student, in turn, learns that intellectual autonomy entails moral accountability—to oneself, to one's interlocutor, and to the epistemic community. The dialogic supervision process thus transforms learning into a *shared audit of truthfulness*, ensuring that authority and autonomy remain in ethical equilibrium.

3. Epistemic Ombuds Office

Trust cannot exist without credible avenues for redress. Fiduciary pedagogy therefore requires an Epistemic Ombuds Office—an independent, confidential body empowered to mediate disputes concerning knowledge, evaluation, or supervisory conduct. Its role would mirror that of fiduciary oversight in corporate or legal settings: to ensure fairness, prevent retaliation, and uphold procedural integrity.

The Ombuds would act as a *guardian of epistemic justice* (Kahl 2025e), protecting students and staff from institutional bias or coercion while fostering an environment where dissent is safe and dialogue protected. Such an office formalises the principle that care must be accountable; that universities, as trustees of knowledge, owe their members not only moral support but legal-style protections for epistemic integrity. It marks the transition from informal virtue to codified duty—the institutional embodiment of fiduciary candour.

4. Feedback as Reciprocal Contract

Under fiduciary dialogue, feedback ceases to be a one-way appraisal and becomes a reciprocal contract. When universities solicit student feedback—whether through surveys, focus groups, or informal communication—they must treat it as part of a governance relationship, not a consumer transaction. Every act of feedback creates a fiduciary obligation: to respond, reflect, and record how input has shaped policy or pedagogy.

This reciprocal model aligns with the principle of epistemic co-governance advocated by Kahl (2025p). Students are not passive respondents but co-trustees in the moral project of the university. Their observations are forms of institutional testimony that require acknowledgment and traceable action. Staff, in turn, must document how that testimony informs reform, creating a closed loop of accountability that prevents the illusion of participation without consequence. Through this mechanism, feedback becomes not the end of dialogue but its continuation.

Goal and Integration

Taken together, these mechanisms embody the structural ethics of fiduciary dialogue. They transform the abstract virtues of candour, trust, and justice into institutional practices that sustain them. Transparency ensures clarity; supervision ensures reciprocity; the Ombuds ensures protection; feedback ensures responsiveness. Each is a circuit of accountability designed to prevent epistemic negligence and cultivate what Kahl (2025p) calls "the living conscience of learning."

In this design, candour is no longer a matter of personality but of procedure. The system itself becomes ethical —its routines grounded in openness, its authority constrained by trust. Only when transparency is institutionalised and dialogue proceduralised can the university genuinely claim to serve knowledge as a fiduciary good, and education as an act of shared moral stewardship.

7.5 Philosophical Synthesis — From Dependence to Mutuality

Epistemic Clientelism Theory (Kahl 2025d) began as a diagnostic model of epistemic power: a framework revealing how dependency structures the production and exchange of knowledge. It demonstrated that, in academic and institutional contexts alike, recognition is often conditional — granted not for truth but for loyalty. Under clientelism, epistemic relationships mirror political patronage: the weaker party seeks validation, while the stronger controls access to credibility. Dependency, in this sense, is not incidental but structural — the very medium through which power reproduces itself. The clientelist arrangement sustains epistemic order at the cost of freedom, binding knowledge to obedience.

In this chapter's culmination, fiduciary pedagogy reclaims and reorients that structure. Rather than attempting to abolish dependency — an impossibility within any human relationship of learning — it converts dependency into mutual recognition. The asymmetry between teacher and student, or between mentor and learner, becomes not a site of domination but of responsibility. Dependency, once a vector of control, is transformed into a field of care. In this inversion, the fiduciary relation absorbs and redeems the clientelist one: it recognises vulnerability as the condition of education but redirects it toward trust instead of subordination.

The moral mechanics of this transformation rest on the inversion of control into care. In clientelist systems, power sustains itself by managing recognition — withholding approval as a means of maintaining dependence. In fiduciary systems, by contrast, power sustains trust by disclosing it — giving recognition as an act of empowerment. This is what Kahl (2025b) describes in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* as the essence of fiduciary candour: authority is ethical only when it risks transparency. The fiduciary educator, therefore, does not conceal uncertainty behind expertise but models the courage to know vulnerably. Dependency is preserved, but its moral valence is reversed — it becomes the soil from which autonomy grows.

Within this ethical architecture, the teacher's and student's virtues form a complementary dyad. The teacher's epistemic virtue lies in enabling autonomy: guiding without dominating, disclosing without overwhelming, trusting the learner's capacity for discernment. The student's virtue lies in exercising critical candour: questioning without cynicism, engaging authority without submission, accepting care without surrendering judgment. As Zagzebski (1996) suggests in her *Virtue of the Mind*, moral and intellectual virtues are inseparable; knowledge requires both humility and courage, both dependence and independence. Fiduciary pedagogy operationalises this insight through practice: each participant sustains the other's integrity by exercising their own.

The result is a self-correcting relationship — an epistemic ecology in which truth is maintained through mutual guardianship rather than unilateral control. The teacher protects the student from ignorance, and the student protects the teacher from dogmatism. Each acts as the other's fiduciary conscience. This dynamic stands as the ethical antithesis of optocracy, where visibility replaces trust and hierarchy replaces dialogue. In fiduciary mutuality, authority becomes dialogical, and recognition becomes unconditional on conformity. Knowledge ceases to be a possession distributed by rank and becomes a *shared covenant of care*.

Thus, what began in *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* as the study of epistemic pathology culminates here as normative ethics — the moral cure to its own diagnosis. The transformation from dependence to mutuality

completes the philosophical arc of fiduciary pedagogy: a movement from knowledge as currency of power to knowledge as act of faith. Education, in this light, is no longer the management of intellects but the cultivation of conscience — the practice of knowing together, responsibly, and in trust.

7.6 Comparative Pedagogy — Dialogical Traditions and Epistemic Agency

The pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue does not emerge in isolation; it stands within a broad lineage of dialogical, relational, and moral approaches to education that view learning as a shared ethical act rather than a unilateral transaction. Its novelty lies in formalising what earlier traditions implied — that trust itself is a duty and that knowledge, to remain free, must be cared for reciprocally. The fiduciary frame thus unites philosophical traditions that have long treated education as a moral conversation: Freire's liberation pedagogy, Nieminen and Ketonen's psychology of epistemic agency, and non-Western frameworks of relational virtue such as *xin* and *Ubuntu*. Together, these lineages affirm that the act of knowing is never solitary — it is an exercise in responsibility to others.

Freire: Dialogue as Co-Creation of Knowledge

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) established the modern foundation for dialogical education. For Freire, oppression is epistemic before it is political: it manifests as monologue, the imposition of knowledge by those in power upon those rendered voiceless. Liberation, therefore, requires dialogue — the mutual naming of the world by teacher and learner. Through conversation, both become *co-subjects* in the process of knowing; neither can own the truth alone.

Fiduciary pedagogy extends this insight by introducing an ethical formalism to dialogue. Whereas Freire's model emphasised the humanistic necessity of dialogue, the fiduciary model establishes it as a duty of care. Dialogue is no longer only a method of liberation but a moral obligation of stewardship. The teacher owes candour and openness; the student owes sincerity and engagement. Trust becomes codified as a normative condition of education — a covenant rather than a preference. In this sense, fiduciary dialogue completes Freire's moral project by giving it institutional architecture: a system in which the ethics of co-creation are written into the very design of academic life.

Nieminen & Ketonen: Epistemic Agency and the Conditions of Trust

In contemporary psychology of learning, Nieminen and Ketonen (2024) describe epistemic agency as the learner's sense of being able to contribute meaningfully to the production of knowledge. Their empirical research identifies two necessary conditions: perceived autonomy and supportive relations. Students must feel free to explore intellectually, yet safe in the knowledge that their contributions will be respected.

Fiduciary pedagogy operationalises precisely this balance. The fiduciary educator cultivates autonomy not through abandonment but through care; freedom and structure coexist within a moral contract of mutual accountability. Students are encouraged to exercise critical candour while trusting that such candour will not incur punishment. As Kahl (2025d) notes in *Epistemic Clientelism Theory*, the transformation from dependency to mutuality occurs only when trust displaces fear as the organising principle of knowledge exchange. Fiduciary dialogue thus provides the ethical infrastructure that Nieminen and Ketonen describe psychologically — turning epistemic agency from aspiration into practice.

Cross-Cultural Resonances: Xin and Ubuntu

Beyond Western pedagogical traditions, fiduciary dialogue finds deep resonance in Confucian and African philosophical ethics. In Confucianism, the virtue of *xin* (信) — often translated as *trustworthiness* or *fidelity* — denotes not mere honesty but the moral reliability that binds relationships into harmony. The teacher's role is not authoritarian but exemplary: authority arises from being worthy of trust. This aligns precisely with the fiduciary ideal of candour and consistency as the basis of moral legitimacy.

Similarly, the African philosophy of Ubuntu articulates an ontology of interdependence: "*I am because we are.*" Knowledge here is inherently communal care — an act of mutual recognition within the human family. Learning is valuable not because it individualises achievement but because it deepens belonging and responsibility. The fiduciary model of education echoes this ethos: truth is sustained through reciprocity, and the self realises itself through ethical relation. Where the neoliberal university isolates learners as competitors, Ubuntu restores them as collaborators in a shared moral enterprise.

Outcome: Toward a Global Fiduciary Pedagogy

By integrating these diverse traditions — Freire's liberatory dialogue, Nieminen and Ketonen's relational agency, *xin*'s trustworthiness, and Ubuntu's communal care — fiduciary pedagogy establishes a globally resonant moral grammar for post-market academia. It transforms dialogue from methodology into governance, from emotion into ethic. The result is a coherent pedagogical model that unites East and West, psychology and philosophy, modernity and tradition under a single principle: that education is the mutual exercise of trust in pursuit of truth.

As Medina (2013) argues, epistemic justice cannot exist without *epistemic solidarity* — the shared responsibility to sustain just conditions for knowing. Fiduciary dialogue makes this solidarity tangible. It proposes that universities become what they have always promised to be: communities of conscience in which knowledge is not consumed but *cared for*, not possessed but *entrusted*. In this convergence of traditions, the pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue offers the moral architecture for a truly plural, truthful, and humane university.

8. Conclusion: Feedback by Other Means

8.1 Return to Premise — The Essay as Fiduciary Feedback

This essay closes the loop it began. The University's repeated invitations for feedback — whether through module surveys, end-of-term questionnaires, or the staged "How's it going?" sessions (§ 1.1) — were framed as gestures of partnership, opportunities for students to help shape their learning environment. Yet, as this work has shown, such mechanisms often function less as genuine dialogue than as ritual performances of accountability. Their form suggests openness; their design constrains it. In response, the present essay offers what might be called feedback by other means — an act of fiduciary reflection that fulfils, more faithfully than any survey could, the University's stated desire to hear how things are "going."

This is, therefore, not a grievance but a fiduciary response: a conscious exercise of epistemic responsibility within a relationship of trust. To speak critically here is to act as a trustee, not an adversary. As Kahl (2025p) argues in *Toward Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath*, participation in academic life entails a moral duty of candour: one must disclose the truth as one perceives it, especially when silence would allow institutional self-

deception to persist. Feedback, then, is not an act of compliance with administrative procedure but a moral covenant between student and institution — a shared duty to protect the integrity of the learning environment. The essay thus assumes the form of *stewardship*: a contribution to the epistemic commons made in good faith and with sincere care.

In doing so, it performs the function that ordinary feedback mechanisms simulate but rarely achieve. The survey quantifies sentiment; this essay articulates conscience. It translates individual experience into structured ethical reflection, exposing not personal grievance but systemic patterns of epistemic risk. Where the feedback form reduces thought to checkbox, the essay restores dialogue to its proper form — speech grounded in truth and oriented toward understanding. In Freire's (1970) sense, this is education as liberation: the act of naming the world one inhabits, not for condemnation but for transformation.

The tone of this feedback, accordingly, is not confrontational but fiduciary — balanced, responsible, and sincere. It recognises that critique, when offered honestly, is a form of care. It speaks not to wound but to heal, not to discredit but to rebuild. For a university that claims partnership with its students, such dialogue is not a threat but the fulfilment of its own ethical promise. In this light, the essay stands as both method and message: a lived demonstration of what feedback could be if it were reimagined as mutual stewardship — truth spoken in trust, by one trustee of knowledge to another.

8.2 Reasserting Duty — The University as Fiduciary of Truth and Plurality

If the first duty of the university is to teach, its higher duty is to guard the conditions under which truth can be taught at all. As argued in *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl 2025g), the modern university was not founded as a corporation but as a trust — a moral and intellectual institution holding knowledge in *fiduciary custody for society*. Its authority does not derive from market share, prestige, or visibility but from an implicit social covenant: that it will act as trustee of truth, steward of intellectual plurality, and guarantor of the epistemic commons. When universities forget this role, they cease to be public institutions and become merely credentialing enterprises — powerful, perhaps, but morally hollow.

Kahl's *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025b) extends this idea into a legal-ethical framework: fiduciaries are bound by candour, loyalty, and care. Applied to universities, these translate into duties of truthfulness, transparency, and protection of epistemic diversity. Candour demands that institutions disclose error rather than conceal it; loyalty requires that they privilege the pursuit of knowledge over the preservation of image; care insists on sustaining the intellectual ecosystem — its dissenters, minorities, and experimenters — without whom progress is impossible. The university's legitimacy, therefore, is ethical before it is administrative: it rests on its fidelity to truth, not its efficiency in governance.

Plurality, under this view, is not a matter of inclusivity policy or demographic representation but a fiduciary necessity. The diversity of voices and disciplines within the university is the moral equivalent of diversified investment in a trust: it protects the epistemic commons against monopoly and stagnation. As Medina (2013) notes, epistemic justice depends on *epistemic friction* — the presence of multiple, sometimes conflicting perspectives that keep the pursuit of knowledge honest. A fiduciary university cultivates this plurality not as a branding exercise but as a moral safeguard: difference is its mechanism of truth-testing. When hierarchy, managerialism, or fear of controversy narrow the range of permissible thought, the university breaches its fiduciary duty of openness.

The civic parallel is exact. Just as fiduciary directors must act in the beneficiaries' best interests, not their own, so too must universities act in the public's epistemic interest, not merely in defence of their reputation.

Reputation follows integrity; it cannot replace it. To act for truth, therefore, may at times require acts of candour that risk reputational discomfort — a moral courage that distinguishes trusteeship from administration. The university that dares to admit its limitations and open itself to scrutiny is not weaker but stronger, because it honours its foundational trust.

Thus, the call here is not for nostalgia or cynicism, but for reform grounded in remembrance: to recall what the university is meant to be — a fiduciary polity of knowledge, sustained by candour, justice, and care. When it speaks truthfully and listens pluralistically, it fulfils its duty not only to its students but to society at large. Its moral authority, unlike its ranking, cannot be manufactured; it must be *earned anew each day* through openness to truth in all its voices.

8.3 Epistemic Renewal — From Clientelism to Care; From Optics to Candour

The renewal of higher education cannot be administrative alone; it must be moral and epistemic. What this essay has traced, across its chapters, is a shift in the university's moral architecture — from the logic of *clientelism* and *optocracy* toward a model grounded in *fiduciary care* and *epistemic candour*. This is not a matter of reforming policies but of transforming ethos: replacing the pursuit of compliance and visibility with the pursuit of truth and trust. Renewal, in this sense, begins with conscience before it manifests in structure.

The contrast is stark. Under epistemic clientelism (Kahl 2025d), knowledge circulates through dependency: the student learns to comply in exchange for recognition, and the lecturer, in turn, performs conformity to satisfy institutional optics. The culture rewards silence, discourages dissent, and treats loyalty as a substitute for merit. Candour becomes dangerous; compliance becomes safe. The resulting moral climate breeds fear of judgement rather than love of knowledge.

By contrast, fiduciary care transforms these relations into acts of reciprocity. Authority becomes a practice of trust, not control. To teach or govern under fiduciary ethics (Kahl 2025e; 2025g) is to accept vulnerability — to disclose uncertainty, to invite challenge, to honour dialogue. Here, compliance gives way to courage: students are entrusted as co-custodians of the epistemic commons, and educators act not as administrators of learning but as trustees of its moral conditions. Candour replaces comfort as the measure of integrity.

A parallel shift occurs at the institutional level. In an optocracy, universities govern through visibility: optics, metrics, and imagery displace substance. Appearances of inclusion or excellence take precedence over their practice. Truth becomes secondary to presentation — a symbolic economy of virtue where being seen to care replaces caring itself. Renewal demands the inversion of this regime into epistemocracy (Kahl 2025g): governance through truth, accountability, and transparency. Under epistemocracy, the university's legitimacy no longer depends on how it looks, but on how it listens — to its own members, to evidence, and to the broader society it serves.

The synthesis of this transformation can be read as a moral reprogramming — a replacement of the institution's operating system. Visibility must give way to virtue; performance to transparency; compliance to courage. Each of the preceding chapters contributes to this reconstruction:

- Chapter 2 grounded the moral framework in fiduciary ethics — candour, loyalty, care, and justice.
- Chapter 5 diagnosed the corruption of these principles through optocratic drift.
- Chapter 6 revealed the surrounding ecosystem that rewards opacity and punishes candour.

- Chapter 7 proposed pedagogy as the site of renewal — a fiduciary dialogue capable of transforming culture from within.

In bringing these threads together, the essay advances a single normative claim: that epistemic renewal begins where institutions dare to risk truth. A university can reform only by rediscovering its duty of care to knowledge itself — by ceasing to market virtue and beginning to *practise* it. This is what Barnett (2000) called the challenge of *supercomplexity*: to navigate a world saturated with information by grounding action in authenticity rather than appearance. For the twenty-first-century university, this means choosing candour over comfort, and trust over theatre.

The vision that follows from this trajectory is neither utopian nor nostalgic. It imagines the university not as a marketplace of credentials but as a sanctuary of candour — a fiduciary polity of knowing. Within such an institution, truth is not a commodity but a covenant, binding all who teach, learn, and lead to a shared ethical purpose: to preserve, through openness and care, the fragile integrity of the human search for understanding.

The pedagogical challenge, then, is to rebuild trust after fear. Universities must learn to communicate risk without manufacturing suspicion—to cultivate what I call fiduciary vigilance: awareness tempered by empathy, protection grounded in openness. The alternative is an epistemic monoculture of self-censorship, where silence and averted eyes masquerade as civility.

8.4 Closing Maxim — "Feedback Is Not a Survey but a Covenant"

Feedback is not a survey but a covenant.

A survey gathers sentiment; a covenant binds conscience. The distinction defines the moral distance between procedure and promise, between the transactional and the fiduciary. Surveys belong to administration — they quantify moods, translate thought into metrics, and close the loop of institutional comfort. A covenant belongs to ethics — it commits parties to truth, to continuity, and to mutual accountability. Where the survey measures satisfaction, the covenant sustains trust. The former ends when the form is submitted; the latter begins when the dialogue does.

In the fiduciary sense, feedback is sacred dialogue — a renewal of the institution's founding promise to serve truth, not merely to perform responsiveness. It is a re-enactment of the moral contract between student and university, teacher and learner, trustee and beneficiary. Such dialogue presumes neither equality of power nor identity of view, but equality of sincerity: each party owes the other candour, care, and openness. This is what Kahl (2025p) calls *fiduciary candour* — the courage to speak truth in good faith — and what Kahl (2025e) frames as the moral infrastructure of epistemic justice. The university that honours such dialogue keeps faith not only with its students but with the very idea of knowledge as a public trust.

To engage in covenantal feedback is thus to act as co-trustees of truth. It recognises that dialogue, like knowledge itself, cannot be outsourced to data capture; it must be lived. The student's voice is not a datapoint but a conscience; the university's duty is not to manage opinion but to *receive it as truth offered in care*. In Freire's (1970) spirit of dialogical reciprocity, both parties become learners — each teaching the other how to speak truth without fear, and how to listen without defence.

Such is the ethical culmination of this work. Feedback, when reimagined as covenant, restores the university's moral pulse. It transforms institutional routine into ethical relation, recasting communication as the medium of renewal. In this light, to offer critique is not rebellion but fidelity — a reaffirmation of shared trust in the

possibility of truth. The covenant of feedback endures where surveys cannot: not as a record of satisfaction, but as a quiet vow between conscience and community — to guard, together, the light of knowledge.

8.5 Citations in Summary — Anchoring Reform in Core Works

Every architecture of renewal requires its foundations. The reform proposed throughout this essay rests on a triad of works that together define the structural, ethical, and moral grammar of fiduciary higher education. Each contributes a distinct dimension — institutional, ethical, and epistemic — yet they cohere into a single system of care: law as structure, conscience as virtue, and justice as ethos.

1. ***Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl 2025g): The Institutional Blueprint**
   This work establishes the framework of *fiduciary governance* — the idea that universities must be governed not by metrics or hierarchies but by transparent accountability to truth. It defines epistemocracy as the antithesis of optocracy: a polity where authority derives from candour, and where decision-making is tethered to the moral responsibility to disclose, justify, and listen. *Epistemocracy* provides the institutional scaffolding for the reforms envisioned here — a governance model that treats knowledge not as a product but as a trust.

2. ***Toward Academia's Own Hippocratic Oath* (Kahl 2025p): The Ethical Charter**
   If *Epistemocracy* provides the structure, *Hippocratic Oath* furnishes the conscience. It articulates the fiduciary virtues of academia — candour, loyalty, and care — as binding moral duties akin to the physician's oath. In doing so, it redefines academic professionalism as a covenant of trust. The educator, like the trustee, owes honesty even when inconvenient, loyalty even when unprofitable, and care even when unseen. This ethical charter transforms pedagogy and governance alike into acts of fiduciary responsibility, restoring integrity as the first principle of higher learning.

3. ***Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (Kahl 2025e): The Moral Criterion**
   This third pillar provides the evaluative compass for reform. It asserts that fairness in academia cannot be procedural alone; it must ensure equity of voice — the inclusion and recognition of all epistemic agents, regardless of status or conformity. Drawing on Medina (2013), it situates justice as an *epistemic virtue*: the sustained effort to hear what power prefers to ignore. In this sense, justice is not merely the outcome of good governance but its condition — the ethical oxygen of a truthful institution.

Together, these three works establish a fiduciary architecture of renewal. *Epistemocracy* defines the law; *Hippocratic Oath* embodies the virtue; *Epistemic Justice* preserves the ethos. They translate the theoretical arc of this essay — from critique to reconstruction — into a coherent moral programme for higher education.

In closing, this essay stands as both offering and mirror. It offers a vision of how universities might restore their covenant with truth, and it mirrors what genuine feedback should look like: reflective, candid, and given in the spirit of care. Delivered not through checkboxes but through conscience, this is feedback by other means — the voice of stewardship speaking to the institution that taught it to value truth, and now asks it to live by it.

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Version History

Version	Description of Changes	Epistemic Impact	Date
1	Released under title *The University of Reading's LLM experience as a mirror of higher education: Epistemic clientelism, optocratic drift, and the pedagogy of fiduciary dialogue*	N/A	2025-10-18

Version	Description of Changes	Epistemic Impact	Date
2	Integrated new section “The Pedagogy of Fear and the Optics of Safety”; expanded discussion of campus safety messaging as epistemic conditioning.	Strengthens phenomenological grounding; extends optocratic drift into epistemic vigilance; connects fiduciary ethics with visual governance and psychological conditioning.	2025-10-30

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