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New development: University managers balancing between sense and sensibility

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the ways that the trends of corporatization and commercialization have changed managerial roles in universities. The authors argue that we have gone too far with these trends and plea for redesigned management roles. Performance measurement systems relying on student polls for teaching and on journal metrics for research support managerial interventions. However, managers also need to acknowledge the autonomy and different capabilities of their staff members in order to get the best results. This article contributes to the debate about desirable management roles in universities in the light of a meaningful academic knowledge production.

IMPACT

This article will be of interest to university managers because it encourages them to rethink their roles by considering the need to ensure the long-term survival of academia, to academics who wish to engage in managerial positions because it warns them against a mechanical use of performance metrics, and to academia in general because it stimulates everyone to ask: where are we going? Politicians will benefit from reading this article because it makes them aware of the consequences of favouring New Public Management (NPM) principles in academia.

KEYWORDS

Academia; knowledge production; New Public Management (NPM); performance measurement; research quality; university management

Universities in transition

Universities were traditionally predominantly managed as clans (Ouchi, 1979) or professional organizations (Broadbent, 2007). Staff members shared values and beliefs about the importance of impartial and expertise-based knowledge production. As a result of recruitment policies that found the 'right members' in terms of expertise, commitment, and propensity towards academic work, there was only a limited need for bureaucratic instructions and surveillance. Market-based controls of teaching or research quality benchmarking were not largely developed. Decision-making power was decentralized to academic professionals (Kallio et al., 2020). At the faculty and department levels, managers were seen as a *primi inter pares* and had little in the way of formal responsibility or power. Staff members could manage their own research and teaching, often in consultation with their colleagues.

In the 1980s and 1990s, this clan/professional control came under pressure and was in large part replaced by bureaucratic and market-based controls. As a consequence, managerial roles significantly changed (Kallio et al., 2020). Parker (2011) analyses the changing identity of universities in the Western world under the influence of New Public Management (NPM), as inspired by a neo-liberal view of government.

Governments reduced funding and wanted to make universities more competitive and efficient by having them raise their own external funds for teaching and research, and by offering commoditized, high-quality services. Parker explains that universities were encouraged to embrace corporatization through professionalization and by adopting private enterprise forms of control (following a CEO-like structure, including a supervisory board of outsiders), and commercialization (such as fee-based educational programmes and externally funded research). In addition, both teaching and research became subjected to quality assessments, which sometimes led to an obsessive focus on metrics and rankings (van Helden & Argento, 2020a). The need to measure and compare the performance of individuals, departments, and universities for accountability purposes is very much in line with the NPM paradigm (Söderlind & Geschwind, 2019).

Changing managerial roles

Due to NPM influences, and related trends of corporatization and commercialization, management roles at various layers in universities changed dramatically. Although there are differences between countries, between public and private universities,

and between old universities and young universities (such as the former polytechnics in the UK which focused on teaching and applied research), some general trends of changes in management roles are evident. At the highest layer, university managers started to resemble CEOs—viewing their organizations as actors in a market for excellent teaching and research. Market-driven devices, like teaching and research assessments, impinged on the perceived importance of downwards steering devices of planning and control. These were cascaded down to the lower layers of the organization, such as faculties, (research) schools, teaching programmes, and departments. Middle managers in universities, like faculty deans and department heads, were mainly seen as the ‘serving hatches’ for higher-level managerial imperatives. Many of them complied with these imperatives, although some also acted as a ‘buffer’ between their bosses and their staff members.

Middle managers often use performance measurement systems to deal with the various pressures they are exposed to. Conflicting pressures may stem from contradictions among government regulations, state control (state pressure), the expectations of the academic community (academic pressure), and the need to comply with international standards and market mechanisms (market pressure) (Grossi et al., 2019). As a result, university managers who are responsible for the development (and wellbeing) of academics need to navigate between ‘sense’, i.e. following the principles of NPM by constantly demanding high academic performance in terms of efficiency and quality (as imposed by the externally developed assessment systems); and ‘sensitivity’—allowing individual academics to develop and grow, and thereby contributing to the long-term survival of academia.

Managers’ approach and attitude in the evaluation of academic performance is not always ideal. Field (2015) observes that, in their eagerness to promote NPM, managers are fixated on (over)ambitious levels of achievement, and particularly reward those academics who comply with the system without questioning it. This can cause academic staff to become demoralized. Even good relationships between managers and their subordinates can become strained if the former are not able to sufficiently support the latter. According to Field (2015), academics tend to prefer managers who are genuinely interested in them as people and who encourage them to focus on a long-term trajectory rather than on short-term instantly measurable results.

Positive and negative impacts

NPM in universities has had its pros and cons. On the positive side, efficiency improvements enabled

universities to enrol substantially increasing numbers of students without a proportionate rise in teaching budgets (Parker, 2011, p. 439). In addition, globalization trends made teaching programmes more attractive (for example double degrees and international exchange programmes) and contributed to improved research output and quality (through, for example, international conferences and publications in both national and international research journals). However, there are also major drawbacks:

- The increased use of metrics and rankings compromises academic freedom and self-determination. It sometimes puts unnecessary pressure on academics—especially those in their early career stages (Cleaver, 2021). The quantification of research activities and output is incorrectly associated with quality (Kallio et al., 2017; Söderlind & Geschwind, 2019).
- Student satisfaction surveys are often used to assess teaching quality without recognizing that, what students like, might not necessarily be what they actually need to learn at a university (Bedggood & Donovan, 2012).
- Competitive pressures in both teaching and research have increased work-related stress (ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012), damaged motivation and collegial work relationships (van Helden & Argento, 2020b), caused the removal of some less ‘profitable’ disciplines (Parker, 2011, p. 441), and pushed the more fundamental role of academics as impartial and critical observers of society to the margins (Watermeyer, 2019).

Desirable management roles

Our intention is for this article to contribute to the important debate about the need for changes in the managerial roles in universities. A return to the ‘old times’ is not the solution. Although universities should be recognized as centres for autonomous, impartial and critical thinking and knowledge creation, in the past they were often shielded from society without pressure to perform (Martin-Sardesai et al., 2020). Moreover, the globalization and commercialization of research and teaching cannot be ignored, and should be embraced for their positive impacts. But have we gone too far in reshaping universities as enterprises in a competitive setting subjected to an audit culture (Argento et al., 2020)? And have we, as a consequence, given up too many virtues of academic life?

Our agenda for debate comprises three elements. First, we want the top layer of universities consider a more facilitating role towards faculties and other

places of knowledge production, and soften their control repertoire of strategic planning, performance budgeting and auditing. The audit culture of metrics and rankings needs to be changed to use these control mechanisms more sensibly (Argento et al., 2020; Cleaver, 2021). In addition, managers have to be open to faculties operating with different goals. The history and law sub-faculties in humanities faculties, for example, could focus on preparing monographs about domestic themes in the national language, while the science faculty might compete at an international level through publications in high-ranked journals. Teaching could be pluriform in that teaching philosophies may diverge among faculties, ranging from student-activating to research-driven approaches. Managers at the top university layer may additionally advocate a management-by-exception mode by requiring minimum standards for teaching and research outcomes. Central level interventions would only be considered if faculties underscore the minimum standards. If minimum-standards are met then faculties would have the freedom to pursue their own strategies. Management-by-exception contributes to decentralized decision making, which aligns with the notion of universities as highly professional organizations.

A controversial issue is whether universities require outsiders (for instance from the business sector) or insiders as top managers. If a private enterprise mentality starts to pervade universities, we believe that academics should revolt against it, and support the managerial roles embedded in the primary processes of universities. Being active in the discourses about these themes through publications and conferences is an obvious route, but academics should also be taking an active role in platforms where metrics in university performance and governance are debated and settled (by, for example, participating in university boards and faculty boards, and seeking dialogue with deans or department heads, support functions and external actors). Söderlind and Geschwind (2019) suggest that university managers with a teaching and research background do not generally blindly make use of performance measurement systems. While using them for obtaining resources, making decisions, and lending legitimacy to the university, these managers also value the more intangible aspects of academic work that unfortunately have become overshadowed by the need to constantly excel.

Second, rather than merely functioning as 'serving hatches' for the introduction of higher-level managerial imperatives, middle managers, such as deans and department heads, need to position themselves as the linking pins between their bosses and their staff. They also need to install and use those teaching and research performance measurement

systems that respect and use the diverging capabilities of the staff members without pushing them into the fixed frame of excellent teacher or researcher. Managers are in the position to make a nuanced use of performance measurement systems and to carefully consider the individual characteristics and needs of the academic staff members in the pursuit of avoiding work-related stress. This approach offers a solution to Broadbent's (2007) concerns about the mechanical application of performance measurement systems inspired by simple ideas regarding straightforward transformation processes based on inputs via throughputs into outputs. She argues for performance measurement systems in higher education institutions which acknowledge that a focus on measurable elements implies a bias towards the visible aspects of governance, whereas other elements, such as the benefits of professional autonomy and diverging stakeholder interests are also relevant. Broadbent (2007, p. 197) sees the university manager as a conductor of an orchestra, who offers leadership but also melds the talents of all staff members. This means that managers act as a buffer between their unit and external pressures, such as financial constraints and performance requirements from higher levels. If their group or department lives up to these constraints, individual staff members can be given a certain amount of freedom in pursuing their particular talents. If the higher layer performance controls are too tight, the buffer function of middle managers is damaged. This argument reinforces our call for a more facilitating rather than a constraining role of university top management.

Third, at the macro-level of the university sector as a whole, the discourse should be repositioned to focus more on students and other, for example, research-interested stakeholders. This means no longer pushing institutions to be the best in a rat race of equally positioned institutions. Of course, universities are distinctive in terms of research and teaching activities, including research-driven education but, given the rising numbers of students, it makes sense for some universities to specialize in applied research and/or high-quality teaching. These ongoing trends should be included in the political debates on how to make efficient use of a country's tax money spent on higher education. In addition, globalization and commercialization should not completely erase country-specific university settings.

Sense and sensibility

To balance sense and sensibility, all university layers require committed managers. Sense relates to the rational behaviour supported by performance measurement devices, while sensibility is associated with sensitivity for the intangible aspects of

academic life and the diverging capabilities of a highly professionalized staff. Given that the managerial positions in universities are mostly based on temporary appointments (i.e. managerial roles are executed in a limited period of time), it is important that staff with some level of seniority who wish to engage in these positions are prepared for functions like programme manager or department head through training and learning on the job.

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