

What is Happening to Our Universities?

Professor Ben R. Martin

SPRU – Science Policy Research Unit,
University of Sussex

B.Martin@sussex.ac.uk

WE-Heraeus-Seminar on 'Quantum
Thermodynamics for Young Scientists',
5 February 2020, Bad Honnef

Structure

- Introduction
- Centralised top-down management
- Bureaucracy
- Teaching to a template
- Research by numbers
- Conclusions

Introduction

Growing dissatisfaction of academics with e.g.

- latest management idiocy
- some new bureaucratic nonsense
- patronising instruction as to how to teach
- latest crude 'performance target' for their research

What might be driving this?

Management literature stresses benefits of

- flatter organisational structures
- decentralisation and local initiative
- flexible and 'lean' systems and processes

Why are universities moving in opposite direction?

Why are academics so meekly acquiescent?

Centralised top-down management

20-30 years ago, many universities relatively decentralised

Undoubtedly some problems

- local fiefdoms
- lack of consistency in treatment of students
- weak or incoherent research strategies
- inordinate amounts of time spent on committees

Solution adopted by many VCs/Rectors/Presidents

- more centralisation
- more hierarchical top-down management
- more formalised procedures

Management literature

Extensive research on relationship between organisational structure and performance

Much focused on centralisation

- “the extent to which decision-making power is concentrated at the top levels of the organization” (Caruana et al., 1998, p. 18)

Extensive literature review by Zheng et al. (2010):

- “the majority of scholars have agreed that a decentralized organizational structure is conducive to organizational effectiveness”

Management literature

Decentralisation

- facilitates *effective communication* (horizontal as well as vertical) (Burns and Walker, 1961)
- encourages *creativity* (Khandwalla, 1977)
- helps generate *imaginative solutions to problems* (Deal and Kennedy, 1982)
- increases *staff motivation and satisfaction* (Dewar and Werbel, 1979)
- increases *responsiveness to changes in the external environment* (Schminke et al., 2000)

Management literature

In era of globalisation and growing competition, increasing emphasis on the ability of organisations to generate and successfully implement innovations

- *Decentralised structure stimulates adoption of technological and organisational innovation* (Kimberly and Evanisko, 1981)
- *Negative influence of centralisation and of formalisation on organisational innovation* (Damanpour, 1991)
(Formalisation is “the degree to which decisions and working relationships are governed by formal rules, standard policies, and procedures” – Lee and Choi, 2003, p.192)

Management literature

More recent work shown decentralisation even more important

- for *organisations operating in uncertain environments* (Baum et al., 2003; Nahm et al., 2003)
- in *organisations where there is more learning*, more knowledge based work and more knowledge-sharing (Nahm et al., 2003)
- for *organisations engaged in knowledge creation* as more individuals involved in decision-making, generating a greater number & variety of ideas, and helping to ensure successful implementation (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2010)

Literature on universities

While many studies of relationship between organisational structure and performance in the private sector, fewer on public organisations, and very few indeed focussing on universities

- Cameron and Tschirhart (1992)
 - “Participative decision processes are more effective than autocratic or centralized decision processes primarily because in a post-industrial environment the need for multiple sources of information and multiple perspectives is escalated.”
- Diefenbach (2005)
 - Case study of effects of implementation of ‘new public management’ on a major university
 - Revealed fundamental internal contradictions in NPM approach
 - Noted the “cynical use of latest management techniques by senior managers in order to gain more power and control internally”

Literature on universities

- Nedeva and Boden (2006)
 - Analysed the impact of neo-liberalism on universities
 - Identified a loss of capacity to generate 'understanding' type knowledge
- By et al. (2008)
 - “The audit culture and managerialism have created an environment that encourages opportunistic behaviour such as cronyism, rent-seeking and the rise of organizational psychopaths. This development will arguably not only lead to a waste of resources, change for the sake of change, further centralization, formalization and bureaucratization but, also, to a disheartened and exploited workforce, and political and short-term decision-making.”

The puzzle

Given that universities

- operate in uncertain environments,
- are centrally involved in the generation, diffusion and application of knowledge, and
- aim to nurture creativity, innovation and problem-solving abilities,

all the more reason to expect the trend would have been towards a more decentralised structure.

But the reverse appears to have been mostly the case.

Why?

Examples of centralisation

Decisions imposed from above with no prior consultation – management by email

Removal of support staff from departments to central offices

- e.g. IT support, financial administrators
- Means academics end up doing more things themselves (e.g. photocopying, making travel arrangements), lowering their productivity
- ‘Greater efficiency’ for central university means somebody else has to devote more time to the task

Examples of bureaucracy

Concern with illegal immigrants

- → attendance registers, logging of PhD supervisions (booking an 'event')
- But over-response to Border Agency requirements

Research ethics

- Needed for medical research + research involving vulnerable individuals and animals
- But applied to all research – bureaucratic overkill

Teaching changes

- No longer left to discretion of convenor
- Require lengthy discussion and approval by committee

Teaching to a template

Problems in past and improvements certainly needed, but often taken too far

- Takes up too much time + diminishing returns
- Causes irritation that being ‘infantilised’ instead of treated as professionals

e.g.

- Instructions about ‘learning outcomes’ or how to use PowerPoint
- Complex instructions about ‘modularisation’ and ‘credits’
 - Modules deemed too big or too small forced to become ‘the right size’ in terms of credits
- ‘Semesterisation’
 - Faculty left struggling to think what could be the ‘problem’ to which two semesters (each fragmented into parts by immovable public holidays) was the ‘solution’

Teaching to a template

Student feedback - 'new and improved' procedures

- National Student Survey
 - Panicky emails to lecturers to oversee completion
 - 'Incentives' (bribes?) to ensure high response rate and positive responses
 - HEFCE investigated 30 cases where universities fiddled the figures – likely to increase as NSS used in TEF
 - What does this do for the sense of morality engendered in students?

Universities judged on % of Firsts and Upper 2nds

- Scarcely credible annual 'improvements'
- Inevitable grade inflation

Research by numbers

Research Assessment Exercises – RAE/REF

- 1st 2-3 exercises addressed previous problems
- Then diminishing returns set in
- ‘Red Queen effect’ → costs now > benefits
 - £250M to decide how to distribute funds between 100+ universities
- Tilted balance from teaching to research
- Favours mainstream mono-disciplinary research
- Narrowed focus on research publications, especially in ‘top’ journals – very one-dimensional view of academics
- Encouraged game-playing to maximise ‘score’

Fundamental contradiction at heart of science policy

- For 20 years, policies emphasised ‘users’ → Mode 2 research
- But then subject to periodic Mode 1 research assessment

Conclusions

Problems certainly not unique to universities

- Also found in schools, hospitals, the police force etc.

Common driving forces?

Drive for ever greater economic 'efficiency'

- i.e. more output per unit input, with little regard for quality or anything that can't be measured in economic terms
- Woodward (1958) – for organisations based on mass production & standardisation, greater centralisation and hierarchy may make sense as enables the production system to be more controllable and predictable
- But is that how universities now see themselves??

Conclusions

‘New public management’

- Emphasis on accountability, performance targets, metrics
- Encourages changes in behaviour to maximise one’s ‘score’ according to the designated metrics – corrosive effect on ethics
- Similar effects with gaming of performance indicators used for e.g. schools, healthcare, crime

Globalisation and increasing competition

- Obsession with international league tables
- Various stratagems/ruses to improve position

Growing use of head-hunters

- To justify high fees, keen to bring in other candidates, and then push these
- Often end up with individuals that previous employers delighted to say ‘goodbye’ to

Conclusions

But why have most academics so meekly accepted these developments?

- Some too frightened (e.g. profs on perf-related pay)
- A few bought into the managerialist ideology
- But most too chronically overstretched to resist

Analogy with the ‘boiled frog’?

- If academics 20 years ago presented with all these changes being implemented in one fell swoop, would have thrown out en masse
- But changes introduced incrementally and by stealth
 - “Having already accepted all this, why resist going just a bit further?”
- If academics continue to acquiesce, we risk eroding our sense of integrity, self-worth and dignity, becoming mere cogs in the higher education production machine

References

B.R. Martin, 2016, 'What's Happening to our Universities?',
Prometheus, 34, pp.7-24
(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08109028.2016.1222123>)

- Working Paper available at www.sussex.ac.uk/spru/swps2016-03
- Contains numerous references to other relevant literature, including all those cited above