Bridging the divide: Managed managerialism

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Abstract

Management in universities has had to change, as the demands on universities have demanded different skills. One consequence has been a backlash against what is perceived to be an emerging culture of managerialism. This conceptual article argues that a balance is needed between collegial and more corporate style management if a university is to protect its academic work while surviving in an external environment that could be perceived to be increasingly hostile to the traditional collegial model. It is argued that the best of both should be harnessed in protection of the academic project and that it is naïve to assume that it is possible to revert to a purely collegial model and indeed, that the collegial model itself may be an abstraction rather than a reality.

INTRODUCTION

It is axiomatic that the higher education landscape is changing. The challenges include scarce resources, increased legislation and increased competition from both the public and private sector. This competition is in terms of knowledge production/research (through things like large-scale state, parastatal or private research and development initiatives) and knowledge dissemination/teaching (through increased private provision from private education providers and ‘corporate’ in house training divisions).

It is unlikely that there was ever a period in higher education in which the hegemony was not in one way or another being challenged and it is equally clear that higher education by its very nature can never have been a static idea or structure. Perhaps the challenges today are different in their ability to bring together pressures from the state, economy, information technology and the general public at a pace that is difficult for the higher education sector to manage because it is structured to be more measured and deliberative in its responses. Perhaps too the challenges within a rapidly transforming South African society are more intense and extensive because of the need to fast track equity and redress and other elements of transformation (Meyer 2002, 535; Warner and Palfreyman 1996, 11).

All of this may well be unique but there is no doubt that higher education has faced similar challenges and that these challenges manifest in similar themes – a
search through the archives of any university will demonstrate cycles of crisis related to finances, access and government interference. Perhaps more significant is the abundant evidence of the ‘time honoured traditions’ (Lucas 1996, 207) of delaying maintenance, increasing class sizes, cutting back on library holdings and increasing tuition costs as mechanisms used across the world for universities to manage these challenges. Restructuring is another theme that resonates.

Lucas (1996) argues that just as the crises recur and the responses repeat themselves the record also reflects that internally academics have responded in ways that appear to discount the size of the problem and resist management attempts to resolve challenges as limits on academic freedom (also de Groof, Neave, Svec 1998, 86). He also argues – backed up by a range of empirical studies – that what frequently emerges is infighting amongst the disciplines within a university and a huge internal direction of energy to address what is frequently an external challenge demanding unity, strategy and collective action.

Many involved in the internecine struggles of South African universities facing mergers and economic pressures and a demand for improved graduation rates will struggle to argue convincingly that Lucas – even ten years on – is essentially wrong.

As this struggle is acted out across South Africa the issues of academic freedom, university autonomy and managerialism play themselves out most unsatisfactorily.

**CHANGES THAT HAVE BEEN TRIED, TESTED AND FAILED**

The deliberative nature of universities – including some of the resultant lack of flexibility and quick ability to change – may well be why universities as a concept have outlived many revolutions and crises. It is also unlikely that any modern economy or educated nation would ever completely replace the idea of the university in its entirety. Thus many continue to argue that universities should not change and they hold onto Cornford’s 1923 observation (cited in Meyer 2002, 534) that in a university ‘nothing is ever supposed to happen for the first time’.

However, as the state, like the early European church, becomes less and less able to pay for unchanging higher education universities have lost some of their capacity to resist change and have had to make adaptations that many find very uncomfortable and some even find untenable.

Some of these changes have been in leadership and management and here, as in the USA in the early 1980’s the question has to be answered whether this shift and the resultant increase in management power is a cause of problems, a solution or a bit of both (Michael 1997, 118). Some like Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjiattas (2003, 76) argue strongly about the risks and tensions inherent in the co-existence of (bureaucratic) control and academic deliberation and freedom. These authors argue that regulation (internally or externally imposed) is on the whole inappropriate in the conduct of university core business.
Others have so embraced managerialism that a ‘Google’ search of the terms ‘vice chancellor’ and ‘chief executive officer’ together will give you 267 000 hits in 0.27 seconds. Many of the first 50 of these hits use the latter management term to refer to the role of the former!

**BRIDGING THE DIVIDE**

Perhaps then we should not be seeking anymore to defend the collegial and professorial model against the business one but instead seek to find ways to ensure that the latter achieves better legitimacy with the former and in so doing is in itself. The lack of legitimacy of business models within the academy mean that managers and leaders are often unable to implement and sustain real change using business ideas and language. On the other hand the collegial model is so internally focused on knowledge generation and dissemination within particular disciplinary fields that it fails frequently to provide the overview leadership needed for a responsive university (Michael 1997, 127).

Admittedly the line between the two is complex. Sometimes – as with enrolment planning, the proposed national applications service, the Programme and Qualification Mix process or the mergers – an ability to respond quickly, decisively and with certain incisiveness, usually characteristic of corporates, enables universities to resist encroachments on their freedoms. At other times, such as with accreditation, access or quality assurance debates, much more deliberative public intellectual engagement is vital to ensure that the academic essence of ‘the University’ is defended against simplistic applications of business style tools.

Those then that indicate that if universities have the ‘key success elements’ of positive powerful leadership, a written strategic plan, a coherent management team to implement the strategy and an action plan (Flack 2004, 16) are likely to doom universities to short-term progress and compliance and perhaps even short term financial security. What they will not achieve is the academic staff co-operation needed to ensure that real change is effected and sustained. It is the nature of academic work that compliance requirements can, on the whole, be subverted by simply being ignored. There are very few sanctions available to those that seek to manage academics and those that exist are very rarely successfully applied (Conraths, Edwards, Felt and Shenton, 2002; Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjiattas 2003, 86). Academics expect to participate in deliberation about how and why actions and regulations should be in place (Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjiattas 2003, 79) to an extent that is rarely replicated in corporate organizations and wishing this away is naïve to the point of being irresponsible.

Implementation power vests with academics and thus no change will yield the intended outcome without their support. Repeated failures of performance management systems and of the some of the requirements of bodies such as SAQA to change the way courses are structured and written up, make this self evident. Most universities complied with submitting qualifications in outcomes
based formats for the purposes of recording qualifications in the early 2000’s. How may have followed this with actually teaching or assessing differently? Have those that have complied actually delivered better value to society and the economy?

Some universities have taken to the corporate model much more easily and it could be argued that the internal culture of some of these was always more compliant and less free. Some of these universities are financially more secure than those in which the resistance to managerialism has been most pronounced and some are even achieving and maintaining significant international academic reputations. Others are bureaucratic and uncreative to the extreme – efficient but certainly not effective.

And in some where the resistance to managerialism is most pronounced publication rates are still falling or are at best static – this can surely not be viewed as a victory of the academy?

**SO WHAT WOULD A COMPROMISE MODEL LOOK LIKE?**

This article thus suggests serious attention to a hybrid that will give a modern university a fighting chance of being able to respond to the new challenges and the pace at which they are coming while enjoying the trust of the academy.

This means moving away from the model where some universities have corporatised to the extent that the distinction between them and a corporate conglomerate is hard to identify. In these universities all courses that do not meet their own costs are discontinued, research productivity drops and increasing use is made of part time staff. Others have so actively resisted the bureaucracy that is inherent in a more corporate management model that their financial controls remain weak; their ability to defend their decisions in terms of administrative justice is under threat all the time and they find themselves constantly outpaced in terms of innovations by more structured, organised environments. Their research productivity and graduation rates cannot be offered as a defence as these are not flourishing.

While it may be true that ‘the central justification for managerialism, namely its ability to maximise efficiency, doesn’t apply to academic work’ (Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjiattas 2003, 87) it is not necessarily true that maximising efficiency is not the role of university management. Management must seek to maximise efficiency in order to ensure sustainability. It must be strong and regulatory to ensure that the university remains competitive and spends as little time and money as possible in defending itself in the breach. It must also be inherently respectful of academic work. It must ensure real space for deliberation in universities under siege. It must ensure that that which can be managed simply is managed simply so that complexity where necessary is free to exist.

To be able to argue that the academy is managing itself many management positions are filled by promotions from within the academy. What has not followed is a reasonable effort to ensure that these people – whose disciplines range from
neonatology to graphic design – are equipped to effectively manage constrained resources, tightened legislation, a modernised economy, labour relations and information technology. The academy itself is thus set up to fail in its stewardship over public resources.

This is not just about the ‘peripheral resources’. Academic accreditation for instance, of the content and methodology of teaching and research work, means that academic managers need to be sophisticated negotiators of bureaucracy (Michael 1997, 123). Those who are not allow these ‘quality protection processes’ to stifle academic freedom even more than is inherent in their design.

Thus, internal cooption of academic managers, without support or training, has fed into the burgeoning bureaucratic processes to leverage compliance. The proliferation of committees, floods of policy documents and standing orders are all efforts to meet the demand but they do not achieve the aim behind the demand – to account for consistently poor student success for instance. As academics resist the method they remain free to fail to account. New bureaucratic attempts to weaken the bureaucracy – manifested through things like restructuring or recreation of committees or procedures – simply create new bureaucracies (Michael 1997).

The cultural change that is the seed of any sustainable organisational change fails to be planted. This is where the vice chancellor and her/his team have to exercise transformational leadership which is more than simply getting the right charismatic person (or people) into leadership positions. A dynamic vice-chancellor, even if fresh out of the leadership of the academy, is not a sufficient ‘remedy against the iron cage tendency of the bureaucracy’ (Michael 1997, 120) because the bureaucracy is not simply the creation of the internal managers. It is a contextual reality that must be negotiated and managed itself – in ways that are respectful of the academy but not simplistically so. Universities by the very nature of their business, and their longevity, exhibit embedded organisational cultures, which make their ability to respond to change and the need to evolve, less agile (Bargh, Bocock, Scott and Smith 2002, 24). Paradoxically, radical change or crisis is more keenly felt in universities than they would be in corporate organisations of the same size because the universities, by definition, seek a state of stability grounded on what is perhaps sometimes more idea than substance: academic collegiality.

If the senior leadership take the side of using bureaucracy to manage the university they will experience a decreased level of participation of academics in decision making and significant infringement on academic autonomy. The ‘managerialist university’ can be said to have emerged with all its paucity of academic integrity and legitimacy. Once so labelled it is very difficult for any university management to shake that label and thus to attract the academy needed.

If the senior leadership simply invoke, self referentially, the ‘collegial model’ without question or challenge they set themselves up to collusion with those elements of ‘collegiality’ which are little more than resistances to be held
accountable. They also fail to leverage the resources, influence and information that equip a university to defend itself against state interference and to secure resources it needs.

It is generally accepted that collegiality includes deliberation, the primacy of the academic project and a commitment to certain ideals. When so presented it is easy to argue as do Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjiattas 2003, 84 that university managers use ‘deviant centred strategies’ to characterize academics as ‘knaves’ and to justify efforts to manage them based on assumptions that they are not to be trusted. It is equally true that ideals, the primacy of the academic project and genuine deliberation can very rarely be said to characterize Senate debates today.

Anyone who has tried to survive the collegiality of the academy as expressed in discussions about the use of scarce resources or peer review of academic ideas will know that the academy is too frequently a competitive and contested political space in which collegiality is more often invoked than enacted (Bargh, Bocock, Scott and Smith 2000, 24). Some would consider this characterisation uncharitable but would struggle to demonstrate how a university in this country (with neither the resources, the political space nor the inherent institutional culture) can manage effectively using only a model of collegiality that many have in fact never experienced in a pure form – even if it did exist at some time in some places.

A rampant bureaucracy also makes very limited sense as it does limit autonomy and will as a result decrease research and deliberation and real engagement with knowledge and freedom of thought. Curbing bureaucracy and consciously entrenching collegiality seem to be self evidently necessary. Heckscher (1997) argued that this needs to be done in a way that genuinely changes the way that the organisation works – delayering or even devolution do not necessarily dismantle the barriers to effective co-operative work. Sometimes they simply result in a different form of bureaucracy emerging. An example would be the situation in which certain functions are devolved to a university faculty in order to make them more efficient. They are then simply carried out inefficiently in five places rather than just one.

Similarly, academically defensible ideas such as the need to ensure high quality teaching are more harmful than good if they are only manifested in a plethora of onerous and expensive bureaucratic procedures (Pierce 1994, 5) and not in a genuine self-reflective teaching environment.

Unless there is meaningful deliberative space, participation and consultation and the academy/ professoriate are genuinely able to exercise influence and authority academic unity will emerge – in pursuit of the common management enemy and any effort to ensure that the university is adequately responsive and proactive is doomed.

**FINDING THE BALANCE**

This is not a new idea. The four notional types of governance described in the
Council of Higher Education Governance Task Team Report (2002, 23) attempt to describe the importance of balancing collegial participation and bureaucracy/managerialism. A further similar exposition is provided by Farnham (1999 in Conraths, Edwards, Felt and Shenton 2002, 36) with respect to British Universities. The former classified organisations on two axes: delegation of authority (limited to extensive) against governance that is either self-referential or public interest and representatively driven. It is argued by the CHE report (2002, 24) that the most effective and efficient arrangement occurs in the areas where there is extensive delegation of real authority and where the public interest and representivity inform governance.

Excessively managerial structures that are self-referential and do not delegate real authority are most likely to land up being unstable and prone to endemic crises. While the CHE does not make explicit what the nature of the delegation or representation should be, and thus avoids direct discussion of the role of academic vs. professional management, the categorisation of Farnham (1999 in Conraths, Edwards, Felt and Shenton 2002, 36) takes the debate further.

Here it is argued that the most collegial (academically autonomous) universities are characterised by high academic staff participation in management and high professional autonomy of academics while managerial universities are characterised by low professional autonomy and staff participation in management. Low autonomy with high participation is described as entrepreneurial while high autonomy and low participation is essentially bureaucratic.

Simplistically then what needs to be achieved is university management that is characterised by high professional autonomy, high academic staff participation in management and high delegation of authority and governance that takes into consideration the public interest and is open to representative structures. These would provide for public and private accountability (neither excessively regulatory nor laissez faire) and co-operation between the academy and management that is needed to ward off unnecessary interference.

**MANAGED MANAGERIALISM**

Managed managerialism enables universities to take on only enough of the principles of effective corporate type management to ensure that the deliberative environment that academic autonomy demands will be not be under threat. It will have as its aim ensuring that there will continue to be the resources and infrastructure for effective academic work. It will promote accountability and two of its intended products – efficiency and sustainability in ways that are desirable and consonant with academic professionalism. University bureaucracy must be academically professionalised (cf. Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjiattas 2003, 88) but it cannot disappear.

Some have attempted to do this by adding to the cohort of promoted academic managers a number of professional managers (in fields such as IT and Human
Resources). In some places professional managers wield the balance of power. Others have changed the roles of academic managers (Deans and Vice-Chancellors and Deputy Vice-Chancellors) to mimic corporate management roles rather than the deliberative academic head and external ambassador of earlier times. In almost all places a significant amount of power has shifted to what is essentially the Vice-Chancellor’s management team (Stephenson in Warner and Palfreyman 1996, 86).

Restructuring these teams, by for instance, the inclusion of Deans, where they are so far removed from the academy as to have lost legitimacy does not automatically make them able to effectively negotiate the internal binary system or to ‘balance the conflicting imperatives of stability and change’ (Meyer 2002, 551). Unless the role of the Dean remains legitimate with the academy their mere inclusion does not enable university management to draw on the best of the skills of academics while using some of the rapid, more visibly accountable and responsive tools brought by professional managers (Dobson and McNay in Warner and Palfreyman 1996, 31; Bargh, Bocock, Scott and Smith 2000, 8–9).

By continuing to draw Deans, Deputy Vice-Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors from those that have also demonstrated real mastery of the academic process the shared roots (in academia) of the key senior people they are better able to give attention to the ‘kind of university an institution aspires to become (and ...) consider the kind of teaching and research in which it wishes to become involved, and the kinds of students it wishes to recruit – and how best to achieve these objectives’ (Bargh, Bocock, Scott and Smith 2000, 65).

Shared roots are not a sufficient condition. University leaders have to exercise transformational leadership (which derives its authority in universities from academic stature) out of the context of the discipline in which the stature was achieved. Some unconditional respect would accrue to the professoriate exercising these traits within the discipline, but external to the discipline the academic collegiate may resist the influence being exercised especially if it is exercised without the deliberation that is quintessentially academic business. Their previous membership of exactly the culture they are expected to protect and change, works both for and against them. Effective professional managers in the areas of human resources, industrial relations, finance, fundraising, administration and the registrar’s office that can be trusted to ensure that the right thing is done quickly and properly enable a powerful synergy that works for the academy.

This synergy is dependent on rising above the current ‘either-or’/’them-us’ separation of managers/administrators and academics which is probably as old as the university model and may, to some extent be unavoidable as the unpleasant task of enforcing rules and regulations and drawing attention to scarce resources normally falls to one group and is frequently experienced as irksome by the other (Warner and Palfreyman 1996, 4). Effectiveness and demonstrated delivery on their mandate to provide the resources, infrastructure, and environment in which academic work is possible is the best strategy for bridging this divide.

Knowledge production and knowledge dissemination should thrive in this
environment because the essential nature of professionalism requires that sort of focused commitment (Enslin, Pendlebury and Tjiattas 2003, 86) and effective management partnerships reduce the distractions and hindrances.

Thus the successful hybrid does not require the Dean, for instance, to give up his or her academic leadership. It does mean that the role of Executive Dean must not simply be an academic name for a corporate function of resource competition and management (Fitzgerald 2003, 9; Bargh, Bocock, Scott and Smith 2000, 61; Dobson and McNay in Warner and Palfreyman 1996, 31; Conraths, Edwards, Felt and Shenton 2000).

The ability to retain some kind of membership of ‘us’ through virtue of appointment from within the academic ranks is threatened to the extent that any leader is expected to act in a way defined by the academic ‘us’ as curtailing their autonomy. Perhaps the experience of separation, of tension and ambiguity, which now extends to most senior leaders in universities, is just an extension of the ‘them and us’ separation that registrars and more junior administrators have always felt.

An effective hybrid university management model requires that we are very clear about the roles we expect people like Deans to play – if we fail to do so we set them up for cooption and rejection and render them ineffective.

Without this conceptual clarity universities continue to rage internally and the state continues to make demands and continues to erode institutional and personal academic autonomy.

CONCLUSION

Academic and administrative managers have the same aim – to keep the state at a reasonable distance and to protect all the forms of autonomy we hold dear. If deliberation and collegiality are kept alive within universities, it should be possible to do this. Collegiality is not necessarily a guarantor of responsible collective decision-making or of commitment to decisions made. On the other hand, some management decisions do impact negatively on the essential elements of academic freedom – sometimes because legislation or resource constraints make the alternative impossible and sometimes for the less positive ‘managerialist’ tendencies which may emerge in this complex structure.

Collaborative and participatory mechanisms of governance must be retained; open, honest and timely communication with academics is essential and fair, evenhanded management is needed. With these in place, it is argued; the essential elements of the collegial are maintained without the academics/faculty being burdened excessively with concerns about day-to-day management. If the above are provided there is essentially no real risk to the essence of the collegial model while there is room for managerial efforts to protect and enhance effectiveness and efficiency and display respect for external and internal accountability demands (Lucas 1996, 214–215). Managerialism must be managed.
REFERENCES


Higher Education Act (Act no 101 of 1997). South Africa


