

# **Management and Leadership in UK Universities: Exploring the Possibilities of Change**

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## **Abstract**

This paper considers the case for reform of management structures in UK universities and offers proposals for change. The model of top-down, performance-led management that characterises many institutions is both outmoded and ill-suited to the challenges of an increasingly turbulent higher education sector. Drawing on the experiences of a university that introduced a new scheme of Performance Management I explore alternative approaches to leadership and management, collaborative or partnership working designed to improve employee voice and the need to re-evaluate approaches to Human Resource Management. I conclude with a five point model for change.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Management, Higher Education, Performance Management, Human Resource Management, Trust

## **Introduction**

The UK higher education sector has become increasingly marketised and highly regulated as a consequence of successive neoliberal governments' policies (Kline, 2009; Deem, Hillyard & Reed, 2007; Shore & Wright, 2004). Such policies have been designed to create quasi or pseudo-market conditions, in the belief that this leads to higher standards of quality and increased student choice. Universities have responded by adopting a more management-led approach and have reorganised their academic structures accordingly, in an effort to achieve greater operational efficiencies. As a consequence they have developed complex management structures more akin to industrial corporations (Boden & Epstein, 2006) in order to satisfy the demands of the regulatory bodies and associated audit procedures in an increasingly dynamic sector.

Within universities such change has led to a transformation of academic departments into business units run by management teams focused on corporate targets, working within tight budgetary constraints. To support the management agenda there has been a significant expansion of the administrative functions and a related increase in the numbers of non-academic staff (Whitchurch, 2013). There has also been a significant rise in the level of senior management salaries, whilst academic pay levels have shrunk in real terms (Grove, 2016). Such an imbalance is illustrative of a particularly corporate focus in universities (Scott, 2000) that are both hierarchical in structure and bureaucratic in their processes and procedures.

Underpinning this structural change, there has been a growing reliance on metrics as a measure of quality and indicator of performance. The National Student Survey (designed to measure the quality of the student experience) and the Research Excellence Framework (to rank research performance and allocate research funding) have, despite concerns about their reliability and validity, become the accepted benchmarks by which universities must measure themselves. The UK Government's proposal (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016) for a Teaching Excellence Framework (to offer medal-style ratings of universities' teaching standards) is the latest system designed to enhance standards of higher

education delivery. Such metrics are now routinely relied upon when making judgements about the performance of individual academic staff. This signals a significant shift of culture in the academy where peer-esteem and academic professionalism have been replaced with a management-led system of individual performance assessment and rating against corporate objectives.

The approach to individual performance management within universities is rooted in the ideology of Human Resource Management (HRM) that requires line managers to regularly monitor individual performance. Consequently, the line manager's role has become more judgemental than developmental, leading to concerns about a growing managerialism (Deem et al., 2007; Deem, 1998) and a weakening of the academic voice (Shattock, 2013). Such developments not only conflict with traditional notions of the university as a collaborative, democratic *republic of scholars* (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007) but also are at odds with a wider awareness that highly qualified, professional knowledge workers such as university academics should require very little in the way of direct management interventions. Yet senior university managers continued adherence to a top-down system of performance management not only undermines professional autonomy but has led to conditions of 'over-managed institutionalised mistrust' (Deem et al., 2007, p. 190).

There is an emerging consensus that the current situation is unsustainable. As Middlehurst (2013) notes, the internal governance and management architecture that has developed in universities reflects an outmoded command and control ideology rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Bacon (2014) also questions 'the notion that the values of managerialism – expressed in approaches such as monitoring employee performance, meeting targets and publicly auditing quality – somehow represent the only way to deliver change in complex 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge-based organisations (2014, p. 14).'

Accordingly, this paper considers the case for change in universities' approach to management and explores alternative approaches to leadership and management styles. Drawing on a case study of a university that recently introduced a new system of performance management, I discuss the issues which emerged to argue for a reform of management structures and a re-evaluation of the role of HRM. I contend that the most effective method of achieving any kind of reform is by adopting a bottom-up, or emergent approach. By engaging with the existing university networks (for example research groups; departments; trade unions) management can try to re-build trust and foster commitment by working collaboratively or in partnership. Such reforms potentially enable academics to regain their voice and ultimately, enable universities to deal more effectively with the pressures of an increasingly turbulent external environment.

The paper begins with a brief contextual overview of the changing landscape of higher education and discusses how this led to the emergence of the corporate university and the adoption of HRM. I then consider some of the recent literature concerning the nature of university internal governance and discuss the potential for reform arising from such debate. Details of the case study follow to illustrate how things can be done differently. Finally I draw conclusions and offer five recommendations.

### **Rise of the corporate university**

Given the scale of the changes to the landscape of higher education globally (Marginson, 2007) it is perhaps understandable that some degree of reform in the management and organisation of universities was necessary. The corporate model proposed by Jarratt (1985)

was very much of its time and swiftly became the template for the modern, managerial university (Scott, 1995). The idea that Vice-chancellors should reinvent themselves as chief executives of corporations, Heads of Department become line managers of business units and individual academics become servants of the corporation chimed perfectly with the prevailing neoliberal discourse of business efficiency and managerial prerogative. Yet not only do such notions conflict with long established academic traditions (Dearlove, 1997; Kogan, 1998), subsequent developments in the nature of work and how it is organised raise serious questions concerning the validity of such a hierarchical model.

Critics contend that there has been a clear and concerted agenda to gain control of the academic labour process (Farnham, 1999; Willmott, 1995; Wilson, 1991) through the use of a variety of audit technologies (Power, 1997) and standardisation of processes. In the corporate university, not only must academics conform to the demands of the audit culture, they are also subject to regular scrutiny by line managers who are empowered to ensure that individual academic performance is aligned with corporate objectives (Shore & Wright, 2000). Opportunities for risk-taking and creativity are constrained by a regulatory, performative and judgemental system based on rewards and sanctions for under-performance (Ball, 2003). Yet persistent management claims that such standardisation enhances the quality of the student learning experience, effectively trumps any opposition.

The role of a university is much debated (Barnett, 2013, 2011; Collini, 2012) and beyond the scope of this paper, but however we understand its core purpose, a university is surely reliant on academics to carry out the teaching and research which remain a central activity. Yet despite the fundamental importance of that role, academics find themselves having to respond to various management imperatives, which not only erodes academic freedom and autonomy, but also leads to a de-professionalisation of the role (Kimber & Ehrich, 2015; Dearlove, 1997; Halsey, 1992). It has been argued that the emphasis on managerial processes in the corporate university has led to a democratic deficit as 'advocates of managerialism do not seem to tolerate debate or questioning and prize efficiency over equity and justice' (Kimber & Ehrich, 2015, p. 85). An increase in the size of the management function in universities has arguably shifted the locus of control away from academics.

The adoption of a more management led approach is often justified on the grounds of business efficiency and cost-effectiveness. In an ever more competitive sector, it is argued, a more corporate approach to management is required in order to maintain control over a university's increasingly diverse activities and to comply with the various regulatory requirements of the sector. Universities have developed complex internal audit processes and procedures accordingly, leading to a related growth in the numbers of administrative and support functions. The emergence of the blended professional (Whitchurch, 2013) – a kind of hybrid role – muddies the water rather, but in 2015/16 there were 208,750 non-academics compared to 201,380 academics (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2017) employed in UK universities.

Human Resources (HR) is one support function that has grown significantly and also enjoyed a degree of aggrandisement in the role titles bestowed upon its personnel (Waring & Boden, 2011). Marketing, Strategy and Finance have undergone similar growth with each of these functions evolving their own management and supporting sub-structures. Emerging agendas for higher education have led to the development of newer mission focused units - Student Experience, Learning and Teaching, Employability, Enterprise and

International/Transnational Education – all of which appear to operate semi-autonomously beneath the university umbrella and with their own management structures.

There may be a strong justification for the existence of such support units but the bureaucratic machinery of the corporate university has now become so complex that there exists ‘a contradiction between the stubbornly hierarchic nature of policy implementation processes and the policy messages themselves’ (Saunders & Sin, 2014, p. 136). As is often the case, attempts to rationalise systems and increase efficiency have the counter effect, as messages get lost in the mire of red tape and obfuscatory processes.

The growth in the size and influence of the HR function is particularly significant, indicating an agenda beyond responding to government imperatives. HR has moved on from its previous incarnation as *personnel* - an administrative support function staffed by low-level clerks, to facilitate the keeping of records and to centralise the management of employment-related matters (Kaufman, 2007). Human Resource Management (HRM) is a distinctively unitarist ideology of management designed to maximise competitive advantage by taking a strategic approach to managing an organisation’s human assets (Storey, 2001). Accordingly, HRM advocates the devolution of power to line managers to directly manage and improve the performance of individuals (Guest, 1997) by monitoring performance against quantifiable targets in line with corporate objectives, via surveillance techniques (Townley, 2002) such as appraisal.

The implications of such developments in universities are twofold. First, HR departments no longer exist as a purely administrative, support function but now play a key role in developing strategies and associated policies to support overarching corporate strategies (Waring, 2013). Second, the power and authority of line managers has increased. Not only have they inherited many of the welfare duties of former personnel departments, but they are now responsible for reviewing, monitoring and rewarding the performance of academic staff and effectively dealing with any underperformance. It should be emphasised that the successful implementation of HRM is contingent upon the abilities of line managers (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Hope-Hailey, Farndale, & Truss, 2005), highlighting the importance of ongoing training and development. Where the ability of line managers is found wanting, then an individual’s experience of work suffers accordingly (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

Becoming an academic manager is now arguably an alternative career path for some and the possible consequence is an over-emphasis on academic management rather than academic leadership (Bolden et al., 2012). The former takes an institutional focus and is associated with ensuring compliance with managerial tasks and processes, whereas the latter is more concerned with academic values and identity. Significantly, academic leadership is not usually provided by those in formal management positions, but tends to come from those who ‘exemplify a specific set of values associated with high quality academic work’ (Bolden et al., 2012, p. 34) such as a senior colleague or a former PhD supervisor.

To some extent, line managers are rather constrained in their ability to *lead* rather than *manage* by the requirement for them to implement performance management – a key plank of HRM. Repeated studies have failed to deliver definitive evidence of a link between performance management/HRM and enhanced organisational performance (Guest, 2011). This is often attributed to the rather amorphous nature of HRM (Boselie, Dietz & Boon, 2005; Keenoy, 1999) and that its claims are more rhetoric than reality (Legge, 2005). It has also been suggested that performance management/HRM is entirely unsuited to environments

characterised by variability and complexity (Boxall & Macky, 2009), and is ineffective even under 'textbook' conditions (Cushen & Thompson, 2012).

The use of performance management is, therefore, particularly problematic in the context of a university, an environment characterised by variability and complexity. A university is staffed by a workforce that is, by definition, highly skilled and knowledgeable, that operates most effectively when working collectively with, amongst others, academic peers and the student body. But HRM is inherently individualistic, offering universities a one-size fits all, best-practice approach to managing their academic workforce. The diverse nature of academic work does not easily lend itself to this rather reductionist approach to management that is a continuing source of frustration for academics throughout the sector (Franco-Santos, Bourne & Rivera, 2014).

At a time when many other creative and knowledge based industries have recognised such shortcomings and are moving away from performance management (Rock, Davis & Jones, 2014) universities persist in their requirement for line managers to review and monitor individual performance through regular staff appraisal. Of the many drawbacks of the appraisal process it is perhaps the sheer amount of time taken up in advance preparation and follow-up reporting that frustrate both appraiser and appraisee in equal measure. For while there may be some intrinsic motivational value in having a developmental conversation, any such benefits tend to be negated by the highly structured nature of a discussion focused on corporate objectives, metrics and quantification of performance.

It remains difficult for many academics 'to see the problem that appraisal is intended to solve' (Field, 2015, p. 184) as there is little evidence to suggest that the professional autonomy of academics is not to be trusted and managerialism, in the shape of HRM, more effective. As a consequence there exists an identity schism between the academic manager who displays '(values *congruent with the managerial discourse*)' ...and the managed academic displaying... '(values *incongruent with the managerial discourse*)' (Winter, 2009, p. 121). Such divergence in values would appear to be inconsistent with a broader corporate mission to maximise individual and organisational performance to the ultimate benefit of the student.

There is a growing imperative for organisations to motivate and retain their knowledge workers. Such workers require high degrees of freedom and autonomy to work independently, leading many private sector corporations to flatten their hierarchies accordingly (Horwitz, Chan & Quazi, 2003). Indeed there has been something of a resurgence of traditional content theories of motivation as proposed by Maslow, Herzberg and McClelland (see for example Buchanan & Huczynski, 2016) and recognition that knowledge workers are far more likely to be motivated by intrinsic factors. For example, Pink (2009) identifies three essential elements which lead to enhanced individual motivation. These include 'autonomy, our desire to be self-directed...mastery, our urge to get better and better at what we do...purpose, our yearning to do be part of something larger than ourselves' (2009, p. 10).

Yet the homogeneous corporate target-led approach adopted by universities appears to have become entrenched, despite growing concerns about its suitability. A possible explanation for such obduracy is that a process of isomorphic rationality (Rutherford & Meier, 2014) or groupthink (Janis, 1982) appears to unite university managers in the belief that it is the only way. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that universities have moved from an approach based

on trust, collaboration and democratic accountability, to a corporate system of managerially driven performance measurement against corporate objectives.

### **Time for change?**

The previous section provided a brief outline of the ways in which managerialism has come to define the modern, corporate university. In summary, universities continue to be structured according to an outdated system of hierarchical management and internal governance with a growing network of administrative and support functions. The management of people follows a directive model heavily reliant on a metrics based approach to performance management rooted in individualistic HRM. The consequence has been an erosion of academic freedom and autonomy and a decline in trust.

As noted in the introduction, there is a growing awareness of such issues and for some, a degree of frustration that the situation should have come to this with so little apparent resistance from academics themselves (Martin, 2016). O'Byrne and Bond (2014) identify that UK higher education has become 'a site of contestation between three distinct paradigms: the *intellectual* model, the *managerial* model and the *consumerist* model' (2014, p. 577). Whilst recognising that the intellectual represents the traditional notion of a university, O'Byrne and Bond argue that the competing needs of the other two paradigms cannot be ignored and that the university needs to strike a balance – 'a triologue' (2014, p. 582) – between all three, in acknowledgement of the academy's diversified role.

Such pragmatic solutions do however require a willingness to change and seek compromise, which takes us back to a consideration of the quality of leadership in universities. Research in this field has proliferated in recent years with bodies such as the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education commissioning a UK wide survey into university leadership (Leadership Foundation for Higher Education [LFHE], 2015) and publishing a number of authoritative studies.

One such study found that universities' performance management systems are largely ineffective, based as they are around a short-term principal/agent orthodoxy that is entirely unsuited to a knowledge-based environment traditionally characterised by trust, shared values and long term outcomes (Franco-Santos et al., 2014). The requirement to quantify academic work and to demonstrate its relationship with corporate objectives is particularly problematic for academics who argue that 'the highly subjective and self-determined nature of their work simply does not lend itself to such an approach' (Waring, 2013, p. 14). Further, variability in the stances adopted by the appraiser (Field, 2015) raises questions concerning the universal effectiveness of appraisal, suggesting that its main purpose is as a monitoring and surveillance strategy.

Such systems of management fail the test of legitimacy and organisational justice (Stensaker, 2013) for many academics who perceive this to be an infringement of their professional autonomy. However, even the utility of such currently popular notions as distributed leadership 'whereby leadership is conceived of as a process dispersed across the organisation' (Bolden, Petrov & Gosling, 2009, p. 258) is open to question. For while distributed leadership seeks to move away from leader-centric, hierarchical approaches there are still concerns that such problems could even be exacerbated by a proliferation of leaders with varying styles and personalities leading, ultimately, to slower and less effective decision-making (Bolden et al., 2009).

A more promising approach identified in Bolden et al.'s (2009) study is emergent leadership which is characterised as an unplanned, bottom-up informal approach. This style of leadership 'does not adhere to clear lines of hierarchy and command, but emerges from the interplay between collective engagement and individual agency' (Bolden et al., 2009, p. 271) and thus gives everyone a role to play in the leadership of the institution. Clearly such an approach accords with notions of academic freedom and autonomy which are, of course, the very values that are compromised in the corporate university.

Emergent leadership is an idea that is starting to gain traction in the private sector where some organisations are re-examining their approach to managing knowledge workers and recognising that such individuals require freedom and autonomy to pursue the creative elements of their work (Rock et al., 2014). Alternative organisational forms based on the concept of adhocracy (Mintzberg, 1979) that promotes inclusivity, flexibility and devolution of power are being seen as the best means of engaging staff in a time of rapid change and increasing competition. Such notions hark back to an earlier form of collegial university management and unsurprisingly, there are growing calls for a return to collegiality (Burnes, Wend & Todnem By, 2014) in UK universities.

Notions of collegiality can be problematic, evoking for some images of a golden past that never was. Yet the underpinning values of democratic accountability and shared endeavour offer an important starting point and a necessary vehicle to begin to challenge the current model of command and control and to at least offer some hope that things can be done differently. Bacon's (2014) notion of neo-collegiality seeks to do just that by accepting the need for some modernisation in the context of changes to the UK higher education sector but also recognising that such changes have rather lost sight of the core purpose of universities – teaching and research. Neo-collegiality recognises that a university's key resource is a highly educated and articulate group of academics and as such, it makes little sense to exclude them from decision-making. Neo-collegiality also offers a variety of approaches to collegial decision-making that will differ across and within universities, but that are all rooted in the values of democracy, inclusivity and trust.

At a time of significant change for the academy it seems clear that there is a real need to attempt to rebuild trust between those at the top of the hierarchy and those that represent a university's greatest asset – the academics.

### **Doing things differently**

In order to illustrate the points made above, in this section I begin with a short case study that demonstrates how partnership and collaboration can have significant benefits which may, in time, start to rebuild the trust within the academy that has clearly diminished, if not disappeared.

The case institution is a medium sized post-1992 university in Wales, which I have called UniCymru.

#### **A first-rate performance management system?**

The period between 2011 and 2012 was a time of significant change in the Welsh higher education sector as a consequence of the Welsh government's reconfiguration agenda for higher education (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2009)

that advocated the creation of fewer, larger institutions in Wales. It was a time of considerable unrest for all Welsh institutions involved, with some in favour of reconfiguration and others implacably opposed to the plans. The academic union, the University and College Union (UCU), was broadly in support of the government's agenda which placed it firmly in opposition to some institutions' senior management and governing bodies. This put internal industrial relations under some considerable strain – a situation that was exacerbated by an active media campaign pursued by both the universities and UCU.

The Welsh Government's reconfiguration agenda ultimately achieved its goal of creating fewer, larger institutions. In the aftermath of the episode UniCymru's governing body sought to review the university's corporate strategy and decided that a more target-led approach was the best way forward to consolidate its position in a reconfigured sector. Accordingly the university sought to develop a system of performance management to support that agenda and introduced a scheme which included a controversial five point rating system, designed to improve individual staff performance.

Both the recognised unions – UCU for academics and UNISON for support staff - rejected the scheme on the grounds that it was highly judgemental, that ratings systems had been shown to be both ineffective and divisive when introduced elsewhere and that it was inappropriate to have a one-size fits all approach in a university. Management rejected the unions' view and introduced the system anyway. UCU immediately declared a dispute arguing that a lack of meaningful consultation amounted to de-recognition. There followed a protracted disputes procedure and at each stage of the process there was a failure to reach agreement. What had previously been a good working relationship between the management and UCU locally was put under severe pressure and was in danger of breaking down completely.

The disputes procedure was eventually exhausted and reached the final stage. This involved a meeting chaired by the vice-chancellor where both management and UCU had an opportunity to set out their respective cases. It was the judgement of the vice-chancellor that while there had not been a deliberate attempt to derecognise UCU the consultation process had fallen short of previously accepted good practice. Accordingly the vice-chancellor recommended that management and unions should get back around the negotiating table and try to reach an agreement through working in partnership. Such an outcome was acceptable to UCU and the dispute was called off. It was agreed that a joint working group should be established and once the terms of reference had been jointly agreed, negotiations re-commenced.

At the start of negotiations there was already some feedback on the implementation of the new scheme which, it was found, had not gone well. Uncomfortable with the notion of assigning a '1-5' rating to academics, most reviewers had resorted to scoring everyone at the midpoint '3' or satisfactory. Such evidence concurred with much of the existing literature and supported the original concerns of the unions. It also provided an opportunity to investigate alternative models that may be more appropriate. In terms of the dynamics of the joint working group it was this context that helped to overcome any lingering animosity from what had been quite a bruising dispute. Management were clearly very keen to find a solution to the problem and UCU were equally keen to take the opportunity to stress the benefits of collaboration and partnership working. Both parties had a vested interest in seeing the process succeed.



Drawing on the latest research from the field, UCU suggested a model that provided an opportunity for academics to reflect on their performance in a developmental conversation with the reviewer and to consider their objectives for the future. Such a scheme did not require performance to be rated. Instead the reviewer and reviewee would complete an agreed summary of the discussion, which would form the basis for the next review. All members of the joint working group supported the development of such a scheme and it was agreed to introduce it on a trial basis to be reviewed after a year. In 2016 the scheme was formally agreed.

Although the scheme did not conform to all elements of good practice – it remains a one-size fits all approach and there is no opportunity for staff to comment on their manager's performance – its main purpose was to be a developmental rather than judgemental exercise. Also, the principle of partnership working had been established which sought to reach agreement through collaboration with the recognised unions.

There are several important issues that arise from this case to which I will now turn.

Social partnership was central to the New Labour approach to developing a more harmonious approach to industrial relations strategy in the UK (Bach & Kessler, 2007). Partnership agreements were designed to give trade unions a stronger voice in workplace negotiations in exchange for accepting more flexible working practices. Such agreements have been subject to significant analysis in the industrial relations literature with many suggesting that although they do offer unions a seat at the negotiating table with management, their influence is limited and essentially on management's terms (Samuel & Bacon, 2010; Samuel, 2005). Whilst recognising the limitations of formal partnership agreements, there is a strong case to be made for the notion of management and unions working in partnership at the local level where there is the potential for significant mutual gain. Union density remains relatively high in UK universities and the adoption of partnership working would not only signal a positive intent to work collectively, but would provide a route for the university to utilise the skills of its academic workforce. It is worth looking to Scotland where following the recommendations of the Von Prondzinsky review (Scottish Government, 2012), universities are required to include on their governing bodies at least two directly elected staff members, plus a nominated trade union member from both the academic and support staff trade unions.

The case of UniCymru demonstrated the benefits of involving trade unions in partnership working but the principle can be extended to a whole range of other groups. The modern university has developed a complex network of departments, schools, teams and units in response to new and emerging missions for higher education, adding additional layers to the existing hierarchical structures. As Bolden and Petrov (2014) noted, it is often the case that the bureaucratic procedures associated with such structures actually prevent units carrying out their roles effectively, due to their lack of autonomy. It is surely necessary to devolve genuine power to these units and facilitate a more emergent approach. There are many potential benefits, from developing local leaders on the first stage of their career trajectory (Irving, 2015), to developing a more inclusive approach to leadership that enables universities to respond to opportunities with greater agility. The Teaching Excellence Framework proposals mentioned earlier in this paper provide an opportunity for universities to work in collaboration with academics in teaching departments in order to develop a strategy in an inclusive and emergent manner.

This paper has shown that the adoption of performance management in universities has been problematic and so it proved in UniCymru. The scheme that the university introduced featured a ratings scale that by its very nature, suggested a judgemental, rather than developmental purpose. Such a scale clearly prejudiced the review meeting from the outset and it was difficult for line managers to conduct the meetings in a supportive and positive manner. This was unfortunate, because if we recognise that people can benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their experiences – which we surely do in a university context – then a well conducted review meeting, carried out by an appropriately trained individual may be beneficial. It is the quality of the conversation that is important and Winter (2009) has previously noted the potential of generative conversation which can help to foster a positive atmosphere of collaboration and break down the identity schism between academic managers and managed academics (Winter, 2009). More recently Parrish (2015) has reminded us of the need for academic leaders to display ‘emotional intelligence traits related to empathy, inspiring others and responsibly managing oneself...’ (2015, p. 830). The adoption of a performance management scheme that seeks to be developmental rather than judgemental in purpose is a necessary first step in attempting to recreate conditions of trust.

The previous paragraph highlights one of the key points to emerge from the UniCymru case. That is the need for appropriate and ongoing training and development for line managers. Appraisal is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of any line manager’s role and in that respect higher education is no different (Field, 2015; Waring, 2013). It seems strange that universities – institutions which exist to educate others – do not see the need to adequately educate their own managers, but appear to endorse the notion that competence in one particular type of work automatically qualifies someone for another. The relationship between line manager and individual academic is always going to be difficult given the very nature of the university environment and there is no need to expand further here on the difficulties of herding cats (Deem, 2010). However, it is encouraging that work such as that undertaken by the LFHE is starting to demonstrate the need for universities to take leadership more seriously and that, as such, effective training and development is a crucial element.

Middlehurst (2013) argues the case strongly for a comprehensive review of universities’ internal leadership and governance structures that amounts to inverting the management pyramid. Universities deploy significant resources in developing their management control systems. The time invested in such activities – for those who develop and monitor the systems on the one hand and those who must comply with the requirements of those systems on the other - represents a massive waste of time that could be devoted to other matters, such as teaching, research and supporting students. As discussed above, there can be no clearer demonstration of the extent to which professional academics are no longer trusted by university leaders to do their job. Such a decline in trust is clearly regrettable indicating as it does the extent to which the corporate model of the managerial universities has become entrenched.

In the corporate university the management focus has been almost exclusively about creating systems to ensure conformity, standardisation and control. HRM has enabled university managers to develop such systems whilst adopting the soft rhetoric of this supposedly unitarist ideology. Such rhetoric espouses workplace harmony, commitment and a willingness to go beyond contract (Storey, 1992) for the greater organisational good. The reality is rather different. HRM is also predicated on a belief that individual performance cannot be left to chance, but needs to be closely monitored and directed by managers equipped with the power to issue sanctions for instances of under-performance.

A far more fruitful way forward surely lies in recognising the values that underpinned the academy traditionally, based as they were on trust, professionalism and collective responsibility. For as Jameson (2015) argues it is the large majority of academic staff who operate a form of invisible leadership that is ‘as much if not more effective in maintaining quality institutions than overt forms of corporate managerial authority’ (2015, p. 3). A university is a unique environment, staffed by academics who are highly intelligent, articulate and largely self motivated. In such an environment the most effective leaders are those who understand this and recognise that their role is more about enabling and support rather than monitoring and control.

### **Conclusions**

The discussion arising out of the case at UniCymru has highlighted a number of points which, if taken together, can be put forward as a means of addressing the problems inherent in the corporate university. This is not a radical agenda for change by any means and some may argue that a far more drastic set of measures is required. One idea that is gaining support is to adopt an entirely different governance model based on the values of social ownership and to create a Trust University (Boden, Ciancanelli & Wright, 2012). Such a model, regulated by trust law, effectively turns all employees into partners with formal rights to consultation in decision making. The core academic and educational purpose of the university would be defined in a legally binding trust deed, creating clear governance responsibilities, addressing managerial control, enhancing academic freedom and thus preserving in perpetuity the university’s status as a ‘community social asset and an element of the knowledge commons.’ (Boden et al., 2012, p. 21).

What is proposed here does offer an entirely achievable set of incremental reforms. Incrementalism is very often the best way to achieve lasting change, by making small shifts and building commitment gradually. Resistance is minimised as people come to accept new methods of working, or norms of behaviour, over a period of time. This logical (Quinn, 1980) approach to managing change has much in common with Lewin’s (1947) model that advocates a staged approach of unfreezing existing norms, beliefs and attitudes and gradually re-freezing around a new approach.

There remains the issue of who triggers the change and, as discussed in the introduction, there is work to be done to convince senior university managers of the need to reform. The imperative to respond to the consequences of the UK referendum on European Union membership must surely provide a wake-up call for university leaders and the opportunity to utilise the skills, knowledge and creativity of their academic workforce in formulating a response. As noted above, the case for reform has been well made by an influential group of respected academics and expert bodies drawing on evidenced based research from across the sector. Drawing on such work I suggest five proposals below.

### **Partnership and employee voice**

The case of UniCymru clearly demonstrated the benefits that can accrue when management are prepared to sit around the negotiating table with trade unions. Consultation with the recognised trade unions tackles managerialism head on, as long as it is meaningful and entered into in a spirit of cooperation. Clearly this may be problematic in institutions where the experience of industrial relations has been soured by conflict and animosity and it requires commitment on both sides of the table to make it work. However, the benefits to be gained from a strengthened employee voice are significant, providing the associated

opportunity to address concerns around academic freedom and autonomy. Issuing a commitment to partnership could be used by universities as a statement of intent that genuine change is being proposed.

Recent work on trust in organisations for the Chartered Institute of Personal and Development (Hope-Hailey, Searle & Dietz, 2012) has demonstrated the significance of the relationship between effective employee-voice systems and organisational commitment. Employee-voice is a fundamentally important area of consideration for organisations when attempting to build trust between employees and senior management (Farndale, Van Ruiten, Kelliher & Hope-Hailey, 2011). In the corporate university trust is a vital element of the psychological contract that has been eroded by the persistent demands of managerialism.

### **Reform of management structures**

A cogent argument in support of reforming internal governance structures and adopting a more collegial approach has been made by others (Bacon, 2014; Middlehurst, 2013) and such reform is surely now long overdue. Reforms to institutional governance in Scotland (discussed above) are welcome. In Wales, although the Welsh Government does not go as far as advocating union representation on governing bodies, it does want to see a greater level of strategic involvement from governors, including advising on the reform of organisational structures (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2011). The management structures that emerged and grew exponentially following Jarratt are simply too complex, top heavy and no longer fit for purpose. Flatter structures enabling devolved responsibility and decision-making are recognised as representing current best practice.

Whilst acknowledging that universities have evolved and diversified, their core purpose of teaching and research remains unchanged and in this respect academic departments represent the frontline in service delivery. Yet corporate centralisation restricts the ability of departments to operate effectively and, significantly, to respond flexibly to the needs of students. In the current competitive context and in order to meet the needs of customer oriented fee-paying students the principle of subsidiarity must surely apply (Bacon, 2012). Not only would this enable departments to respond to students more effectively but it would also enhance the academic voice in collective decision-making, which is an important first step in rebuilding trust.

### **Management training and development**

The role of line managers has developed out of all recognition and become increasingly complex and demanding. Performance management and staff appraisal, as illustrated by the UniCymru example, is one of the most challenging areas for line managers to undertake effectively. Managing complex social interactions requires a particular set of skills that come easier to some than others, which is one of the weaknesses of such a process. This is not to mention the amount of time and inevitable bureaucratic record-keeping (whether online or not) that such a process generates. Yet universities have consistently failed to provide the necessary training and ongoing development to adequately equip individuals for such a demanding role. Generic talks on the latest policies and procedures have their place but do not provide the sort of focused training that is required.

Ironically, the resources to provide such training already exist within universities, but is seldom utilised. Academic specialists in, for example, business, psychology, sociology and education all have the potential to contribute to management development programmes. Trade union representatives have direct experience of dealing with individual grievances,

disputes and conflict and could add valuable practical insights in the form of training seminars and workshops. Such a peer-learning process plays a central role in the academy and there is no reason, beyond a stubbornly resistant managerial mindset, that it should not be applied to those who seek to manage and organise the work that takes place in academic departments. The associated benefits of having appropriately trained and more emotionally aware heads of department are clear. It would provide the conditions necessary for a return to a more collegiate approach, by emphasising the developmental, rather than judgemental purpose of the role.

### **Emergent leadership**

Paradoxically universities – institutions that exist to foster learning – seem unable to apply that principle to themselves and, as a consequence, their approach to management remains wedded to an outdated command and control model. Bolden et al.'s (2009) work on emergent leadership provides a blueprint for the kind of informal, bottom-up approach that used to exist in the academy and is now recognised across parts of the private sector as being the most effective way of operating in a dynamic environment. Employee engagement increases when there is a tangible feeling of being part of decision-making, and the associated benefits of enhanced morale are clear. Universities throughout the sector are already reliant upon a form of invisible leadership (Jameson, 2015) as academics exercise an intrinsic professionalism and loyalty to the values of the academy.

It is surely time to recognise that continued attempts to micro-manage and the use of controlling HRM are entirely unnecessary and counter-productive. Universities' insistence on standardisation and metrification of processes is not only indicative of a lack of trust in academics, but also leads to a diminution in quality. Greater autonomy for academics to be more creative in the ways in which they meet their student needs should be encouraged. The complex network of bureaucratic systems and auditory processes that has grown up to ensure corporate conformity is rendered surplus to requirements when academics are trusted to fulfil the contractual duties for which they are paid. As a consequence, administrative and support units are freed up to return to the useful work for which they were originally created.

### **Re-evaluating Human Resource Management**

HRM was originally introduced into UK universities following the *Rewarding and Developing Staff in Higher Education* (RDS) initiative in England (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2001), which was designed to improve overall standards of people management and leadership throughout the sector. While the wider debate continues concerning the legitimacy of HRM, the approach has been particularly problematic in the university context. Central to HRM is a belief that performance can be improved by establishing quantifiable performance criteria and then empowering managers to direct, monitor and assess individuals in the pursuance of those criteria. Not only is such a target-led approach of questionable utility, leading, as it does, to sub-optimal performance (Seddon, 2008), the highly subjective nature of academic work does not lend itself to quantification. As a consequence, target setting in universities is a largely illusory process of little value beyond justifying the existence of line managers who are required to demonstrate that individual performance has actually been managed. Accordingly there exists little compelling evidence to suggest that performance management/HRM has led to any improvement in the performance of academics.

It is time for universities to re-evaluate their approach to people management. There remains an important role for the HR department to fulfil in its original guise as a support function.

The essential tasks of HR - *recruitment and selection, payroll, managing contracts, pensions, grievance handling* - are all of fundamental importance and will always be required in a large people based organisation. Added to that is an important role in facilitating training and development and acting as a conduit between trade unions and management. But the notion of HRM as a guiding management ideology has to be abandoned and a judgemental approach to performance management replaced by one that is employee-centred, based on values of trust, professionalism and collaborative endeavour.

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