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Responding to regulatory jolts in the English higher education sector

Gerardo David Abreu Pederzini¹

Contact details:

School of Management
University of Bath
Claverton Down
Bath
BA2 7AY
UK

Emails: gdap20@bath.ac.uk
gerardo.abreu.pederzini@gmail.com

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¹ School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, UK.

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Abstract

Throughout the world universities are having to face constantly changing environments. A particular type of important change is public policy reforms or regulatory jolts. The English higher education sector is an example of the latter, where constant regulatory jolts have been seen in past decades. Leaders at universities have needed to interpret these environmental changes and decide how to cope with them. In this paper, the case of the post-Browne Review reforms in England's higher education sector, is used in order to explore how senior leaders in universities make sense of regulatory jolts. Based on primary qualitative research, which involved 47 semi-structured interviews with very senior university leaders in England, including 24 university Vice-Chancellors, I explore how senior leaders in universities interpreted, or in other words made sense, of the post-Browne Review regulatory jolt. The paper particularly suggests that senior university leaders' interpretations might be deeply intertwined with their identity interpretations of who they are throughout these periods of turbulence.

Keywords: policy change; regulatory jolt; sensemaking; adaptation; university leadership

Introduction

Universities, as most organizations, are embedded in broader political, regulatory, economic, social and technological environments (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Denis, Lamothe, & Langley, 2001; Johnson, 1988; Kaplan, 2011; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Meyer, 1982; Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989). The purpose of the strategic management of universities, as for any other type of organization, is precisely to match a university to its (changing) environments (Burgelman, 1983; Chaffee, 1985; Collis & Rukstad, 2008; Denis et al., 2001; Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992; Mahon & Murray, 1981; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Noda & Bower, 1996). Thus, as environments change, universities strategically need to change with them (Balogun & Floyd, 2010; Denis et al., 2001; Johnson, 1988, 1992), triggering, therefore, what Sporn calls the adaptation process (1995). Among the possible environmental changes that universities could experience, one that has become truly important -and challenging- is public policy change. It could be said that public policy changes or reforms, generate regulatory jolts that impact and disturb universities. Regulatory jolts are an important form of environmental change for universities throughout the world, given the extent to which governments have sought to influence higher education (Enders, de Boer, & Weyer, 2013; Readings, 1996; Scott, 2006). England's higher education sector epitomizes precisely the case of constant regulatory jolts, as it has been subjected to considerable public policy change, especially during the last 60 years (Scott, 2013), including the expansionist Robbins Report of 1963, the Thatcherite neoliberal reforms of the 1980s, the polytechnics gaining university status in the early 1990s, the constant change in regulatory agencies, the Dearing Report of 1997 and the introduction of tuition fees that followed, the subsequent hike on fees and the beginnings of a variable fees regime during the Blair period, among many, many other regulatory jolts (Watson, 2014). These regulatory jolts have sometimes converged, while others diverged in even opposing directions. Furthermore, as de Wit recently argued in this journal, 'Changes in the environment do not automatically mean changes in universities (or other organisations). Changes are assessed, interpreted, reacted to, by actors in universities' (2010, p. 2). Thus, a question of current importance is, how do university leaders make sense of and respond to regulatory jolts?

To approach this question, I will consider not only the case of England's continuously changing higher education policy environment, but more importantly, I will focus on one of the latest and most controversial regulatory jolts: the post-Browne Review reforms. In the English higher education sector, prior to the Browne Review, universities were able to charge up to

approximately £3,000.00 to home undergraduate students, and in addition, universities received a generous teaching grant from the government too. Furthermore, the government provided several other types of grants, including the one on quality research. However, in terms of undergraduate home recruitment, quotas existed that controlled the number of students that universities could recruit. In short, before the Browne Review, universities, on the teaching side, faced major restrictions in terms of the tuition fees they could charge undergraduate home students and the number of these students they could recruit, while being at the same time significantly subsidized too. The Browne Review recommended a step forward in the direction of deregulation of both home undergraduate fees and student number controls. Following the publication of the Browne Review in 2010, the first government responses were mainly encapsulated in the White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System*, published by the Department for **Business, Innovation & Skills** (from here on BIS). The first responses from the government did not implement the Browne Review and its recommendations as such, but included, nonetheless, important changes in the neoliberal direction set by Browne, such as: lifting student number controls for high achieving students, and allowing universities to charge now up to £9,000.00 in undergraduate home tuition fees, among several others (BIS, 2011a, 2011b; Hillman, 2014; Scott, 2013; Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2011; Watson, 2014). At the same time that universities were being allowed to charge higher fees, the government reduced significantly its teaching subsidy for universities; although, other types of funding, such as quality research, have continued. The Browne Review and the first government responses (mainly encapsulated in *Students at the Heart of the System*), will be here referred as the Browne Jolt, which represents an instrumental context where to study university leaders' sensemaking of regulatory jolts, given the transformational, controversial and radical change that it incited in the English higher education sector.

Regulatory jolts

Environmental jolts are a way through which environments change, and are defined 'as transient perturbations whose occurrences are difficult to foresee and whose impacts on organizations are disruptive and potentially inimical' (Meyer, 1982, p. 515). A regulatory jolt, in particular, is a disruptive and difficult to predict perturbation, but in this case, refers specifically to a disruption of the regulatory type. Hood et al. define regulation as 'a form of steering or control system that involves a combination of information-gathering, standard-setting and attempts at behavior

modification' by an overseer who has 'official "mandate" to scrutinize the behavior of the "regulatee"' (2000, p. 284; Bozeman, 2013; deLeon & deLeon, 2002; McDermott, Fitzgerald, & Buchanan, 2013; Shaffer, 1995).

University leaders, if aware of a regulatory jolt that could affect or impact their university, might need to develop a strategy to create/recreate a fit between their university and its changing/changed environment (Chakravarthy & Doz, 1992; Denis et al., 2001; Hodgkinson & Sparrow, 2002; Johnson, 1988; Maitlis & Christianson, 2013; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). As arguably university leaders play a key role in this process of responding to regulatory jolts (Daft & Weick, 1984; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hodgkinson & Sparrow, 2002; Mintzberg, 1978), then further focus needs to be placed on how these leaders develop such responses. University leaders in responding to such jolts in their environments, are influenced by the way they interpret and make sense of the jolts, and how they might link their interpretation -or sensemaking- of their environments with their sensemaking of their own university and what this needs (Barr, Stimpert, & Huff, 1992; Eggers & Kaplan, 2013; Laamanen & Wallin, 2009; Tripsas & Gavetti, 2000). Hence, university leaders' sensemaking of a regulatory jolt (i.e. their socio cognitive process of meaning development of the discrepant or confusing cue that the jolt might entail (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2013)), is arguably an essential element to research and understand, in order to comprehend how universities and their leaders respond to regulatory jolts. The process of a university responding to a regulatory jolt then becomes heavily influenced by leaders' linking of different interpretations: their interpretation of the environment and their interpretation of their university and what this needs (among others). In short, university leaders need to translate government action to make it relevant to their contexts (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992; McDermott et al., 2013), which is why sometimes the effects of regulation could differ from what governments were expecting (Bowe et al., 1992; deLeon & deLeon, 2002).

The Browne Jolt

The regulatory jolt to be explored is the Browne Review and the UK's government initial responses to it (BIS, 2011a, 2011b; Browne, 2010; Callender & Scott, 2013; Scott, 2013; Watson, 2014). The Browne Review was an independent review of English higher education, focusing particularly and almost exclusively on home undergraduate funding, policies and regulation. Browne's

recommendations promoted the deregulation of tuition fees and student numbers, in contrast to the previous higher education system in England, where universities were constrained on how much they could charge to home undergraduates (approximately £3,000.00) and how many they could recruit (BIS, 2011b; Callender & Scott, 2013; Watson, 2014). The initial government responses to Browne differed from what Browne recommended, yet their ethos was related to Browne's. The Browne Jolt overall (i.e. Browne Review + first government responses) is the product of an incremental and historical process of quasi-neoliberal policy reformations in English higher education. The ethos of accountability, efficiency, marketization and the consumerism focus that characterized the post-Browne reforms is evidenced particularly in English higher education public policy since the 1980s (Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhardt, & Terra, 2000; Henkel, 2000; Marginson, 2013; Shattock, 2003; Shattock, 2013; Watson, 2014). Additionally, the idea of making students contribute more towards the funding of their education is illustrated in policy decisions especially since the late 1990s (Browne, 2010; Scott, 2013; Watson, 2014). Therefore, English higher education has been continuously changing. However, the post-Browne Review policy changes presented by the government between 2010 and 2011, and implemented from 2012, are particularly important as they significantly challenged certain taken-for-granted views in higher education. The core changes that the government first promoted were announced through the White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011a, 2011b); although there were other instances (e.g. the 2010 Spending Review and the Education Act of 2011 (Callender & Scott, 2013; Hillman, 2014)) where the position of the government was expressed too. Interestingly, a higher education bill to legislate changes in the sector did not materialize (Hillman, 2014; Morgan, 2012; Watson, 2013), which means that changes were introduced without much legislation, the exception being the vote in the House of Commons in 2010 to approve the hike on the tuition fees cap.

In the original changes promoted by the government, four types of regulatory disturbance can be identified (BIS, 2011a, 2011b; Brown & Bekhradnia, 2013; Hillman, 2014; Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2011). The first one is the deregulation of certain aspects of higher education, including especially the liberation of high achieving home undergraduate student numbers, so that universities could recruit then as many as they wanted, something that in the previous system universities could not do because of student number controls (BIS, 2011a, 2011b; Scott, 2013; Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2011; Watson, 2014; Wyness, 2013)). The second type of regulatory disturbance is the change in certain regulations, including the possibility for universities to charge

now up to £9,000.00 in tuition fees, a fees cap almost three times bigger than the previous one. The third type of regulatory disturbance was the incursion of new regulations, including the creation of a margin pool of student numbers to be assigned to universities charging low fees, so they could expand and compete. Finally and paradoxically, the fourth type of regulatory disturbance was the continuance and/or sometimes enhancement of previous burdening regulations, as for example the requirement of Access Agreements for universities charging maximum fees, or universities need to participate in the Research Assessment Exercise/Research Excellence Framework in order to access public research funding. The continuance of research policy is highly important because of what it says about the Browne Review. Within the British higher education sector, one of the main disappointments was that the Browne Review ended up being a very succinct analysis of the sector (both because of its final official remit and because of time pressures), focused only on home undergraduate policy, excluding other important and interacting elements of universities' work, such as postgraduate students or research. The interaction between teaching and research in England is complex and abundant, but it can be illustrated, for example, by the fact that several universities may even subsidize research (or research related) activity through teaching income. Thus, the Browne report exclusion of other elements, such as research, was seen as evidence of the incompleteness of an otherwise thoughtful, careful and well-thought report. Additionally, this created concurrent and discrepant pressures for universities on the teaching and research dimensions. On the one hand, the teaching public funding was being drastically reduced and substituted by tuition fees that students mainly pay with government backed loans. On the other hand, the public funding for research was actually being ring-fenced (HM Treasury, 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand that although this paper focuses on the Browne Jolt and its implications for undergraduate policies and funding, this jolt did not happen under *ceteris paribus* conditions. But, by contrast, other important events were concurrently pressuring university leaders. Furthermore, because of the incompleteness of the report and the government responses, the Browne Jolt left unfinished (or untouched) several topics that could and have continued changing, including the still need to address research public policies or the future powers of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Many of these unfinished businesses are currently generating further regulatory changes, for example, through new Green and White Papers, the possibility of a higher education bill, as well as further reports, reviews and policies now on research, university-industry relations, higher education

access, and postgraduate students. All of the latter have propagated and sustained an environment of constant change and jolts to which university leaders must continue responding to.

Methodology

It is clear now how the Browne Jolt was an important regulatory jolt that dramatically changed the dynamics of higher education in England, while at the same time wrapped in a complex and multi-dimensional context of continued higher education public policy changes of various types. Thus, the Browne Jolt sets an instrumental case where the sensemaking of university leaders' could be explored, as English universities' responses to this transformational jolt was without doubt influenced by the actions of university leaders, which emerged at least partially from the way these leaders made sense of the Browne Jolt. Now, sensemaking, as a socio cognitive process, depends on social interaction (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), as well as on people's cognition and language (Maitlis & Christianson, 2013), which is contingent on values, personal attributes, attention to stimuli, and experience, among other factors (Kaplan, 2011; Ocasio, 2011; Walsh, 1995). Therefore, sensemaking studies have been characterized by qualitative methodologies (see, for example, Balogun & Johnson (2004), Maitlis (2005), or Smerek (2013)). Semi-structured interviews could be particularly helpful, as they allow the researcher to access, at least partially, some of the internal life of the leader, so to understand - even if only incompletely- how is it that the leader is experiencing events and cues around him/her, and how the leader constructs interpretations of these events and cues (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Therefore, considering the approach and the focus of this paper on sensemaking, a qualitative strategy (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003), underpinned by semi-structured interviews was followed (Bryman, 2012; Fontana & Frey, 2000). In my case, a general interview protocol was used in interviews, which mapped and identified the main topics to be covered in interviews; although, I had flexibility regarding specific questions, and even novel or different topics to cover, depending on the specific situation of each interview and the opportunities that unexpectedly emerged in them. These interviews were part of a broader research project, and thus, the interview protocol included various stages. However, Table 1 summarizes the main topics that were covered in interviews and which are relevant for this paper. The interviews began with questions to build rapport between the interviewer and myself (Kvale, 1996). Then, I moved into thematic questions addressing the interpretations of university leaders of each step and event in the history and

development of the Browne Jolt. Structuring questions were used as transitional questions to change from one event to another. Finally, interpreting questions aimed to confirm with the interviewee the interpretations that I was developing so far (Bryman, 2012; Bryman & Bell, 2007; Kvale, 1996). A total of 47 in-depth semi-structured interviews were done with very senior leaders at over 23 different universities. The interviews included: 24 university Vice-Chancellors (i.e. university Presidents, sometimes also known as Chief Executives), 16 Pro-Vice-Chancellors (or equivalent), plus 7 interviewees that were involved in the design and implementation of the Browne Jolt. A second method used in order to triangulate and complete the information from interviews, as well as in preparing the interviews, was documentary analysis, especially including newspaper articles or media interviews the interviewees had already given and published. A similar approach (interviews plus documentary analysis) has been constantly followed in other efforts to research environmental change, for example, Danneels (2011), Tripsas and Gavetti (2000), Bartunek (1984), and McDermott et al. (2013), among others.

[Please insert Table 1 near here]

The first precursory step to analyse the data overlapped with data collection, as after doing interviews, I wrote brief notes regarding my first impressions. Similarly, during documentary analysis, memos were written to record first ideas. Full transcription of all interviews was then done by myself. Subsequently, the analysis was done much in line with what has been called the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), which includes a first order analysis (i.e. a descriptive analysis), which organizes the data into a descriptive narrative (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994), plus a second order analysis (i.e. a theoretical analysis), where data is further refined towards a contribution not just to explain an individual case, but to explain the underlying phenomenon and thus allowing theorization (Langley & Abdallah, 2016). In short, the first order analysis coding organizes the data descriptively, while the second order analysis coding searches for the theory that explains the observed and underlying phenomenon of interest. In line with the Gioia method and its rigor and transparency, the findings sections will show examples of relevant data, in order to justify the emergence of the proposed theory and contribution of this paper.

Findings

Regarding the ways in which university leaders made sense of the Browne Jolt, these were varied and contrasting. However, there are three sensemakings or interpretations on which I would like to focus: flexibility, enabling jolt, and outsmarting jolt. I will describe and focus on these three sensemakings, as they will enable a novel contribution regarding the possible reactions to and interpretations of regulatory jolts by leaders. Additionally, these three sensemakings will show how leaders respond to regulatory jolts by linking different interpretations, which in this case will include the interpretation of the jolt and also not only an interpretation of what the university needs, but more specifically, an interpretation of who they are and what their role is throughout such periods of turbulence.

The first interpretation regards the idea and sensemaking of the Browne Jolt as demanding flexibility, as it was conceived as being only a tiny part of a continued and constantly changing policy environment. Thus, these university leaders argued that more than having to make sense and prepare a response from their universities to a specific jolt, such as the Browne jolt, they as leaders of the university need to deal and cope with the fact that change is the only constant in English higher education. The way these leaders made sense of change was, therefore, by arguing that the most important capability of a university for these dynamic and changing policy environments, is to be flexible or adaptable, as the Browne Jolt is just one piece of a flowing and changing puzzle, which they cannot control or predict either. As a university Pro-Vice-Chancellor, for instance, explained:

You know, look at how higher education, how much it has changed in the last 20 years, who knows how it is gonna be like in 20 years' time. Things we haven't even imagined, so... build for the most flexibility you can and also you have to do it with confidence...

Table 2 provides further illustrative quotes regarding flexibility. In short, for these interviewees their sensemaking was about developing flexibility. In other words, if the higher education sector has been changing so much, then they are not just trying to figure out how to respond to specific changes, such as the Browne jolt, but instead, they are thinking more broadly regarding the necessary capabilities that their universities should have in order to be flexible and respond to anything that the environment might throw at them. The interesting point of flexibility, is the juxtaposition of two interpretations of how leaders are conceiving themselves within this whole process of responding to a regulatory jolt. On the one hand, the idea of being flexible,

acknowledges that they actually cannot control everything or predict precisely how the environment will be in the future either. Therefore, instead of trying to be the sort of Carlyle's Great Man/Woman leader that controls it all (Grint, 2005; Heifetz, 1994), they are acknowledging their impotence in some regards, and thus, are only trying to focus on developing broad and unspecific capabilities that would allow them to adapt and quickly change, regardless of what the sometimes unpredictable environment throws at them. However, the paradox emerges because this whole idea of flexibility, at the same time that it demerits the ideal of the heroic leader in control, it also revives it. In other words, leaders are accepting that they are weak in the sense that they could not predict fully how things will evolve; yet, through this idea of flexibility they are trying to beat complexity: they are trying to develop a unique, powerful and context independent tool (i.e. the capability of flexibility), through which they will be able to cope with any environment, even if they do not fully understand it. For example, the Vice-Chancellor of a university, about flexibility and its power, said: 'I think we... were beginning to develop options that could adapt to and mitigate the effect of almost any outcome really, which is, I think, you know my job really'. Thus, overall, it seems that in the sensemaking of flexibility we see the juxtaposition of the weak leader, accepting the impossibility of predicting and anticipating fully all environments, and the macho leader, believing that there is still a way to be in control through the capability of being flexible.

[Please insert Table 2 near here]

A second important sensemaking encompasses those university leaders for whom the Browne jolt was interpreted as an opportunity for them to finally change certain things in their universities that in the past they had not been able to. Thus, for these interviewees, the Browne jolt was an enabler. For instance, some of them argued that sometimes there are things that are difficult to change in universities, but if there is a crisis in the environment, then it becomes easier -using the excuse of the crisis- to convince their universities that change is needed and finally implement it. As a university Chief Operating Officer mentioned: 'So yes, absolutely, conditions changing in the external environment can be used effectively by leaders, in order to effect change internally'. Here, the juxtaposition of the impotent leader and the heroic Great Man/Woman leader seems to take a step forward in the direction of the heroic identity. It is clear, on the one hand, that since these leaders are accepting that the Browne Jolt produced a crisis, then they are accepting that

some things have gone outside their control. Yet, on the other hand, they seem ready to propose an interpretation where they take control back, by arguing that they could use the crisis to enable some change that they had always aimed for. For instance, the Vice-Chancellor of a university described his experience of aiming to shift the culture of his university from an extremely research focused culture, to a balanced culture focused on both research and teaching. However, this Vice-Chancellor found significant challenges, as the university resisted this change. Thus, the Browne Jolt was instrumental for him, as it evidenced to the faculty how important the students are. As the Vice-Chancellor himself explained:

...because now, felt one way or another it is terribly likely we will have higher fees, went on to giving me levers to say, the students really matter.... We must have a better staff student ratio. It all ties together, if you can afford. So I think it went on being a very benign environment for me, for what I wanted to do.

Table 3 provides further examples of quotes regarding the Browne jolt as an enabler. In short, for this group of university leaders their sensemaking of the Browne Jolt was very instrumental. Some of them might not have liked the reforms, yet they recognized that because of the reforms they could now push their universities to introduce change that in the past had been resisted. By reclaiming their control over the situation through their feeling of using the Browne Jolt instrumentally as an enabler for their plans and visions for their universities, these leaders managed to continue the juxtaposition of the weak vs. the macho leader, although shifting the balance a bit more towards the heroic interpretation of the leader in control.

[Please insert Table 3 near here]

A final sensemaking I would like to discuss, is the one of outsmarting the jolt. In this case, university leaders would acknowledge that the jolt presented challenges; however, they would claim not to be shocked or stressed about it, as they found a way to outsmart the system. For example, the Vice-Chancellor from one university, discussed the problem of at which level to set the university's tuition fees. Originally, it was expected by the government that universities would spread their fees throughout the £6,000.00-£9,000.00 range, with some charging at the bottom of the range, while others at the top. It was assumed that this would happen, as the government expected that some universities would try to take advantage of the special pool of extra students that was created by the government for universities that charged low fees. However, as it is now

well known, most universities ended up charging the cap or near it. For instance, ‘Average tuition fees for 2013-14 were £8,507 (£8,263 after fee waivers)’ (Taylor & McCaig, 2014, p. 18). In the case of this particular Vice-Chancellor, his interpretation was that it could be possible to benefit from both opportunities: charging a very high fee at the cap, and accessing the market and opportunities that were opened for universities charging low fees. The way in which this Vice-Chancellor aimed to take advantage of both opportunities was by using the partner Further Education Colleges, of which his university accredits their degrees. This is how the Vice-Chancellor explained it:

Of course, there was something else that we could do, and that was that we had a number of partner colleges, further education colleges, which offered UniA’s degrees and they were priced at £6,000.00 pounds, and what could happen was that those institutions could bid directly to the funding council for numbers, and we could, and then we could use the numbers that they had previously received to make up for some of the losses that we had. So for the first year we were able to claw back at least half of the loss of places from core and margin, and with that, with the numbers that we were able to recruit through AAB, then we would bring too much more than before. And in fact in the first year..., and we actually over recruited, we had to pay a fine.....

In other words, the Vice-Chancellor’s argument is that by charging the highest fee at his university, they could compete for high achieving students (i.e. those with AAB A-levels), whose numbers were now deregulated and with the high fee bring more funding to the university. On the other hand, by working with partner Further Education Colleges, which would charge lower fees, his university could access the opportunities the government was opening for universities charging low fees. Table 4 shows another two cases of Vice-Chancellors that described how they allegedly outsmarted the jolt. The interpretation of outsmarting takes even one further step towards the direction of the heroic leader. Here, the voice of the impotent leader is weakened, although it does not completely disappear, because leaders still acknowledge, first of all, that there was a crisis. Nevertheless, in this case these leaders did not need to invoke previous goals to which they could connect the crisis in order to turn it into an enabler, neither did they need to invoke some super powerful and all-encompassing flexibility capability. By contrast, in this case, leaders faced the Browne Jolt tête-à-tête, as the ultimate heroic leader would have, and they claim to have allegedly won the fight against it.

[Please insert Table 4 near here]

Discussions and Conclusions

Flexibility (i.e. the jolt as part of many unpredictable changes which require universities to be flexible so to be ready for anything), enabling jolt (i.e. the jolt as enabler for previously intended but unrealized goals), and outsmarting jolt (i.e. the leader as being able to face tête-à-tête the jolt and beat it) are three important ways of making sense of regulatory jolts, which can contribute to our understanding of the ways that leaders make sense and react to regulatory jolts. The literature on regulatory change acknowledges -classically- several different styles through which an organization, including universities, could respond to regulation. Response styles usually addressed in the literature, could be classified in terms of: anticipating, reacting, defending or proactivity (Engau, Hoffmann, & Busch, 2011; Koberg, Chesley, & Heppard, 2000; McDermott et al., 2013; Meyer, 1982; Oliver & Holzinger, 2008; Shaffer, 1995).

Anticipators respond to environmental jolts before it has happened (Engau et al., 2011; Oliver & Holzinger, 2008). Thus, anticipators try to adjust ex-ante to the shock. By contrast, reactors wait for a regulatory jolt to happen. Adapters would be an example of reactors, which translate the jolt and adjust it to their organizational contexts (Bowe et al., 1992; Engau et al., 2011; Koberg et al., 2000; McDermott et al., 2013; Meyer, 1982; Shaffer, 1995). Defenders seek to resist new regulation, as the status quo may be beneficial to them (Mahon & Murray, 1981; Oliver & Holzinger, 2008; Smith & Mick, 1985). Finally, proactivity is about organizations trying to influence regulatory development, even if they are not anticipating or experiencing a regulatory jolt (Engau et al., 2011; Meyer, 1982; Oliver & Holzinger, 2008; Yoffie & Kwak, 2001). Additionally, the previous four classes (anticipators, reactors, defenders and proactive organizations) may overlap. Based on this framework, we can easily realize that in the case of flexibility, this is a sensemaking that is consistent with anticipators, although it is presented in an arguably different and unusual way than the classic picture of an anticipator. The classic anticipator would try to predict the environment and start adapting to changes in it ex-ante. Yet, flexibility is not about full prediction. The only thing these interviewees predicted was that more change would keep happening, but actually because they felt they could not fully predict future change, they made sense by arguing that the most important thing was to be flexible, so that their universities could adapt and respond in the future to anything. In short, as Shattock, these interviewees had accepted that ‘the future is infinitely less predictable’, except for the certainty of change (2000, p. 95). Therefore, the flexibility sensemaking is arguably a novel expression of anticipators, where

the only thing that is being anticipated is further change, but the dream of predicting that further change precisely has been given up. Now, this dimension of giving up something, evidences that the leaders' interpretation (i.e. sensemaking) of the Browne Jolt is deeply intertwined with their interpretation of themselves and their leadership. In other words, it becomes evident that leaders' interpretation of their own identity, or in short the answer to the question 'who am I?' (Smerek, 2013, p. 374), is deeply interrelated to their interpretation of the jolt. In the case of flexibility, we saw, for instance, how these leaders had to acknowledge their impotence regarding everything that they could not predict or anticipate. Yet, the standard heroic leadership identity that is certainly preponderant as part of most leaders' development (Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Mabey, 2013), re-emerged through the idea of flexibility. So that the leader could feel comfortable with its impotence, as long as the university was developing this super powerful capability of flexibility, which would allow it to face any challenge, even those, that the leader could not anticipate.

On the other hand, the enabling jolt sensemaking, is related to a kind of reactors, although these interviewees do not fully fit with the category. The instrumentality of the enabling jolt sensemaking, actually fits closer with a newer category McDermott et al. call extrapreneurs, meaning those who 'add extra dimensions to mandated change' (2013, p. S93). Thus, for the enabling jolt sensemaking, it was not simply an issue of what change the Browne Jolt is demanding from universities, but how could university leaders use this jolt to their advantage in order to demand now from their universities other changes that would have been difficult to achieve in the past. Interestingly, the enabling jolt sensemaking, juxtaposes once more the two paradoxical faces of the identity struggle of these leaders. On the one hand, leaders acknowledge the jolt is a crisis outside their control, but they try, on the other hand, to connect this crisis to their previously frustrated plans and goals for the university. So that now, the heroic leader, through its response to the jolt, seems to be emerging like the Phoenix to reclaim its macho authority over the university, as the university is finally following the leader's wishes.

Finally, the outsmarting jolt sensemaking, in the standard categorization of responses to regulatory jolts (i.e. anticipating, reacting, defending or proactivity), seems to fall in the category of defending. In this case, leaders had no problem saying they faced tête-à-tête the jolt, which they acknowledged as a crisis and thus accepted their impotence in that regard, yet they say that from that confrontation with the jolt they came out victorious like Hercules. Thus, it is evident that once more the leaders' identities are deeply intertwined with their interpretation of the regulatory jolt,

while at the same time, it seems that their identities entail a struggle, like in the previous two sensemakings. This struggle is not fully surprising, as it is widely acknowledged that during periods of significant change, leaders and managers can struggle with conflicting identities and identity ideals (Clark and Geppert, 2011; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). In this case the identity struggle is between the dimension of acknowledging their impotence as humans, and their wish to fulfill the standard heroic archetype of the macho leader in control of everything, and thus in control of the jolt. This struggle could be essential in order to understand how universities are responding to regulatory jolts, as sometimes if leaders' sense of impotence overwhelms them, the university might not find the right push and thrive to confront the jolt. While, by contrast, other times if leaders sense of macho leadership and being in control overtakes them, then they might push for exaggerated reactions or risk taking. So far in the three sensemakings analyzed in this paper, it seems, nonetheless, that the three responses, although in different degrees and intensities, were able to balance the two dimensions of the identity struggle of leaders. Table 5 summarizes the implications of the findings of this paper, in terms of the interconnections of leaders' identities and organizational responses to a regulatory jolt.

[Please insert Table 5 near here]

In summary, universities throughout the world are facing ever more complex and changing environments, where public policy and regulation are particularly constantly evolving. This changes in public policy impact universities and require from their leaders to make sense of them and respond to them. England is a paradigmatic example of the latter, where especially in the last 60 years we have seen a plethora of regulatory reforms. One of the latest was the very controversial reforms following the Browne Review, which I called the Browne Jolt. The Browne Jolt changed many of the taken for granted assumptions in English higher education, first of all by trebling undergraduate tuition fees, and second and most importantly, by deregulating student numbers and thus introducing increased competition in the sector. By studying a community of university leaders in England, I have suggested that leaders made sense of the Browne Jolt in many different ways, however, on three very important ones I focused. The first one is flexibility, where leaders anticipated more change in the future. However, by contrast with classic anticipators, in this case university leaders were not wondering about how exactly those future changes would be, but simply that more changes would come, and hence the key response from them was to improve the

flexibility of their universities so they could be ready for anything. The second sensemaking was enabling jolt, where leaders believed that the pressures of the regulatory change should be used to enable other changes that have previously been frustrated. This sensemaking I argued is best explained not through the classic classification of anticipators, defenders, reactors and proactivity, but through a newer one called extrapreneurs. Finally, I explored the outsmarting jolt sensemaking too, where leaders were now facing tête-à-tête the jolt, as classic defenders, and claimed to have come out victorious from this fight with the Browne Jolt. Most importantly, the study presented here has evidenced the intertwining between the process of leaders' making sense of regulatory jolts, and the process of making sense of their own identity (i.e. of who they are during these turbulent times the jolt has generated). Evidently, it was seen that in terms of identity there is a struggle in leaders, between the dimension of accepting their impotence against the powerful forces of the jolt, and the other contrasting dimension of trying to fulfill the classic archetype of the great heroic leader in control. Different interpretations of the jolt seemed to be connected in different ways to the identity struggle of leaders. And, since all of the explored universities are universities that have survived reasonably well the Browne Jolt (as it is the case for most universities in England), then certainly the question emerges on how important each of the dimensions of the identity struggle is. In other words, could we say that the sort of macho heroic stereotype of the leader is necessary for leaders to wake up and face a storm? Or, even more importantly, when is the leader more deluded, when feeling impotent or when feeling powerful and heroic? These are questions which absolute answers might perpetually elude us, yet, through this paper I hope a step forward has been taken in the direction of enhancing our understanding of the connections between leaders' sensemaking and organizational responses to regulatory jolts.

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