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Research Domain: Management, Leadership, Governance and Quality

Title of proposal: How academic managers talk about strategy process: roles, practices and rationales of strategy engagement

Girotto Michele¹; Francesc Xavier Llinàs¹, ¹Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, UNESCO Chair of Higher Education Management, Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

This study focus on strategizing in practice from the viewpoint of academic manager's experiences and practices in strategy implementation. The strategy process of an organization creates and implements strategy. Although this process influences the activities of many members of the organization, strategy research has only recently started to become interested in the activities of practitioners and practices in strategizing. Therefore, studying strategizing entails giving more room to explore how different organizational actors engage in institutional strategy process. Specifically in the context of professional organizations, studying strategizing can result event more complex given the popular concepts like resistance to change, staff understanding and subunits goals or control structures and practices. This study analyzes the strategy implementation in three types of universities and explores variations of implementation practices and its outcomes within and across cases, as well as patterns of behaviours in the use of strategic planning by different academic managers.

Paper Outline

The paper will explore the academic manager's experiences in the use of strategy text and their role in strategy implementation process in different typologies of higher education institutions. As such, the activities, practices and perspectives involved in the construction and implementation of strategy are studied through narratives of academic managers regarding their views and roles within the strategy process. In this manner, this study uses a qualitative design based on multiple case studies, with semi-structure interviews with top and middle academic managers in three typologies of universities within the Spanish higher education system: Technological University, Regional University and Research University.

The construct of "strategic planning" has been widely investigated by a great number of scholars and there is now a vast literature on planning for business enterprises and governmental organizations. In the

specific context of higher education, a broadly range of literature on strategy, strategic planning and strategy change can be found (e.g. Birnbaum 2000; Davies and Thomas 2002; Davies 2004; Keller 1983). Various authors (e.g. Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Denman 2005; Askling and Christensen 2000; Deem and Brehony 2005) attribute strategic planning's immediacy with higher education to development in the new public management approach to state services, greater autonomy and self regulation being afforded to higher education institutions. Others authors highlight the need for higher education to respond to challenges through embracing greater management capacity (Amaral et al. 2003), with the creation of more flexible and effective administration, pinpointing challenges arising at institutional governance and managerial levels.

Thereupon, the formulation and implementation of strategy in universities are not simple, as the different interest groups in the university pursue their own goals in relative isolation with little collective strategic action for the university as a whole. Also, the higher education landscape and different governance systems in various contexts have influenced on strategy development. In addition, the development of different forms of management has been closely connected with the structure of universities, especially public institutions. As such, the activity of developing strategies and putting them into practice must be understood within the institutional larger context, framed in the diversity of interests that characterizes the collective action (Townley 2008). In general, the emphasis on practice illustrates how the interaction between individuals, activities and the context in which they are located, are socially integrated and articulated and are interpreted through stories and narratives that create meaning about the defined issues (Brown and Duguid 1991).

Correspondingly, strategizing involves several people, and it is based on the idea that organizational actors ensure mediation between action and cognition through conversations on the day-to-day basis, thus contributing to the structuring of strategic change processes (De la Ville and Mounoud 2003). The process of strategizing usually involves a lot of talk and text (e.g. meetings, presentations, conversations, etc.) in like manner the outcomes of strategizing are also discursive in their nature (e.g. strategic plans, vision statements, official speeches, etc.) (Maitlis and Lawrence 2003). Hence, strategic discourse is not unanimous enterprise but a polyphonic project that receives different kinds of emphasis in different contexts (Seidl 2007), that is to say that strategy discourse can be used by managers in different ways for their own benefit (Suominen and Mantere 2010).

Thereupon, issues of contexts, power, politics, emotions and a lot of other factors all add to the complexity of strategy formulation and implementation. As argued by Hrebiniak (2006) while the implementation view would characterize the success of the strategy realization in terms of organizational members activities being redirected in a specific way, the usefulness and usability of the official strategy possibly should also be treated as a success factor for strategy realization in order to confront popular concepts like resistance to change, staff understanding and subunits goals or control structures and practices.

This study, based on three case studies within different typologies of universities, will address the experiences of academic managers in strategy implementation through their narratives and will explore practices of strategy implementation and the role of strategy text in practice. Notwithstanding, few studies

have taken, as a central focus of analysis, particular in the context of universities, the artefact (strategy texts) itself and the patterns of behaviours when it comes to be used, and what implications it brings for the strategy implementation outcomes.

The exploitation of multiple sources of data allows the identification of distinct patterns of narratives regarding strategy implementation practices and effectiveness as well as contextual elements which enables or constrains academic manager's engagement in strategy development. Accordingly, the analyses rely on a holistic understanding of narratives of practices based on multiple perspectives of actors involved in strategizing activities to account for variations in practices, behaviours and contextual elements across cases.

The analyses explore in this paper lead to propositions about circumstances that allow for certain patterns of institutional strategy alignment to emerge, and about patterns of behaviours depending on the actor's responses for adopting consensus or conflict upon the function and utility of the institutional strategy text in their daily usage. The developed concepts and propositions contribute to the streams of literature on higher education management by exploring the need for broader exploration of strategic planning implementation effectiveness in the higher education sector, encompassing conceptualizations of strategic planning performance measurement criteria in higher education, as well as in attending more closely the socio-cultural contexts from which strategy arises.

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