

## 'Teachers' to 'academics': the implementation of a modernisation project at one UK post-92 university

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### Abstract

Among the many external forces that have impacted upon institutions, league tables have been the dynamic to which universities across the world are now responding. Following the appointment of a new vice-chancellor at one post-92 UK university, a modernisation project was introduced aimed at maximising the institutions' research standing. For the institutional actors, the university's lecturers, this modernisation project demanded a change in their working practices from one which had focused on teaching related activities to a situation where an emphasis was to be placed upon research. This study examines how university teachers at this institution understood and responded to the modernisation project to acquire research skills and provides an insight into a path-breaking strategic plan that was enacted within an historically dependent setting. It muses on the dialectics of institutional path dependency and the path breaking effect of a modernisation project that was stimulated by new managerialism.

### Keywords

Neo-liberalism, academic staff, management, higher education, post-92, path-dependency, modernisation

### Introduction

A change in a university's chief executive provides a moment in the narrative of the university when fundamental change is anticipated.

The arrival of a new vice-chancellor at Forest University (for anonymity, Forest is the pseudonym used to describe the post-92 British university in which the research that is reported upon in this paper was undertaken) set an ambition for the future during the autumn of 2005, which was to recast the university's position from a teaching-led university to one which is located within the hierarchy of research-led universities. This modernisation project was set to run between 2006 and 2012.

The university considered that it needed a more balanced economy where research, enterprise and education were equal partners. The vice-chancellor identified that it would be necessary to change the academic staff footprint of the university from a position which he described as being dominated by 'teachers' to one where 'academics' would prevail.

As a case study, this article considers the implementation of a policy, or modernisation project, at an English university where its origins and structures have been historically determined and are deeply set.

### **Background to Forest University**

Before providing further consideration to the competitive nature of higher education, and to put this study into context, what follows is a brief history of Forest University, its demographics up to the implementation of the modernisation project, as well as further information on the UK higher education system in general.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Forest was a college of Technology, but towards the end of the decade it became an institute of higher education. In 1992, following the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), the institution was granted university status having been a polytechnic for around just two years. With the exception of one polytechnic which was merged with a university in the mid-1980s, all of the remaining thirty-four was granted university status following the 1992 Act of Parliament. As with other ex-polytechnic universities, Forest continued to place an emphasis on offering undergraduate and post-graduate taught degree programmes which had a professional or a vocational focus. Unlike the "old" or pre-1992 universities, Forest did not follow the allocation of research resources and it had less than 10% of its academic staff involved in any form of research.

Currently, across the UK's 168 higher education institutions, there are over 2.3 million students with more than 181,000 academic staff working in them. In 2010, Forest University employed fewer than 700 academic staff (full-time and part-time) and had an enrolment of more than 18,300 students (HESA 2014) across six academic schools.

### **The incentives for change**

The changing structure and marketisation of the UK's HE environment gained momentum following the introduction of Thatcher's neo-liberal project and has continued throughout successive governments of New Labour and to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in power today. Whilst the marketisation of HE can be traced back to the 1960s, a decade during which the Robbins Review was published in 1963 and a dual system of universities and polytechnics existed, higher education institutions (HEI's) were placed into even greater competition in 1986, following the introduction of the Research Selectivity Exercise (RSE) not just for position in league tables but also for the employ of academics with a research reputation (Robertson 2010).

In 1992 the abolition of the line between the binary system of polytechnics and universities took place and permitted the UK's polytechnics to change their title to that of university. Essentially, this allowed them to compete in a single marketplace for students, certainly on the basis of their name, on a more level playing field with the traditional university. Having a single structure for universities

in the UK, however, did not ensure that institutions were seen as being equivalent, and today there still is an informal hierarchy as they compete on the basis of academic standing, influence and wealth. Leading this hierarchical structure are the twenty-four research intensive Russell Group universities, predominantly followed by the remaining research led traditional universities, with the post-92, or new universities, below them.

For the last two decades in particular, there have been significant changes in the UK's HE sector where the number of HEI's have increased vastly to meet government policy directives. Alongside this increase in the number of institutions the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, an Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom, "stimulated institutional competition" (Hodgson and Spours 2006, 681) and the sector responded by seeking to develop entrepreneurial competitive activities.

The increasingly competitive landscape of higher education demands institutions to assess the potential of their activities at all levels. Along with many other universities across the globe, Forest has endeavoured to adapt to government imposed regulatory control systems that are aligned to New Public Management (NPM) and New Managerialism. For higher education in the UK in particular, the practice of NPM is central to institutional attention on climbing league tables and the recruitment of high calibre students and academics. NPM is also responsible for goal driven agendas and the internal self-evaluation and external competitive measures of outputs (Marginson, 2013). One significant measure in the UK which has been in existence for almost 30 years is the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) (now known as the Research Excellence Framework or REF) which serves to assess the quality of university research outputs. To date, there have been seven reviews. The first was known as the Research Selectivity Exercise (RSE) and was carried out in 1986. The most recent was completed in 2014 (REF 2014). As Willmott (2003, 129) suggests, performing well in these "peer review[ed]" audits provides a "halo effect" where funding from private sources and corporate sponsors as well as that obtained from the higher education funding councils is allocated to institutions which perform best and whose "research [is] of the highest quality" (HEFCE 2009, 1).

NPM and the RAE are aimed at ensuring accountability in the use of public money. Both introduce private sector style commercial and market considerations which are ubiquitous across UK public sector organisations and they have acted as the incentive structures for Forest to recast its position. The presumption of the future, therefore, acted as a catalyst for policy change at Forest that reflects a globally competitive higher education.

### **A globally competitive higher education**

Higher education (HE) is driving economic development around the world and as the importance of knowledge in the generation of wealth is recognised it increasingly becomes central to economic policy (Harris 2005). The need for governments to advance their knowledge-based economy is important as skilled workers and the research and innovation developed by HE institutions fuels competition (Vincent-Lancrin and Kärkkäinen 2009).

Governments' policies relating to competitiveness have been introduced with the intention that HE is brought into the global trading system (Robertson 2010). Universities have responded by extending their reach to recruit international students, as well as developing their other core activities of

research and enterprise. Despite universities maintaining differences between their missions, their management practices appear to have converged to those that fit the construct of new managerialism. Increased regulatory pressure from governments appears to have coerced HEIs to sustain external legitimacy and in periods of such uncertainty, institutions have demonstrated mimetic tendencies as they imitate or model practices on institutions that they deem to be more successful – universities have also adopted processes, structures and practices associated with those of the professional associations to which the university managers and administrators belong. These observations, which are explained by the work of DiMaggio and Powell, indicate that institutions have become “isomorphic” (1983, 147) as a result of coercive, mimetic and normative processes, but also, they are indicative of a changing structure where, globally, marketisation that is close in form to textbook markets is influencing the HE environment (Marginson 2012).

### **League tables and university rankings**

University league tables based upon a set of weighted indicators, which were initially introduced to make institutions more accountable amid rising student enrolments, have grown in popularity across the world. For example, *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Times* all rank universities within the UK, whilst *Maclean's* in Canada, *The Australian* in Australia, *La Repubblica* newspaper in Italy, *Die Zeit* in Germany and the Spanish *El Mundo* newspaper, to name a few, also rank their universities. As these rankings have evolved, so too has their popularity with stakeholders in considering institutional reputation. It is widely acknowledged that achieving gains within the league tables increases brand reputation which in turn helps to develop an institutions market reach for overseas students as well as for research grants and acting as quality assured hubs for teaching and research activities in other regions. Importantly, universities can improve their rankings if they align themselves appropriately with the particular measures that the league tables adopt to construct their “organizational report cards” (Dill and Soo 2005, 496) where it is widely accepted that research output is one of the significant measures. In a knowledge-driven economy a university’s intellectual credibility is exemplified by its performance in research and, in turn, performing well in league tables provides universities with institutional prestige, a more recognisable brand as well as the opportunity to attract greater levels of research funding (Lucas 2006). Clearly, then, universities who improve their performance in research are also likely to gain a higher position in the league tables.

Global media agencies that maintain databases of comparative data stimulate competitiveness and entrepreneurialism between institutions (Robertson 2010). The Thompson Reuters Web of Knowledge, for example, provides users with the ability to find high-impact journal articles and amongst other things provides access to bibliographic and citation information. Global league tables like the Times Higher QS and the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), also known as the Shanghai Jiao Tong launched in 2003, provides global university rankings on education performance and reputation and provides key actors like universities and policymakers with a basis upon which the legitimacy of the global university is be measured. As research dominates more highly than teaching and learning in the world’s league tables (OECD 2008; Marginson 2012) it is widely acknowledged that institutions with a high profile in research will tend to fair much better in these tables.

In relation to all of the dynamics discussed so far, senior managers at Forest recognised that it was necessary for their institution to be aligned with the definition of academic quality, where research is seen as being fundamental to the reputation of institutions. This recognition aligns with Dill and Soo's study which explored distinctions between the measurements of academic quality in league tables across Anglophone countries, where they highlighted that research is a "prominent shared measure" (Dill and Soo 2005, 499) and that it is seen as significantly more important than teaching (Barnett 2003; Lucas 2004; Dill and Soo 2005; Harris 2005; Lucas 2006; Sikes 2006; Young 2006; Marginson 2012).

A comparison and analysis of university ranking systems undertaken by Dill and Soo supports this recognition as they refer to the prominence of research as being "assessed primarily by staff qualifications and the ability to attract research grants" (Dill and Soo 2005, 499). Forest University's managements' attempt to improve its performance in the UK's 'home' league was therefore to be achieved by having more academic staff hold doctorates and to pursue greater levels of research which was to include applying for research grants and publishing in international journals.

As evidenced in the burgeoning literature, there is much debate about the perceptions of the importance of research in relation to that of teaching in HE across the developed world and how consumerist expectations might be met. What is under-researched, however, relates to the changing of staff footprints following the implementation of modernisation projects in settings which were historically determined. Using the context of organisational change in UK higher education, this article provides an insight into a path-breaking strategic plan that was enacted within a historically dependent setting. The study, which was carried out within a single, technology based school at a British university, muses on the dialectics of institutional path dependency and the path breaking effect of how a modernisation project was stimulated by new managerialism.

## **Methodology**

It is clear from considering similar methodological studies that researchers either relied entirely upon documentary sources for data gathering (Parker 2008) or used documentary data in conjunction with interviews (Young 2006) which helped to understand and assess the constructs of everyday community life (Berg 2007; Cohen et al 2007; Punch 2005). This research project which aimed to gain an 'insider's view of a particular group' (Savage 2006, 385) was necessarily located within an interpretivist philosophical tradition and employed research instruments drawn from qualitative approaches to give greater breadth and depth to the data collection and analysis. The approach primarily made use of semi-structured interviews and document analysis but also adopted a survey to help with participant selection. This approach permitted deep probing of the research problem, and enabled a merging of data for comprehensive analysis (Creswell 2009). It also provided a means for triangulation as different sources of data could be compared, corroborated and validated as the study proceeded (Deren et al 2003). The methodological approach for this study was, therefore, similar to that adopted by Young in her research.

Whilst participant observation is normally seen as the preferred method of data collection for research in culturally mediated constructs (Punch 2005), this was seen as being problematic for this study as the working lives of academic staff tend to be more solitary than in other spheres.

University lecturers have both autonomy and academic freedom and accordingly the environment in which to observe their understanding and how they respond and acquire the knowledge and skills that enable them to become *academics* would be restrictive. Due to the likelihood of problems associated with this, the use of digitally recorded individual semi-structured participant interviews was chosen. A document analysis of formal institutional documentation, memoranda, emails and reports was made as these could be treated as a source of data (Denscombe 2010) with the knowledge that their authenticity is guaranteed and having the benefit that they would help to corroborate the findings obtained through the interviews.

Analysis of the dataset derived from the survey of academic staff employed in the school identified around twenty potential participants based upon profiles which were representative of a wider community. The criteria for selection required candidates to be in post both before and after the implementation of the modernisation project and that their profiles were aligned to what the institution discourse described as “teachers”, because they were seen as being part of an “under-qualified academic staff base” (Forest University 2007). Typically, they were mid-career and in their mid-40s. They did not hold a doctorate and their highest qualification was a master’s degree, though for some an undergraduate first degree was their highest qualification. They were not involved in winning research grants and contracts and they did not publish in academic journals or supervise doctoral students. Their focus was, however, on teaching and learning and the programmes that they taught as well as having a general commitment to students (Forest University 2006).

Three females and four males agreed to take part in the interviews which represented a relatively high proportion of those eligible to participate under the criteria set for selection. Formal ethics approval was obtained prior to the commencement of the study, participation was voluntary and the participants were free to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was maintained by the use of pseudonyms.

The interview process consisted of two rounds of interviews that took place over a period of six months between 2011 and 2012. Typically, the duration of each interview was around 1 hour 15 minutes. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the way in which university teachers at Forest understood, responded to and acquired the knowledge and skills that enabled them to become what the institutional discourse described as academics. Through a framework of seven over-arching lines of enquiry, the semi-structured interviews consisted of a series of sub-questions which provided an exploration of actor understanding of the modernisation project. In addition to exploring actor understanding of the terms “teacher” and “academic”, questioning was also directed to drill down and understand what, if any, were the institutional mechanisms to support and engage staff. Consideration was also given to the personal and professional conditions that may have enabled or impeded an individuals’ transition to becoming an “academic”.

In the first set of interviews respondents were asked to reflect back on their experiences and to consider institutional life prior to the implementation of the modernisation project. The second set of interviews took place following analysis of the first round and focussed on actor responses for the period in which the project was implemented. This approach provided an opportunity to juxtapose the different perspectives that were drawn and as Patton (2002) notes, this provides a much richer

source of data. Using different data collection techniques allowed for triangulation and for findings relating to the same situation to be brought together.

Data analysis, whilst commencing simultaneously with data collection, did follow the field work as an integrated set of activities which ensured an interpenetration of the data with its analysis (Ezzy 2002). Dominant themes and stories were identified against the prevailing questions for each of the interviews; these were then extracted and compared to those obtained from previous interviews with the other respondents. This system of analysis offered a mechanism whereby specific phrases and terms were readily identified. This was important because the versions of events and stories of the participants often communicated significant themes that explained the cultural arena (Rubin and Rubin 1995) of the organisation.

### **Discussion of findings**

Athanasiaides and Patramis advise that the stable path followed by organisations is “characterised by a high degree of sedimentation and taken-for-grantedness” (2002, 612). After gaining university status, Forest maintained differentiation from the pre-92 universities by continuing with the legacies of its LEA (Local Education Authority) and polytechnic foundations and this was seen as central to the development of the institution along paths of continuity. Responsibility for running the university’s schools and departments continued to be delegated to those who worked within them, and these actors continued to recognise the need for a commitment to teaching and learning and maintaining fiscal prudence by concentrating on increasing student numbers and not pursuing activities where there was no net gain in income. The scope of the organisation, therefore, reflected the critical mass or dominance of its staff. The roles of academic staff changed very little and the vast majority maintained their teaching loads of around eighteen hours per week and spent the remainder of their time involved in the individual supervision of students, preparing for their next lecture, assessing student work or developing new courses. Respondents commented that,

“I was more involved in student support, so my typical day was very much about being available. I spent a lot of time on developing teaching materials, it was all very much focussed on how to deliver, how to engage students and how to assess students. My normal day was pretty much totally student focussed.” (Bethany)

“Working life was entirely about students and management of the programmes.” (Imogen)

“All of our courses were publicised as being vocational courses and we were very, very proud of the fact that if you came and did our courses then you’d be highly employable at the end of it.” (Damian)

“We were doing degrees for industry, we linked with industry on our degrees and students got jobs. We were very quickly saying we were one of the top universities for employment and I remember some marketing people saying, ‘look, if you go to XXXX University you’ve got less chance of getting a job than if you go with us’.” (Michael)

The respondents acknowledged that whilst particular developments had taken place over the years, these changes were not recognised by them as being particularly significant. They occurred

incrementally over relatively long periods of time and not at particular junctures – this emphasises the path dependency of the organisation during that period.

The implementation of the modernisation project that demanded the institution to be research-led dis-embedded the institutional influences that had stabilised its previous path. Following the introduction of a new set of rules as an intensive effort for Forest to change direction to become research led, actors had to interpret what they should do. Interviewees indicated that they were influenced by the new scripts and templates provided within the university (Hall and Taylor, 1996). They noted that Forest was no longer going to be a vocational university to the point that reference to this in the foyer near the main entrance of the university was removed, together with any mention of the term from the university's publicity material. Whilst this action may have been about market positioning of the university, it was also symbolic and a signal to influence actor behaviour by suggesting there was no turning back. The respondents recognised that the vice-chancellor "was moving Forest from a teaching institute" (Damian) as the rhetoric was now about "research, publications, [...] research grants and bringing in money" (Sophie).

The university's corporate plan clearly set out a vision for the creation of an environment to enable Forest to be located within the "research-led hierarchy of universities" (Forest University 2006, 2). Scrutiny of the strategic plan (Forest University 2007), a document which was published over a year later, suggests, however, that the idea of the institution being *research-led* was, perhaps, ambitious as it could not genuinely compete with the research intensive universities. Shortly afterwards, the expression *research-led* was discontinued and rephrased to "academically-led" (Forest University 2007, 4). Respondents acknowledged this observation and felt that the words, an academically-led university, were carefully re-chosen by the vice-chancellor because he recognised that Forest University did not have "the facilities, the physical facilities, [...] the years behind [it] or the connections with industry" (Michael) for it to compete with the traditional, research-led universities.

Forest's modernisation project had regulated the routinised behaviour of its academic actors. With new sets of arrangements being embedded institutionally, tensions had changed. With its increasing embeddedness, traditions and existing sets of practices had become more peripheral as they were challenged by the new arrangements. Each of the respondents recognised the shift in the institutional mission which accompanied the changing focus of their roles. They acknowledged that they could no longer focus solely on teaching and learning activities – the path-dependency that was provided from the institutions legacy had been broken and new trajectories were to become a reality (Nielsen et al 1995). The university discourse now described academic staff as research active, if they were qualified to doctoral level and were participating in research and enterprise activities.

The publication of the *Forest University Strategic Plan* outlined the necessity for the number of research active academic staff to be in the clear majority (Forest University 2007). To help embed this institutional fix, a project in the form of a Community of Practice (CoP) was established with the aim of assisting academic staff in their development to become research active. This project was offered to staff who fitted the descriptor of teacher and who was deemed by their line manager to have the potential to develop a research capability. Typically, but not exclusively, the academics to which this programme was offered were in mid-career and having entered academia from industry their activities were focussed on teaching and learning.



The project had four fundamental components. The first consisted of providing participants with an external career coach to provide one-to-one coaching sessions. The second element provided the opportunity for participants to gain mentoring support from an individual identified by Forest University as being research active, and the third component gave them the chance to reflect, with their peers, on their own personal challenges as well as those facing the organisation. The final element to the programme provided a series of workshops and events which were based around networking and conferences, developing bids for research grants and enterprise activities as well as providing advice on getting journal articles published. Evans describes these types of activity as research activities because they provide the “componential structure of research[er] development” (Evans 2011, 22). The academic actors at Forest, however, saw the programme not so much as a structure for their development but as a way “to get people doing PhD’s” (Bethany), to “push members of staff into research” (Damian) and to “begin to make those engagements” (Imogen).

From their perspective,

“anybody that was primarily involved in teaching and didn’t have a research profile, and wasn’t involved in enterprise activities, was deemed as being a teacher” (Damian).

Imogen provided a response that summed up the understanding of all the respondents when she commented that:

... it became very apparent that ... [she] was gonna have to change ... primarily into engaging more with research activities – so writing more academic papers [and] attempting to get research funding (Imogen).

The idea of the *teacher* versus that of the *academic* posited from the formal institutional documentation recognised that those teachers who were embracing the modernisation project, whilst in mid-career, were actually early-career researchers but who did not have the profile commonly associated with those beginning their research careers.

A catalyst for actor engagement in becoming an outward facing *academic* was mediated in part by interactions with colleagues. Casual conversations were in some instances the seed from which actors engaged with the institutional construct of the externally facing academic. Informal moments such as these provided an opportunity for actors to interpret the reality of their situation and make sense of the institutional discourse. One reiterated her experience and commented that:

... you sit and talk to people over lunch and you begin to realise that everybody’s feeling they have to take on all these extra things. Then you start to realise there’s actually a lot of you, [and] if you’re not careful you will be the only one not doing it (Sophie).

Another respondent considered that she was becoming marginalised as it became evident to her that she was “the only one that’s [referred to as] Mrs” (Bethany) on internal circulation lists.

Each of the respondents recognised that academics were expected to have or be working towards gaining a doctorate and, in terms of job security, without one they each considered that they were in a “vulnerable position” (Damian) and at risk of losing their jobs. Tyler voiced the general view when he felt that “it wouldn’t be wise to avoid the path of doing a PhD, in the context of potential rounds of redundancy” (Tyler). An indication of the increased level of participation by institutional actors in

the university's research agenda is highlighted by Damian when he commented that "everybody, including line managers are frantically running around like headless chickens trying to generate research outputs" (Damian).

Forest's senior executives saw the need to free staff time in order to "develop academic potential" (Pro vice-chancellor, presentation slides to senior staff). Rationalising undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes by placing them in frameworks was seen as a means to provide staff with time to engage in research activities. The respondents, however, saw this as a move whereby "student contact and teaching time was to be sacrificed in favour of research" (Tyler).

Whilst evidence from the interviews clearly indicated that individual actors understood the rationale behind the modernisation project, it also suggested that differences of opinion existed for the need of the institution to pursue its ideology and move from being teaching-led to academically-led. Respondents recognised the binary divide of *teachers* and *academics* and on the basis of their skills and background they felt that they belonged to the group that the institutional discourse described as teachers. They each considered that they needed to address the shortfalls in their profiles. They recognised that becoming research active required intellectual or academic development which needed to be underpinned with a doctoral qualification. They acknowledged that the new institutional discourse dictated that a doctorate was the new benchmark qualification for academic staff, and obtaining one was crucial for them to survive in the organisation.

Whilst all respondents recognised the need to obtain a doctoral qualification, there was evidence to suggest a binary divide in the perceptions of respondents in relation to whether the institution privileged particular doctoral qualifications. Respondents whose highest qualification was already at master's degree level each decided to pursue an EdD at an external university, whereas those who possessed an undergraduate degree as their highest qualification opted for the PhD route to be awarded by Forest. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, however, staff who opted to pursue the EdD commented that their choice was influenced by their Dean agreeing to fund them to study part-time at a high ranking research intensive university as well as them perceiving that this route was more amenable for part-time study. It is also the case, however, that the commonly accepted entry requirement for a professional doctorate in the UK is for applicants to hold an upper second honours degree in addition to a master's degree in a relevant discipline. This made the EdD unavailable to those who did not hold this mix of qualifications. As an indication of the level of academic staff buy-in to obtaining a doctorate, the number of academic staff holding doctorates increased from fewer than 18% in 2005, to 35% in 2009, and compared to other "new" universities this was around 5.5% higher than the UK national average.

From the perception of each of the respondents, they believed that all institutional actors were engaging with the changing requirements of the institution, albeit to varying degrees. This suggests that institutional actors quickly understood a new set of rules to which they should operate and apply. Each of the respondents clearly distinguished cultural change and they identified that the organisational "paradigm" (Johnson et al 2011, 176) had changed to include controls that necessitated institutional actors to comply with the demands of the modernisation project. They recognised that whilst there was once minimal supervision and monitoring of staff against institutional objectives, this had changed as managers were tasked to ensure that every academic was formally appraised against the new institutional objectives.

As a case study, the findings of this research would not be complete without some discussion around, or reference to, the initial achievements made by Forest regarding its modernisation agenda. The significant level of buy-in and engagement afforded by the institutional academic actors to their employer has already been captured, so to conclude this section consideration to Forest's achievement in relation to other outcomes is now given.

By 2010, the university had rose twenty seven places to 58<sup>th</sup> in *The Times* university league table and was also maintaining its position with *The Guardian* league table as the highest ranking "new" university with a rise of five places to being positioned at 32<sup>nd</sup> and in *The Complete University Guide* the university had gained twelve places to 54<sup>th</sup> compared to two years earlier (The Complete University Guide 2010; The Guardian 2010). At the same time, undergraduate applications to the university had risen by around 14% and the university had also witnessed a 5% increase in student satisfaction which was reported in the National Student Survey (NSS) that was commissioned by the UK's higher education funding councils (Forest 2010). Forest's success was also reported in data supplied by the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) as the number of graduates that were employed in graduate level jobs increased over a four year period, from around 57% to 70% (Forest 2010).

At the beginning of this paper mention was made of the RAE 2008, which was an assessment of university quality profiles administered by the UK's four funding councils for the purpose of determining research grants for each university. In this assessment, Forest University saw significant improvement compared to the previous assessment, RAE 2001, with an associated tripling to more than £2.2m of its quality-rated HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) research grant (Forest University 2010).

Forest's climb in the various league tables is also indicative that the University's reputation had improved, and the tables also provide some evidence that the modernisation project was working. The three major university league tables in the UK, whilst having a focus on teaching and undergraduate student satisfaction, do not all measure research quality. *The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide* as well as *The Complete University Guide* include weightings for research of 17% (RAE 2008) and 15% (RAE 2008) respectively, however, the table offered by *The Guardian* does not include any measure of research quality.

## **Conclusion**

This article reports upon a study that reflects upon the dialectics of institutional path dependency and the path breaking effect of a particular modernisation project that was triggered following the appointment of a new vice-chancellor. In this concluding section, I pay particular attention to how the institutional academic actors interpreted this modernisation project, and I have provided discussion around the different routes taken by the individual actors. Finally, I go on to conclude that for change projects to be successful, senior management must focus on intrinsically motivating their staff.

This paper presents a changed landscape of higher education where institutional prestige, both within the UK and across the rest of the world, is now based upon the quality of an institutions

research outputs. Vice-chancellors are recruited to provide, amongst other things, academic leadership to their university, by shaping academic development through the delivery of the institutions mission, aims and objectives. For the university presented here, the vice-chancellor was appointed with an expectation that transformational change would be made to realign the institution to this global paradigm.

Whilst there is much debate on institutional stability being emphasised by “structural constraints and continuity” (Streeck and Thelen 2005, 6), the respondents in this study clearly experienced a transformational shift, where stability was “ruptured by radical change, making for sudden bends in the path of history” (Pemple 1998, 3). From the positions of the individual actors, who had not come from a research background, the data suggested that they took what they believed was the least form of resistance in meeting the requirements set out in the new institutional discourse whilst at the same time they saw an opportunity to gain a doctorate from a university that is listed highly in the world league tables. Those who held the pre-requisite qualifications to pursue, for example, an EdD at an external university followed that path, whereas those who did not embarked upon the traditional PhD route at their own institution. Whilst the study suggested that the decisions of these two groups of actors were based upon their pre-requisite qualifications, it is prudent to recognise that individual actor preference may have also been based upon the multitude of biological and experiential factors that make them the individuals they are.

The modernisation project for Forest’s vision for the future clearly impacted upon its existing organisational paradigm. Respondents recognised that organisational control had shifted from a regime that was *laissez-faire*, where a lot of decision making was devolved to local management, to an approach where expectations were made explicit. Whilst it is widely recognised that top-down management is often not efficient because it does not encourage actors to combine their efforts to become more productive there is also an acceptance that the approach is seen as a management style that helps to ensure clarity and decisiveness. Irrespective of the virtues of the constructs of top-down and bottom-up management a key point that can be drawn from this study is that academic staff were at best guided in their behavioural development as researchers and at worst they were coerced. None of the respondents lacked an intention to act or respond to the demands of the modernisation project, but evidence from the study suggests that they did recognise that actor compliance was regulated through the feeling of inadequacy, threat of redundancy or lack of promotion. As Evans points out, however, to develop good researchers’ managements must recognise “the tripartite nature of researcher development” which, in addition to affecting behaviour, must also encourage attitudinal and intellectual development (Evans 2011, 32). In other words, researcher development is not simply about manifesting an increased research output if universities are seeking to climb the “status hierarchy” (Aspers 2009, 116) of the university league tables. University leaders should also give thought to the developmental needs of researchers and how researcher development occurs (Evans 2012). The evidence presented in this case study suggests that Forest’s modernisation project did tackle these elements to some degree but a criticism of it, perhaps, lies behind the dynamic that led to staff engagement with the project. Successful change projects rely on actors being intrinsically motivated and having “inherent satisfactions” (Ryan and Deci 2000, 72) and this, from the perspective of the respondents, was lacking at Forest. One respondent, for example, indicated a passive compliance in her engagement with the modernisation project because of fear of getting left behind whereas others cited the issue

of redundancy and witnessing the forced departure of some of their peers as being dominant in the mediation of their actions.

As public sector organisations across the world are embracing marketisation and private sector style practices, the demand for more flexible organisational forms are increasing (Sydow et al 2009). This paper adds to a knowledge base that informs organisational strategy implementation in organisational forms, such as universities, where the legacies and structures are sector specific and are historically determined.

Despite the historical path dependency of universities, where staff can be seen to act habitually and not embrace change freely, the study reported upon here illustrates how actor behaviour can be significantly influenced by making express demands and changing the templates for behaviour and the routines and institutional symbols. This article provides an example where the introduction of a strategy punctuated the equilibrium of an institution and in so doing changed the cultural norms as well as the frames and meaning systems that guided actors. Presented as a case study this paper will be of particular interest to managers of institutions of higher education who are tasked with the implementation of a modernisation programme that is set to re-profile their staff base.

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