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Convergence and local orders in the dynamics of change in higher education: a perspective from Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the leadership and management challenges of a public university in Saudi Arabia from the perspective of academic managers. Based on a series of interviews at one of the regional universities established in the mid-2000s, the paper sheds light on one of those rarely investigated contexts where models of public management are arbitrarily patched on frameworks of institutional governance in the name of modernisation. The perspective of those tasked with implementing the modernisation agenda of the government within recently established universities is considered here, in an attempt to highlight the fortune of prescribed models of university governance and management in their confrontation with local social and cultural orders. A micro-level situationist perspective is adopted, drawing on the concept of local orders to identify local factors affecting the organisational capabilities and institutional status of a remote institution where the dominant cultural and social orders permeate workplaces more easily. Our unique perspective also reveals an increasingly diverse Saudi higher education landscape, and the challenges it poses to the government's one-size-fits-all model of governance for public universities.

Introduction

Globalisation, the evolution of the knowledge-based economy and the New Public Management (NPM) ideology are said to have generated important changes in the higher education systems of most countries around the world (Gornitzka and Olsen 2006; Bleiklie et al. 2011). A common assumption in policy and research circles is that these pressures have resulted in isomorphic trends across and within national systems increasingly dominated by national and international soft law indicators (El-Khawas 2002; Paradeise and Thoenig 2013; Hazelkorn 2015). In this context, those assuming academic leadership responsibilities face the complex task of adapting leadership strategies inherited from past collegial experiences to 'respond to external demands with business-like efficiency and accountability, while navigating the maze of diverging cultural norms, narratives and work ethos of academic environments' (Kligyte and Barrie 2014, 157).

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Leading analyses of these trends tend to rely on the empirical evidence and policy contexts of a set of Western institutions used as 'reference models' (Thoenig and Paradeise 2016, 196) and to assume that in a global context, universal demands require analogous responses. This is being questioned today by studies revealing how NPM-type reforms in neo-patrimonial regimes such as China, Russia or Saudi Arabia tend to be curbed by local political and economic institutions(Asquer and Alzahrani 2020), and how mechanistic solutions of management rationalisation (e.g. Total Quality Management) have legitimised and rejuvenate rigid organisational hierarchies (Vinni 2007). But how do these contradictions in governance and management translate into the professional practice of those implementing 'change' within HEIs? What does change mean to those academic managers operating within autocratic and bureaucratic HE environment? What are the challenges ahead in systems where the administrative modernisation meets the 'twin pillars' ethos of shared governance and academic freedom (Gerber 2014) brought about by a new generation of academics trained abroad?

Our paper contributes to the debate about convergence and diversity in university governance by investigating one of those rarely considered contexts where models of public management are arbitrarily patched on frameworks of institutional governance in the name of modernisation (Nolan 2012; Asquer and Alzahrani 2020; Common 2008). Using the unique case context of a public university in Saudi Arabia identified among the set of institutions established across the country from the mid-2000s, it aims to reveal the challenges and discuss the relevance of NPM-type reforms in environments dominated by limited human resource availability, deeply entrenched patterns of public administration employment, and high level of dependency towards central government funding. The perspective of those overseeing the reform agenda of the Saudi government within recently established universities is considered here, in an attempt to highlight the fortune of prescribed models of university governance and management in their confrontation with local academic, social and cultural orders.

The paper is based on a qualitative study carried out in 2015–2018 by the authors in one of the 16 regional public universities (known in the country as 'emerging universities') established in the mid-2000s in Saudi Arabia as part of large expansion of plan of the national HE provision (Onsman 2011; Smith and Abouammoh 2013).

Conceptual perspective

Public universities around the world present significant similarities in their architecture, purpose and organisation structure. They are often portrayed as institutions possessing unique organisational characteristics that 'distinguish them from many other organisations' (Musselin 2006), squeezed between a system of rules defined by the State and the inherent culture of the academic profession (Kehm 2013). As organisations, universities tend to resemble each other 'as a result of being part of a common collective identity that is bound together by shared cognitive and normative orientations' (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012, 130).

Public universities subject to the same set of governance and management reforms could therefore be expected to react and evolve in a similar way. Yet a focus on micro-level agencies, and on universities as social actors culturally and socially embedded in local structures and networks, can reveal distinctive logics of action (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury

2012). Our perspective is situationist in its effort to link practices and interactions observed and reported (the micro level) to the university as mediating context (mezzo level) and the wider HE policy environment (macro level). We draw on the concept of 'local orders' to situate the meanings observed in local interactions or reported in interviews within the organisation, but also at the intersection with formal policies (e.g. governance reforms, Saudization), and of social relations that produce a distinctive organisational culture. Adapted by Paradeise and Thoenig (2013) to the context of higher education institutions, the local orders refer to local factors such as the local higher education 'market', the relationship of public organisation to local political authorities and a number of cultural political and social dimensions (or orders) that define the field in which local organisations and individuals operate (Fligstein 2001). Thoenig and Paradeise consider universities themselves as 'specific action systems that sustain local orders' whose 'endogenous values and norms impact the day-to-day behaviours of their academic staff and the choices they make, either as individuals or as members of committees, and at various levels inside the institution' (Thoenig and Paradeise 2014, 384). From that perspective, the change observed in universities becomes the result of a complex blend of individual and collective intentions and structural dynamics, even if the drivers of change appear to be standard reform models applied to similar types of systems and organisations elsewhere.

The study

The paper is based on a research project funded by small grants from our respective institutions, carried out in two phases in 2015–2016 and 2018. It involved interviews with top and middle university academic leaders at a case study university in Saudi Arabia,[1] and also in public universities outside Saudi Arabia (in the UK and France) in order to capture the specificity of the so-called centralised Saudi model of public university governance, and the importance of academic agency in its reform. Beyond pragmatic considerations of access, the case study university was deliberately selected among those established from the mid-2000s as part of Saudi Arabia's expansion strategy in regions with limited availability of higher education opportunity. The study also drew on empirical material and documentation gathered during a joint visit to the case study institution. Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from Jouf University where a grant from the research office was obtained. Anonymisation of the case study was a key part of our access negotiation with the institution but also with the research participants, in recognition of potential internal organisational repercussions for participants and also to ensure that the organisation's internal leadership issues would not be made public.(BERA 2018; Taylor and Land 2014). We also consider anonymity methodologically valuable for a project seeking to challenge some of the homogenising and hegemonic representations of the university in the country (Taylor and Land 2014). Our aim in this paper is not to highlight the organisational flaws of any particular university but rather to offer a unique social science perspective on the dynamics at play in the decision making and governance processes and of the challenges they pose, in a context that we consider illustrative of newly established universities in Saudi Arabia.

The paper is interested in the voices of those academics appointed by the rector to middle academic management positions. By this we refer to permanent members of academic staff, temporarily holding formal management roles outside their department. In

Saudi public universities, they typically include the College Deans (or deputy Deans in the case of female academics) and Deans of supporting units (such as the Deanship of Quality Assurance and Accreditation) who report to their university senior leadership (Rector and vice-Rectors). Holders of such positions normally sit on the University Council (with the exception of female deputy Deans). The study sought to capture their perceptions of the dynamics of change in the governance and management occurring in their institution, as well as their role in it.

18 interviews were conducted with academic managers (out of 25 individuals contacted directly by ourselves) at Horizon University, after the project had been authorised by university authorities. The positions held by the interviewees included College Dean or vice-Dean, Dean or vice-Dean of supporting deanship, Dean and vice-Dean of community college; Secretary to the University council.[2] As per the University regulations, our six female participants were holding deputy Dean positions. Interviews were conducted face to face, by Skype (in English or in Arabic) or by email (in Arabic), in order to adapt to local cultural practice and university regulations (on gender interactions in particular), and to the circumstances of the participants (Clark 2006). Face to face and Skype interviews were conducted during the fieldwork phase and served as pilots to refine the interview guide. They were recorded and fully transcribed. Email interviews took the form of a series of open-ended questions sent at once, and in rare cases of follow up questions. Responses were translated into English and coded upon predefined broad categories based on our research questions and emerging themes from the pilot phase. Following a hybrid model of analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006), these were then further clustered into three core themes used to structure the discussion below, namely (1) the autonomy of the institution vis a vis the State and of academy units vis a vis the top leadership; (2) The power and authority of individual academics in key decision making positions; and (3) the competence and skills of managers and leaders.

Setting the scene: local orders and external factors defining Horizon University (HU)

The last decade saw a rise in the number of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. According to the Ministry of Education, there were 34 public and private universities in 2017, 16 of which were established since 2005 to provide an even distribution of public HE opportunities across the country. The emergence and growth of public regional universities – often borne out of existing higher education colleges – did not come without challenges, particularly in relation to the alignment of their model of governance with those of existing, well established universities. Contrasting realities in terms of human resource availability, academic standards, student intake, income sources, along with other factors resulting from their embeddedness in different sociocultural environments, diversely impacted on the implementation of sectoral regulations and reforms at institutional level (Onsman 2011).

A policy-led expansion of HE

The expansion of the HE sector in Saudi Arabia has to be understood within the government's drive towards the growth of native human administrative and academic capital

since the late 1990s (Nolan 2012; Smith and Abouammoh 2013). Participation in HE had not been witnessing the demand-led growth (except to some extent for women's participation) observed elsewhere in the two decades preceding the reforms to expand the system in the 2000s. The recent spectacular rise, allowing Saudia Arabia's enrolment rates to close the gap on 'Developed Regions' (UNESCO classification) in just over a decade.[3]

The most significant of these policy drivers was introduced in 2007 as part of the King Abdullah Project for the development of public education, which aimed at a major overhaul of the Saudi education system The component of the Project that specifically addressed the future of higher education in the Kingdom is known as 'Aafaq'. It incorporated a comprehensive vision of the higher education system supporting a 25 year plan, where management and administration at both system and institutional levels, including academic leadership in institutions, featured prominently (Al-Swailem and Elliott 2013, 43).

A key dimension of this plan was to establish new, well-resourced universities in various geographical regions of the Kingdom. Another was to project a new image of the Saudi skills provision and institutions outside the country in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks in 2001 and in the wake of the Kingdom's accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2005 (Elyas and Picard 2013; Tayan 2017). This multifaceted strategy of expansion and internationalisation has been analysed as 'somewhat obsessed with rankings and defining world class in a Saudi context' (Mazi and Altbach 2013, 15; see also Schmoch, Fardoun, and Mashat 2016).

Resources were also poured into the provision of staff development opportunities aimed at ensuring that Saudi staff could gradually replace non-Saudi staff. The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) established in 2005 – sponsoring hundreds of thousands of students and academics to go abroad in what is considered to be the largest fully endowed government scholarship programme ever supported by a nation-state (Bukhari and Denman 2013) – is a keystone of this strategy. The scheme was introduced at a time when employment laws began to require a 100% Saudization of key managerial positions in Saudi administrations (Al-Dosary and Rahman 2005). It also aimed to 'expand Saudi tertiary education and to help diversify employment within the country and to lift its dependence upon the oil industry' (Bukhari and Denman 2013, 155). In universities, where non-Saudi nationals still represent 46% of the teaching and research staff force (Ahmed 2016), academic leadership positions are now increasingly filled with young Saudis returning from years of experience abroad – in typically highly ranked Western universities. The expansion also drew on a progressive liberalisation of the sector, allowing private colleges and universities from the mid-2000s, and culminating in a wholesale approach of the public sector from 2016 incorporating the explicit of objective of increasing the private sector participation' in the education sector (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2016; Asquer and Alzahrani 2020).

University reforms in Saudi Arabia take place in the context of a highly centralised and autocratic state, where public universities are fully operated and funded by the government which has always 'exercised strong control over the governance of universities' (Al-Eisa and Smith 2013, 28). At the time of the launch of Aafaq, the Saudi administration had already been experimenting with new public management concepts, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) from the 1990s (Al-Qahtani and Ibn-Methheb 1999), aiming

to decentralise and de-bureaucratize the public administration. Despite the huge cultural and political challenges encountered in the implementation of early TQM reforms (Al-Qahtani and Ibn-Methheb 1999; Alruwaili 2012), the approach seemed to have gained sufficient currency within the ruling elite to become a model – without further consultation with academic communities – for the administration of newly created universities in the Kingdom from the early 2000s (Gallear, Aldaweesh, and Al-Karaghouli 2012; Al-shafei et al. 2015; Alzahrani 2017). By the late 2000s, universities were living under procedures of quality assurance produced by the National Commission for Assessment and Academic Accreditation (NCAAA) established in 2004 (Onsman 2011). Ten years later, most were yet to be adequately implemented and monitored in the 'emerging' universities (Alzahrani 2017).

Horizon University in the grand scheme of Aafaq

Observing relationships between layers of decision making, analysing the communication and narrative cascaded from the top of the organisation down to the lecturers, and above all, collecting discourses among those placed in positions of authority, allowed us a view from within of the reform process discussed above.

In the Horizon Province (half a million inhabitants), the government turned individual higher education colleges into a large university campus in 2005. We are calling it Horizon University (HU). This has had substantial impact on the region's economy: In addition to direct employment opportunities, the government poured into the University roughly 350 million Dollars annually that benefited local businesses responding to the University multiple demands (Horizon University's annual report 2016).

The main campus of Horizon University is situated in the province's capital city, while three branch campuses are dispersed in other cities across the Province in order to mitigate students' migration to the main campus.

Agriculture and retail represent the traditional regional main economic sectors while the public sector absorbs nearly three quarter of the local Saudi staffing force. The region is also marked by a much higher unemployment rate for Saudi nationals (nearly 20%) than the national average (about 11%) (Ministry of Labor and Social Development 2016).

The campus of Horizon University remains to some extent a construction site more than 10 years after its inauguration. Built on a fairly remote plot of desert land about 15 km from the capital city, it was designed as a self-contained residential environment, but is currently only accommodating part of the academic staff. Most colleges have only recently been housed in their own permanent building, boasting enviable students and staff space by most public university standards, as well as high-tech laboratories and teaching rooms. Library services are a bit distant from colleges with no suitable pedestrian network completed and no signage available outside the buildings. Being located in a region of limited economic resources means that Horizon is attracting little support from private investors and organisations, and is therefore strongly dependent on state resources.

Like all twenty-six Saudi public universities, HU's governance and management structure is dictated by State regulation under the authority of the Higher Education Council (Al-Eisa and Smith 2013). The University is governed by a University Council presided by

the minister for Higher Education, and is run by a management board chaired by the Rector. The Council includes stakeholders from the Ministry of Education and its higher education agencies along with the University Rector and Vice- Rectors, Deans of academic colleges and Deans of supporting services (Council of Higher Education 2002). The Rector is appointed by royal Decree while the five Vice-Rectors are appointed by the Higher Education Council 'based on the nomination of the University Rector and approval of the Minister of Higher Education' (Council of Higher Education 2002). All other academic leadership positions (departments, colleges, associate deanships) are filled in internally with Saudi nationals and are approved by the Rector. As in most public Saudi universities operating a strict gender segregation (Abalkhail 2017; Alsubaie and Jones 2017), women occupying academic management roles in HU are confined to 'deputy' positions (usually deputy Dean in charge of the female section of a college or institute).

HU has already undergone significant leadership rotations in a context of massive infrastructure investments but persisting shortage of Saudi academics. The reasons for this turn over may be found in the remoteness and persisting lack of economic dynamism of the Province by comparison with central hubs of the country, such as Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam. The Ministry of Education tried to attract professionals and experts to Horizon with a scheme of highly paid contracts, through which young academics were given the opportunity to be appointed to senior management positions. But the university is struggling to retain those with ambitious career plans and little personal ties in the region.

The University applies management procedures introduced as part of the reform process and in particular the procedures in quality management under control of a Deanship of Quality and Academic Accreditation (Al-shafei et al. 2015; National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) 2015). According to Almarshad and Mahasneh (2011), HU had in 2010 completed its first self-assessment and submitted it to the National Commission for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA). The University was asked to reassess itself owing to a lack of rigour in the initial reporting of its quality standards (Almarshad and Mahasneh 2011). This is not particularly surprising at a time when many Saudi universities were considered by the NCAAA to be establishing unsatisfactory internal quality assurance systems and showing poor understanding of evaluation processes (Al-Ghamdi and Tight 2013; Alzahrani 2017).

Local orders in the dynamics of governance: views and perceptions from within

We now turn to the three themes identified in the coding of our data and will aim for each of them to relate the views of academic managers on decision makers and decision making to the particular circumstances of the institution.

Central controls and autonomy

In the most state centric systems, New Public Management is thought to have affected the terms of the relation between universities and the State without necessarily altering the functional diversity of governing bodies. Whilst universities were pushed towards entrepreneurial practices, the mechanisms of accountability towards state authorities remained, therefore ensuring that new reforms bringing more autonomy to the

institutions, did not significantly alter organisational cultures (Whitley 2012; Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori 2015; Austin and Jones 2016).

Emerging universities of Saudi Arabia followed a different pattern because of the conditions of their creation. Most of them were borne out of teacher training colleges and operate with a significant proportion of their staff originating from these institutions and from other public services (Bintwalah 2018). The models of governance and management introduced in the 2000s were therefore imposed on existing organisational and professional cultures. Also, the reforms did not take place in a context of deregulation or reduction of public resources but rather in a context of increased funding of higher education and steady state involvement in defining the objectives and position of each university in the national strategy (Al-Eisa and Smith 2013).

The protective shell of the state

Lay members and local stakeholders are increasingly important in the worldwide move towards more corporate models of governance of public universities. In Saudi Arabia, the State retains control over the income and staffing of universities.

This is the case of Horizon University where, despite changes introduced in the management system and governance, the authority of the State over internal decision mechanisms remains paramount:

> regulations have been written in one book and sent to all Universities … if these are announced by the Ministry of Education we can't discuss … I told you, they don't do anything without returning to the Ministry of Education (College Vice-Dean)

The steering power of the State in this context operates at the levels of regulations and evaluations, placing universities in close and direct accountability to the political directorate (Gornitzka and Maassen 2012) and at the wider cultural level through 'modernisation' messages and symbols disseminated by the monarchy's rulers (Nolan 2012).

Consequently, perceptions of the State/University relationship are in HU largely dominated by a widely shared belief in the public mission of the University and by concerns regarding the availability and trustworthiness of alternative arrangements, and the prospect of weakening the status and authority conferred to HU by its state ownership:

> Horizon University is a government educational institution under the Ministry of Education and cannot be separated from the rest of the institutions because it is important supporter of other institutions in the region and in the Kingdom. (Female, College Vice- Dean)

Yet concerns were specifically expressed in relation to decision making and finances. If autonomy meant more control from local stakeholders, the concern was to fall under the authority of even less transparent and less accountable processes and individuals. If it involved a reduction of direct subventions from the State, the question of where resources would come from in a region of weak economic activity and limited opportunities for commercial knowledge transfer was raised. One senior academic with long management experience summed up those concerns:

> I think universities in small cities will have many challenges especially in terms of external finances and endowments. Universities in big cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah won't have such problems. And decision making is already limited to few leaders! Justice and transparency are absent which contradicts the government policies (College Dean)

In HU, government's discourses promoting new relations with businesses have so far received little echo. Non-State actors have literally no presence the University Council and the level of engagement between the university and external stakeholders are generally limited to government heavily incentivized schemes. Internal bureaucratic obstacles were promptly drawn upon to explain this state of things:

> The country needs us to provide all our expertise, but in a simple way I can say that we cannot participate owing to prolonged red tapes that take several days through bureaucratic letters that must be approved in advance by senior leadership. At the end of the day, the activity has passed without us participating (Female deputy Dean).

Yet there seemed to be little support for further involvement of external stakeholders in the governance. The view was that this would not open up the university to new ideas because agencies with any kind of authority over the institution were clearly identified as being there because of their close interpersonal relationship with the Rector. This confirms observations made elsewhere that the so-called stakeholders are generally themselves under the government and the ruling elite control (Al-Eisa and Smith 2013).

Power and authority

In this section, we look at how the balance between individuals' powers and those of governing bodies operates in HU in a context of pragmatic adaptation to change.

The foundations of authority and power at HU

Typically, academic leaders emphasise the importance of their academic background and credentials in the foundation of their authority over a sector of their university. Even the most corporatized and autonomous public universities of the USA and the UK remain largely governed by an 'academic oligarchy' (Burton Clark's expression cited in Austin and Jones 2016) where the research profile (or scientific capital) is commonly perceived as central to ascertain the authority of an academic leader.

In HU the authority conferred by research reputation and academic credentials is less determinant in the access to leadership positions, and less critical in establishing one's authority once in the job than having management skills and the right connections in the university hierarchy. Consequently, the appointment to a Faculty Dean position owes less to lateral collegial interaction and the idea of *primus inter pares*, than to strategic decisions of the university's executive management. The situation was seen as potentially problematic by a number of respondents, but rarely expressed in such unequivocal terms as these:

> The short-listing of applicants should be subject to integrity and transparency and not governed by loyalty to individuals at it is, which leads to injustice (Deputy College Dean)

In the Deanship units in particular, where the appointment of academic leaders is largely left at the discretion of Vice-Rectors, personal relationships play a major role, reminiscent of practices observed in the local public administration (Alruwaili 2012; Bintwalah 2018; Aldossari and Robertson 2016). Yet this is not entirely due to a prevailing patrimonial culture: academic managers in the Deanship units come from within the institution, but because of staff scarcity and the national drive towards Saudization, University leaders have limited choice if any in the selection (many positions are left vacant until a suitable and agreeable colleague returns from their study abroad sabbatical). At this

point, the appointees have hardly built any kind of academic authority among their peers, or developed much of the management and leadership skills required in such positions:

> Since the university is one of the emerging universities, many of them have been assigned to modern administrative tasks without experience. They are supposed to have been teaching at university for a long time, followed by a stint as Head of academic department at least (College Dean)

Personal leadership and authority within a chain of command

Individuals in such positions owe their power to the responsibilities vested on them by the statutes and by the rector or sub-rector who appointed them. These powers are then non-negotiable:

> The Dean is the person in charge of making any connection between the top management and the staff both academic and non-academic, because they cannot go straight away to the top … I mean the Head of Department cannot send, you know, like anything to the top management … without my permission (College Dean)

In this type of environment, academic managers spend a lot of time managing relationships within their units, and conveying demands from lower to higher levels, as well as requests or orders from above to below. Interviewees were provided with a list of responsibilities and leadership styles and asked to rate them in relation to their own experience. Most of them emphasised personal expressions of authority (leading by example, acting as a role model, representing the Institution) while roles in enabling a collaborative culture within the unit, protecting or supporting colleagues, or encouraging participation in decision-making got low ratings. Yet, most respondents expressed frustration at this state of things. Female leaders in particular felt that being kept away from the actual decision making structures of the university restricted their role to being part of a chain of command ('there is no doubt that if we had the opportunity we could be better decision-makers than we are currently' College Deputy-Dean)

Their male counterparts, although acknowledging some participation in certain decision making structures, referred to human resource matters as their main domain ('We are staff managers more than decision makers' College Dean). In these circumstances, it is no real surprise that staffing conflicts and tensions dominated most of their agendas.

In a reminiscence of situations discussed across the Saudi public administration (see e.g. Asquer and Alzahrani 2020), comments on difficulties with subordinate staff (academic and even more so, non-academic) e almost invariably raised the issue of the absence of formal tools and powers to incentivise work within units. Interviewees converged on the problem of dealing with a culture of minimal engagement with work, and on their incapacity to act on it. Some lamented their lack of coercive powers, but most reported their incapacity to motivate colleagues:

> The university environment is not stimulating because it is equal to who works and who does not work. The measures for reward and motivation are almost absent. (Dean of Deanship)

There is no incentive for the leader to reward the outstanding employee, and this may be due to regulations that are not commensurate with the modern age of leadership and management (Secretary to University Council)

Two types of explanation to this phenomenon were commonly offered. The first relates to the competences of subaltern administrative staff ('the biggest challenge lie in the lack of adequately qualified employees' (College Dean)).

As has been well documented, the rapid adoption of laws by the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, and Ministry of Civil Service for the Saudization of administrative posts forced public sector employers into a panic recruitment of Saudi staff to fill in key positions left vacant after international staff saw their contracts terminated (Ahmed 2016). This has been more of a problem in areas of limited availability of skilled labour such as the Horizon province. And as Al-Dosary and Rahman (2005, 500) put in their review of the strategy 'To solve the unemployment problem, the government has forced the public sector to hire Saudis for non-existent jobs, which has turned government agencies into a vast social welfare system'

This situation is reflected in the second type of explanation provided, the absence of motivation among employees 'whose evaluation does not have any impact on their wage or promotion' (Dean).

Academic managers reported struggling within the limits of their power to stimulate employees, but also to instigate among a disparate lot academic and non-academic staff working in their departments and colleges, a culture of that reflects the specificities of universities as organisations and their changing relations to the State:

> Our challenge is to adapt to the academic environment and understand the nature of academic business, which extends for many hours, because the background of many who are now work at the university either from outside the academic arena or used to work in old established university. (College Dean)

A major feature of universities with strong state appropriations such as HU, where staff are paid by the State, is the type of professional identity and loyalty that they generate. Administrative staff at HU belong to the Saudi public administration and behave according to expectations and requirements of their employer, something academic managers tend to perceive as a disloyalty to the university idea and as limitation to their own power. To some extent this tension between hierarchical positions managed within an organisation and employment status regulated from outside is symptomatic of state universities, but in HU this tension also expresses local realities such as the paucity of skilled workers, the close family and clannist ties stimulating strong forms of institutional nepotism (Alruwaili 2012; Asquer and Alzahrani 2020; Aldossari and Robertson 2016), and limited prospects for professional and social mobility.

Strategic power, collegiality and governance

As discussed earlier, a frustration expressed by academic managers at HU is their minimal involvement with the governance of the institution. This is another interesting expression of the gap between the standard rules of Saudi public universities and the local practice. On one hand, interviewees spoke of universities as being collegial organisations. With the significant exception of female managers, they also felt that appropriate mechanisms were available in the state and institutional regulations for this collegiality to formally exist in HU. Yet, few felt that it operated in practice. A College Dean with years of leadership and management experience, reported being involved in councils and committees

with the more senior leaders of the University but without any of the authority he had as research group leader:

> I may be a decision maker or a participant in decision in the realm of laboratory industry as it is my main subject … and that's it! (College Dean)

The same superior-subordinate model characterises all chains of command within the University, with key individuals appointed at strategic positions to ensure the political effectiveness of the top-down decision making processes. The formal structures in place may reflect a policy drive towards a more regulatory role of the state and more institutional autonomy, but those in medium to high level- positions within the hierarchy are seeing little collegiality in action in the institutional governance, with decisions of the committees undermined by appointment procedures and overruled by the University leadership.

Senior academics involved in academic governing bodies such as the many committees set up by the University Council or by the Rector and Vice rectors felt that their functioning was subverted by the opacity of appointments to leadership roles and by the impossible reward of work efforts among subordinates. We have also seen how the level of competence of some of the administrative staff was perceived as a challenge by most academic managers. But what of the competencies of those called on to lead large sections of this organisational structure?

Skills and competences in academic governance and management

In the climate of ever increasing competition for stretched public funding that characterises most public higher education landscapes, leadership models and practices have tended to emphasise efficiency, cost-effectiveness and income generation. This has typically been monitored through a combination of internal performance audit and external quality assurance frameworks on the one hand (Middlehurst and Teixeira 2012) and of university leadership capacity and capabilities development (Wallace et al. 2011; Middlehurst 2013; Black 2015) on the other hand. This approach is said to have contributed to a professionalisation of all core businesses of universities (Middlehurst 2013) although leadership training programmes have often been met with resistance by academics who saw in their stringent economic imperative a threat to the distributed and collaborative leadership still existing in universities (Wallace et al. 2011). As a result, the strategic capacity of institutions has often been strengthened by expanding the senior management team, and also by incorporating new technical positions held by non-academics in and around executive teams (Middlehurst 2013; Hyde, Clarke, and Drennan 2013) thus addressing the question of quality in relation to leadership and governance without affecting too much the roles and skills of senior academic leaders.

In Saudi Arabia, training has been identified as a key component in the reform of management and governance of Saudi universities. Al-Swailem and Elliott noted that the establishment of an Academic Leadership Centre (ALC) in 2009 'played a significant role in the success, effectiveness and quality of higher education leadership within institutions at both senior and middle university management levels' (Al-Swailem and Elliott 2013, 38). Yet in recently established universities like HU, issues of leadership and managerial competence remain rampant, and staff surveys reveal a low sense of trust in

the management and leadership among Saudi academics (AbdulCalder 2015; Bintwalah 2018).

For whose benefit?

The massive investments in consultants – predominantly from Western, English-speaking countries – and in 'prestigious venues abroad for multiple weeks of residential and immersive training' (Ahmed 2016, 26) to provide training and development are met by circumspection by academics at HU as in many other universities in the country. A view dominates that these opportunities tend to primarily benefit the individuals co-opted to deliver or attend them (Metcalfe 2006; Aldossari and Robertson 2016). Interestingly, this view is largely shared among those in power positions. As one of our respondents put it:

> Training is very important, but training should be offered to those who actually need it, for the training to pay off (Deputy Dean of Deanship)

The allocation of opportunities for training (abroad in particular) seem to be following a similar logic to that observed in recruitment and in appointments to strategic positions. With limited collegial structures of control, nepotism supplant needs in the distribution of opportunities. And the academic staff at HU are contributing to this dynamic, because with slow career progression prospects through conventional promotion criteria, the reward for those undertaking the training is high (access to leadership and other financially incentivised positions, establishment of a reputation transferable across the sector, international travel opportunities). Therefore, in a context where externally validated management certificates supplant academic credentials as passports to leadership positions (Bintwalah 2018), a high demand meets a generous offer stimulated by the urgent need to find locally the skills once provided by foreign staff, but also by the need to fix locally those academics tempted by more rewarding positions at other universities.

As a result, most of our interviewees had attended courses in various techniques of management and leadership at home or abroad. The fact was particularly remarkable for women, whose level of qualification appeared in sharp contrast with their self-reported marginalisation in decision making:

> I have received many courses including: – Management course under the pressure of work from the Institute of Public Administration – self-control course of the Institute of Public Administration – Course of problem analysis and decision making from the Institute of Public Administration – a course in development of leadership skills and management in Istanbul and others in programme evaluation. (Female, Deputy College Dean)

More experienced leaders, particularly those College Deans with little or no specific training related to their current position, were more inclined to emphasise the 'natural' skills required in their role and the fact that not everyone was ready for it:

> Leadership is an art part of which is a gift from God Almighty, and most of it is a skill that is acquired by training. Managers and agents differ in mastering these skills and then applying in them in their functional reality. (College Dean)

Their insistence on training for leadership as simply complementing skills acquired along a career mirrored a position shared among established academic leaders around the

world having already performed multiple management roles (course, department, research group and projects) in their 'career pathway to the top' (Breakwell and Tytherleigh 2008, 112). But within the specific context of HU, where many academic leaders tend to get their first taste of management with their first appointment in a Senior leadership position, the acquisition of technical knowledge in their new domain of authority alongside general leadership skills is regarded as crucial and urgent, and therefore subject to keen interest and competition.

Deans and vice-Deans within the supporting deanships in particular, often recently returned from doctoral studies abroad, felt the need for the credibility that comes with management qualifications, particularly when faced with the task of line-managing highly qualified administrators. And for those locked up in a management career by the university hierarchy, leadership and management qualifications also provided a welcome source of legitimacy partially compensating the ineluctable erosion of their academic capital (Bintwalah 2018).

Discussion and conclusions

In higher education research, university governance is viewed from both system-level, organisational level, and from an academic identity perspective. Governance from a system-level perspective refers to the relationships between the university and the state, and the literature abounds on how the globalisation of the economy and other challenges imposed to welfare states have impacted everywhere around the world on this relationship. From an organisational perspective too (internal governance of institutions), changes are often related to the international environment and other external forces (markets, state and local authorities, prospective students and their families) coming with new pressing demands. These two levels of analysis often combine in generating ideal types of university governance. HU does not fit comfortably in any of these typologies. It is without a doubt a State-led bureaucratic model of management operating in an environment where state regulation remains 'high and on the rise' (Kwiek 2015, 78), but also reveals features of models where 'managerial self-governance, external guidance, and competition are low and on the rise' (Kwiek 2015). Its orchestration of new regulations and external guidance is subject to a Weberian '*Estate-type*' of patrimonialism (Weber 1978, 232) *where those* exercising governing powers have personal control of the means of administering change. This phenomenon, already observed in local public administration and in those colleges out of which HU emerged as a university, represents a major challenge to the change agenda of the government and a remarkable illustration of the influence of local orders on public institutions (Alruwaili 2012).

HU is a typical product of the Saudi model of expansion to all regions of the provision of internationality recognised university-level education. It exhibits a 'hierarchical' mode of governance marked by strong government control of finances, of student access, of staff appointment, of quality assurance of both teaching and research, and of regulations on internal management (Capano 2011). This mode of governance resulted from the historical encounter of a an inherited Weberian type of bureaucratic organisation with the uncritical adoption of private sector QM practices as part of the Saudi wider reform of the public sector from the late 1990s. In the context of HU, TQM (as quality management and as systems management) and bureaucracy combined in 'mechanistic solutions' and

managerial and political controls, made possible by their shared 'quest for building up a standardized and stable system for running and developing an organisation' (Vinni 2007, 116). However, the more recent introduction of New Public Management -type measures relating to performance-based reward systems and transparency have had less successes in its relations to local orders. HU is not one of those loosely coupled institutions with decentralised control of resources typically associated with NPM reforms (Bleiklie et al. 2015) but rather one where reforms were externally imposed through a combination of strong State bureaucratic controls over the administration and patrimonial domination. As seen in the responses of academic managers on decentralised internal governance, any disruption of centralised bureaucratic processes (and related powers and protection) is met with caution if not suspicion.

Academic managers interviewed felt that the power of the State was omnipresent from funding all areas of activities to regulating human resources. Far from being perceived as necessarily holding back change prospects, State controls were often presented to us as catalysts for change against more conservative attitudes from within the university. This is in sharp contrast with discourses from academic leaders in more externally oriented universities of the capital city and other vibrant economic centres of the country, where state controls tend to be interpreted as obstacles to innovation, and where universities have already been able to negotiate higher levels of decisional and financial autonomy.

In a highly centralised and hierarchical university like Horizon University, the power of the State is in large part vested in the Rector, who in turn delegates part of their authority to other senior leaders who they have appointed, directly or indirectly. The decision makers at any level of the management structure are therefore answerable to the top of the university hierarchy (and those influencing it) rather than to its community of scholars or to external non-State stakeholders. The power of academic leaders therefore lies primarily in their effectiveness and efficiency in applying cascaded policies and in their capacity to exert personal influence within the system. Academic credentials play less of a role in their appointment and in their capacity to handle the role than their social capital (Bintwalah 2018). Once a senior academic in HU is officially vested with powers over an academic community (department, college, etc), the skills required (in human resource management in particular) are perceived as more technical and more narrowly defined than they are for academic leaders in more collegial environments. Their capacity to generate support among academics for the rules and their application is also much more directly influenced by the trust publicly expressed in their abilities by the rector or the ministry than in their credentials as academics.

Finally, in addition to factors related to the status of HU in the Saudi HE system and to policies governing the appointment of academic leaders, a number of contextual factors need to be considered. As already indicated, the remoteness of the institution and of the city in relation the 'core' of the Saudi political and economic activities is having a significant impact on the turnover of staff: local recruitments and the stability of the workforce in public administration in the region are reinforcing clientelism and the vertical nature of decision making (Alruwaili 2012). The remoteness and conditions of establishment of HU (a predominantly teaching university with a public mission of providing skills for its region) also mean less diversity in sources of income and a higher dependency on state income which in turn perpetuates its state-led bureaucratic style of governance.

Elsewhere, these conditions create a path-dependency typically associated in the literature with patterns of resistance to reform because universities have a 'cultural heritage only partially compatible with the reforms' (Ramirez and Christensen 2013, 697). Such patterns of resistance to change should not be overestimated in the case of HU. Senior academic leaders interviewed did welcome change, particularly towards more transparency in procedures and more bottom up channels of communication, but expressed concerns about the possibility of further autonomy being granted to the institution because of the inherited work culture of HU and general lack of trust in its leaders among administrative and academic staff. Change is observed and welcomed in relation to infrastructures, procedures (student admissions, quality assurance more generally), but the idea of a place 'not ready' to break free from the shield of State uniform and autocratic policies (however constraining they may be) dominates discourses of those making the connection between the top and the bottom.

The project was conducted as single case study and our findings do not speak for the entire higher education system. Yet by identifying local factors affecting the organisational capabilities and institutional status of HU, we hope to have paved the way for more nuanced readings of the pace and features of the Saudi HE reform. In particular, we have sought to highlight the dynamic relationship between 'reformers' demands and actual practices in the universities' (Thoenig and Paradeise 2016, 297) in a higher education system rarely considered from micro or even meso-level perspectives. HU is a fledgling university incorporating inherited patterns of professional culture and hierarchies from its founding organisational structures, and blending them with externally imposed governance and management models. It is located in a remote part of Saudi Arabia where the dominant cultural and social orders permeate workplaces and generate original patterns of organisational behaviour. Understanding those patterns from within allows a better appreciation of factors stimulating or hindering organisations' capabilities to act and meet the various demands placed on them.

The institutional diversification that accompanied the reform of the HE governance has in Saudi Arabia begun to draw a binary landscape with a small of research-oriented, loosely coupled institutions setting the pace of governance reforms, then patched on a large number of more recently established predominantly teaching universities. But looking at the unique complexity of organisational cultures at the confluence of local orders and macro dynamics reveals an increasingly diverse Saudi higher education landscape well beyond the functional/historical differentiation conveniently reported (Mazi and Altbach 2013). With an entirely new generation of academic leaders now returning from years of studies abroad and demanding more responsibilities and recognition, this diversity begins to present a challenge to the Saudi government.

This study of a remote regional university offers two types of implications for the country's HE expansion. Firstly, most 'new' universities like HU, established in the country in the mid-2000s, were created upon existing post-secondary institutions. In HU, inherited academic relations and institutional management remained deeply ingrained in the professional identities of local academic and non-academic staff as new staff joined in with contrasting demands and expectations. These universities thus faced the challenge of handling complex staffing structures and needs while having to comply with new standards and practices driven by 'policy change based on supra-national statistics at the local level' (Tayan 2017, 68). The case of HU shows

how local orders, including pre-dating academic practices generate unique local conditions of organisational behaviour when they intersect with reforms, and illustrates Paradeise and Thoenig's argument that 'standardization does not imply homogeneity' (Paradeise and Thoenig 2013, 215). It also reveals that, rather than evolving positively, these identities become factors of 'resistance to change' in a system that bypasses and threatens them in the name of standardisation and modernisation, rather than recognise their value in building new, viable institutional cultures. Our study shows that rolling out to the entire system the type of stakeholder model of governance and accountability benchmarked against international university metrics and ranking of such beacons as King Abdullah University for Science and Technology or King Saud University is counterproductive if ignoring or supressing context-specific relationships among those stakeholders at local levels (Al-Eisa and Smith 2013; Nolan 2012; Schmoch, Fardoun, and Mashat 2016; Elyas and Picard 2013).

Secondly the case of HU reveals that the greater autonomy supposedly granted to universities by the reforms remains constrained by Saudi Arabia's authoritarian polity. International calls for more neoliberal western-type approaches to the way universities allocate resources and promote quality teaching and learning, often relayed by government officials (see e.g. Al-Eisa and Smith 2013) tend to oppose autonomy, motivation, efficiency and modernity in public university governance on one hand (the side of the government's reform projects), and centralisation, bureaucracy and conservatism on the other (Nolan 2012; Tayan 2017). But our project shows that in the absence of a truly comprehensive and transparent decentralisation of university governance, middle academic managers at local universities continue to perceive and use bureaucratic management as a shield against the incompetency and power excesses of those appointed by 'royal patronage' to oversee the reform agenda (Nolan 2012).

Both sets of remarks suggest that 'pockets of reforms' (Nolan 2012) amounting to more controls while ignoring the weight of local orders, and leaving unchallenged the power relationships hindering academic cultures, are unlikely to allow successful pilots to trickle down across the sector. A one-size-fits-all world class university strategy without alternative options for university governance in places like HU and little incentive for staff and student mobility across institutions may on the contrary allow tensions to build up locally. Resentment is already flaring up in those universities such as HU where newly qualified academic staff are unable to find the space to express their interest in research and research-led teaching innovation.

Notes

1. Called Horizon University (HU) in this paper. Fictitious names are used for the region and institutions described in this paper.
2. HU is made of 13 academic colleges (housing 3–9 departments each), 3 community colleges, 7 deanships. Each of these units is led by a Dean, supported by a deputy Dean (female section) and Vice-Deans.
3. Accessed 10 November 2019. http://uis.unesco.org/country/SA.

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