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Conclusion: New Practices and Identities as Drivers of Cultural Change

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The aim of this book was to analyse the functioning of higher education from different insiders' perspectives on higher education institutions, in a social context of accelerating speed of reforms (see Guy Neave in this book). 'Insiders' in our case are academic leaders, academics or students. We have also aimed to look at academia from the point of view of leadership, quality management, strategic thinking and academic work. Changes and reforms are discussed in a number of chapters in the context of collegiality and other central cultural characteristics of higher education. These continuously under-estimated structuring principles create a context for all the reforms and changes taking place in academia. Reform is one of the forms of change, as Taina Saarinen and Jussi Välimaa discuss in their chapter. With these different perspectives we have aimed to feed discussion on the difference between reform attempts and actual changes taking place in higher education and higher education institutions.

What we have tried to underline through the title of our book 'Managing Reform in Universities: The Dynamics of Culture, Identity and Organisational Change' is the ambiguity relating to how reforms are adapted in universities. While managing reform can be understood as a controlled and quite instrumental way of adapting to reform, managing reform can also be interpreted as a more naturalistic and less deterministic mode of adaptation – where changes are coped with rather than strictly controlled.

One of the key insights found in a number of the chapters in our book is that reforms have opened up new practices and new identities in higher education institutions. New practices can be found in relation to

the organization of research and education, in how decisions are taken regarding strategy or how information on performance is collected and analysed. New possible identities have also appeared, influencing students, academics and the leadership of universities. Such new identities compete with the existing making it more difficult to find appropriate responses to the challenges caused by reform. As such, one can argue that the new practices and identities found are the key drivers for change in higher education institutions. However, as also underlined in our chapters, the result is rarely pure adaptation of the 'new' at the expense of the 'old'. Rather than controlled adaptation, we find compromises – characterized by partial adaptation, by mixing new practices with old, often resulting in more hybrid institutions. Such compromises have also been found in other recent studies focusing on the relationship between reform and change in higher education (e.g. see Amaral et al., 2003; Teixeira et al., 2004; Huisman, 2009; Gordon & Whitchurch, 2010).

While our empirical data does not allow us to answer the question of whether the noticed compromises could be characterized as a substantial transformation of higher education, they do indicate that different explanations can be offered as to how we should portray change. While one certainly can see how new reform-inspired structures influence the cultures of higher education, one can also see how cultural artefacts, norms and traditions influence the new structures being implemented. However, while the use of the word 'compromise' suggests that higher education finds its practical solutions in a state of harmony, our data do indicate that the changes undertaken are not free of conflict and tension.

On change, reform and tension

Typical of many higher education reforms is the fact that reformers share an ideologically inspired starting point for their actions. Normally, this ideological starting point not only dictates their assumed and hoped outcomes of the reform but it also prevents them from seeing higher education and higher education institutions as they are in reality. Higher education as a national system or as higher education institutions are a complex social entity with many organizational layers of governance and decision-making processes, with conflicting interests between teaching and research and third mission, and with poorly defined clients and stakeholders. Instead of acknowledging this complexity the reformers often, and normally, define higher education institutions as they wish to see them – either as state organizations

(as was the case in the 1960s and 1970s) or as business-like enterprises (which has been the case during the 21st century). These politically idealized perceptions of higher education institutions as certain kinds of organizations try to force higher education institutions into social dynamics defined and hoped for by the reformers. Defining higher education in this way serves the needs of the reformers because it gives the political rationale for action. However, it creates problems for the implementation of reforms because reforms normally affect only some parts of the complex nature and processes of higher education while many of the previous practices and practicalities remain as they have always been. This is one of the reasons why there may exist many parallel academic and administrative cultural layers in higher education institutions (see Sahlin in this book). Cultural characteristics embedded in the basic processes in and of higher education institutions are not easily overturned even by new practices and identities.

Of course, some reform attempts may be more successful than others and change can take place in different forms. Hence, it is important to emphasize that there can be different underlying assumptions on the nature and causes of changes in the field of higher education research and policy-making. In their chapter, Taina Saarinen and Jussi Välimaa define four main types of changes depending on whether changes are caused by internal or external factors, or whether the nature of change is continuous development or radical discontinuation. These distinctions are important because higher education policy is legitimated with a continuous need for change. The question is, therefore, whose view of change becomes the dominant one? As Guy Neave points out in his contribution, the acceleration of higher education policy-making at the macro level is a fact in Europe. Essential also is the fact that from the early 1990s onwards and at the macro level, this 'stop/go' rhythm mutated into a reiterated cycle of continuous adjustment, occasionally amplified by new initiatives from government, often to correct what earlier national strategy had enacted and which, in the meantime, had revealed unwelcome and perverse effects.

The implication of this development – regardless of the nature of change as such – is that higher education institutions most likely are destined to enter into a more permanent state of tension, as Cláudia Sarrico and Ana Melo note in their chapter. There are forces both pushing universities in the direction of the mass university and forces pushing it in the direction of the ivory tower serving the needs of the elites of societies.

   The increasing number of identity options found in modern univer-
sities is without doubt an important factor that provides fuel for such
tensions. As Mary Henkel underlines in her chapter, academic career
trajectories have multiplied in an environment for choice, diversity and
uncertainty. At the same time, the balance of power is shifting towards
higher education institutions which have become more managerial and
more structured and thus more powerful actors than before. In a glob-
alized world, institutional futures are substantially shaped by economic
and reputational competition, fed by national and international perfor-
mance measurement and rankings. In this environment the processes
of academic identity formation and development are difficult to pre-
dict even though Mary Henkel suggests that those most in command
of their academic identities are most likely to be in elite universities –
although one could also imagine greater diversity among the academic
staff within elite institutions as a result of this development. For sure,
new practices related to research funding will lead to expectations for
academics to interact in new ways with both those that fund and admin-
ister research programmes – again challenging traditional academic
identities (see the chapter by Metcalfe). At the same time, meaning and
value and self-esteem among academics remain strongly linked with
their commitment to intellectual agendas developed within defined
traditions and their individual or principled purposes within them.
   The definitions of students are also challenged by increasingly global
and consumerist expectations. According to Sónia Cardoso, the identi-
ties of students are influenced not only by traditional images of students
as institutional actors but also by the perceptions of students as con-
sumers. However, despite the (self-)concept of student as a consumer
being increasingly widespread and assimilated, students still do not
strictly behave as such. There are tensions to be found between their
traditional student identities and their expected consumer behaviours.

From traditional to extended forms of collegiality?

The accelerating cycle of reform, and the new practices and identi-
ties established, have challenged the university in new ways, as Kerstin
Sahlin discusses in her chapter. She describes four different ideal types of
governance and organization: professional, administrative, New Public
Management and Audit Society. Crucially, the role of a university leader
is profoundly different according to the four governing and organiza-
tional ideals. According to Kerstin Sahlin, an important task for leaders

of universities is to handle this mixture and interplay of organizing prin-
ciples in addition to the important task of handling the translation of
general principles into a working practice. Kerstin Sahlin emphasizes the
importance of collegiality as a culture of working and as a way to reach
decisions in academia.

   David D. Dill also emphasizes the need to take collegial practices
seriously as the core processes within higher education institutions.
Without considerable collegial decision-making powers and academic
autonomy the processes of teaching, research and recruiting academic
staff will result in poor quality. Thus the processes of efficient leadership
in academia require the respect of principles and values of collegiality,
academic freedom and autonomy. In this regard he comes close to Keijo
Räsänen, who in his chapter stresses the fact that the work of ordinary
academics is one of the major generators of change in research and edu-
cation, and possibly also in the practices of governance in academia.
Why should we believe that university managers and politicians are the
only actors capable of renewal and improvement in academic work?
A similar argument is launched by Maria J. Rosa and Alberto Amaral,
who emphasize the need for academics to get involved and motivated
in institutional quality assurance practices. There is a real danger for
institutional quality if the members of the higher education community
consider that quality assurance has nothing to do with quality enhance-
ment. In the same manner, Nicoline Frølich and Bjørn Stensaker show
that unorthodox, broader or even anarchic ways of organizing strategic
processes, in which competing sensemaking processes are confronted,
can create new ideas and ways to think forward, sometimes leading to
more dynamic translations of ideas and possible practices to undertake.
Finally, Amy Scott Metcalfe underlines that network approaches extend-
ing beyond disciplinary and institutional boundaries are becoming
more important both when initiating and undertaking research projects,
perhaps paving the way for a new understanding of 'collegiality' in
contemporary higher education.

   It is on these arenas that tensions are often played out, that problems
have to be addressed and that decisions have to be taken. While estab-
lished and more traditional forms of collegiality can indeed be said to be
important processes in handling these challenges, our different contri-
butions also point to emerging or perhaps extended forms of 'collegial'
arenas – arenas where administrative and academic staff are jointly to
reach decisions, arenas integrating different vertical levels in the uni-
versity or arenas expanding beyond institutional borders. Whether such
arenas could indeed be characterized as 'collegial', is, of course, another

issue, which also leads us to some final reflections on the underlying themes in our book – the interactions and dynamics of culture, identity and organizational change.

On future research agendas

Overall, this book has helped to paint a picture of change in higher education as interactive and quite dynamic where the result of reform can take surprising twists, where change is complex and where adaptation is not seen as passive, a response to external cues. We think three elements are vital in explaining such outcomes.

A first element, central in reform, but also central as paving the way for new practices in higher education is what we can label cultural entrepreneurs. These people are not necessarily the formal leaders in the organization, but people who see reform and change as opportunities and not only as threats. They can sometimes be found within the academic staff, as emphasized in the chapter by Keijo Räsänen, or be part of more developmental processes such as strategy developments, as shown in the chapter by Nicoline Frølich and Bjørn Stensaker. This suggests that studies of academic leadership should perhaps be broadened beyond the current focus on managers and the formal positions they hold. Of interest here is the study of how formal management and informal leaders can interact and open up new insights into organizational change in higher education. Such informal interaction could shed light on how modern forms of collegiality play out in higher education, also following up the plea for a renewed emphasis on the classical academic practices underlined by Kerstin Sahlin and David D. Dill.

A second element, central to higher education institutions, although often overlooked during reform, is the symbolic and cultural capital of a given university. Currently one can detect some ambiguity as to the role of the reputation and other cultural artefacts in higher education, not least due to the role such artefacts play in external rankings of higher education institutions. However, within academe itself, such cultural artefacts are also frequently used in a variety of ways – from selecting research collaborators to legitimizing procedures, decisions and positions. Reputation is in itself a cultural element that blurs the distinction identified in our introductory chapter between culture as something an organization is or something an organization has. Reputation is often conceived as something an organization is, not least underlined in a number of classical studies by Burton Clark in the 1960s and 1970s. However, in modern higher education it also seems that reputation and

other cultural artefacts are something an organization can use for different purposes, transforming the element into a manipulative feature – something an organization has. How such cultural capital plays out in reform processes is an under-studied phenomenon in higher education, although several of the chapters in this book touch upon the subject. As shown by Mary Henkel in her chapter, inherent academic identities are still quite persistent in higher education and even paid tribute to in some reform rhetoric related to concepts such as quality and excellence. As further underlined by Maria J. Rosa and Alberto Amaral, and visible even in the chapter by Sónia Cardoso, cultural capital can also be used to mobilize resistance and in blocking reform. But, as highlighted by David D. Dill, cultural capital can also be weakened, opening up for the hollowing out of key cultural characteristics of higher education. Hence, a key issue for further research is analysing the relationship between reform and cultural capital in more depth.

A final element we see as vital in creating interesting adaptation processes in higher education is what we would label cultural transmitters – found in existent and new practices exposed to reform. In this book, a number of such practices have been analysed ranging from new ways to organize research (Metcalfe) and how leadership is executed (Sahlin) to new ways of performance reporting (Sarrico and Melo). What we do know is that such transmitters are open for cultural influences, but we know less about how such transmitters function in relation to each other, and how and in what form they are institutionalized in the sector. The spread of such transmitters makes it harder and harder to see them as merely symbolic practices, not least because these practices are occupied and undertaken by academic and administrative staff stepping in and out of these practices. As such, academics and administrative staff can be expected to carry such cultural transmitters into other arenas they are participating in. Here, there is a need for more holistic in-depth and close-up analysis of academic work and academic practice. There is indeed much research that focuses on certain dimensions of academic work – that being teaching, research or innovation – but there is a lack of research analysing how all dimensions of academic work and academic practice are affected by reform. Hopefully, our book has been an inspiration to those that want to take up these challenges.

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