

Using 'managerial' approaches in universities is consistent with maintaining academic freedom

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How should universities be organised to ensure they remain competitive and financially sustainable? As [Giulio Marini](#) and [Emanuela Reale](#) write, there has been a long-standing debate over the use of so called 'collegial' and 'managerial' approaches in universities. Based on a survey of staff at 26 universities across 8 European countries, they find that both approaches can coexist as long as academics are given freedom over how they achieve stipulated goals.



It is a leitmotiv that public services must be efficient: they are expected to be 'market oriented', 'entrepreneurial', and 'financially sustainable'. Universities are not an exception in this respect, since they are asked to perform, to be accountable to several stakeholders, and to stand out in international rankings and in national evaluation exercises to top up one's credibility and prestige. These forms of competition are visible even in the context of public opinion and they constitute an increasing preoccupation for academics and those managing universities.



But how can universities really become more competitive, more effective and more entrepreneurial? One answer is to look to managerialism as a route to achieving these aims. Managerialism typically

refers to the use of managerial practices in an academic context which are common to the private sector, such as a powerful management body capable of controlling how activities are conducted within a university, often using non-academic criteria, such as financial factors, as the basis for decisions.

Managerialism is often contrasted with 'collegialism', where academics play a more prominent role in setting the agenda for universities, and there has been a corresponding tension between these two approaches in recent decades. For the first time, it is now possible to draw on [quantitative data](#) to illustrate how these issues are perceived in the European context, using survey responses from 26 universities in 8 separate countries, focusing on the views of middle managers working in academia.



Graduates of Salford Business School. From [youtube](#)

Combining collegial work and managerialism in higher education

The general problem may be approached in this way: academic scholars are increasingly detached from academic managers and the top-management of universities. The latter often do not share the same vision as those they are responsible for managing, who in turn are not used to viewing themselves as a group that ought to be managed. Put simply, scholars are accustomed to being their own rulers and being responsible for their own career trajectories. This loose mode of organisation – which in some contexts could be characterised as 'organised anarchy' – is embodied in several forms of collegialism that are now perceived to be coming under threat.

This clash dates back at least as far as the 1980s. Burton Clark, who was probably the most eminent among those who pioneered research into the nature of higher education, was aware of the possible resistant and conservative

role of collegialism in potentially blocking the growth of genuinely entrepreneurial universities. Scholars in the field of higher education have studied the relation between collegialism and managerialism for the last two decades, with little consensus emerging from this body of work as to the most suitable approach.

In countries where so called ‘new public management’ principles do not have long-standing roots, the debate is even more open. Some scholars focus on the persistence of the collegial model in universities, despite legislative reforms and a willingness to overcome or reduce it. However, more recently, it has been argued that under certain conditions, collegiality could actually be rejuvenated, rather than disappearing in a pitched battle against managerialism.

Our [survey](#) shows that collegiality can thrive, even when ‘managerially led’. We found that a third, more probable option, is the emergence of new hybrid models, mixing some aspects of managerialism, and some forms of collegialism. Indeed, our data highlights that these two cultures already coexist to a large extent. Moreover, we find that collegiality is not hindered even in universities where managerialism largely influences organisational change.

But how can collegialism endure (or even increase) in those universities that are more managerially led? We considered the importance of five factors in the coexistence of collegial and managerial cultures, which are often considered in the literature as key items of organisational change, but have never been put together in a quantitative study. These factors are:

- The extent to which middle managers (i.e. Heads of Department) have to be accountable to other governing bodies;
- The distribution of decision-making power at certain levels of the organisation (i.e. on the ground, middle levels or top management);
- The change of discretionary power (increased or decreased) exercised by the different governing bodies of the universities in both management and academic affairs (research and teaching);
- The degree of importance placed on performance in funding allocations;
- The impact of ‘steering at a distance’ tools such as quality assurance and evaluation.

Among these five dimensions, we found the last to be the most relevant in shaping how managerialism and collegialism vary across universities. Collegiality is higher in more managerial universities, particularly if the rules of competition are seen as being ‘fair’. Fair competition is when research evaluation and quality assurance, typically at national levels, are reckoned to generate positive impacts such as improving teaching and research quality, transparency and strategic decision-making. Secondly, collegialism and managerialism are both higher when greater accountability is expected from middle managers towards the heads of the university, which is itself a further hint that demanding organisational assets don’t necessarily hamper the collegial fabric of universities.

Ultimately, a road for a coexistence between both managerialism and collegialism is possible, provided there is still a commitment to autonomy for scholars in terms of how they achieve goals, particularly in specific areas like teaching and research. Under these conditions, managerialism looks to be sustainable.

The authors’ sample of 26 Higher Education Institutions and the respective survey was part of a more comprehensive project titled TRUE (Transforming Universities in Europe) led by 8 groups specialized in Higher Education studies. The research was funded by the [European Science Foundation](#). The authors’ full study is available [here](#).

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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