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BELMAS Annual Conference 9 July 2017

Academics and Power: How a New Cadre of Career Track Academic Managers are Colonising University Management



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Context and Rationale

- ‘Woe is me’ academic misery narrative
- Universities going to hell in a handcart
- Managerialism “seeped into every nook and cranny”
- Academic authority and status have declined in inverse proportion to that of managers
- Managers/management have taken over
- Didn’t match my own professional experience
- Wanted to critically examine this narrative and explore who these managers are that are supposedly taking over our universities

Research Focus

- **Second-tier managers:** Deputy and pro vice chancellors (PVCs)
 - Core members of the executive team
 - Not only play a vital management role in support of the VC
 - But also form the main recruitment pool for future VCs
 - Under-researched and under-theorised group
- **Pre-1992 universities:** University status prior to 1992 Further and Higher Education Act
 - Traditionally have part-time PVCs on internal secondment
 - Changing their PVC role and appointment method
 - Want to understand nature and implications of that change for who PVCs are, what they do, and their motivations and aspirations

Data Sources and Methods

Two studies and data sources: SRHE-funded research award and ESRC-funded PhD

1. Census of PVCs (n=229)

- 42 pre-1992 English universities
- UUK members (excl. specialist and private universities)
- Snapshot in time of demographic/professional profile (June 2016)
- Publicly available data from university websites

2. Semi-structured interviews (n=45)

- 19 vice chancellors and 26 PVCs
- Pre-1992 universities that appointed at least one PVC via external open competition

Academic Dominance

- PVCs still overwhelmingly career academics: 91% in pre-1992s (89% in post-1992s)
- Despite the more managerial interpretation of PVC role, key criterion is a track record of research excellence
- Academic credibility is a non-negotiable requirement
- Generic management skills/experience not recognised
- Professional managers - from inside or outside HE – are not deemed to have legitimacy to manage academics
- ‘Glass wall’, or vertical segregation, between academics and professional services managers at PVC level
- A form of “professional apartheid” (Janet Beer)

Rise of the Career Track Manager

- Traditionally, PVCs were hybrid academic-managers who maintained their underlying academic career
- Part-time PVC role is now a full-time management job
- ‘Reluctant’ or ‘good citizen’ managers being replaced by ‘career track’ managers (previously only in post-1992s)
- Similar profile but different motivations, attracted by a “seat at the top table” and the “being-in-charge angle”
- Happy to call themselves managers and to assert their ‘right to manage’ others – a key tenet of managerialism
- They are ambitious: many aspire to the top job
- An academic management career has been legitimised

Growing in Influence

- PVC cohort in pre-1992s is growing: increased by 55% between 2005 and 2016, from 148 to 229
- Rise from 3.8 to 5.4 posts on average per institution
- Change from 'floating' policy role to the direct management of people and performance
- Creation of new executive variants of the role: PVC/Deans and executive DVCs or provosts
- Budgetary and line management responsibility for faculties and/or professional services
- PVC portfolios expanded from T&L and research to international, planning, external relations, fundraising
- Extending collective management power and remit

Power Relations

- Academic misery narrative suggests academics have lost power in relation to managers
- Yes, but not to professional services managers
- Academics continue to monopolise PVC posts in a form of social closure that maintains their exclusive status
- They are also extending their sphere of influence
- Arguably it is they, not professional services managers, who are colonizing university management
- Real shift of power is thus from rank-and-file academics to this new professional elite of career track managers
- Reflects a professional stratification within the academy

Concluding Thoughts and Questions

- Changes to PVC role are an understandable response
- However, some things are lost when academic management becomes a full-time career
- This new cadre of career track PVCs are divorced from day-to-day frontline academic activities; not returning to the ranks – likely to have sacrificed research career
- Growing gulf between them and academic community
- Increasingly regarded as management “suits” acting in a managerial capacity or their own self-interests
- If PVCs are neither functioning academics nor professional managers, is this change for the better and is it still meaningful to insist they are academics?

Find out more

- Link to Guardian article
- [No Room at the Top? The Glass Wall for Professional Services Managers in Pre-1992 English Universities](#) *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education* Published online 28 November 2016
- [Managerialism: An Ideal Model](#) *Studies in Higher Education* Published online 13 February 2017