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More than One Way to be Rational: An Alternative Reading of Academic Middle Management Practice

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Introduction

Since the early 1980s, universities throughout the Western world have seen substantial and irreversible change. While the speed of sector transformation may vary from country to country, the drivers and directions of these changes and associated impacts seem remarkably similar, being primarily economic reasons and the notion of increased competition (for funding, students and staff), these two factors being key drivers. At international level, increased competition is seen as a function of globalisation and its associated knowledge imperatives. At national level, competition is linked to funding methods, with pressures for change being most noticeable where public funding remains substantial. Managerial methods, imported from the private sector, are widely recommended as means to achieve sector transformation and to project universities into the 21st century.

These changes have been accompanied by an academic debate concerned with both transformation issues at the strategic level and the impact of change. The present paper suggests that the time has come to consider, within this debate, the extent to which preoccupation with change and the prevalence of the managerial paradigm have resulted in a one-sided, possibly uni-dimensional, understanding and evaluation of the sector's managerial competence. This consideration is particularly relevant since the pressure to develop managerial competence at all levels will continue (Brown, 2004), and as the recognition of the central role played by academic middle managers in change processes grows. Uni-dimensionality, it seems, can no longer be afforded.

This article reviews the prevailing Higher Education (HE) management discourse and its conceptual limitations. Using a multiple rationalities framework, a reading of academic middle management is presented which indicates conceptual transitions and the potential for a more holistic concept of academic middle management practice. The central argument is based on a case study undertaken in the UK HE context. While this positions and explains the debate in a specific context, the main thrust of the argument can be applied in countries where universities have come under equal pressures, such as Germany, France or Italy.

Keywords: Academic Manager; university management; management development; rationalities; management practice; change.

The UK background

Since the 1980s, successive Conservative and Labour governments have endeavoured to reduce the HE sector's dependence on government funding (Gordon 1995; Williams, 1997; Hughes, 1998; Gosh & Rodgers, 1999), resulting in an agenda for change which, as universities are encouraged to seek alternative sources of funding (e.g. SHEFC¹, 1997), promotes economic rationales over the societal and individual educational functions of higher education. At the same time, the sector has been transformed into a mass university system, probably by far the most visible sign of sector change. This expansion, both in terms of numbers and diversity, has made the sector more resource-

¹ Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. SHEFC statements, while aimed at the Scottish HE sector, are read as paradigmatic here for the UK sector at large.

intensive while funding through public money has decreased (Dearing, 1997; SHEFC, 1997; Dearlove, 1998a, 1998b).

While universities are encouraged to become more entrepreneurial in outlook, the pressure for greater accountability has increased. Universities must demonstrate their capability to deliver (greater) value for (less) money (Jary & Parker, 1998), institutional effectiveness and efficiency being measured against a wide range of performance benchmarks (Gosh & Rodgers, 1999). Accountability requirements subject teaching and research to quality assessments, binding academics and their managers into an ongoing process of performance measurement and its associated audit trails. Increasing resource constraints *and* increasing competition (Naude & Ivy, 1999) have required changes to be made to university structures, processes and relations, as well as organizational culture transformation. To achieve this, the Jarratt Report of 1985 first recommended a radical review of university governance and the import of private sector management practice (Jarratt, 1985; Jackson, 1999; Ford et al., 1996). Since then, universities have been in a steady process of reorganisation, with a crucial shift in locus of power and control from academic boards to managerial executives (Dearlove, 1998a, 1998b; Holloway et al., 1999). 'Old administration' has been replaced by 'new' managerialist practices and their discourse, as increasing emphasis is placed on performance and its measurement (Trow, 1994).

External sector stakeholders generally have welcomed this shift from academic self-governance to greater managerialism and a "keener assertion of top down authority" (Dearlove 1998a: 68; Trow, 1994; Trowler, 1998; Taylor, 1999). The official verdict is that the sector has "responded remarkably effectively to national priorities" (*Leadership and Management*, 2003). Universities are reminded, however, that the need to find "new and better ways of doing things will continue and intensify" (Dearing, 1997), and policy makers stress that "the highest calibre of leadership and management" is required if the sector is to survive (Alexander, 2003). Leadership and management capabilities "must" be improved (*Leadership and Management*, 2003) to ensure sector competitiveness *and* to ensure that academic staff are "fully aligned to the need to assist the organisation in becoming as efficient and effective as possible" (Garrick, Rec. 22, 1997).

In the managerial context, the role of academic middle managers has been revisited. Policy makers urge universities to professionalize their management capability and improve the "quality at senior and middle management levels" (*Leadership and Management*, 2003; italics mine). Heads of academic units have thus become targets for management development as, by implication, they appear deficient in their practice when measured against new managerialist benchmarks. Yet, paradoxically, little consideration is given to their current 'management' practice, which, in one way or other, must have contributed to the publicly recognised success of the British HE sector in the first place.

Analysis, discussion and tentative resolution of this paradox are the topics of this article. We will argue that the managerial discourse co-produced and utilised by policy makers, university managers and academics writing about academic management *constructs*, rather than represents, the academic middle manager as deficient. This construction is located in the prevailing uni-dimensional rational management model which, by promoting managerialist practices, obscures existing alternative, often locally-contingent and effective, management practices. The following section traces this construction effort.

Academics on academic middle managers in new HE - the official picture

The traditional role and function of the academic head has been widely studied, both in terms of what these encompass and in terms of the (structural, personal) prerequisites that make office holders effective leaders (Tucker, 1984; Moses & Roe, 1990; Middlehurst, 1989; Green & McDade, 1991; Middlehurst 1993; Brook & Davies, 1994; Rowley & Sherman, 2003). While an already complex profile or job description emerges (Green & McDade, 1991; Brook & Davies, 1994), budgets and line management functions have moved to the top of the office-holder's responsibilities (Jackson, 1999; Middlehurst, 1993; Clark, 1995; Dearlove, 1998a and b; Jackson, 1999; Townley, 1999), as happens elsewhere in the public sector (Holloway et al., 1999). There is, however, consensus that the role of the academic middle manager is ambiguous and inherently problematic. Analyses and solutions are offered from two complementary perspectives which may be termed the managerial leverage perspective and the management deficiency perspective.

The managerial leverage perspective stresses senior university management's failure – or at least reluctance - to redefine boldly the role of academic head, or to give such person the leverage required to fulfil their line management function (Middlehurst, 1993; Jackson, 1999; Meyer, 2002). Some even doubt whether managers at this level will ever be able to play “a satisfying, rewarding and truly effective part in the management of universities” (Eley 1999: 22). Solutions are implicitly touched upon: Eley suggests that, as long as research performance, rather than managerial capability, is used as the main selection criterion in appointing academic heads, the *impasse* will not be resolved (Eley, 1999; Jackson, 1999). Equally, the wisdom of short-term headship appointments (Jackson, 1999; Rowley & Sherman, 2003) is questioned. University managers are challenged to rethink academic middle management (Brook & Davies, 1994; Meyer, 2002) the better to enable this level to effect “adaptation and renewal” in their units (Meyer, 2002: 543). This, it is argued, needs to be supported by appropriate management training. New managerial skills, as far as the official consensus is concerned, will be required (Eley, 1999; Rowley, 1998; Osseo-Assare&Longbottom, 2002). Implicitly, a break with the older or current practices is seen as essential.

The managerial deficiency perspective focuses on factors inherent in the nature of academic careers, work and values that all determine the effectiveness of academic middle managers. Academic communities stand accused of a reluctance to change and resistance to the efficiency agenda (Rutherford, 1992; Jackson, 1999; Meyer, 2002; Osseo-Assare & Longbottom, 2002). Academics seem frozen in the inertia of an out-of-date “hollowed collegiality” (Massy et al. 2000: 32; Dearlove, 1998) or “one-sided mental models” (Meyer 2002: 535). They are not aware of the need for change to fit the environment (Richardson et al. 1995), for “new ways of behaving” and “new ways of operating” (Patterson 1999: 9), nor are they fully appreciative of the opportunity for revitalisation that sector changes or “new influences” (Winter 1996: 82) might entail (Middlehurst, 1993; Rutherford, 1995; Winter, 1996). By the same logic, academics, considered to be of “limited manageability” in any case (Lockwood 1985: 40), are widely portrayed as neither wanting nor appreciating nor understanding the need for management (Kennerley, 1992; Barnett, 2000; Rowley & Sherman, 2003), but of responding to the challenges they confront in a quasi-neurotic manner. Martin (1999) states that academics feel “disillusioned and ill-equipped to deal with contemporary demands and [are] at odds with the values and practices of their particular university” (Martin 1999: 1). It is thus the role of senior management to align academic staff with the organisation *and* to assist them in overcoming their neurosis - “academic staff need

the concerted support and help of their universities” to enable them to “think, and to reason and to collaborate with the aim of serving change rather than constraining it” (ibid.: 59, 69; similarly Barnett 2000: 110; Boyett, 1996; Ford et al. 1996). The blame, it is claimed, lies squarely with the academics.

Such critical comment is neither without evidence nor without justification. Yet it remains an “implicit attribution of blame to the victims of change based on a deficiency model” (Knight and Trowler 2001: 32), and one that is executed by the dominant discourse, for as long as the cause of the criticised behaviour remains exempt from equally critical enquiry.

To assist academics in overcoming their change averseness, the techniques of soft managerialism are promoted. These include “creating a collegial environment” and “enhancing trust, respect, teamwork” (Rowley & Sherman 2003: 1062; Rowley, 1997). Indeed the importance of trust building is emphasised frequently (Dearlove, 1998; Rowley & Sherman, 2003; Meyer, 2002), as are integrity and inspiration as change leadership qualities (Middlehurst, 1993). The creation of collective responsibility for performance and operation of the unit, cooperation and transparency (Meyer 2002: 545), are encouraged as teams replace the “collegial fiction of equal and universal involvement” (ibid.). Through such practices, “the kind of co-operation that will [...] enable [the institution] to be more institutionally innovative in responding to the pressures on universities to change” (Dearlove 1998a: 73) can be created. The pivotal role of the academic middle manager as facilitator is obvious: “given the problems of effecting change from the top or the bottom, there is, then a vital role for leadership from the middle” (Dearlove 1998a: 74). Yet this, as pointed out, is the level seen as problematical.

A significant problem, it is argued, is that academics do not want to become academic managers but must be coerced into the role (Dearlove, 1998; Jackson, 1999; Meyer, 2002; Rowley & Sherman, 2003). Such coercion, it seems, inevitably results in poor management as it exacerbates two shortcomings. Firstly, the academic career has left these player managers “poorly equipped with the requisite interpersonal and general problem solving skills”, thus making them “poor managers when they do manage” (Dearlove 1998a: 73). Secondly, the combination of coercion, ill-preparedness and allegiance to ‘traditional’ values of *academia* means that these managers are unable or unwilling to take hard managerial decisions or a strong strategic steer on the change agenda, for fear that such initiative might make their return to faculty difficult once their period in office expires (Rowley & Sherman, 2003; Jackson, 1999). Instead, a preference for compromise rather than for decisive change-oriented action is said to prevail because many academic managers ‘don’t want to rock the boat’ (Allen 2002: 70).

Academic and public debate thus suggest that the academic middle management level is not equipped to deliver on the change agenda. Based on a recent UK-based study, the *Times Higher Education Supplement* reported in early 2004 that “many deans and heads of department are ashamed to be managers [...], avoid their managerial responsibilities” or fail to deal “with poorly performing staff” (Johnston, 2004; see also *Times Online*, 2004). Nearly 20 years after the Jarratt Report first challenged conventional university hierarchies and modes of operation, department heads, it is concluded, are still “shirking their responsibilities” (ibid.). Academic texts use a conciliatory tone but confirm that the academic middle manager requires training and development if s/he is to make the transition from old-style academic head to new-style academic manager, to be a “coach and proactive facilitator of a department’s strategic change” (Meyer 2002: 545); to be a “good citizen leader” (Dearlove 1998a: 73); or “better leader” (Rowley & Sherman 2003: 63) who can rally and align their colleagues to the overall goals of the organisation.

Again we encounter paradoxes: firstly, and ironically, the observation that many of the soft managerialist tools recommended and the corresponding conceptualisation of the academic middle manager as coach and facilitator, curiously resonates with practices and interactions which academics have traditionally valued: collegiality, team work, consensual decision making, listening, coaching, fostering the intrinsically motivating quality of academic work. Indeed, in 1987 Kouzes & Posner, and Middlehurst in 1989, pointed out that practices common in academic units might also be utilised to facilitate sector change (Gregory, 1996). Significantly, such possible affinities between 'traditional' academic and new managerial practices are rarely reflected upon. Yet, it might be precisely these affinities which could explain the second paradox, namely, that academic units are after all functioning *despite* the alleged managerial deficiencies of their middle management level. Why should it be "surprising that so many heads do so well" (Allen 2002: 70), that "we have so many good academic managers" considering that "we do not train them and we do not reward them adequately" (Denton & Kellett 1994: 46) ? The answer could be that the practices academics use at local level to manage their unit and its resources, while seemingly 'old-fashioned' or non-managerialist, or not called 'management', are robustly effective in aligning academics to the common goal and may indeed be quite similar to what is now proposed as the new way forward. These paradoxes, we propose, can be resolved if the mechanisms that underlie the conceptualisation of academic middle management practice, as outlined in this section, are reviewed and the discourse is read 'against the grain'.

An alternative reading of academic middle management practice

To develop an alternative reading of academic middle management practice, we adopt a position of "moderate post-modernism" (Kvale 1996: 231) and argue the need to replace positivistic claims of an objective truth and to adopt a social constructivist position which acknowledges the co-existence of multiple realities as they are constructed in the minds of individuals or communities. Such realities, while mental constructs, gain status as reality as they are conditioned, shaped and shared through social and political contexts. Communities, by means of discourse, create their specific "local, personal and community forms of truths" (Kvale 1996: 231). Such multiple realities or truths rarely co-exist as equals, but competitively and through the instrument of discourse, which constitutes a 'knowledge about' insofar as it produces textually ordered knowledge that "packages and stabilizes the order of things" (Prior 1997: 67). Discourse thus tells us, *qua* discourse community membership, how to understand and act in the world (Chia, 2000). But it does so through the dialectics of privileging preferred and consequently concealing alternative practices. To that extent, all discourse is reductivist as it "aggregatively produces a particular version of social reality to the exclusion of other possible worlds" (Chia 2000: 531; see also Trowler, 2001).

The discourse community that has shaped the debate on academic middle managers, as presented above, is located within rational management thought and managerialism in practice. This perspective promotes the construct of management as a planned, purposeful, measurable, results-oriented process of resource transformation and thus as a "disembodied practice" (Townley 1993: 223) of universal applicability, rather than a product of local interaction and practice (Townley, 2001). Guided by a form of rationality that envisages as norm and goal "a conscious mastery of reality through the construction of increasingly precise abstract concepts" (Kalberg 1980: 1152), management here is the translation of logical means-end calculations into practice (Rowan, 1998).

Typical of this discourse is the rearrangement of organisational reality in terms of “polarised antinomies” (Townley 1999: 290) such as rational-irrational, planned-intuitive, formal-informal, old-new, change-stability, individual-collective, explicit-tacit, quantitative-qualitative (Bolan, 1999; Rutgers, 1999). This rearrangement is the product of a “process of privileging” (Townley 1999: 291) which subordinates one constituent of the antinomies to what becomes the privileged superior. By implication, such privileging marginalizes or conceals the subordinated as inferior ‘other’ in so far as the dominant concept sets the benchmarks against which the other will be measured, and, mostly, deemed deficient, deviant, or obsolete. Yet the ‘other’ is always a possible alternative, if not a challenge, and is therefore relegated to the margin with considerable effort.

How discursive practice contributes to the reification of the constituent deemed superior is best illustrated in the insistence with which ‘change’ has become embedded in management writing and practice as both origin and motor of the contemporary management imperative. Ontologised as a “quasi-natural phenomenon” (White & Jacques 1995: 55) and declared synonymous with progress, change has gained the force of inevitability, with both the capacity to destroy or create business opportunity (duGay, 2003); as a consequence, it demands, necessitates *and* legitimates constant managerial adjustment and intervention – and legitimates judgements and evaluations which categorise incidents of change critique in terms of change resistance and obstruction of progress (White & Jacques, 1995; duGay, 2003). This perspective is now firmly anchored in both the private and public sector management debates but can be *de*-constructed if we acknowledge that organisational realities are the product of subjective constructions or *a posteriori* rationalisations (Hatch, 1997; Weick, 2001) along the axes of familiar dichotomies.

The discussion of academic middle managers, as summarised above, illustrates this process of privileging and the extent to which this most ambiguous level in the university hierarchy is constructed by the prevailing discourse. The reading (not representation) of behaviour and action as change *resistance* or management *reluctance*, of *withdrawal* as *disillusionment*, and of value-bound decision making as “shirking”, defines the academic head against managerialist benchmarks, and thus *ex negativo*. This perspective, while suggesting, as a consequence of its discursive logic, that academic managers need development, leaves unquestioned whether their current practices contain elements effective in their own right. What is currently operated is thus concealed or removed from the focus of enquiry. Consequently, the question of whether the “implementation gap” (Trowler 1998: 96) widely noted in university management may only partly be a product of middle management dysfunctionality, but partly also a product of flaws in managerial concepts or measures imported into the sector, remains unasked.

It is, therefore, timely to turn to alternative perspectives. Taylor (1999) and Trowler (1998) comment critically on the denial of agency accompanying the debate. Trowler confirms the tendency in academic discourse to “make [...] invisibles academics’ values, attitudes and responses to change” (Trowler 1998: 98), and to present an “essentially passive conception of academics” (ibid.: 101). Against this view, he argues that responses to change policies at local level may not be acts of negation but of active reconstruction, which may well result in academics “contributing towards [change], albeit in ways unforeseen by senior managers” (Trowler 1998: 98). Taylor (1999) makes a similar re-assertion of academics’ engagement in the process of change. Both Trowler and Taylor argue against reductivist representations of academics’ responses to change (Taylor 1999: 66ff) and offer instead a differentiating picture. Their concern rests mainly with responses and ‘coping strategies’ at individual level, rather than with management practices. The challenge to rewrite what academics turned managers of their peers do as managers thus remains.

We argue that, to achieve this, an alternative approach to the managerial concept of rationality is required in two interlinked respects, namely, as an ontological position to adopt and as an epistemological device to understand managerial practices. The prevailing management discourse and its practices are closely linked to a uni-dimensional model of rational logic. This rational paradigm has been challenged by a “less limited and truncated” model of multiple rationalities (Bolan 1999: 68; Rutgers, 1999; Townley, 1999; Townley, 2002), designed to “retrieve management from the confines of rationality and managerialism” (Townley 1999: 293) and with far-reaching implications for management thought and practice. If the baseline definition of rationality is to provide the guidance for “wilful action” (Bolan 1999: 70; also Townley 1999: 293) through processes that “weigh values, ends, means, outcomes” and other drivers (Bolan 1999: 72), then multiple meanings of rationality are implicit insofar as guidance for action, or reasoning, imply “not a purely means-ends calculation but rather the development of patterns of action based on value postulates or clusters of values” (Bolan 1999: 71). As the reasoning individual exists in a social context, such reasoning will always be shaped by that context and is thus a social activity (Bolan 1999: 74) with the diversity this entails. Thus Townley’s starting point is practical reasoning which “*is constituted by one’s membership of and integration into a particular social institution, which defines substance, obligations and duties. It is informed by, and itself informs, the practices of some distinctive form of social order and it is qua membership of such a social order that someone exercises practical reason*” (Townley 1999: 293).

Townley applies practical reason to reread middle manager resistance as an alternative management practice informed by an awareness of the values, constraints and requirements of the social context in which it operates (Townley, 1999). This perspective challenges the abstracted, goal-rational management model that defines what is desirable by the outcomes it specifies and measures, through a notion of effectiveness “related to socially produced practical knowledge” and informed also by notions of “substance, obligation and duty” (Townley 1999: 293). Implied is that the lens of managerialist single-dimension technocratic or functional rationality and its academic discourse can neither fully read (appreciate) nor incorporate such more socially and locally grounded concept of rationality as valid means to explain and effect local level organisation and operation.

Bolan revisits Weber’s four types of rationality. Weber’s concepts of practical, theoretical, substantive, and formal rationalities encompass the spectrum from ego-centred reasoning to reasoning and action based on means-ends calculations, from reasoning and action based on abstract causality, to value-based to formally codified processes of reasoning. Present at “all levels of collective processes” (Bolan 1999: 71), they consequently render uni-dimensional models of rationality invalid. To this, Bolan adds Habermas’ perspective of rationality as *also* a process of communicative action between participants “seeking to reach a fundamental understanding that would provide a normative framework of agreement for mutual coordination of plans and actions” (Bolan, 1999: 72). From such broader perspectives on rationality, Bolan arrives at the concept of an expanded, socially grounded model of rationality which is crucially linked to the notions of adaptation and mediation, termed “adaptive rationality” (ibid: 74ff.). This is not only fundamentally social in the goals it aims to achieve, but *also* a means to mediate between instrumental rationality, e.g. the means-ends calculation rationality of modern management thought, *and* substantive rationality or, in Weber’s terms, value-based rationality. Bolan elaborates this “synthetic model of adaptive rationality” as a means to organise – and understand - management processes and, not only uncovers the domains obscured by the dominating managerialist paradigm – such as claims of morality and legitimacy, sentiments and motivations, the formal and the informal -,but also rehabilitates these as legitimate constituents of organisational reality, coexisting with other forms of reasoning, and thus equally valid components of management.

Bolan's focus on an "expanded social model of rationality" (Bolan 1999: 74) provides our interpretative lens. It stresses the co-existence of rationalities, within an individual's rationalisation process² and at the organisational level, thus the need for mediation between these rationalities: "adaptive rationality" achieves this mediation as it endeavours to produce fusion that traverses the boundaries of instrumental and substantive rationality respectively. Through such mediating of rationality resolution of conflict or purposive action can be achieved. By extension, the concept of rationality to inform management practice should be such multiple and mediating rationality, and management practice should be mediating or negotiating practice. This would be at the ontological level. At epistemological level, the task for academic comment on management would be to uncover the interactions of those multiple rationalities, and thus the inherently dialectical nature of management practice, rather than to benchmark reality against single-dimension instrumentalities.

Bolan's adaptive rationality as mediating rationality is synthetic insofar as it does not play on declaring any one rationality superior to the other but as equal and equally required in the "management of large scale social arrangements" (ibid.). In practice, this cannot be without tension. As the mediation process entails communication between the rationalities and their discourses we therefore extrapolate from this as a management imperative the need to focus on the organisational interfaces where the differing processes of rationalizing meet and generate friction.³

This concept of co-existing instrumental, value-bound, procedural, and mediating, rationalities refutes the prevailing reading of academic middle management practice as a sequence of acts of negation. Instead it redefines universities as sites where differing – other but equal - rationalities encounter each other. More specifically, the case reported below reveals academic middle management practices as mediating rationality 'in practice' as the heads of schools try to fuse disparate interests, effect transitions and communication. To that extent, academic middle managers are indeed "contributing towards [change], albeit in ways unforeseen" – or rather unread – by senior managers (Trowler 1998: 98).

Academic middle management in practice – the case introduced

The case study sought to explore how academic middle managers conceptualise and verbalise their management practice. The participating university was a long-established small-sized UK university which had managed the sector changes successfully. The recent appointment of a vice chancellor from a non-university background, the reconfiguration of the executive, and the full executive support for the sector's modernisation agenda signal that the institution aims to further strengthen its managerial approach and outlook. At the senior management level this university was thus fully aligned with the sector change policies. The training and development of its academic middle managers had now moved to the top of the university's HR activities.

² "Every social action is subject to simultaneous scrutiny [by the reasoning individual] from the viewpoints of status, validity, and power. [...] The different forms of rationalization [...] are derived from these three fundamental motivations of social action. The search for understanding, success and mediation between them as they counter one another can be viewed as the ontological base from which the different forms of rationalizing arise. [...]" (Bolan 1999: 77).

³ "Management in complex social settings involves the fusion of both instrumental and substantive rationality in ways that recognize the dynamic processes of change occurring within each while being sensitive to the contradictory and often conflicted intermix of each" (Bolan 1999: 81)

The study aimed to obtain rich textual data which would enable a fresh interpretation of academic middle management practice against the dimensions which current research has identified as the most critical dimensions. These include, as highlighted previously: change reluctance; the unwillingness to become managers; decision making; management training; management skills, techniques, solutions; discourse.

Semi-structured interviews were used as these give “access to the meanings people attribute to their experience, and social worlds” (Miller & Glassner 1997: 100). Closed questions were used for factual information, and a mix of open and probing questions were asked which encouraged self-reflection among the interviewees and thus resulted in particularly rich text (Saunders et al., 2000). The interview schedule was organised around the dimensions above.

The interviews were carried out over a period of three months. Interviewees included eight current heads of school, equally divided between science and arts faculties, one acting head of school, and one member of the executive who was interviewed to provide a complementary perspective. Interviews lasted on average 90 minutes and were tape recorded and transcribed.⁴

As argued elsewhere, case studies are of limited generalisability as they provide the “rich understanding of context and [...] processes enacted” (Saunders et al. 2000: 94) in a specific locale. However, the data reported here are of relative generalisability to the extent that they demonstrate active conceptualisations of managerial tasks and issues. *How* these converge with or diverge from the prevailing academic and local senior management discourse will differ – relatively – from context to context. The point of generalisation is that such conceptualisations take place and are enacted and thus refute claims of management averseness.

Academic middle management in practice – some findings

Change reluctance, change resistance

Interviewees did not confirm the much cited change reluctance. Throughout, they acknowledged change as a now normal part of their working lives, and described their attempts to manage at the interface between sector, university, and local change agendas. They normalised change as either “a sequence of developments” (S2) or a “string of perpetual minor changes” (A4). Significantly, the need for change and modernisation was welcomed as it helped eliminate bad practice (S3; A4) and democratise the sector (A1), but interviewees also saw market implications: *“I have seen the university transform itself into a leading modern university which can hold its own in comparison with most universities of its size and bigger”* (A1). At local school level, change was perceived as ongoing and creating a change management imperative for heads of school *and* an opportunity for improvement.

Equally, downsides of change were reported, such as increasing bureaucracy, the standardisation of processes, the loss of creativity in teaching and research. However, in particular in reference to the research assessment exercise, the interviewees recognised the need to align their own units with the externally imposed requirements as they evolve. They may be cynical as to the effectiveness of these performance

⁴ In this report I use a simple code to identify participants: A1-4 refers to heads from arts and humanities; S1-4 to heads from sciences.

measures, but not longer resist them, as their pragmatic coping strategies were improving: *“I suspect like all universities, we are getting better at playing the game”* (S2).

All interviewees had their local change agendas. Paradoxically, what seemed to jeopardise this was not their, or their colleagues', unwillingness to embrace change but the bureaucratic structures and procedures that have accompanied the sector shift from old administration to managerial governance: *“We have lost the freedom to make sweeping changes. In the old days we would have been autonomous. These days everything has to be referenced to central policy, central quality audits and so on. You can still deliver on these ideas but it is much less flexible”* (S4).

The unwilling player manager – myth or reality?

Academics do not want to be managers, and they do not see management as a natural or desired facet of their careers. Only two of the interviewees had volunteered to take the role, and in all cases an exit route was already determined, as the appointment was temporary, and normally 'rewarded' with a sabbatical. The notion that the appointment required sacrifices was commonly shared; research in particular, even reputation, had suffered. Yet all accepted the appointment, even although there was no financial incentive.

What transpired was a different motivation, rooted in a notion of collegiality, local level loyalty, duty, fairness, and corporate loyalty, the latter reflecting recognition of a relation of mutual interest between individual and university aspirations. The interviewees did certainly not pretend to be selfless heroes but stressed that they would 'try their best' to fulfil their responsibilities to fulfil obligations towards colleagues and the university as a whole.

Does not wanting the job mean not doing the job?

Interviewees saw attractive aspects of the job. Significantly, one of the main attractions was the opportunity to bring about change and improvement to their immediate environment: *“The thing that makes it really interesting is that there is some scope for creativity, for initiating change. On a more procedural level, one can have an impact.”* (S4). This contradicts the picture of the academic resentfully accepting an unwelcome role. Obvious reluctance combines with a sense of obligation, and with enthusiasm for change and improvement. The emerging 'management philosophy' further questions the cliché of the 'unwilling' academic manager.

“To provide leadership” (A2), *“to take the leadership role”* (A1) was seen as key to the job, but management practice was defined holistically as a triad of leadership, administration and management. One interviewee summarised this as achieving and maintaining *“that balance between actually advancing things and getting people to make changes and moving forward institutional changes, but at the same time remaining friendly and collegial”* (A2). In other words, he saw it as his responsibility to manage change and enable staff to achieve change, and to align local, individual and corporate agendas. This reads like a pro-active concept of management, not like a gentleman scholar's view of an unwanted job. Other interviewees echoed this.

Interviewees wanted to bring about change, to improve colleagues' job satisfaction and morale (A3), *“to keep people happy”*, explicitly not happy *“at all costs”* (A2), but rather with a focus on delivery, because, managerially speaking, better morale means higher output. They wanted to improve *“school efficiency”* (A3) and to move the school forward, *“improving the department”*, *“improving [...] teaching, our research standing, our*

international reputation”, to keep people *“thinking about what they do”* because *“it is very easy to stagnate”* (S4). There was explicit commitment to continuous improvement.

Interviewees were realistic about their management challenges and determined to tackle these. To develop and communicate a strategy was seen as central to this: *“you have to have that vision [...] and transfer it downward”* (S4), *“provide leadership in terms of [...] the long-term direction the school is moving in”* and identify *“new directions”* and *“new fields”* [A2]; [A3]: *“it is incumbent upon me to ensure that we have those strategic discussions [...] and that we have a vision”* (S2).

Yet while interviewees put the school first, and consistently defined change agendas as outcomes of local unit issues or local unit interests, the need to align local or individual interests with those of the university was recognised. *“One of my responsibilities is to remind people that we are part of a university and not a little independent fiefdom”* (A2), which may require the need to *“explain [to colleagues] what the institution’s aims are and how their ambitions can be achieved within that institutional aim”* (A1).

Making decisions – trapped in hollowed collegiality?

Interviewees confirmed a preference for collegiality and consensual decision making but stressed that they saw themselves as both change agent and final decision taker, at times *“quite a lonely job”* (S4) because *“in the last resort I decide”* (A4). ‘Collegiality’, consensual decision making, were not idealised (*“it does not mean that everybody gets an equal shot”* [A1]) because of its main weakness: *“[collegiality] makes it difficult sometimes to make changes, and to make them at the rate you want”* (A2). Yet it remained the preferred mode of decision making, for reasons of cultural affinity, and for tactical reasons. One interviewee considered it a time-consuming but effective means of achieving the decisions he wanted: *“If you are going to move the school in a particular way, you want it in a consensus way. So you have to work quite hard to get the results you want”* (S1).

Consensual decision-making was not seen as a means to avoid difficult decisions. Interviewees saw this as their job, and theirs alone. But the advantage of tactically used consensual or collegial decision making was that it achieved outcomes more effectively, even if it took a bit longer to reach desired outcomes.

Shirking managerial responsibilities?

‘People problems’ in particular were cited as *“unpleasant”* (A1) but needing to be resolved, and in such situations interviewees accepted their line manager function as an *“agent of the executive”* (A4): *“when it comes to [difficult personnel problems], if you are going to be honest and you are going to be the leader, you have to do these things yourself”* (S1). Unpopular decisions have to be taken *“and people may hate you but you have to detach yourself from that”* (S4). Interviewees reported on conflicts between loyalty to colleagues and managerial duty and their recognition that *“you have to do certain things as manager. As head of school it was my responsibility to do the job as a manager”* (S1). In that role, the responsibility to exert control and align colleagues with corporate objectives was accepted, however reluctantly: *“Sometimes you just have to say right, these are the conditions under which we all collectively have signed contracts [...] and if people are not prepared to follow those procedures and work collectively in the institution, then the conditions of their employment have to be looked at”* (A1).

The interviewees became managers reluctantly but once appointed, they did not seem reluctant to do the job. They may see themselves as “player managers” doing a stint,

but not as playing at management (Dearlove, 1998). The conceptualisations they offered drew on terminology and concepts used in contemporary management practice. Occasionally this was done with irony, mostly it seemed the 'normal' language to use. All in all, interviewees used the discourse of management confidently to describe their own clearly goal-oriented management practice. The principles and skills the interviewees cited as instrumental to achieve their objectives – or *“to get the best out of people”* (S1) - strikingly resemble the 'soft managerialist' recipes commented upon earlier. These included honesty, integrity and ability to create trust; leading by example, and out of a sense of obligation; invisible or light touch management (*“my style is light-touch management, but not laissez faire”* (A3)). In relation to people management, interviewees saw their role as part developmental and guiding, and also embraced as relatively non-problematical the role of appraiser, with new staff being a particular responsibility, in other words coaching and facilitating. In this regard the need to remind staff of the give-take relation with the university was uncontested: *“You can't conceal that people are expected to deliver. [...] One of my most important jobs is to try and ensure that new colleagues integrate into the collegial culture of the school and reassure them [regarding appraisal, audit culture, culture of monitoring].”* (A2).

Preference was given to consensual and participative, even *“distributive management”* (S4). Participation, delegation and representation of *“all stakeholders”* (A1) was considered vital and three interviewees (A4, A3, S4) had invested considerable energy into creating efficient management structures to achieve this and create a sense of ownership: *“A lot is done by delegating and trying to make sure that decisions are made and action taken at the lowest possible level”* (A4). Nonetheless, interviewees regarded themselves as central drivers and holders of responsibility: *“I don't tell people what to do, I give them a goal rather than a management task. I seek advice from my management group”* (S2) – but *“it is inescapable that one person has to bear the responsibility”* (S1).

Notions of collegial management style resonate with team-based management as one interviewee observed: *“I think team based management is the way forward [...]. It means you have a commitment from everyone in the team. We have the nucleus of team based management in academia although we may not dress it in the same jargon.”* (S4)

Mobilising people skills such as *“good listening”*, problem solving and prioritising skills (A1, A4, S2), interviewees believed that their approach did not result in compromise but enabled them to deliver on their change agenda. Being transparent - *“transparency makes it easier to accept tough decisions”* [A4] - and using rational evidence based argument (S1; S4) had enabled them to let colleagues *“see the benefit of change”* (S4) and thus implement change with less if not without resistance.

Management training

Interviewees had mixed views on management training. Technical, information-rich training, for instance on finance or employment law, were appreciated (A1, A2, A4). The management development initiative offered by the university's centre was received with scepticism and seen as offering merely simplifications of complex reality: *“the University offered a huge training programme set up for heads of school, until we said: 'look, we have so little time, we can achieve this in much less time because you are spending whole days just to develop some very simple concepts of management’* (S1). More effective learning came through *“learning the hard way, learning on the job”* (A1).

Missed Opportunities

Interviewees showed little interest in transforming a currently informal gathering of heads of schools, designed to provide a forum for the sharing of ideas or concerns, or the exchange of good practice, into a more formal agenda-based body. The usefulness of such a body was questioned – heads preferred the direct link between their unit and the executive as more effective to achieve their goals or represent the interests of their school. We gained the impression that the creation of a more formalised body representing heads of school was seen as a further formalisation of their role as ‘managers’ and thus create an unwelcome distance between collegiate and heads. In other words, heads identified themselves as *primus inter pares* within their local collegial community, but not *qua* membership to the middle management level.

Interviewees talked about a school administrator as a possible solution to their workload dilemma – but rejected it. The exception was the romanticised notion of the “unsung hero” of the department (S1), e.g. the normally late middle-aged, no longer research-active academic who knows the ins and outs of the department, school and university and who can be trusted to be on the side of academics rather than ‘management. Professional or appointed administrators were a different matter and seen with distrust. That such administrators might create their own job, or seek to increase their (bureaucratic?) power were commonly held fears which prevented heads from actively and collectively considering whether and how such a role might be designed to free more time for academic heads to engage in the academic development of their unit. There seems thus reluctance to institutionalise *fora* or functions that to support the complex head of school role – despite the fact that voice and other benefits might be gained.

A word on words

All interviewees were sensitive to management discourse, reflecting either a reluctance to call what they do ‘management’ or to refer to themselves as managers, or ironically playing with examples of management terminology where it has become jargon. At the same time, their reflections on their day-to-day tasks and roles were comfortably phrased in mainstream management terminology, as amply illustrated in the preceding sub-sections.

Discussion - academic middle management as mediating rationality

The findings confirm some of the observations in the literature (yes, academics rarely volunteer to become player managers), but refute the claim that academics shirk from managerial responsibility. Two observations were striking. Firstly, the fact that all interviewees conceptualised their role comfortably, at times ironically, in the terminology of current management discourse; and secondly, the fact that their observations on their management practice bore strong resemblance to soft management recipes which university managers and academic writers argue have to be *imposed upon* academic middle managers. We could conclude from this that the interviewees were either colluding with managerialism or subverting it through gaming. Either perspective is misleading. These academics, as temporary managers straddling two conflicting domains, were, we propose, practising a synthetic, mediating ‘philosophy of management’ grounded in adaptive rationality, which endeavoured to ease the tension and communicate between senior management’s and their academic colleagues’ expectations. If we move the argument in this direction, we can conceptualise academic

middle management practice in such a way that the explicit contradictions between the reality according to the academic interviewees, and reality according to the prevailing discourse, can be dissolved in a form of management practice that operates by embracing multiple forms of rationality, rather than by freezing them in antinomies.

To illustrate this revised reading of academic middle management practice, we shall now revisit the themes of the academic middle management debate as they were reflected in this case study. What we hope to illustrate is that the management practice that has been uncovered illustrates a process of fusion of different rationalities, their values and imperatives, aimed at preserving what is considered locally good whilst achieving coordinated action deemed to be institutionally 'good'.

From this perspective, the discourse of management, for instance, may well have been adopted by academic managers to ease communication upwards as well as communication downwards, simply because this is the discourse used sector wide at operational level. Using managerial discourse is thus neither collusion nor tactical compliance, but a matter of choice to ease communication. The irony that shone through in the interviews retains a space of discursive freedom from which managerial and collegial or academic language and activity can be linked without subordinating one to the other. Using managerial discourse upwards creates credibility, using it with irony amongst colleagues establishes a communicative – discursive – platform which will better enable the mediation between the managerial and collegial interface.

The unwillingness of academics to assume a managerial position as a sign of their withdrawal from corporate responsibilities has been discussed in the literature. The opposite seems the case here: interviewees mobilised values of a social and ethically grounded rationalization when they indicated that duty and loyalty had made them accept the role. This is not an irrational argument, but an argument of a different rationality, echoing Weber's substantive rationality. Given that the role currently offers limited rewards that could, at individual level, result in a positive cost-benefit calculation, it seems imperative for university management to foster rather than to denigrate this commitment to service. If it sounds old-fashioned, it still seems to 'do the trick'. To redefine – and respect - academics' agreement to become managers, however reluctantly, in positive terms of a non-instrumental rationality seems even more important considering that, to date, promotion, recognition, reputation and funding are still largely linked to the one area all interviewees felt they had to make the greatest sacrifices in, namely research.

Academics' management practice deserves a similar rehabilitation. Throughout, interviewees expressed commitment to collegiality, consultation, to academic values of autonomy, of freedom to do research, freedom to have, as one interviewee said, "dream time" (A2). But the interviewees were also acutely aware of the limitations of collegiality and the constraints on 'academic freedom' within an institutional framework. The conceptualisation of their management practice was in positive and productive terms, sensitive to local and institutional expectations; the determination to move the school forward, the recurrent comment on change agendas, the commitment to leading by example, to moving people forward, the recognition that managerial jobs 'had to be done' and difficult decisions had to be taken, qualifies a reading that suggests aversion to management tasks. Instead, it seems heads of school tried to fuse, negotiate between – or adapt – seemingly opposing rationalities.

The operational success of the schools would imply that they must have been relatively well managed. Again the notion of adaptive rationality can offer a means to uncover the process. What the interviewees described as their management practice was more a process of integrating, co-ordinating or stream-lining the mostly accepted expectations of

goal-rational university management (e.g. delivery on accountability requirements; productivity measures) with the local requirements of academic colleagues whose right to pursue their research and teaching, and focus on their careers the heads as middle managers respected whilst *also* expecting their colleagues to contribute to the larger whole. Interviewees saw themselves as conduits of the executive, but endeavoured to retain specifics at local level, not simply for the sake of protecting terrain *against* the executive but with the view to creating an environment that would enable effective and efficient operation, and meet the productivity requirements stipulated by the sector via the executive. To that extent the interviewees mediated between managers and academic staff and tried to accommodate both. This is an example of the dialectical function of Bolan's adaptive rationality in operation. Middle managers who try to strike the balance between ever-growing requirements of an increasingly bureaucratised sector and the personal and professional needs of individuals with "whose life you play" (S1), or the need for academics to have "dream time" (A2) whilst also wanting to be consulted on changes and decisions, are not change-averse or shirking. Such managers may simply be trying to balance the diverse claims and expectations of "all stakeholders" (A1) through mobilising and operating "a technical, political and moral imagination in the service of creating new forms of social practice which can be responsive to new expressions of needs" (Bolan 1999: 82).

This balancing act is more difficult than seeing the world in the monochrome of managerialism *or* outright rejection of management. Academic middle managers are not the knights in shining armour in this story. They too were engaged in a process of discursive privileging, and construction of antinomies, as they clearly privileged academic over managerial discourse, and local over institutional concerns. They were as biased towards their academic community, as university managers are biased towards the corporate agenda. Given that they *simultaneously* tried to mediate between rationalities, such lapses may be unavoidable. But that does not release them from the obligation to *avoid* such 'privileging' and the dichotomisation of the world that it entails. Questioning the value of management training, for instance, by saying that it keeps them from important work immediately polarises the situation around the opposites of academic (good) and managerial (wasteful) activity. Rejecting a regular meeting of heads of school as wasteful rather than an opportunity to claim managerial voice through formalising such meetings and giving the forum an agenda is a further example of how antinomies (working for the school = good; working with other schools to drive agenda = wasteful) risk being perpetuated, thus hampering a more holistic understanding by university managers of their genuine managerial efforts.

Academics tend to display scepticism towards or dismiss management tools, techniques or initiatives, as evidenced here. There is a 'them and us' perspective, and at times such scepticism may reflect, and we should stress mostly unjustly, a lack of respect among academics for the efforts of university managers: if managerialism privileges one mode of seeing the world, academics, by inclination, privilege another, thus risking an equally reductivist perspective.

At the same time, mediation between the two worlds is possible. Several interviewees displayed this in the interviews (see above) and also as they emphasised the university executives' efforts to communicate, to clarify and explain initiatives and the positive impact this had. Their scepticism may thus be as negotiable or malleable as they, and university managers, are capable of moving beyond the confines of their preferred rationalities and discourses. Negotiation at the interfaces where the different management levels, their rationalities and discourses collide, thus poses the main managerial challenge for the future of HE sector management.

Concluding Remarks

Alvesson and Deetz (2000) define as the central task of the researcher today “[to enable] more open discourse among the various members of organisations” *not* through offering further extensions of research debates but through offering “counter-pictures of dominant ideals and understandings” (Alvesson & Deetz 2000: 7). Out of such contrast of picture and counter picture, new understanding can emerge. From a multiple rationalities perspective we can gain a more differentiated understanding of organisational reality and can rehabilitate currently concealed management practices. Importantly this perspective rejects the claim that one rationality is better than another as a simplification. Instead it challenges us to accept a more complex notion of management as a dialectic process of negotiating across different rationalities. This asks for more complex approaches to management practice than those offered by plain managerialism as it requires the synthesis of means-ends driven with social, value-based or local preferences and objectives.

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