



LINKING RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE



WARSAW SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

“Quality, managerialism, market orientation and other matters: exploring strategizing in universities”

Paper presented in track “Navigating (in) diversity. Policies, governance, institutional strategies” at the

EAIR 33rd Annual Forum in Warsaw, Poland

28-31 August 2011

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Key words

Governance, Management, Quality, Strategic Planning.

Abstract

Quality, managerialism, market orientation and other matters: exploring strategizing in universities.

The purpose of the paper is to explore university strategizing by means of examining academic managers narratives relate to institutional strategy. This main objective is explored in two parts: theoretically it draws on connections of concepts such as managerialism, governance and market orientation with the way institutional strategies are formulated and implemented in higher education institutions. Empirically, the approach taken is narrative and discursive analysis, based on a case study in a Spanish public university. This analytical scheme is based on a systematic exploration of the main factors considered to be responsible for enabling or constraining strategy implementation.

Presentation

Quality, managerialism, market orientation and other matters: exploring strategizing in universities

1. Introduction

The concept of managerialism became the main style of management in most OECD countries as a response to the demands of the competitive environment and financial pressures. These types of government as Currie et al. (2003) argue serves to increase the efficiency and outcomes of teaching and research. This scenario called for many higher education institutions (HEIs) in several European countries to develop the concept of entrepreneurship (Clark 1998), while there has been an increasing demand by governments for greater accountability and quality control. The changes entail inter alia a shift from allocation of funds based on historical criteria to performance-based mechanisms. The reforms have been interpreted as an attempt of the state to use more systematically financial incentives to control organisational behaviour and to improve efficiency and quality (Geuna & Martin 2003; Taylor & Taylor 2003). The argument that the provision of higher education is part of a market not only has been accepted at the policy level, but is also influencing the reform of university governance in different contexts.

It is noted in the literature a considerable discourse in the last decade regarding the governance of higher education, which has moved from a system of “academics” to a system of ‘managers’, being increasingly subject to external market and state regulations. As a result of this new reality, studies can be found that emphasise several changes experienced by the higher education sector in recent years in different contexts. On the one hand, there are evidences regarding demands for relevance, stakeholder’s engagement and the marketing of services, and on the other hand, the demand for generation of knowledge and social commitment, as well as creation of diversity. In this manner, issues such as relationship problems between autonomy and academic identity (Hellstrom 2004), or the massification of education (e.g. Henkel 2005; Kondakci & Van den Broeck 2009; Margolis 2004) are on the focus of attention. In this context, Ferlie and Geraghty (2005) ask if the professionalization vs. managerialisation debate is overstated and argue that more contemporary thinking and empirical study is needed. Specifically, regarding the Spanish System, there is a scanty number of studies exploring these debates.

This paper on the one hand, makes a theoretical reflection on issues of governance and institutional strategy and on the other, makes use of a case study in a Spanish university in order to reflect, from a strategy as practice perspective, upon the problems involved in university strategizing. The overall questions stated are to what extent the strategy set by the universities has really contributed to build a competitive advantage, endowing internal and external excellence? Additionally, to what extent their strong political and financial relationship with the Administration creates a comfortable situation of dependency, which can end up limiting innovation, differentiation and diversity creation?

The concept of strategy as practice, as a theoretical lens of analysis is used for exploring the development of strategic planning tool relate to governance and higher education market issues, using a Spanish public university as a single case of analysis. Thus, narratives of the university academic managers regarding the institutional strategy are explored, both at the top and middle management levels. The paper can contribute to practitioners as it highlights the problematic of institutional strategy implementation and participation, and shed lights on issues of governance and higher education competitive market in producing and implementing strategies at institutional levels.

2. Analytical framework

The development of different forms of management has been closely connected with the structure of universities, especially public institutions. As such, the activity of developing strategies and putting them into practice must be understood within the institutional larger context, framed in the diversity of interests that characterizes the collective action (Townley 2008). The problem of collective action by influencing the development of the strategy and its implementation has led to the emergence of a stream of research of strategy as practice (Whittington 2006). In general, the emphasis on practice illustrates how the interaction between individuals, activities and the context in which they are located, are socially integrated and articulated and are interpreted through stories and narratives that create meaning about the defined issues (Brown & Duguid 1991).

In this context, strategy is carried out through discourse and individual action and is contextually embedded in a set of social, political and economic factors (Hendry 2000). In consequence, strategizing involves several people, and it is based on the idea that organizational actors ensure mediation between action and cognition through conversations on the day-to-day basis, thus contributing to the structuring of strategic change processes (De la Ville & Mounoud 2003). This involves taking into account the relationships between different organizational levels and practices, and how actors are positioned in the process of producing and implementing strategy (Giraudeau 2008; Jarzabkowski & Balogun 2009). Therefore, studying strategizing entails giving more room to explore how different organizational actors transform the grand discourse of strategy. Consequently, investigating strategy-making processes actually means operating an equilibration between discourses of “grand strategy” (Barry & Elmes 1997) and the minutiae of everyday practice through developing a more systematic sensitivity to narratives. Hence, issues of context, power, politics, emotions, and a lot of other factors all add to the complexity of strategy formulation and implementation.

The process of strategizing usually involves lots of talk and text (e.g. meetings, presentations, storytelling and conversations). Additionally, the outcomes of strategizing are also discursive in their nature (e.g. strategic plans, vision and mission statements, official speeches, etc.) (Maitlis & Lawrence 2003). Thus, strategy discourse is not an unanimous enterprise but a polyphonic project that receives different kinds of emphasis in different contexts (Seidl 2007), that is to say that strategy discourse can be used by managers in different ways for their own benefit (Suominen & Mantere 2010). While the implementation view would characterize the success of strategy realization in terms of the organizational member’s activities being redirected in a specific way, the usefulness and usability of official strategy possibly should also be treated as a success factor for strategy realization in order to confront popular concepts like resistance to change, staff understanding and subunits goals or control structures and practices (Hrebiniak, 2006).

Bringing the issue of strategizing and its outcomes to the higher education sector, much controversy have been at play, specially regarding one particular outcome of strategizing: strategic planning efforts in HEI and their respective pitfalls (Birnbaum 2000). During the last decades, strategic planning has been regarded as a necessity for HEI in order to give more effective and efficiency responses to meet the demands imposed by changing environments and increased competition. In the European context, both authorities and HEIs in many countries see strategic planning as a useful tool to handle shifts in the environment and the growth in market competition. In like manner, when the need to reform HEIs is on the agenda, strategic planning has been regarded as a useful tool (Powers 2000). Even though strategic planning is a widely accepted tool, the backdrop of strategic planning in HEIs is a mixed experience and there are a number of criticisms as to its usefulness for universities (Chance & Williams 2009; West 2008). Additionally, as universities come to rely on public funding and more on engagement with marketplace for economic survival, they have increasingly become managed as if they were business, a phenomenon known as managerialism (Deem & Brehony 2005), although the influence of this phenomenon in different contexts is not clearly evidenced. As such, this overall context constitutes the

analytical background for the argument of exploring university strategizing in the context of a Spanish HEI.

3. Data and Methodology

This study involves a single case analysis (Yin 2003) in a public Spanish university that has a comprehensive background in strategic management, which allows for exploration of academic-managers perceptions in different organizational levels regarding the institutional strategy. Each of these academic-managers has a story to tell about themselves and their relationship with the university, when it comes to strategizing, allowing looking into the complex process involved as the academic managers narrate their experiences and perceptions about the university strategizing and governance. A single-case approach, while limited in terms of generalization, is nevertheless appropriate for an interpretative and holistic understanding of the debates being discussed in the paper.

The analysed university has a matrix-type structure of schools and departments with around 30.000 students (first and second cycles), employing around 2.800 teaching and research staff and about 1.600 administrative and service staff. Its first strategic plan came into light in 1995, covering a four-year period and have set the guidelines for planning in three levels: institutional, sectoral and structural units. The university has produced three other institutional plans, which were carried out in different ways. The empirical basis consists of written documentation (institutional strategic plans, contractual programs with the administration, units strategic plans, etc.) to provide a detailed understanding of the context and texts generated from interviews with the following university members: two members from the top management team involved in the institutional strategy programme, five directors of schools, one dean, one director of service and three heads of departments.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish, and lasted between 50 and 110 minutes. The interviewees were mostly male (2 were women), and have been working in the university for more than 15 years, occupying managerial positions from a range between 5 to 10 years, allowing for rich narratives to be told. The interviews were characterised as semi-structured conversations exploring specific aspects related to the institutional governance and strategy and the role and usefulness of the strategic plan within the university and the structural units. All the interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed and analysed using specific software (MAXQDA). Narrative analysis was used as a tool for exploring the individual experiences and perceptions of the institutional strategizing. The analytical scheme followed recommendations by (Boje 2001), for dealing with the individual narratives and by (Fairclough 2003) for exploring intertextuality between talks and their interaction.

As such, the analytical process was highly interpretative, where in a first stage of the analysis, all the interviews were sorted in general terms to examine whether there were relationships between the parts and the whole, identifying common and divergent issues being talked about. From this interpretative process different issues were identified, such as: Knowledge and perception of institutional strategy, implementation effectiveness and handicaps, usefulness of strategic plan at different organizational levels, internal and external factors influencing strategizing. Furthermore, by comparing and contrasting the individual academic-managers narratives in relation to the different issues identified, it allowed clustering them in categories of narratives, which are then used to reflect upon the paper overall questions: the strategizing being conducted has contributed to build a competitive advantage? And, to what extent the strong political and financial relationship with the Administration helps creating a comfortable situation of dependency, which can end up limiting innovation, differentiation and diversity creation?

4. Case analysis and findings

In this section the findings from the case analysis are discussed. The analysis shows issues emerging from the narratives told by top and middle managers, looking closely at the interplays of strategy implementation and governance issues influencing in the outcomes of the strategizing at the university.

4.1. Academic-managers narratives about Knowledge of institutional strategy

The attitudes towards the planning dynamic in the university are overall positive by all academic managers being interviewed, however issues of integrating and legitimating this planning dynamic within the academic units are a real challenge still to be faced. The data show two contrasting narratives: Narrative of support, that acknowledges the planning benefits and highlights the idea of strategy as “direction” and Narrative of limitation, that brings forward the challenges faced in strategizing relate to implement strategy at the decentralized “business units”.

Narrative of support

This narrative emphasises the idea that the planning mechanisms helped on assisting the different units in obtaining information on their areas of activities, serving as “direction” for the institution in its strategic and management tasks. This supporting view upon the institutional strategy was most common told by top team members (TMT), but in some points shared by middle managers. Also it highlights key aspects and benefits of the planning dynamic created within the university, addressing the usefulness of the planning mechanisms for many units in their process of strategic decision-making.

It was not a purely economic issue; the value of the dynamic of planning was based on the willingness of the different units in obtaining valuable information in order to provide them a support in their decision-making. We think it has been a useful tool for the development of the internal planning of the units (TMT member).

The planning mechanism was quite interesting, you were not required to achieve a particular result, but instead you were asked to pin point how far could you arrive at the areas identified as being problematic and then you should be committed to comply it (Director of department).

The majority of the interviewees argued that the institutional planning mechanisms developed at the university were quite positive in terms of promoting a certain kind of strategic thinking and direction. However, the purpose of formulating strategic plans and its contents were not clearly identified as being a consequence of the need to meet the challenges from the university surroundings. Very few concepts of increased competition, institutional differentiation and increased internationalization were touched upon during the interviews.

This issue supports the arguments proposed by Gines Mora and Vidal (2005) arguing that in the Spanish Higher Education System prevails a feeling of “undesirable competition”, consequence of the massification of the higher education achieved by the geographical expansion in the number of HEI, where new universities, which were clones of the old ones, tended to offer the same programmes and services. Consequently, as the authors argue, given the characteristic of the regionalization influence of the universities and the lack of students and faculty mobility, nobody is promoting differentiation, increasing competitiveness or taking whatever action necessary to make the whole system more orientated to the diversity of the social needs.

Narratives of Limitation

This narrative acknowledges the role of the political influences in the strategizing mechanisms developed in the university, resulting in the creation of resistance and problems within participation. Issues such as window-dressing, governance structure, autonomy and top-down approach to planning were highlighted as being at play in negotiating the strategy deployment. The main idea addressed here is related to the inertia experiment in strategy implementation at the different units, due to the fact that the negotiations involved with corporate levels have allowed limited room for manoeuvre and the build up of innovative strategies in the overall institutional level.

There are times when management policies are set, based on meeting funding requirements, as such, there are some constraints that cannot be ignored, we are part of a public administration, therefore, management and strategizing can be seen limited by criteria that are not always the most appropriated. There are aspects that could be interpreted as window-dressing when we look at the funding mechanisms, however, the university has always tried to improve its planning and quality systems, but indeed we have to bear in mind that they are tied to the funding schemes of the public administration, which in fact could limit strategy innovation (Dean).

Also characteristics of the hierarchical systems, where the praxis at play in different internal units could be in conflict within the institutionalized formal mechanisms, were expressed as being elements of limitations, bringing upon issues of organizational culture diversity and communication problems.

Many times when there is an element of contradiction, the university pyramidal structure plays a more general opposition to the parallel cultures rather than being inclusive, which allows more informal paths to exist, such as the creation of a systems of building bridges in order to overcome the bureaucracy and supporting to solve major problems at local level (Director of School).

Practice express creativity, a capacity 'to put up with', to subvert imposed rules and create room for manoeuvre (De la Ville & Mounoud 2010). This idea is coupled with middle academic-managers argument that to solve major problems in their unit, "bridges" were being built to overcome bureaucracy and inertia. This is in line with the results of consuming strategy in a Polytechnic university (Suominen & Mantere 2010) that argue that managers perform some prohibited actions and tricks in order to cope with strategy in their everyday work.

This narrative also addresses the idea of controlling present in the negotiation scheme taking part in strategy implementation within the units, through the extensive use of measuring mechanism as a result of top management control, highlighting controlling over strategizing.

Even now, after the university long relationship with a 'planning culture', I do think a lot of people do not believe in these indicators [information provided by the TMT for planning at unit levels]. Any School will tell you that they are following it, due to the budget issue; I sometimes perceive that this is a kind of imposition, because many people do not believe that those indicators are really important (Director of School).

The key aspects acknowledged here highlight issues of participation, recognition of unit's individuality and differences, communication and ownership. As respect to participation, it stressed that the institutional discourse regarding strategic planning delegitimize participative behaviours (Mantere & Vaara, 2008) in strategizing and at the same time give way for creation of "sidelines games" within the formalized organizational rules of actions as argued by De Certeau (De la Ville and Mounoud 2010, p. 192). This can be related on the one hand, to the organizational hierarchy in which prevails a collegial and hierarchical model, where academic resistance play an important part, and on the other hand, the structure mechanisms for planning did not allow for discursive spaces and more collaborative conversation to emerge within the collective action (Townley 2008) of the university.

There were norms for guiding strategy formulation, but such norms seem not to leave much room for increased the steering capacity of the university as a whole. This implies that these plans may likely express window-dressing responses to external demands instead of promoting internal ambitions for increased steering capacity. However, in an overall vision, the current planning implementation and development at the university may be seen as 'good' in given direction, but more pressures are put on enhancing participation and taking into account the units individualities within the university collective action.

Strategic planning in the university has worked well in the sense that it has driven the strategic thinking at the university, however it has failed to be present at all university levels (Dean).

Also the professional culture of the university plays another relevant part, along with the problematic issue of strategy ownership, which brings into light concerns for improvements in the mechanisms of communication and participation.

It is very difficult to strategize bearing in mind the type of collective we have in the university. Mission and vision... I think such concepts have not been deployed to the bottom levels. If you ask a professor in our school to describe the mission or vision of the School or the university, he/she will not know what to say (Director of School).

Process of institutionalization accompany and support the emergence of integrative organizational discourses that support strategizing outcomes. As such, in the process of institutionalization of the practices within the university, there was a clear lack of recognizing the parallel cultures that characterizes the units individualities, and at the same time lead to a constraint in different parts of the organization as respect to strategy ownership.

While the informants and their narratives have admit that most leaders at different levels are familiar with the university strategy, academic and service staff in general will have little knowledge. The communication aspects of strategizing was acknowledged as playing a central role in 'selling' the plan to different stakeholders, in building commitment between leaders and allowing participation and information among the key stakeholders.

4.2. Strategy efficiency and governance issues

The organizational culture, the model of governance at play and the management efficiency are some relevant issues acknowledged as having a strong impact in the university strategizing. The heavy structure that characterizes the university, where the costs spent in managing the core business (teaching, research, knowledge transfer) represents half of the amount spent in developing the core business itself. This contributes to the development of a dysfunctional system, reflected by the increasingly deficit, and is strictly related to policies adopted and to the type of relationships with government administration.

We have a deficit of more than 70 million Euros, as a result of a structural deficit added with an inefficient management. Under these circumstances, my question is: what strategy can be done bear in mind this context? The structural deficit, is related to the agreements we pact with the Local government administration, who in a first place assumes a compromise, but furthermore do not accomplish it. Thus, what strategy can you really do? (Director of department).

Additionally, in the context of the current financial cutbacks, the interviewees portrayed the management of the university, as it should be based on greater autonomy and responsibility. Issues of power, political influences, real strategic diagnostic and thinking, identification of the university core productive centers in order to set its priorities strategies, were some of the main warning themes on debate.

The strategy of the university can be good, but very constrained by issues such as the actual evaluation system that creates perverse behaviors, inefficiency in the management structures which are conditioned by the public statutes, changing policies, lack of working-team culture, and changes of favors at the expense of responsibility (Director of School).

On one hand there is the problematic of carrying out a reflective exercise when designing appropriate strategies, and on the other, the governance system in place limits the autonomy to weigh out the strategy that pleases everyone. Coupled with that, there is an issue highly addressed by the academic

managers: the lack of “institutional responsibility”, where the vice-chancellor has long been the only responsible on the decision-making structure process.

We are faced with the problem of having to be a large university, that at the same time wants to be excellent, although not able to say excellent in what. Our production centers are not clearly identified. We do not know if they are in the departments, schools, campus... This is very relevant when developing a strategic vision, and constitutes a clear lack in our institution” (Director of School).

6. Conclusions and discussions

Strategy at the university was seen by top manager’s members as a “tool for guiding strategic direction”, argument also shared by middle managers. However, the planning dynamic nonetheless was seen by most managers at unit levels as being overwhelmed by control and lack of ownership, limiting the role of an effective strategizing.

These issues are consistent with the argument proposed by Hellstrom (2004) where both the duality that involves setting the vision, direction and strategy and setting up the diffusion of routines to implement them, depend on maintaining a psychological contract with the interested parties from the academic community. Additionally, the strategizing activity is largely characterized by bridges, a metaphorical concept of a practice related to the intents to overcome the institutional bureaucracy, which reinforces the perspective of cells structures (Buckland 2009). Furthermore, the rationale and the format of the plans were strongly framed by the demands and requirements of funding schemes and by the imposition of the governance model at place, rather than resulting from a rigorous analysis and strategic thinking for building innovative approaches to market demands.

As such, the day-to-day management and the governance structure of the university lead to the creation of cell division and micro-groups. There is a clear lack of centripetal forces, and the need to identify where are the production centers in order to talk about an effective strategy making. On the one hand, the strategizing is rather characterized as short-term reaction instead of a vision exercise, looking at competition and differentiation. On the other hand, the changes needed are strongly relied on policy levels, and are limited by the governance structure, which creates a system that does not allow for innovation and differentiation.

Intrinsically, to accomplish strategic change and effective implementation, better communication channels, more spaces for participation and transparency as well a clear leadership were identified as being the key tools to “sell and by in” the university strategy. Consequently, it suggests the need for enhancing discursive spaces, considering also the fundamental role of building integration and strategy ownership, and allowing for real strategizing debate to be conducted.

Inasmuch as this is a relatively limited study of 12 academic-managers in one single case, the discussion put forward in this paper should be carefully taken into account regarding generalization issues. Nevertheless in the context of the current university governance model at play, it can serve as a reflection for both policy and practice levels. However, a comparative study in other public universities would be needed in order to validate a clear picture of the whole Spanish system.

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