

Forget Copycat Management

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It is an open secret that government does not think much of the way universities are managed. If government is right about this it should recognize that it must also carry some of the blame: overregulated, underfunded institutions, subject to pseudo market forces created by funding formulae are not going to find developing coherent management styles easy. Initiative, innovation, and change are more difficult to achieve if institutions are slipping into deficit.

Having said this, universities owe it to themselves to think seriously about management and governance questions because good management and effective governance assist academic performance and strengthen universities' ability to withstand the vagaries of erratic funding policies and environmental turbulence. Perhaps above all the process gives universities confidence in facing the future.

But too often academics and administrators who would accord high priority to detailed research in established disciplines pluck out of the air ready-made managerial solutions from elsewhere that they may have heard discussed in the bar at a conference and present them as newly minted answers to their own problems. A classic cliché in university committees is the notion that the better the decision the closer it is taken to the coalface, implying that academic resource decisions are best taken at the departmental level. The picture this conjures up, however, ignores the fact that there is no evidence that coalface workers are good at closing seams, determining strategy about the future of pits, or even of diversifying the scope of the activity. By the same token it is all too possible to hear the most outdated managerial concepts repeated as ultimate truths when business research, known to their own business school colleagues, can tell them that the world is no longer that simple. We deceive ourselves when we draw easy analogies between customers and students, chief executives and vice chancellors, governing bodies and company boards of directors. Organizationally, universities remain in part *sui generis*, and their management will be most effective when it respects this.

We should therefore recognize, though many institutions seem not to, that leadership in universities, as in any grouping of professionals, depends on building a consensus, and that management is a team activity rather than a matter of issuing directives from behind

closed doors. Universities seem to the outside world to be overly democratic but are often extremely hierarchical, excluding the most knowledgeable people on particular management issues from participation in decision making on the issues in which they are the most expert. Universities are often deeply resistant to flat structures where communication lines are short and decisions can be taken quickly, preferring extended decision-making structures where process triumphs over timeliness. Too often relations between academic and professional managers are confused by considerations of status when it is abundantly clear that partnership and a sense of equality and open discussion encourage creative thinking and innovative managerial solutions.

We therefore need not new managerial fads or tool kits but more investment in thinking about university management issues. Many universities nowadays have turnovers of £150 million or more and are big organizations that can only get bigger. They require input by professionals, from both academics in managerial positions and from professional managers, working together, to run them effectively. There are, however, still too many universities that have not recognized the implications of scale in their management and work on models that have not kept pace with the speed of change. The benefits of good financial management are often not understood, strategy making is fragmented, policy decisions are not subjected to challenge, and once taken, are not translated into effective action.

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Universities are interlocking organizations in which all the parts are interdependent; improving institutional effectiveness has more to do with examining each related activity on a holistic basis than grand new policy initiatives or bold restructuring. To improve university management we need to educate a wider proportion of our staff in what the management issues are and how to approach them. It is not sufficient to delay this until they become a dean or a pro vice chancellor or until they have been consigned to one specialist administrative area for 10 years or more. If we are to take institutional management seriously we must prepare a subset of the younger generation of academics and administrators so that when they reach senior positions they understand the issues and approach them professionally.

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