2018

Adopting more diverse models of organisation in higher education- the implications for institutional strategy.

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Abstract

A universal approach to strategy formulation in higher education implies one that is fit for the many and complex contingencies faced by that institution. Reviews of current form of strategising indicate that the present approach to strategic management falls short of meeting that criterion. The paper suggests that this deficiency might be addressed by adopting a much more fluid perception of the university as an organisation and devising a form of strategic management that that takes greater account of the paradoxical nature of the institution and the environment in which it operates. It argues that deficiencies in the present form may be attributable to a limited systemic theorisation university as an organisation and suggests adopting a more pluralistic approach, one that involves paying greater attention to the local processes that actually bring change about. The result is a much more diffuse and continuous conceptualisation of strategy that fuses intentional and emergent forms and helps to reframe the many conflicting strategic issues which are faced by higher education institutions[i]. The implications for organisational development in universities and further work to be done are briefly reviewed

Present Approach to Strategy Making in Higher Education

Studies of strategy making universities in the UK (Buckland, 2009), Ireland (Elwood & Rainnie, 2012; Lillis & Lynch, 2014) and Europe (Frølich, Stensaker, & Huisman, 2017) reveal a predominantly planned approach to strategy management in higher education. By these accounts, it is driven mainly by the need to compete for students, in pursuit of prestige and funding and in response to the soft governance mechanisms used by national and transnational agencies to steer higher education towards certain social and economic aims (Gornitzka, 1999). Strategy is conceived as establishing sectoral legitimacy, alignment with the environment, setting out boundaries and organisational vision, projection of certain institutional image or supporting preferred patterns of activity within the institution (Buckland, 2009; Frølich et al., 2017; Hinton, 2012; Shattock, 2010). The prime responsibility for strategy making tends to lie with dominant coalitions within and outside the institution (Scott & Davis, 2007). Managers as leaders are expected give strategic direction, to promote a certain culture or particular patterns of activity and behaviour within institutions. The process of strategising relies mainly on a set of rational tools used to objectively assess the organisation and its present status including scenario planning, environmental scanning, SWOT analysis and identification of core competencies or institutional dashboards and goal setting (Davies, 2008; Hinton, 2012). Likewise, strategy implementation often follows the mechanistic model of organisational restructuring and selective resource allocation and recruitment in pursuance of such goals.

A common criticism in the these studies is that strategic plans are over influenced by the need to satisfy institutional review criteria by funding agencies, for lacking any detailed

analysis of institutional processes or local context and as being incapable of meeting the rapid rate of environmental change. The results are a blandness and similarity in content and plans that do not take account of the realities of organisational life or can be quickly overtaken by external events. Buckland gets to the heart of the matter when he points out that these deficiencies arise from a basic misunderstanding as to how strategising for change actually happens in universities. In my paper at the last HEIT conference I argued that this restricted perception of strategising may be based on a limited systemic way of thinking about the university as an organisational actor, in which a higher education institution is perceived as a distinctive entity, a purposive and adaptive actor with pre-set goals and with a visible structure designed to achieve these goals (Doyle & Brady, 2018). The perspective of change tends to be external and macro with institutions viewed as a functioning system within a wider social environment or organisational field. Change is initiated, usually from the top down, with a specified end state in mind. It is assumed that, by itself or in conjunction with others, the institution can construct such an envisioned end state, that it can identify and implement a set of actions to reach that goal and objectively monitor progress towards it. Analysis of such change and its management tends to focus on the transition process between start and optimal end state, on what sustains or impedes progress, with an emphasis on what should be happening and less on what is actually happening as Buckland points out (2009). It is this way of thinking about the university as an organisation that presently underpins much institutional research and strategic planning in higher education. Strategic outcomes tend to be confined to themes or models that address issues of organisational core competencies, boundaries with other elements of the field, resource dependencies and institutional positioning and image. (Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Hinton, 2012; Shattock, 2010).

A more universal way of thinking about strategic management

A new more pluralistic way of thinking about organising and strategic management is required to address the above limitations. Again, a new way of thinking can come about by posing fundamental questions about the actualities of why and how we practice strategic management in higher education. Stacey puts it succinctly when arguing that any approach to strategic management must be in the context of what people think, feel and do in organisations of how they actually experience change (2011); it is people who practice strategising and it is therefore essential to understand how people interact in organisations to bring about change if one is to understand the process of strategising and have any real influence over its outcomes. Drawing on complexity theories of change and social theories on human interaction of Herbert Mead and Norbert Elias he portrays alternative responsive way of thinking about organising and strategising that tries to address these issues. The ideas are complex but at it's heart is an attempt to present a way of thinking about change that reflects the reality of the complex and paradoxical nature of organising and strategy making in organisations; the inherent tensions that exist within organisational missions, the role of leaders as both participants and observers in organisational activity, the conflict between human agency and structure, between individual and collective identity, the emergent and deliberate nature of strategising and the interaction between local or peripheral parts of the organisation and the centre. All of these issues resonate with debates within higher education around the purpose of higher education and tensions around how students, faculty and management interact (Manning, 2017), and the more widespread adoption of the so called complete organisational forms (Seeber et al., 2015).

The responsive way of thinking of organisation is based on a fundamentally different paradigm of organisation and organisational change. It is a paradigm that is based on an alternative process philosophy that depict organisations as emergent entities in a continuous state of change arising from day to day interactions between organisational members. Rather than being an imposed structure, organisations find their own form of order and coherence, often referred to in terms of self-organization or emergent change. Change is not predictable or linear but is cyclical involving a constant ebb and flow of ideas created by unique sets of interactions between people at specific junctures in time and for which there can be no defined end-state.

People involved in such interactions are not seen individuals driven by the need for self-actualisation operating within some institutional framework as is assumed in the rational systemic paradigm. Instead the motivator of organisational behaviour is seen as the human urge to relate in which individual identity shapes, and is shaped by, the collective. This concept of interdependence leads to several insights into the nature of interactions that bring about change. The first is that such interdependence inevitably leads to a power differential within groups that is present regardless of hierarchical status and can lead to feelings of inclusion or exclusion from whatever themes are playing out at the time. It also gives a deeper understanding of diversity, one that is implicit to all social settings given the multiplicity of identity and power differentials that exist rather than arising from some demographic variety such as age, gender or ethnicity. Interaction does not follow any blueprint although it can be influenced by prevailing institutional values or statements of strategic intent. So, there is a commonality between the types of conversation that happen but because of diversity each interaction is unique and can lead to unique change outcomes. Change comes about when new conversation patterns or discourses emerge in groups and this is more likely when diversity is present and recognised.

Thinking about change in this way points also to its iterative and cyclical nature and how local discourse can lead to change at organisational level and beyond (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Scharmer, 2009; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Change comes about through a heightening of awareness of the existing themes within the group or organisation. Through generative dialogue new themes are developed and a collective vision of the future or what is possible emerges. This results in experimentation or actions being taken or new mental models being constructed at local level which can cumulate and amplify to produce new organisational or field patterns (Weick & Quinn, 1999). So instead of change being envisaged as episodic or some shift of one state of equilibrium to another it is seen as a continuous process in which current stable themes or mental models are reinterpreted in the present in a way that retains or builds on existing ideas and values, dispenses with others and makes way for new themes or models to emerge (Sharmer, 2009).

This way of thinking about organisations and how people bring about organisational change leads to a very different and perhaps more universal way of thinking about strategic management in higher education, about the purpose of strategic planning, about how, where and when strategising takes place. It's purpose can still be an instrument of organisational change in the sense that it informs development decisions at management level (Davies, 2008). The existence of plans can serve as a defence against the anxiety of dealing with an uncertain future or can be a means of legitimising certain organisational values or aims thereby projecting a positive image or the institution. Strategic goals also serve as the initiator of local conversation where they are particularised in that context and can be used to derive

new models or organisational themes (Stacey, 2011). Therefore, strategising becomes a much more diffuse and unpredictable activity. Strategic management is now about actively participating in conversations at all levels about important emergent issues Dominant coalitions may still produce statements of intent and seek to achieve consensus, but responsive processes happen locally and produce unique outcomes. Attention shifts from the centre to the periphery where interaction with others outside the institution leads to innovation through engagement with emerging ideas (Scharmer, 2009). Greater attention is paid also to the process of strategising. Given the unique characteristics of each set of local interactions the outcome of strategising cannot be controlled or predicted, but they are not random. Outcomes arise from the quality of the interaction taking place and, critically, on its ability to bring underlying tensions to light. In turn, this depends on the diversity of those involved in such interactions, the clarity and authenticity of exchanges between people, an acknowledgement of the power configurations that confer or limit choice and the institutional values and norms that shape the choices that are being made (Stacey, 2011).

Behind these ideas is a recognition of the inherently paradoxical nature of organising and strategising. Mintzberg &Waters talk about strategising as walking on two feet one deliberate and one emergent (1985). From the above account we can see that all strategising is emergent but relying on an interplay of intent within or between groupings in organisations (Stacey, 2011). The systemic way of thinking about strategy places emphasis on clarity and consensus in strategic outcomes and a process of strategising that seeks either or solutions to issues. The responsive or emergent way of thinking recognises that multiple solutions can coexist and that in paradoxical situations no single strategic model can apply. Issues cannot be resolved but must be reframed in a different, perhaps more universal, way. These ideas resonate strongly with the role played by universities which is characterised by engagement with multiple sub-systems in society. Likewise, life within the field of higher education presents many historical and current tensions; specialisation versus integration, individualism vs community in student life, research vs teaching, interdependence vs independence allowing academic freedom , flexibility vs efficiency in school structures, public vs private good or competitiveness vs collaboration (Manning, 2017). It is not surprising then that strategic change management in universities can be described as the 'management of paradoxes under turbulent circumstances' (Meister Scheytt & Scheytt, 2

Yet as I outlined in previous sections acceptance of ambiguity and inconsistency do not equate to organised anarchy or chaos in strategic management or the frequently misconstrued form of garbage can decision making described by Cohen, March and Olsen (1972). Responsive processes are by their nature reflective, encouraging active and diverse engagement with current themes. Confronting paradox allows people to leverage opposing tensions rather than attempting to resolve them, to reframe the polarities contained within them in creative ways. The creativity or spontaneity required to do this is not impulsive or random but emerges from skilful collective processes of people dealing with the unique contingencies of the situation they face (Fligstein, 2001; Stacey, 2011). The result in terms of strategic output is a shift in emphasis from seeking legitimacy and being seen to respond to some particular environmental need towards a position where people exercise such creativity, assert their individual and collective identity and enable institutions to achieve optimal distinctiveness within that institutional environment (Zhao et al , 2017).

Implications and further work needed

To sum up, applying universal principles to strategic planning in higher education means recognising, reflecting on and integrating a diverse range of perspectives on organisational change. It requires a much more fluid perception of the university as an organisation, a shift of attention from structures and high level planning to the local processes that bring change about and to the nature of the institutional work in which individuals shape, and are shaped by, what is going on (Scott, 2015). The compelling case for embracing this emergent approach is that the complex and constantly evolving environment in which higher education operates requires a more complex or universal conceptualisation of strategising for change (Askling & Stensaker, 2002; Manning, 2017; Stewart et al, 2016). Deploying this conceptualisation means that strategising becomes a much more diffuse and continuous process, strategic intent extends beyond issues such as core competences to what is possible and emergent (Scharmer, 2009). The dominant coalition of top managers and other influencers can and should continue to engage in their own conversations with people within the field and generate strategic models which they feel are responsive to current needs. They can and should continue to transmit this strategic intent, but they cannot predetermine how such models or ideas will be received or transformed at local level or how such local interactions can in turn lead to organisational wide changes (Stacey, 2011). Likewise, the process of strategising is no longer seen in terms of something that is engaged in periodically but as something which is done as part of people's daily interactions. Attention then shifts to the quality of those interactions and how they can affect strategic outcomes.

This has two significant implications for organisational development in higher education which I will briefly review here - see Doyle & Brady (2018) for more detail. The first is that the more diffuse notion of strategising described above leads to a more diffuse or distributed concept of leadership in higher education (Jones & Harvey, 2017). Leadership is now conceived as the capacity to sense and shape individual and collective futures. As a concept, it is firmly anchored to the process of change rather than to personal charisma or hierarchical position. Leadership development must then concentrate on enhancing the ability of people at all levels to deal with change, to embrace complexity and paradox, to deepen their resilience in rapidly changing situations and to develop the integrity needed to make ethical choices when consequences may be unknown (Kezar, 2008; Kezar & Lester, 2011). The second major implication is a general shift from what Bushe &Marshack term a *diagnostic* approach to strategic planning and development based on the systemic way of thinking to a *dialogic* approach based on the responsive emergent way of thinking described above. Change interventions concentrate on expanding involvement in current discourses, encouraging the generative processes that lead to a questioning of existing mental models or ways of thinking and enable the emergence of new thoughts and action. Strategising is less about tools and techniques and more about active engagement by all change agents in organisational conversations, surfacing differences and patterns and encouraging experimentation with those emergent ideas (Nevis et al, 2008; Olson & Eoyang, 2001; Ray & Gopplett, 2013; Scharmer, 2009; Weisbord & Janoff, 2010). This approach may be discomfiting as it offers no particular tool, solution or model to follow but as Stacey suggests 'there is nothing as practical as constantly reflecting on what we are doing and why we are doing it'(2011, p 402).

The emphasis on the work to be done around the research and practice of strategising in higher education must now shift from analysis of actions and outcomes to an exploration of peoples individual and collective experience of change processes; taking personal experience seriously (Stacey & Griffin, 2005) and the social practices surrounding strategy making (Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Such exploration needs to be completed at the individual, group and organisational levels and consider how such experiences affect each other. The potential benefits are worth pursuing. A universal way of thinking about strategy in higher education induces a wider vision of what is possible, a deeper quality of awareness about the present and a more distinct sense of the future. The focus of attention on interaction between people helps institutes become more collaborative, innovative and inclusive encouraging the movement of all players towards a collective perception of what is best. It enables institutions to 'get out ahead of the current changes' (Manning, 2017 p.8), to think beyond what is now or past, to learn from an emerging future.

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[i] I interchangeably use the terms higher education institution and university throughout this paper.