

The impact of managerialism on the strategy work of university middle managers

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In an attempt to understand the effects of managerialism on university managers in a developing country, we set out to gather rich data on the strategy work of middle managers through a single case study at a South African university. Managerialism has the potential to solve inefficiencies in university systems and processes, as it could help to simplify the complex university management environment. Yet, our findings show that middle managers at the chosen institution are constrained by the effects of managerialism. Managerialism has resulted in a tyranny of bureaucracy which translates into disempowered middle managers, a culture of conformance over collegiality, control at the cost of innovation and experimentation and an over-articulation of strategy which devalues the strategy. To cope with the identified negative effects of managerialism, middle managers create their own systems outside the bureaucracy and provide more support to peers and subordinates.

Keywords: middle managers; managerialism; university management; academic managers; strategy work

Introduction

The challenges facing universities are becoming bigger and more complex (Bisbee and Miller, 2006, 24) and managing universities is no easy task. University management structures have been known for inherited public sector management styles, many hierarchical layers, costly administrative burdens (Chaharbaghi 2007, 319) and bureaucratic systems. University managers face challenges resulting from declining state funding, changing student demographics, new technological developments and increased market pressures (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Rowley and Sherman 2001; Göransson, Maharajh, and Schmoch 2009; Weinberg and Graham-Smith 2012).

Growing evidence exists that higher education is gradually being appropriated by managerialist ideology originating from the private sector (Kolsaker 2008, 513). Through such means as mission articulation, strategic planning, evaluation and commercial marketing, higher education managers are to ensure that their institutions become more entrepreneurial, adaptive and commercially responsive (Meek et al. 2010, 1). Teelken (2012, 271) reports that although these managerialist practices are considered useful, there is also evidence of detrimental effects on primary tasks of universities.

Research was conducted to investigate the impact of managerialism on the strategy work of university middle managers. All layers of management in the institution have an important role in ensuring the productivity, efficiency, sustainability and competitiveness of the institution, but in this article we focus on the middle layer of management, both academic and non-academic middle managers. In support of the views of Wooldridge, Schmid, and Floyd (2008, 1190), we assert that the middle management perspective is a necessary point of observation from which to study the organisational processes associated with building and renewing capabilities. Further, we agree with the views of De Boer, Goedegebuure, and Meek (2010, 230) that university management is not confined to the top of the institution but cascades down to its constituent parts: the faculties, departments, schools and research institutes.

A review of the literature confirmed the view of De Boer, Goedegebuure, and Meek (2010), who claim that remarkably little is known about how university middle managers go about their tasks and call for more research to grasp the nature of the work of university middle managers. Meek et al. (2010) explored the role of middle-level academic managers in the higher education systems of 10 countries – research on this topic in developing countries, such as South Africa, was absent. The choice of a university in South Africa was confirmed by the numerous calls for research in higher education institutions in developing countries (Rowley and Sherman 2001; Pityana 2009; Kuanda 2012). Our

original research stance proposes that managerialism constrains the strategy work of university middle managers rather than enabling them.

Our exploratory qualitative case research examined the nuances and complexities of managing on the middle level and enhanced our understanding of the impact of managerialism on the strategy work of middle managers in this context. The findings reported in this article are part of a larger study of the strategising practices of university middle managers in a South African university (Davis 2013). Following this introduction is an overview of the middle management perspective and a review of the existing knowledge on middle managers in the university context and managerialism in universities. Next, a description of the research context, methodology and analysis process is provided. Finally, the findings and our contribution are described.

Middle managers in universities: a review of the literature

The first stage of our research was a review of the existing literature which confirmed the shortage of published research on the middle management cadre in the university context, specifically in developing countries. In the context of the research reported on in this article, middle managers were identified as those managers who link the activities of vertically related groups and are responsible for at least sub-functional workflow, but not for the workflow of the institution as a whole. Our research did not explore academics in the profession. We purposely selected academic middle managers, who are responsible for managing groups of academics and operate within the academic faculties. We also selected non-academic managers – those managers who function in support departments, such as human resources, finance and central administration. A thematic search across a wide range of publications in the last 15 years has revealed that reporting on middle managers in higher education in developed countries is not new. Our thematic search, using middle managers and universities as search criteria, identified studies by Burnes, Wend, and By (2013), Schneijderberg and Merkator (2013), Rayner et al. (2010), Whitchurch (2008), Bryman (2007), Deem (2004), Parker (2004), Rowley and Sherman (2003) and Wolverton, Ackerman, and Holt (2005). The focus of these identified studies was on academic managers.

The unit of analysis for many of these studies was the academic head of department (HOD) and investigations centred on roles, attitudes and leadership development. Findings confirmed that roles were changing and academic managers experienced unique challenges within their working environments. These challenges include the more managerial nature of HOD work in both statutory and chartered universities (Smith 2002) and an increasing amount of management and bureaucratic work at the expense of their teaching and research (Floyd 2012). The HOD is also required to provide leadership for both academic and administrative functions. In contrast to the middle managers in administrative departments, some academics find themselves in management roles which they did not necessarily aspire to but that are required in the university management context (Rowley and Sherman 2003). In other cases, academics deliberately want to move away from teaching and research by taking on a management role as the current concept of an academic career is very different from the one of two decades earlier (Deem 2004). However, according to Floyd (2012), there is a growing perception that the pressures associated with being an academic manager outweigh the perceived rewards of the position. Indeed, Wolverton, Ackerman, and Holt (2005, 227) claim that the random selection of academic HODs often produces a manager who might understand departmental idiosyncrasies but may not be inclined towards effective leadership.

Managerialism in universities

Published research on managerialism in universities since 2000 indicates that managerialism is a well-documented phenomenon (Deem 2000; Winter, Taylor, and Sarros 2000; Preston 2001; Deem 2004; Roberts 2004; Deem and Brehony 2005; Schapper and Mayson 2005; Chaharbagi 2007; Anderson 2008; Kolsaker 2008; Smeenk et al. 2009; Meek et al 2010; Pechar 2010; Trowler 2010; Verhoeven 2010; Hyde, Clarke, and Drennan 2013). The thematic search on managerialism in universities provided evidence of a substantial drive towards greater accountability of academics to their pay-masters, including performance management, teaching and research quality inspection, performance indicators and target setting (Deem 2004, 107–108). Managerialism represents a distinctive discourse based upon a set of values that justify the assumed right of one group to monitor and control the activities of others (Kolsaker 2008, 515). Research on managerialism, with a wide range of different foci, has been conducted at universities in Europe (Kehm and Teichler 2013), the UK

(Deem 2000, 2003, 2004), Portugal (Santiago and Carvalho 2004, 427–444), Australia (Winter, Taylor, and Sarros 2000, 279–294; Schapper and Mayson 2005, 181–197), the USA (Roberts 2004, 461–467), South Africa (Adams 2006, 3014) and comparatively in the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK (Teelken 2012, 271–290). The literature review revealed two schools of thought about managerialism – one school supports managerialism and the other school opposes it. In support of managerialism, Kolsaker (2008) found that academics appear to accept managerialism as a facilitator of enhanced performance, professionalism and status.

Overall, there is growing evidence that managerialism is becoming increasingly entrenched in a university context. It is offered as an ideological approach to ensure that universities become more responsive; fulfilling a greater range of needs more efficiently. Santiago and Carvalho (2004, 427) explain that the drive for managerialism is aimed at addressing two weaknesses within universities. First, the higher education institutions do not adapt to change as fast as the changes that occur in the environment. Second, collegial governance is dominated by traditional academic structures and practices aligned with guild-like interest that leads to the creation of irrationalities and inefficiencies in the systems and its institutions.

According to Chaharbagi (2007), managerialism manifests itself in costly administrative burdens to the management of universities that seem to be undermining the morale, motivation and goodwill of university employees, managers and professionals. The effects of this managerialist movement impact universities at various levels. At the national level it could result in political strategies aimed at system reorganisation; at the institutional level it could include strategies addressing governance, management and changes to the institutional culture and at the individual level it can have an impact on the behaviour of the university professionals (Santiago and Carvalho 2004, 248). Fitzgerald (2009, 51) refers to the ‘tyranny of bureaucracy’ and explains that managerialism leaves little time for leadership. This view is echoed by Weinberg and Graham-Smith (2012, 68) who assert that managerialism erodes collegiality. Managerialism and its profit-driven motives alter the institutional culture and call upon academics to enhance not the discipline but their career paths and the university’s own market share. Ultimately, the changes in the institutional culture impact on the professional identities of organisational members. The organisational culture and related climate influence the way in which members define and perceive the nature of inter- personal interaction (Lester 2009). Neuman and Baron (2003) and Twale and De Luca (2008) found that the academic environment has a number of organisational and work features that increase the likelihood of hostile interpersonal behaviours which further erode collegiality. The control measures inherent to managerialism often involve performance management systems, performance measures and targets. Keashly and Neuman (2010) found that performance management systems threaten faculty members’ authority to direct their own work and interfere with collegiality. Such feedback is considered not collegial because it violates the norm of professional respect. How managerialism and the accompanying bureaucratic processes affect university middle managers remain largely unexplored. Our research was aimed at addressing this knowledge gap by exploring the work of middle managers in a South African public university.

The research context

The South African higher education landscape has seen extensive changes ranging from the fundamental reorganisation of the distribution and character of higher education curricula governed by a national qualifications authority (Ensor 2006) to the reconstruction of the academic workplace (Webster and Mosoetsa 2001). Government-mandated mergers in 2002–2004 reduced the number of South African institutions of higher education from 36 universities and technikons to 23 new institutions. Like other educational institutions worldwide (Lungu 1985; Smyth 1995; Smith 2002; Fitzgerald 2009; Pijl and Frissen 2009) the management structure and associated decision- making and strategic management processes of the chosen university resonate with a bureaucratic structure. To describe this structure, we adopted classifications developed by Mintzberg (1990) and extended the description to that of a machine bureaucracy. Machine bureaucracies commonly pursue highly articulated strategies developed and revised by someone in central command who articulates it fully at some point in time so that everyone else can implement it and then pursue it (Mintzberg 1990, 192).

Within the described structure, managerialism has led to more bureaucratic processes where arrays of mechanisms, such as performance measures, incentive systems, various other control procedures and the articulation of the strategy itself act not to promote change in strategy, but to resist it (Mintzberg 1990). In line with the view of Chaharbagi (2007), managerialism focuses on conformance emphasising norm-following behaviour – a focus which prescribes an array of activities to describe what professionals can and cannot do (Chaharbagi 2007, 326). By institutionalising managerialism a regime of regulation has been created. Such a regime is detrimental to attaining and imparting knowledge and wisdom and distances universities from their efforts to seek innovation and free thinking. The research reported on in this article set out to explore the lived experiences of academic and non-academic middle managers within a growing university in a developing country aimed at understanding the impact of managerialism on the strategy work of middle managers.

Methodology and analysis

Knowing the effects of managerialism on the work of university middle managers is a useful starting point for understanding how and why middle managers take certain actions. Chaharbaghi (2007, 319) stated that understanding managerialism comes from experience that can be conveyed through accounts of what managerialism feels like and not simply by theorising it. In order to examine what managerialism ‘feels like’ to university middle managers and to understand the nuances and complexities of their work, we considered a constructivism-interpretivism paradigm to be most appropriate. As practising academics at a university, we wanted to engage in research that is practically relevant to institutions responsible for teaching and researching. We aimed at shedding light on the contextual influences upon middle management practice and providing a basis for relating these specific micro-findings to other institutions. In accordance with the views of Siggelkow (2007, 22–23), our research enabled us to get much closer to the theoretical constructs and we claim to provide a much more persuasive argument about causal forces than broad empirical research could. Micro-practices are context sensitive and embedded in practice. The research strategy for gathering the data was qualitative in approach using in-depth interviews with academic and non-academic managers through a single case study. This methodology provided a richness of data which enabled us to develop a valid knowledge base which could inform the management practices at the chosen university and may be relatable to the experiences of others.

Middle managers at the chosen university include directors of schools and non-academic directorates, HODs and managers of non-academic departments. From the target population a purposive sample was drawn. The aim of purposive sampling is not to establish a representative sample but rather to identify key informants whose context-specific knowledge and expertise regarding the issues relevant to the research are significant and information rich. Our intention was to gain a deeper understanding of the strategy work of university managers through their insights and experiences. Participants from different business units within the university were chosen, that is, academic and non-academic as well as core business and support business. A stratified purposive sample was taken, in other words the number of academic and non-academic participants chosen was the same in ratio as the number of academic and non-academic middle managers in the population. Also, the race and gender of the sample were aligned to the race and gender of the middle management cadre in the population.

The final sample consisted of seven academic managers and 10 non-academic managers. Interviews were conducted in June 2012 at the offices of the participants. Only three of the participants had fewer than three years’ experience in middle management in the institution while the others had in excess of 10 years’ experience. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcribed interviews were not treated as text, but as reflections of realities of those being studied (Schwandt 1994, 118). The 17 interviews amounted to 864.05 minutes of recorded time and the transcribed interviews amounted to 1,35,910 words.

The process of developing the coding scheme was ongoing and iterative, began shortly after the first few interviews and was regularly evaluated throughout the process of data production, further coding and analysis. During the first-order analysis stage we merely identified a multitude of codes while we attempted to identify patterns or themes through which to interpret the strategy work of the university middle managers during the second-order analysis stage. We imported all the documents into the software program, Atlas.ti, to manage the large amount of data efficiently. As the coding

proceeded, additional themes, that had not been considered initially, gradually emerged. Through category construction, we clustered the most seemingly alike things into the most seemingly appropriate groups. These groups, or code families, were later grouped into overarching themes describing the effects of managerialism. The interview text was approached hermeneutically – to deepen the understanding of the meaning of the text in a circular movement where the details of a certain text are contrasted with emerging, more generalised theoretical thoughts.

Our research design allowed us to focus on naturally occurring, ordinary events in a realistic organisational setting, which resulted in a solid perspective on what it is like to be a middle manager at the chosen university. A further strength of our research design was the local groundedness - the data were produced in close proximity to a specific situation, that is, the university's strategic and operational planning and execution with specific emphasis on middle-manager strategy work. Our design also allowed for emphasis on middle managers' lived experiences, an approach which is well suited to locating the meanings middle managers place on the events, processes and structures of their jobs as well as their perceptions, assumptions, prejudices and presuppositions. We attempted to provide thick descriptions with sufficient detail to ensure transferability (Plack 2005, 231).

Findings and discussion

The research findings are positioned within the lived experiences of the selected middle managers and may or may not represent the experiences or views of the entire cadre of university managers at the chosen institution, despite our observation of data saturation. As this was a qualitative study, no claim to representativeness of the participants can be made. The findings are discussed within four main themes with some sub-themes. Each of these themes is supported by families of codes and individual quotes taken from the interview transcripts. The identified themes are disempowered middle managers, changing organisational culture, over-articulation of the strategy and control at the expense of innovation and experimentation. From the onset of the data analysis process, we perceived more similarities than differences in the experiences, practices and views between academic middle managers and non-academic middle managers.

Disempowered middle managers

The literature (Feld 1959; Mintzberg 1990) indicates that in machine bureaucracies middle managers have no power to formulate plans and direct their execution. Our research findings confirmed this view. For example, one academic manager explained that they (top management) 'hand out responsibilities but no empowerment' (Interviewee 2). Findings indicated that participants felt that they were often held accountable for decisions they had not made and needed to solve problems others had created. Several comments were made about the decision-making processes within the institution. Specifically, participants explained that they have little or no influence on major decisions. Participants described an operational environment characterised by command and control from the top management level, which promotes the drive towards managerialism. The participants' descriptions concurred with the work of Hayes and Mintzberg published in the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, Hayes (1985, 117) explained that with a command-and-control organisation, major decisions are allocated to top management who then impose those decisions on the organisation and monitor those decisions through elaborate planning, budgeting and control systems.

One manager explained that there is an appearance of democratic decision-making, but that the real decisions are made elsewhere (Interviewee 2). A non-academic manager referred to management 'setting us up for failure' when he described a situation where a strategic decision was made by top management that had far-reaching consequences on many operational levels and negatively affected service delivery to the students (Interviewee 9). This manager also indicated that the particular strategic decision was enforced despite wide-ranging input that opposed the decision. One academic manager explained that he had no input in the strategic goals of the institution but that his performance is measured against these goals (Interviewee 3).

Despite many requests from top management for input on policies and processes, the participants described their perception that when they (middle managers) do provide input, their input is discarded by top management. Interviewee 6 explained times when ‘one is totally bombarded with requests to make inputs into any and everything [but] nothing happens with those inputs’. This manager also explained that people ‘start withdrawing’ because they worked really hard to give input based on their own experiences, ‘but nothing has happened’. One non-academic manager stated: ‘that’s the frustration because they [management] don’t listen’ (Interviewee 15). Another academic manager explained that ‘the concerns that were raised from middle management upwards are not taken seriously’ (Interviewee 3). Within this command-and-control environment, the rationale for providing input could be more towards the demand for conformance than for making real contributions as participants felt that their inputs were not used anyway. These descriptions confirmed Wesley’s (1990) findings, which showed that middle managers’ exclusion from strategy-related conversations led to alienation, lack of motivation to implement strategies and intra-organisational conflict.

Changing organisational culture

As indicated earlier, managerialism also manifested in changes to the organisational culture which impacts on the professional identities within the institution. Descriptions by participants that referred to the norms, beliefs and unscripted rules of enactment, were grouped into the organisational culture theme. The sub-themes that were identified deal with collegiality and conformance.

Collegiality

It has already been established in the literature that managerialism erodes collegiality. In most of the interview descriptions, we noted pockets of collegiality ranging from limited collegiality to high collegiality. Specifically, we observed a climate of limited collegiality between top management and middle management. It appeared as if the notion of ‘us versus them’ existed in this climate. There is a strong tendency among middle managers not to see themselves as part of ‘them’, that is, part of the senior management of the institution. In terms of collegiality among peers, and towards subordinates, we observed a climate of high collegiality with several forms of emotional support, such as peer collaboration (Interviewee 15), team building and creating a safe space for staff ‘to talk about how they felt and what the issues were’ (Interviewee 4). An academic manager explained that his role is to protect people against unnecessary demands on their time and to make a difference in their lives (Interviewee 2). Although collegiality between middle managers and their subordinates is strong as a coping mechanism, collegiality is under threat due to the impact of the bureaucracy on the organisational culture.

Conformance

Our findings indicated a culture of conformance within the institution. In this context, conformance refers to adherence to the goals, objectives, rules and instructions given by top management. This finding is not surprising as managerialism aims for efficiency through control. Our findings support the view of Chaharbaghi (2007, 319) who state that managerialism has shifted the focus to conformance with an emphasis on norm-following behaviour; from what professionals can do to what professional cannot do. This culture of conformance manifested in and enforced through the performance management system and the demand for target setting in both academic and non-academic functions coupled with daily demands for reports. The use of target setting and then measuring against these targets is described by Chaharbaghi (2007, 319) as ‘a symptom of managerialism’ which leads to a regime of accountability and the use of regulation to police academics, as in the case in the chosen institution. One academic manager stated that ‘it doesn’t matter what you do as long as you comply’ (Interviewee 6). The majority of participants equated the demand for conformance to bullying. Important to note is that bullying can be perceived or real – for some it may simply mean conformance, others might see it as being more abusive in nature. The participants’ reference to bullying was not surprising as Hoel and Salin (2003) found that cultures that breed bullying are characterised by authoritarian leadership that does not tolerate non-conformity. One non-academic manager described her work environment as ‘very difficult’ and said that it is emotionally draining (Interviewee 15).

Findings also indicate that the demand for conformance is often driven through technological tools. Technology-enabled tools, such as email communication and system-generated reports are used on a daily basis in the institution – not only for communication but also, in line with managerialism, as a control measure. One academic manager stated ‘I don’t want my name to go up on that “not-done” list’ (Interviewee 4).

Over-articulation of the strategy

Managerialism also manifested in the articulation of the strategy. In the context of the chosen institution, the university strategy is articulated through many forums, to the extent that one can claim that it is over-articulated. Participants described many texts, such as the formal strategic planning documents, the operational planning documents, the performance agreement templates and the institutional agenda, the corporate communication material and the vast array of reporting formats and templates. Yet, findings indicate that an overemphasis on the strategy text has not only done little to improve the buy-in, but has generated consequences which damage the ideals for the institution set out within those texts. For example, the use of ‘agility’ in the strategy text has made demands on university managers which are unrealisable because other policies and centralised systems prevent them from acting in an agile manner. Participants felt excluded from developing the strategic plan. The result of this perceived exclusion could hamper the acceptance of the plan. Participants were familiar with the contents, which could indicate an acknowledgement of the importance of the document. However, this familiarity could also exist because the strategic plan forms the foundation for the performance management system and operational planning documents that require conformance by all middle managers and employees. Furthermore, several participants stated the success of including certain buzz words in their discussions. Findings indicate that certain buzz words are favoured in the institution, especially to get positive responses from top management. One non-academic manager explained how he used the institution’s strategic plan and strategic documents: he reads through it and highlights the buzz words and then makes sure that he incorporates those buzz words into his own documents ‘... and in two years’ when they give a new document, I will do the same again’ (Interviewee 13). The practice of using buzz words was confirmed by Interviewee 2 who explained, ‘... these words were used at liberty to play the game’. Findings indicate that certain buzz words, such as project, diversity, agility and references to the transformational values of the institution, were perceived to be part of the institutional vocabulary to accomplish strategy work.

We did not sense a wide buy-in into the strategic plan, despite the institution-wide articulation. We found that the actual strategy texts lose meaning and conformance takes precedence over buy-in. Although an abundance of text reinforces the deliberate strategies and formal planning processes within the institution, the demand to carry on with ‘business as usual’ is strong. Furthermore, the fact that so much reinforcement of the deliberate strategies exists does not necessarily mean that the strategies are perceived as being good. Findings indicated that even when participants did not agree with a specific strategic objective or strategy, they still conformed. The notion of conforming to the strategic objectives was described as ‘you don’t have a choice’ (Interviewee 3).

Control at the cost of innovation and experimentation

Findings suggest that the chosen institution has tight controls, high reliance on formalised procedures and a passion for consistency – factors to discourage innovation and experimentation which are arguably required in institutions of higher learning. One academic manager indicated that the institution’s top-down management approach and decision-making ‘is not open to creativity and innovation’ (Interviewee 7). The whole array of mechanisms, such as the performance measures, the incentive systems, many control procedures and the articulation of the strategy itself act not to promote change, but to resist it. Jensen (2003, 379) warns that the process of rewarding or punishing people on the basis of how their performance relates to a target is like ‘paying people to lie’. Further, this process of rewarding for performance causes people to play the system by, for example, setting targets that are easily reachable or by doing their best to see that the targets, however set, are met even if this tactic destroys value for the institution.

In collecting and analysing the data, we observed many constraining effects of managerialism. Linking back to the command-and-control nature of the institution, we classify the nature of strategy work in the age of managerialism within Mantere and Vaara's (2008, 354) mystification and disciplining discourses. According to these authors, the concept of strategy in disciplining organisations is linked to the command structures in the organisation, and strategising is seen exclusively as a top management activity. These strategies are normally not to be questioned or criticised (Mantere and Vaara 2008). This is contrary to what is expected from institutions where climates of open debate, critique, exploration of a diversity of ideas and knowledge creation ought to be fostered. Despite the constraining effects of managerialism, we identified enabling practices introduced by middle managers to deal with the constraints of managerialism.

Systems within systems

Descriptions by participants indicated the creation of alternative systems within the existing systems in order to cope operationally. These systems assumed various forms, such as a workload model so that 'lecturers will be able to work more effectively' (Interviewee 1). Another academic manager described the inefficiencies of the institution's internal communication system: the intranet, website and email system. This manager created a separate website to which users were redirected from the main institutional website where more directorate-specific information could be published, such as 'news happenings, announcements, seminars and the details thereof' (Interviewee 2).

Communication channels outside formal channels

Several managers described how they had formed their own communicative channels, such as informal meetings, ad hoc sessions and alternative communication media, such as directorate/departmental intranet or communiqués. One academic manager said that if there is a concern, they (the directors in the college) will 'quickly meet' and 'have just an informal discussion' (Interviewee 1) to pin one specific matter down and discuss how they will resolve it. Another academic manager described the success of 'taking people for coffee' (Interviewee 3), thereby building relationships. When asked what it is that a middle manager should do to realise the institutional goals and strategies, one academic manager explained that it is very important to keep staff informed and involved and to keep communicating with them (Interviewee 1).

Structuring meetings to be more productive

Descriptions from participants indicated that the practice of focused meetings, of no more than one hour, contributes positively to their strategy work. One academic manager explained, we can set an example for the whole university because our committee meetings are only an hour meeting but we work in those committee meetings' (Interviewee 1).

Peer collaboration

The sharing of ideas and practices to deal with issues that other middle managers may encounter were also described as an enabling practice. An academic manager described how he gives each HOD the opportunity to share and he explained that this practice has been quite successful and that they [the HODs] 'relished the opportunity to share with other colleagues' (Interviewee 7). These reflective sessions were also described by another academic manager who referred to them as 'reality checks' (Interviewee 6) where HODs get a chance to check with the others and to share their experiences on what departmental practices are working well or not working at all.

Some participants described how they consciously engage more with their subordinates and invite participation in operational decision-making. One of the non-academic managers explained how his directorate calls for meetings with the stakeholders to get their inputs and suggestions before he signs off the proposal or decision. He explained that this is an inclusive and participative practice (Interviewee 9).

Conclusion

This was a small-scale case study with a focus on micro-practices and highlights the complexity of the environment in which university management operates and mirrors findings in extant literature. Although we interviewed two distinct groups, academic middle managers and non-academic middle managers, data indicated that the experiences, views and practices are mostly homogeneous. We thus conclude our findings in the context of university middle managers: representing both academic and non-academic middle managers. Managerialism is put forward as a useful ideology to manage universities in developed and developing countries, but our findings provided evidence that managerialism constrains the strategy work of university middle managers rather than enabling them. We set out to explore the impact of managerialism on the strategy work of university middle managers and our findings, in the developing-country context, resonate with the experiences at universities in developed countries. The implied disconnect between the top management cadre and university middle managers suggest that collegiality, in the sense of equals running a university in a communal manner, is under threat. In this case, it was found that the middle management cadre is becoming disempowered and merely implementers at the mercy of large bureaucratic structures plagued with red-tape and minute-detail reporting, command-and-control attitudes, authoritarian leadership and adherence to rules within a culture of conformance. The conditions described by the participants appear contrary to academe's notions of collegiality and consideration, grounded in the revered values of academic freedom and autonomy.

Participants expressed serious concerns about the bureaucracy and Merton's (1968) observation nearly four decades earlier is strikingly applicable to the investigated university leadership: that people in the bureaucracy tend to develop a 'trained incapacity' which occurs when the demands of discipline and rigidity, the culture of conformance and adherence to rules render university managers unable to perceive the end for which the rules were developed. Through this, the obsessive conformance to rules, which is enforced from the higher management levels, become transformed into an end-in-itself. Further, conformance takes precedence over problem solving and innovation is dampened. This implies that university middle managers, in this study, have been relegated to the role of mere functionaries who simply carry out the decisions made by the paymasters. This is an interesting finding and at odds with the traditional view that universities are seats of liberal views and academic freedom.

What can be done to counter the constraining effects of managerialism and bureaucratic tyranny? We argue that all levels of university managers need to go beyond the traditional top-down approaches and to search actively for ways to encourage participation – even in an age of managerialism where the interests of particular actors may seem contradictory. There is substantial evidence, in this study, to suggest that managers' involvement in various facets of the strategy process enhances their knowledge, understanding and support of strategy. As such, we propose that universities in the managerial age cannot rely on the conventional prescriptive approaches to strategy-making but must instead tilt towards the learning end of the continuum, developing strategies that are more emergent in nature through processes that have a grassroots orientation. Our findings suggest that the value of the middle management function in universities could be reaffirmed if middle managers could operate outside the institutional constraints grounded in the many hierarchical layers and complex structures, faceless bureaucratic systems, inherited public sector management styles and the constraining effects of managerialism.

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