UNDERSTANDING COMPLEXITY: A MULTI-PERSPECTIVE MODEL OF ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Some writers contend that HEIs have set a course for a new era of 'academic capitalism'. Students are becoming referred to as the 'raw materials' by some HEIs and as 'customers' who need to be attracted and then their demands satisfied by others. A new era in any research field would appear to indicate a need for further study, however if the nature of the organisations we are studying has and is changing then it may be time to question and reconsider the key assumptions that have been used in examining the organisational cultures in higher education as well - not to mention the research tools which have been developed based on these assumptions.

Keywords: higher education, organisational culture

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a distinctive organisational culture, which is very significant for its academic members, their activities and interrelationship. HEI organisational culture is also significantly complex. The commonly used definition of organisational culture as 'the way we do things around here' (Deal & Kennedy, 1982), may no longer be the case in the context of Higher Education.

Much of HEI research is based upon tools initially developed for the private sector and whilst we may consider HEIs in general heading towards 'academic capitalism', 'massificaiton' and 'McDOnaldization' as service providers, does that really indicate transferability? After all, Birnbaum (1989) distinguished HEIs as: less differentiation of the working processes (e.g. a professor, associate professor and assistant lecturer carry out the same teaching roles); narrow specialisation of members; developed professional hierarchy rather than a structural one; weak interdependency among subdivisions e.g. departments, institutes; limited capacity to influence the 'raw material' quality (enrolled students); limited accountability and transparency on both an individual and organisational level.

The need to develop new frameworks and methodologies as well as reassess assumptions is a necessary and arguably crucial part of research. Berquist and Pawlak (2008) revised the existing four types of culture in HE (Berquist, 1992) and expanded it to six types: Collegial; Managerial; Developmental; Advocacy; Virtual; and Tangible. The shift from 4 to 6 types represents the impact of global external forces in creating new dynamics and phenomena in the organisational culture of HEIs.

Key assumptions

Much of the research in organisational culture adopts a mixed method approach of quantitative and qualitative. This approach has also been conveyed to analysis of HEIs' cultures too. The question here is whether the basic assumptions that have been used in organisations in general are also transferable. Before considering new assumptions and a new model, some of the key existing assumptions are listed below and then considered within the context of HEIs.

Culture is shared through interaction. This assumption can be broken down into two parts: firstly, culture is shared and therefore, a unified culture is considered in higher education. Secondly, interaction is the key cause of culture being unified.

Culture is shared

When considering the first part of the assumption, it seems sensible to consider organisations as sharing values and thereby having one culture. Generalizing is not only a means of making comparisons and utilizing data, but also simplifying as a means to make data usable. However, a number of decades ago Becher (1987:298) suggested that HEI cultures were not in fact unified but rather that subcultures were also prevalent in HEIs. He emphasised the need not to generalize but rather focus on all areas of the organisation: "it is only by understanding the parts …we can understand the whole".

The idea that organisational culture is unified is just one perspective of many that may be adopted in research. This unified or 'unitarist' perspective allows the classification of organisation culture as in the case of Handy (1993) with the four culture types: task, power, people and role-oriented cultures or Hofstede (1980) with an organisation having a role, achievement, power or support culture. There are a number of other assumptions tied to this perspective: top-down cultural leadership; conformity; and homogeneity. Martin (1992) referred to this perspective as the integration perspective and Deal and Kennedy (1982) see it as the 'normative glue'.

Kuh and Whitt (1988:27) point out that "the 'small homogenous society' analogue … is surely strained when applied to many contemporary institutions of higher education" and that, rather than as a monolithic entity (Martin & Siehl, 1983), such institutions should be seen in a multicultural context with a number of subgroups having their own traditions and values, which may or may not adhere to the institution's norms, values and beliefs.

This inherent factor of complexity is an important one. McNay (1999) put forward a model which puts forward universities as collegium, bureaucracy, enterprise or corporation, although due to the evidence to indicate complexity in the cultures of HEIs, it would seem that these models are too broad and too simplistic to show the range or heterogeneous / homogenous cultures founding in HEIs (De Zilwa, 2007:560).

Therefore, this all seems to indicate the need for a new prospective. Martin (1992) refers to another perspective: the pluralist perspective, and recognises the existence of diverse subcultures in organisations (i.e. culture is heterogeneous). This perspective is also referred to as the differentiation perspective and highlights the diversity and inconsistency that occurs within the notion of subcultures, thus allowing for cultural diversity and accepting that conflict may exist between subcultures. Bowen and Schuster (1986) found that members of different disciplines showed different values,

attitudes and personal characteristics. Becher (1987:292) even refers to subcultures within disciplines, which is a subculture in itself: "to affiliate with a particular specialism is to become, except in a few heavily populated areas, a member of a small and close-knit community".

The pluralist perspective seems suitable for examining the organisational culture of HEIs. However, there is another: the anarchist perspective. This perspective indicates an even greater level of fragmentation, with all organisational cultures being made up of individuals with their own values and norms and as such neither a single dominant culture nor any subcultures are said to exist. Hofstede et al. (1990) found this to be the case in twenty case studies and as such, managing cultural change is impossible on an individual basis and the focus shifts towards communication and diversity management. Martin (1992) refers to this perspective as the fragmentation perspective with fragmented groups being issue-specific and no shared meaning between members of the organisation or members of part of the organisation. It seems reasonable for managers to assume the integration / unitarist perspective as this reinforces their desire for all staff to 'tow the line' and ties in with the concept of vision as an integrative force encouraging improved staff performance.

So where do this leave research into HEIs? Which perspective should be taken? Well, none of them – on their own at least. Even writers with a focus on differentiation (pluralism) such as Becher (1987) point out that the academic profession has many more similarities than differences and referred to it as a 'single homogenous profession'. So there is some aspect of commonality. Parker (2000), on the other hand, found that staff identifies with different groups in the organisation and that such groups may be formed on the basis of age, gender or education as well as location, job description and length of tenure. So, for some analysis of organisational cultures there needs to be some blending of perspectives.

Schein points to the possibility of the co-existence of subcultures and a dominant culture when dealing with pivotal and peripheral values (Schein, 1988). Pivotal values are central to an organization's functioning; members are required to adopt and adhere to the behavioural norms derived from these values and are typically rejected from the organization if they do not (Chatman, 1991; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996). Peripheral values are desirable but are not believed by members to be essential to an organization's functioning. Members are encouraged to accept peripheral values, but can reject them and still function fully as members.

With Schein's work (1988) in mind, subcultures could be seen to exist that maintain the pivotal values but only some or a few of the peripheral values. In this way, the subcultures not only cannot be viewed as a counterculture, but should not affect the organization's function. According to Boisnier and Chatman (2002), the "members' degree of conformity to peripheral norms can vary considerably". Thus it could be claimed that subcultures may vary in the extent they are related to the dominant organisational culture. For example, administrative structures shape faculty subcultures (Ruscio, 1987:355), especially when considering decision-making and governance.

Interaction is the cause of shared values

The second part of this assumption concerns interaction taking place as a means of having a unified culture. This seems logical in an office setting where people are working 9 to 5 and interact with one another as part of their

daily routines. However, does this assumption of interaction really transfer across to HEIs? The majority of the staff of HEIs are teachers, who come to work for teaching, spend time on their own planning lessons or marking work and then head home. The teaching hours themselves are not spent with colleagues but rather with students, who have a culture of their own, which may not necessarily be similar to the organisational culture. Planning lessons or marking homework or tests may involve some interaction, but arguably to a limited extent. Thus, when referring to interaction as a means of building up shared values, we may in fact only be referring to administrative or managerial staff. According to Tierney (2008:35) when referring to HEIs "…on the one hand, they are organisations with highly autonomous workers – the faculty. Any yet, on the other hand these autonomous workers assume a great deal of voluntary work in their organisational and professional lives, a fact which binds them together". Thus there is a tension between autonomy and interaction, if it does takes place, then it is beyond standard daily routines and rather through certain work groups and projects.

Certainly if we consider the existence of departmental subcultures (for example) the interaction of managerial staff may be limited to a certain 'managerial subculture', which indicates that, despite interaction, the culture still cannot be assumed to be shared throughout the entire organisation. Consequently, assuming that management represents the values of the entire organisation is also a flawed one.

Organisational cultures can be typified according to orientation

When Handy (1976:185) describes culture as "something perceived, something felt", it comes as no surprise that, depending on who is asked, different views or understandings of HEI culture appear. A student's perspective of HEI culture may be seen as "it's everything we aren't tested on in the classroom" (Van Maanen, 1987:5). Teaching staff have a number of influences upon them, such as the discipline (prestige, publications, and reputation), profession, and the organisation. Research seems to indicate that when considering an HEI, we can examine seem how oriented an organisational culture is in a particular area, such as how research oriented or market oriented a culture may be.

When considering transferring concepts related to orientations from the private to the public sector, the concept of orientation should be used tentatively when used in reference to HEIs. Pushnykh and Chemeris (2006) claim there are significant differences between 'for profit' companies and organisations in higher education. Likewise, if referring to the market orientation of HEIs, then a key question has to be considered: who is the customer? Is it the student or the employer of the student? If we choose the former, then the student is the customer and the course is the product. If we choose the latter, then the employer is the customer and the graduate is the product, but does this mean that the courses and the teaching staff become the raw materials through which the 'product' is made. Clarification of such concepts is crucial in considering the product-, market- or consumer-orientation of an HEI.

There are so many orientations that could be considered in the context of HEI that go beyond that of product-, market- or customer-orientation. We could consider, perhaps, a research orientation, teaching orientation, professional orientation, or, with budgets being lowered, a cost-orientation. The question here though is, does there really have to be one orientation for one institution? If we consider the possibility of many subcultures and a dominant culture in HEIs, then probably not. Teachers may have a student

(customer) orientation, management a cost-orientation or perhaps both have a combination of both orientations but to differing extents.

Due to such complexity, there is no simple answer. One orientation for one HEI seems an oversimplification. All staff with differing orientations, on the other hand, may require the consideration of an anarchist perspective due to the existence of significant areas of ambiguity and uncertainty and lead to equally ambiguous research findings due to such a high level of complexity. Perhaps somewhere in between with competing orientations between various groups would be a compromise between oversimplification and over complication. Kuh and Whitt (1988:6) suggest that some culture properties and orientations may overlap: "four discrete but interdependent [sub]cultures are said to influence a faculty member's behaviour: the culture of the discipline, the culture of the academic profession, the culture of the institution, and the culture of the national system of education". When considering these competing orientations, Silver (2003:161) found that institutional culture may be seen by members as a culture of research, a culture of tension or conflict and mentions the contrast of a sense of community and fragmentation as well as the multiple and competing aspects of academic staff.

Generalizing between institutions

Kuh and Whitt (1988:28) define culture in higher education as "the collective, mutually shaping of patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions that guide the behaviour of individuals and groups in an institute of higher education and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus". When referring to such a concept, it seems that all HEIs are alike and once a number of HEIs have been examined, generalizations can be made. However, Riesman and Jencks (1962:132) highlight the uniqueness of HEIs and that, although related to national academic models, institutions within each country may "draw on different publics" and have "quite different flavours".

Kuh and Whitt (1988:7) also point out the important of national culture in the context of researching the organisational culture of HEIs, by suggesting that an institution's culture reflects the host society in terms of values and accepted practices to a certain extent. Thus if we consider, for example, the market-orientation of HEIs, then it can be seen that Hungary as it has transformed to a more consumerist society and away from the budget-commanded regime, has had a longer path towards a market-orientation than other countries in, for example, Western Europe. A side issue in this context is the issue of 'cultural clash' between the traditional HEI and commercial cultures (Fisher & Atkinson-Grosjean, 2002).

A new model for organisational culture in higher education

By questioning the assumptions listed in the previous section, we are led to consider new assumptions:
- o Values are not necessarily shared throughout the organisation
- o Interaction is limited
- o HEIs may have multiple overlapping orientations
- o Organisational culture affects all employees.

Based on these new assumptions and the findings of Martin and Siehl (1983), the following model could be a potential outcome of mapping an organisational culture and one upon which assumptions may be closer to reality.

Figure 1. A *multi-perspective model of organisational culture*
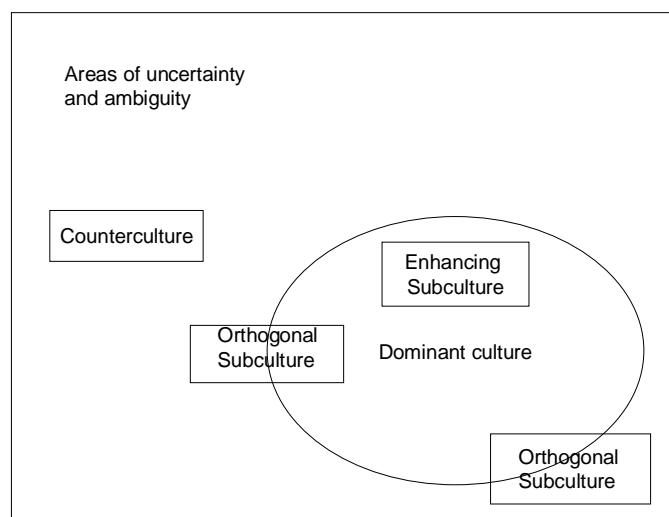
This model may change from one institution to another based on factors such as interaction, location, communication and so on. For example, a University with three distant locations may be like to find one dominant culture shared by management and then three subcultures based on location. Likewise, restrictions on interaction or communication may result in a greater degree of uncertainty / ambiguity and less evidence of shared values in the form of a dominant culture or subcultures.

Implications

There are a number of implications for this new model which researchers need to consider for future research:

1) *Selecting a suitable quantitative tool*. The assumption that more than one type of culture can exist at any one time in an HEI indicates that quantitative tools based on the assumption that culture is unified may not be suited to higher education. Certain tools may be more suitable such as the Organisational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) developed by Cameron and Quinn (1999). This questionnaire is based on the Competing Values Framework (CVF) and assumes that values are competing rather than shared, thus allowing for overlapping orientations and the existence of more than one cultural typology at one given time. It results in a combination of four different culture types: clan, adhocracy, hierarchy, and market and was originally developed for use in educational organisations. Another may be the Organisational Culture Inventory (OCI) developed by Cooke and Lafferty (1987), which also allows for multiple sets of shared values or cultural styles within one organisation.

2) *The importance of demographics*. Based on the previous point, the means by which a culture can be mapped may be based on previous research into the factors affecting the formation of subcultures in higher education.

The basis for subculture formation can be seen in a definition of subcultures: a subset of an organisation's members who interact regularly with one another, identify themselves as a distinct group within the organisation, share a set of problems, and routinely take action on the basis of collective understandings unique to the group (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). Finkelstein (1984:29) saw the main components of faculty culture as: teaching, research, student, advisement, administration and public service.

Whatever the choice of questionnaire, the detecting and mapping up of subcultures will have to be based on substantial demographic information, which may be the means by which subcultural groups are formed and maintained. For example, Tierney (1988) suggests the basis for the numerous subcultures in a university or college as: managerial; discipline-based faculty groups; professional staff; social groups of faculty and students; peer groups (by special interest or physical proximity); and location (offices arranged by discipline).

Detecting the existence and basis for formation of subcultures, dominant cultures and areas of ambiguity or uncertainty may be achieved in a number of ways. For example, a quantitative method such as the OCAI questionnaire may be employed and then with the demographic data a dendogram (regression analysis) may be used to detect subcultures. Observation may be another means. Interviews may also be a way of mapping up the organisational culture.

3) *Representative samples and generalizations*. A qualitative approach is often preferred in studying organisational culture. However if ten or fifteen interviews are undertaken in a college of, let's say 100 staff, it might seem more than enough for a qualitative study then one has to wonder which ten have been chosen from such a complex culture as an HEI. If all ten are from one subculture or if the organisation is one of ambiguity and uncertainty then in both of these cases the results cannot be generalized to make statements about the entire organisation. In fact, allowing for fragmentation and differentiation, quantitative research is a requirement prior to any study of an HEI as a means of developing an organisational map from which a representative sample can be chosen. Randomness is not always better than a non-random strategy and thus for generalizing about HEI culture, a representative sample means at least one member of the dominant culture and subcultures.

Even interviews following quantitative research may not suffice. According to Kuh and Whitt (1988:8) "institutional culture is so complex that even members of a particular institution have difficulty comprehending its nuances". Kuh and Whitt (1988) argue that in order to examine a HEI culture methods of inquiry are needed through which the core assumptions, values and beliefs by faculty, and others may be found and that such methods include observing participants, interviewing key players, conducting autobiographical interviews and analysing documents. Certainly, when faced with such complexity, a mixed-methods approach serves not only as a means of maximising findings but also triangulating data.

4) *Looking for trends*. How many interviews should take place to give valid and meaningful results? According to many text boos, one should perform the qualitative research until one begins to notice trends and can see a pattern of repeated responses. However, in an organisational culture that is predominantly differentiated and/or fragmented, trends are likely to be the exceptions rather than the norm. Rather the research becomes a question of determining how the different pieces fit together and function as a whole. Patterns and trends may be unlikely on an organisational level, but may be

searched for in subcultures, once the basis for the formation of subcultures has been found.

5) *A sense of boundary*. When mapping HEI organisational culture with this new model, there seems to be a sense of boundary between certain groupings such as by department or discipline (Becher, 1987). An apparent strong sense of boundaries seems to be only transversal by administrative and library staff, who, lacking academic credibility are actually interdisciplinary (Berquist, 1992:41). Kuh and Whitt (1988:6) point out that for different cultures existing within HEI culture, some culture properties overlap: "four discrete but interdependent [sub]cultures are said to influence a faculty member's behaviour: the culture of the discipline, the culture of the academic profession, the culture of the institution, and the culture of the national system of education". This aspect of boundaries is highlighted by Bila and Miller (1997) who discovered that Faculty perceived themselves to be isolated form the general public, under-appreciated, and true and honest; Junior Faculty felt overwhelmed with responsibilities, and exploited; Senior Faculty saw themselves to be survivors, with a certain degree of radicalism and seeing to high an emphasis placed on external activities. A potential area for research may be the sense of boundary and how it has changed or is changing in this new era of education.

Conclusions

HEI culture is highly complex with many concepts and assumptions based in the private sector seeming flawed when transferred to the context of Higher Education. This is not to say that HEI cultures are unfathomable or unknowable. There is no question that all areas of HEI culture require attention. According to Becher (1987:298), it is only 'by understanding the parts and their particularity, one can better understand the whole'. Kashner (1990:20) highlights the need to understand culture in an era of change: "readying an institution to reply to the conditions that call for change or to innovate on the institution's own initiative requires a clear understanding of its corporate culture and how to modify that culture in a desired direction". Kabanoff, Waldersee and Cohen (1995) found that the understanding institutional culture helped to predict perceptions of change in the organization and through perceptions of change, employees' attitudes (and therefore levels of resistance) to change could be weighed up.

Generalization may be necessary as a means of creating comprehensive models of the world around us and trying to understand the mechanics behind organisations. However, when such generations mislead, it may be time to reconsider assumptions lying behind them. In recent years tools that deal with competing values such as the OCAI and the OCI seem to be increasingly used (e.g. Pushnykh & Chemeris, 2006; Sanderson & Watters, 2006; Ferreira & Hill, 2007; Kleijnen, Dolmans, Muijtjens, Willems & Van Hout, 2009). Much of the research cites the reason for selection as ease of usage, time savings or, in the case of OCAI, because it was initially developed for education, but very few cite that the assumptions of a unified culture does not apply for many HEIs.

A multi-perspective model provides the means for more accurate findings through more realistic assumptions of the organisational cultures of HEIs. It also entails adopting an entirely different, sequential methodology by which the culture must first be mapped up with either quantitative or qualitative methods and through these results, suitable representative samples of the organisation may be found.

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