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Pietilä, Maria

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The many faces of research profiling – academic leaders’ conceptions of research steering

Maria Pietilä

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ABSTRACT

The article examines academic leaders’ conceptions of research profiling. Global science policies, including the Finnish governmental policy, promote the identification of areas of research excellence and recommend resource concentration on them. However, as active agents, leaders may have competing, even conflicting views on the pros and cons of the institutional norm of selective research excellence and research steering. Drawing on the ideas of micro-level institutionalism, this study seeks answers to the following questions: What kinds of conceptions of research profiling do the academic leaders have? How are these connected to the goals that the leaders are trying to achieve with profiling? The data comprised 15 interviews with leaders at different organisational levels in two Finnish research universities. Two general conceptions of research profiling were identified: profiling as an instrument of strategic management and profiling as symbolic management. The conceptions were connected to various rationales, such as strengthening research and communicating to the external environment. By emphasising the variability and incoherence of leaders’ conceptions and the underlying rationalities, the study contributes to understanding how academic leaders make sense of the complex issues they face and how they cope with various demands.

Keywords: Academic leadership, universities, institutionalism, science policies, sensemaking, research profiling

INTRODUCTION

Perceiving higher education and academic research as drivers of economic growth in the context of scarce public resources has led to a policy convergence: there have been attempts in OECD countries to form world-class universities and to concentrate resources on fewer universities or departments (Hazelkorn 2004; Rostan & Vaira 2011). Barrow (1996) argues that in the US, the ideal of ‘multiversity’ has been transferred to a strategy of selective excellence. As a result, the missions of universities have become differentiated and some weaker academic programmes have been eliminated.

Excellence is a buzzword of twenty-first century higher education policy (Rostan & Vaira 2011). Steering of research and the recommendations to focus on the most excellent research have increased at the supranational, national, and university level (Scott 2006, 136–137; ERAC 2011; Barrow 1996; Ziman 1994). In universities, professional socialisation produces normative pressure on academic leaders, and the behaviour of peer organisations produces mimetic pressure. Steering organisations such as ministries cause coercive pressure through funding instruments. (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Scott 1995.) These pressures can be approached from the perspective of regarding the environment as a constitution of normative understandings.

Although at the macro level universities may be converging towards similar types of structures, scholars have emphasised the need to focus also on the micro dynamics of institutional stability and change (Powell & Colyvas 2008; Daniels et al. 2002; DiMaggio & Powell 1991). Individuals reproduce, but also change institutions by ascribing different meanings to them. Even if politicians, business representatives and policy-makers supported the strategies of selective excellence, staff in universities – the ‘policy implementers’ – do not necessarily share the same views. To understand why institutional reforms succeed or fail, it is important to study the responses of academic staff to macro institutions. Through processes of classification and categorisation, and through expectations concerning legitimate action, macro institutions create *conventions*. Although these conventions are scripts for meaning-making (Powell & Colyvas 2008), people always have room for personal interpretation and sensemaking.

In this study, which is based on interviews with academic leaders in Finnish universities, I report on leaders’ conceptions of research profiling. In Finland, ‘university profiling’ is a national policy aimed at the division of work in the higher education sector. At the university level, ‘research profiling’, as implicated by the Ministry of Education and Culture, means giving priority to strong research areas (MEC 2012, 44). Research profiling is, however, a controversial theme, because demands for the freedom of research and demands to steer it are contradictory. Conflicting institutional norms offer actors a choice of different legitimating accounts (David & Bitektine 2009). Although the macro-level institution of selective excellence frames the situation, leaders may have competing, even conflicting conceptions of research profiling. They are active agents (Meyer 2008), who attach their own meanings to the concept, reflecting their own goals and aspirations. Following this approach, the study is about *the battle on the meaning of profiling*. The research questions are the following: What kinds of conceptions of research profiling do the leaders have? How are these connected to the goals leaders are trying to achieve with profiling?

Previous studies have focused on how academic staff adapt to changing conditions (e.g., Leišytė & Enders 2011; Marttila et al. 2010; Laudel 2006). To date, few studies have examined academic leaders' responses. It is important to study the conceptions of leaders, because their position has become stronger in universities (Marginson & Considine 2000; Bleiklie & Kogan 2007; Rinne & Koivula 2005): as 'managers of meaning' (Smircich & Morgan 1982) they may promote or hinder the introduction and diffusion of selective research excellence. Academic leaders experience pressures to improve research performance and they have increasing formal opportunities to manage research activities (Gläser et al. 2010, 150). However, because they are simultaneously faced with many, even conflicting expectations by academic staff, peer organisations, politicians, and the wider society, they may find it difficult, even impossible to respond to all expectations (Oliver 1991). Thus, it is worth studying how the leaders make sense of the uncertain, ambiguous, and equivocal environment and organisational life (Weick 1995). Leaders were chosen from Finnish universities, because universities in Finland have become more active in managing research priorities. Management structures in Finnish universities changed with the Universities Act in 2010, when some authority was shifted from collegial bodies to individual leaders.

NEO-INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Sociological neo-institutionalism is the theoretical framework of this study. It is fruitful to study conceptions of research policies from the institutional perspective, because research policies involve many symbolic features (Larsen 2000). Furthermore, universities operate in an institutionalised environment: the success of organisations depends largely on the legitimacy of structures and activities, not the efficiency of action (Meyer & Rowan 2008). DiMaggio and Powell (1983; cf. Meyer & Rowan 1977) argue that institutional environments demand organisations to conform to social rules: failure to conform may lead to conflict and illegitimacy.

Institutions are macro-level abstractions made of taken-for-granted scripts, rules, and classifications (DiMaggio & Powell 1991). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) separate three mechanisms of institutional isomorphic change that lead organisations to become more similar. First, coercive isomorphism stems from cultural expectations, formal and informal political influence. Second, normative isomorphism is a result of professionalisation. Third, mimetic isomorphism stems from uncertainties, which lead to the imitation of successful forms: to demonstrate social fitness, organisations most likely mimic similar, successful peers in the field.

As opposed to the rational view on organisations, which assumes that organisational structure controls action, Meyer and Rowan (1977) note that it is sometimes more rational to decouple structure and activities. Organisations adopt appropriate structures to appear as socially fit: the formal symbolic structures serve as a myth, which is displayed to the outside audience (Krücken 2003; Brunsson & Olsen 1993). In the case of selective research excellence, leaders may respond to the external pressure symbolically to defend the university's inner core (Larsen 2000; Krücken 2003) and rhetorically adopt the institution to maintain legitimacy. On the other hand, a reform may have vast effects, if leaders promote it and it is compatible with the historical-cultural traditions of the organisation (Christensen & Laegreid 2001; Brunsson & Olsen 1993).

Recent neo-institutional research has emphasised the role of human agency (Meyer 2008), dynamics and contestation (Powell & Colyvas 2008; Jennings & Greenwood 2003), and power (Lawrence 2008). Actors are seen as intentional and self-interested, capable of choosing to deviate from institutional norms (David & Bitektine 2009). For example, Oliver (1991) argues that organisations do not only acquiesce to institutional demands, but they also defy, avoid, and manipulate them. As a result, change and change dynamics have been incorporated in the models of institutionalism (Jennings & Greenwood 2003). As Powell and Colyvas (2008, 276) argue, '[i]nstitutions are sustained, altered, and extinguished as they are enacted by individuals in concrete social situations.'

New institutionalism's strength is its ability to connect the long-term macro-development of culture, forms, and archetypes with micro, short-term interactions of actors in a field. People regularly generate new ideas, schemas, routines and strategies, often unconsciously. These ideas become institutionalised through the processes of diffusion and legitimation. (Jennings & Greenwood 2003.) Intrasubjective sensemaking (Weick 1995) serves as a micro-mechanism of institutionalisation (Jennings & Greenwood 2003; Powell & Colyvas 2008). The process of sensemaking emphasises the interaction between the exogenous social reality and the individual who interprets and constructs it (Jennings & Greenwood 2003; Scott 1995). Sensemaking refers to the process by which people *create meaning* in a complex situation: leaders, for example, try to make circumstances comprehensible and manageable.

PRESSURE TO CONFORM

Research excellence policy is a cause of homogenisation of structures within the higher education sector: excellence frames are nurtured by the models of *progress*, and changes are rationalised

around these frames (Meyer et al. 2007; cf. Brunsson & Olsen 1993, 10–11). Evaluations, rankings, benchmarking and funding schemes, such as the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme, accelerate the policy. The specialisation of European universities has been prompted by the EU’s *Europe 2020 Strategy on Innovation*. Although the EU has no formal jurisdiction over national higher education systems, it influences the convergence of science policies of the member states (Lemola 2002).

Universities may adopt policies and reforms to increase legitimacy and survival prospects ‘independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures’ (Meyer & Rowan 1977, 340). For example, Hazelkorn (2003, 5) argues that a strong research profile is critical not just for institutional mission but also *for status and survival*.

In Finland, political motives are evident in the Ministry of Education and Culture’s (MEC) attempt to clarify the division of work in the national higher education sector (MEC 2012). Division of work is justified by the need to improve the competitiveness of Finnish universities. MEC, which is the universities’ main funder, has asked the universities to develop their profiles and to define their research focus areas; universities should strengthen their research fields and high-quality research environments. Resource allocation to top-level research and to strategic focus areas was one of the central aims of the Finnish Universities Act (MEC 2010). Similarly, according to the Research and Innovation Council of Finland (2010, 23), universities should prioritise activities, develop a national and an international profile, and specialise in the strong areas.

When considering institutional pressures, it should be noted that profile-building and focusing on research strengths is only one side of the coin: universities and academic leaders face multiple environments and expectations. For example, they are expected to offer interesting study programmes to students and to be involved in third mission activities.

DATA AND METHOD

The data consist of fifteen interviews with academic leaders: rectors, deans, and department heads. They work in two Finnish research universities, which have defined their research focus areas. University A is an established, large, comprehensive university with many faculties.¹ Due to its strong position in the higher education context, it can be assumed that University A has the necessary resources and capacity in terms of size, prestige, and external research funding to

¹ University A has a staff of over 8,000 people and 35,000 students.

influence its environment and to resist external changes (cf. Leišytė 2007, 37; Meyer et al. 2007). University B is a younger middle-sized, comprehensive university, which was merged from two universities in 2010.² The merger may have reduced historical continuity at the organisation with a breakdown of normative agreements on the organisational customs and practices (Oliver 1992). This means that organisational routines and cultural scripts may be stronger at the established university than at the newly merged university.

The selected case departments represent the disciplines of computer science (representing hard sciences) and history (representing soft sciences/humanities). The case faculties are those in which the departments are organisationally situated. Leaders were selected from several departments and faculties, because the prerequisites for steering research differ in different disciplines. For example, the need for critical mass based on expensive infrastructure depends on the discipline (Ziman 1994, 59). Disciplines are relevant for the study, because they have their own values and norms, they face different environments, and they use different ways to resist and to accommodate to change (Becher 1989; Hakala & Ylijoki 2001). Moreover, the cognitive models of academic people are bound by the characteristics and structures of the knowledge domains and social dimensions of particular disciplines (Becher 1989; Schein 1996). Leaders must take the expectations of academic staff into account.

The leaders were interviewed between 2010 and 2012. Documents such as strategies and research policies were used as supplementary data. The interviews were semi-structured, covering themes such as the process of setting the research focus areas, concrete consequences, internal and external factors that encourage or discourage research steering, the leaders' views and aims about research profiling, reactions of academic staff, and the profiling process as a leadership experience. The interviews lasted 1–2 hours, and they were taped and transcribed. The added quotes have been translated from Finnish to English.

Methodologically, my approach was interpretative and data-driven. After several readings of the interview data, I was able to identify repeated conceptions attached to the phenomenon of research profiling and explicit or implicit rationales behind them, brought up by the interviewees. In the interviews, the leaders made sense of the complex phenomenon with the means of language, talk, and communication (cf. Weick 1995). The leaders constructed their environments and weighed the significance of stakeholders and on-going trends.

² University B has a staff of nearly 3,000 people and 15,000 students.

RESULTS

Based on the interviews, I was able to identify two general conceptions of research profiling, both of which were linked to various rationales, by which the leaders legitimated their stand. The first conception portrays research profiling as *an instrument of strategic management*, whereas the second portrays it as *symbolic management*. The categorised rationales represent types of ideal: individual leaders cannot necessarily be situated in distinct categories, because the rationales are often fragmented, intertwined, and combined. Despite the emphasis on language and communication, the conceptions and rationales are not ‘only discourses’, because their relevance was assessed, when needed, by checking whether they were connected to concrete activities.

Research profiling as instrument of strategic management

Research profiling as an instrument of strategic management portrays universities’ research activities as requiring considerable changes: being successful in the new environment requires choice-making in the research portfolio and firm, determinate leadership. Leaders connect profiling to universities’ structural changes, which have ‘questioned the established mindsets’. From the strategic perspective, profiling is a self-initiated change process, although also supported by MEC:

‘[...] it [research profiling] is a change without question. And we take it seriously, [...] the leadership perspective is very clear.’

A distinct, strong profile is pursued with strategic human resource (HR) plans and allocation of strategic funding to the focus areas. The focus areas are visible in the activities of university and widely known in the university community. As a dean illustrates, ‘I think this is the first university strategy that I have seen which is implemented the same as in business life.’ HR plans reallocate professorships and lectureships to the strategic areas, while marginal areas are allowed to wither. Recruitment to new positions is carefully considered from the point of view of *future research potential*, and new recruits are often selected for pre-determined narrow areas instead of being based on merit-based recruiting. The focus areas have been used in prioritising infrastructure acquisitions and doctoral schools and in eliminating ‘unnecessary units’. In the extreme cases, the strategic use of the focus areas has led researchers to resign from their university, when they find themselves outside the unit’s research strategy. The strategic conception is connected with various rationales that leaders aim to pursue.

Rationale 1: Strengthening research and the status as a research university

The predominant rationale behind the strategic perspective sees research profiling as a way to strengthen research and the university's status as a research university. This viewpoint was mentioned by leaders at both universities at all organisational levels, with varying emphasis. By highlighting critical mass, research excellence and internationalisation of the research environment, it fits the current political rationality and shares characteristics with the macro-institutional norm of selective research excellence. Proposals for action as part of research assessments have facilitated the adoption of this rationale.

The constructed outcomes of research profiling are improvements of the units' competitive advantage, international visibility of research, and better research performance. International visibility and research performance are then expected to contribute to international competitiveness. According to the leaders at University B, the comparatively small size of the university makes it 'a necessity' to set priorities. Leaders refer to the University's goal to improve its ranking, which – if it materialised – would reflect advances in scientific quality:

'[...] to succeed, we have to be cutting-edge in international research in the areas we define as our areas of strength.'

Internationalisation of the research environment affects publishing; leaders in the soft sciences emphasised that today the focus has to be on internationally relevant discussions and that publication should primarily be in international refereed journals.

Achieving research excellence and a high position in the international research environment is presented as requiring critical mass to generate synergies. As a leader in computer science stated, '[...] it is clear that one single professor cannot lift it [research] to the top: there must be more people.' To build critical mass, structural changes, such as mergers of small educational programmes, are promoted. Research groups and research collaboration are a route to critical mass in both hard and soft sciences. This stance is described as *a remarkable change* in the soft sciences, characterised traditionally by individually working researchers.

In addition to building critical mass, a repeated argument is to strengthen research by focusing on a unit's strengths and areas to be developed or by finding one's ecological niche within the field of research. In some cases, the strategic view on profiling means also making clear priorities, for 'we cannot be good at everything', leading to the allocation of resources to the focus areas. This is seen as improving the chances of receiving external funding, recruiting students, and planning high-

quality educational programmes. Ecological niches are connected to the discussion about the division of work between Finnish universities.

‘It [profiling] is important for international success. We cannot be good, internationally of high standard [...] if we have complete freedom and vagueness here concerning what we do.’

Rationale 2: Economic scarcity connected with high costs of research

The second rationale, pronounced especially by deans and department heads, is framed within economic rationales: the increasing costs of research and the tightening of university budgets. Leaders perceive profiling as taking place in an environment of scarce resources and increasing pressures to be efficient and accountable; economic pressures trigger a need to prioritise activities. The argument is as follows: the high price tag of research (including salaries and infrastructure) demands choice-making, because units *cannot afford* to do everything. Thus, focus areas serve as a decision-making base for leaders.

Deans in natural sciences particularly used this argument, but also others, such as the head of a soft sciences department at University B, who linked profiling to the *survival* of the unit: ‘[...] this is pure rationality. Soon we won’t exist if we do not focus.’ Even if leaders did not want to set priorities, they set them ‘out of necessity’. Economic resources were mentioned by many as *the only rationale* for choice-making.

Steering of research is connected to the necessity of adapting to the funding model of MEC and universities’ internal funding models. The economic argument differentiates the earlier era of expanding higher education system from the contemporary era of slow expansion and insecure funding. As a rector stated:

‘[...] this organisation grows like wheat dough, but resources don’t grow accordingly. To be able to maintain the high quality we are striving for, in general means we have to be able to make choices.’

A soft sciences dean remarked that Finnish universities, with meagre funding, are today seen ‘more cold-bloodedly as the instruments of production and competitiveness’. An education-oriented university ideal is contrasted with a utility-oriented dynamic university model.

Choice-making means ‘tough decisions’, such as unequal resourcing for different fields. This stance, however, was not shared by all leaders. Some leaders, who expressed the need to make choices, remarked that no action had so far been taken. Furthermore, research policies had usually been formulated in collaboration with staff, and therefore did not represent solely the leaders’ preferences.

Rationale 3: Responding to societal challenges

This rationale was used mainly by rectors and deans. It emphasises the interconnections of science and society, and the responsibility of researchers to tackle societally *relevant* research questions. The rationale focuses on researchers' accountability to their main funder: the public or the taxpayers. Leaders using this rationale at least partly accept that research should be steered in directions that will best benefit society:

'[...] we operate with taxpayers' euros and therefore society has the right to say which direction it [research] should be steered.'

According to this rationale, decisions that allocate resources to areas that are central to society should be made. Research focus areas were presented as reflecting the needs of society, and at University B the needs of the neighbouring regions were also important. Whereas the emphasis of deans in the soft sciences declared was to respond to national challenges, deans in hard sciences referred to global challenges.

A central theme in responding to societal challenges is the advancement of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research: leaders wish to build more synergy and to surpass traditional boundaries between disciplines by building multidisciplinary consortia and by promoting multidisciplinary projects. The universities' and faculties' focus areas are multidisciplinary, which is supposed to guide researchers towards collaboration.

The first strategic rationale emphasised the need to strengthen research based on the researchers' internal strengths. By emphasising external expectations and interests of research, the third rationale contradicts the first rationale to some extent. Although the rationale has been categorised here as strategic, the arguments about societal challenges serve also a symbolic and ceremonial purpose, for example, to avoid conflicts between units.

Rationale 4: Securing a unit's position within the university

In some units, defining focus areas and focusing research have been rationalised with defensive tactics to secure the position of units within the university. The argument is presented as follows: because all units and disciplines want to become visible in research policies, they need to be involved and take action, even if they were against the official policy.

'[It is important] to see that the university has found a place for our work, which is visible in this kind of a list [of research focus areas]. Of course, it arouses concern, at least for a department head, [to see] that "oh, they have quite different topics compared to what we do [in this unit]".'

The leaders of soft sciences at University B particularly used the defensive rationale. Academic staff have criticised the university profile for its focus on hard sciences. A strategic perspective is needed, because profiling is ‘a power game and a resource game between disciplines’. University B has allocated strategic funding based on the focus areas, which makes it important to bring one’s own fields forward. Furthermore, visibility is important for reputation, honour and the motivation of staff.

The influencing tactics include communication about the disciplinary differences of working patterns, funding, and collaboration:

‘[...] I tried to think for real about how to bring our faculty’s researchers and teachers’ way of thinking and working culture into the general discussion.’

Research profiling as symbolic management

Research profiling as symbolic management emphasises the ostensible adherence to the official national policy while concealing the untouched activities behind visible structures. Stakeholders, such as foreign universities and funders, create pressures towards isomorphism by constantly asking about universities’ focus areas. Sceptical leaders accept the idea of profiling because it is a general norm in Finland and globally, and it is what peer universities commonly do: ‘it is the world we live in’. One dean noted that profile-building is not a Finnish invention, but all EU countries have similar policies. All nation states seek competitive advantage and copy each other’s best practices (Lemola 2002). Leaders then gain legitimacy by rhetorically adopting the institutional norm, while still maintaining the identity of the university or the unit (Larsen 2000).

As opposed to the strategic perspective, the focus areas understood symbolically do not clearly affect universities’ activities: they are not used as strategic instruments, their progress is not inspected, and only scarce resources, if any, are allocated based on them. The broad, general areas serve as external, ritualistic structures. The formal policy scripts create a symbol of compliance: whereas the organisation has internalised ‘the rules of the game’, nonconformity is disguised behind symbolic acceptance (Oliver 1991, 154–156).

A distinction is drawn between the focus areas and *the true strategic perspective* of units. Leaders having this conception respond foremost to the requests of external stakeholders, such as MEC, instead of having their own personal ambitions to determine the direction research should go in. The symbolic conception is also connected with various rationales.

Rationale 1: Defending the individualistic work of researchers

The rationale centres on the protection of individual orientation of researchers and emphasises the negative consequences of research steering, such as the exclusion of researchers who work in small research fields, uncertainty and fears about becoming an outsider, and problems with work motivation if research is sharply divided into strategic and non-strategic. This rationale was voiced mostly by leaders at University A. Leaders sharing this view proclaimed themselves supporters of a broad university and protectors of all disciplines: ‘[...] I’ve always tried to dispel concern that some fields of study would be eliminated.’ They detach themselves from the official policy of research profiling and stress the university as a community of scholars. This rationale partly contradicts the strategic rationale of building critical mass. Measures have been taken of necessity, ‘because this is what the faculty and rector expect from us.’

Leaders in soft sciences at University A particularly presented curiosity-driven individualistic work and freedom of researchers as important. They referred to the units’ strong traditions of individualistic work and saw strategic management centred around projects and research groups as limited.

‘[...] the research field of us humanists and the image of researcher have changed significantly according to [the model of] the natural sciences and medicine, where they have big projects, where they have goals like the victory over cancer and so on. [But] our goals cannot be specified like that and they are probably not even achievable with big projects.’

Leaders argued that research does not necessarily benefit from a further division of labour and specialisation, research groups cannot be formed by force, ‘artisan modes’ of research do not benefit from research management, and large projects are not the only efficient form of research. Whereas leaders in soft sciences based their arguments on the special characteristics of their disciplines, such as individuality and funding sources, leaders in hard sciences also referred to individualistic researchers in mathematics and computer science and their right to work independently.

Rationale 2: Unpredictable nature of research and safeguarding new openings

The second rationale behind the symbolic conception addresses research steering’s incompatibility with the unpredictable nature of research. This also serves as an argument why the emergence of new research areas should be secured:

‘[...] they [research results] are true only for the present. What seems now as something that should be resourced might seem quite crazy the day after tomorrow or next year. And then if we put [resources] somewhere with a business orientation, [...] and we say that “this is what

we proceed with”, then [...] it can suddenly turn out to be wrong. And then it will be very hard to cancel.’

Choice-making in basic research is seen as potentially dangerous especially in infrastructure-intensive areas because of the possible ‘wrong choices’ and difficulty of changing direction afterwards.

Securing the strong established areas is contrasted with securing the renewal of research, which leaders at University A especially considered advantageous to avoid having research stagnate. They stated that due to the impossibility of knowing the grand challenges and the scientific breakthroughs of the future, steering should not be too strong and all the ideas of principal investigators should be supported. Research is seen as being renewed bottom-up, outside the focus areas, ‘which all originated from something deviant’.

‘I think the biggest problem in all these focus areas is that we assume that we already know what is good and what is best and so on. I’d always like to leave enough leeway for new [research].’

Rationale 3: Difficulty of choice-making in a comprehensive university / faculty / department

The third practical rationale, which is connected to the first symbolic rationale, is based on the view that choice-making is especially difficult in a comprehensive university or unit. Leaders at University A find it difficult to define focus areas because of the organisation’s large size and the university’s unique position in the national context.

‘We are a leading comprehensive university with centres of excellence in nearly every faculty [...]. We cannot make such a decision that, from now on, we will only invest in medicine or humanism, or so on. We have to have all the basic fields, which are important to us.’

Due to the traditions and large size, focusing is described as something new and foreign, something ‘we haven’t embarked on very gladly’ and as difficult to justify to staff. Variety in research has previously been considered strength rather than a problem: ‘[...] all this variety [...], maybe this is kind of our research focus area.’ A narrow research focus is also problematic in the face of a broad teaching function in departments: many things need to be taught ‘regardless of whether we study it in this university or not’. One dean in hard sciences also questioned the sense of eliminating high-quality units in the name of profiling.

The argument also addresses the theme of commitment: a comprehensive research university needs broad, flexible focus areas to get people to accept them and to commit staff to the organisation. The focus areas of the faculties of University A encompass ‘nearly all our research’. Similarly, the focus

areas of a history department are intended to build commitment – the department’s strategy includes areas from every subject, ‘so that it would look equal and democratic’.

Rationale 4: Communicating to the external environment

According to the fourth rationale, research profiling serves as a communication channel to the universities’ external environment. The most obvious target is the steering ministry. Others include peer universities, potential recruits, students, and external funders. While the research profiles are described as conventional and ‘nothing new’, they have an important communication purpose in providing external visibility and an attractive image. Focus areas of a faculty, for example, are an advertisement that shows *how broad* the research activities in the faculty are. University-level focus areas especially are described as important from the perspective of ‘what we want to signal outwards’, connected with the rationale of responding to societal challenges.

Focus areas and profiles are especially important when applying for external funding and researchers are encouraged to bring out the focus areas when applying for funding. As the research funders often require that a project belongs to the focus areas of the unit or the university, the profiles should not be so narrow that they would weaken competitiveness.

‘At the moment our focus areas have been built so brilliantly that when we don’t clarify what they mean they can be interpreted as including everything.’

As a result of the rationale of communicating with the external environment, which focuses on providing a modern, interesting image, one dean remarked that the national division of work could create ‘more of the same’ despite the aims at rational analysis of strategic positioning. It is argued that when similar units focus on trendy themes, they become homogeneous.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify academic leaders’ conceptions of research profiling and their connections to the goals of leaders. Research profiling as an official national policy has made it essential for leaders to make sense of the issue and to respond to it in some way. While concentration of resources on excellent research is a global phenomenon and also Finnish universities have a normative pressure to focus research, the analysis shows not only the variability and richness, but also the incoherence and conflict of leaders’ conceptions and the underlying rationalities. Thus, the study reveals the rival, strategic and symbolic interpretations of the same phenomenon and contributes to knowledge on how academic leaders cope with various demands. Leaders pursue different aims and refer to different rationales either implicitly or strategically by

constructing their own perspectives and taking advantage of the perspectives of others. It should, however, be noted that the rationales are often complementary and the same leaders use multiple rationales. The rationales themselves are very different, ranging from research-focused, societal, and economic arguments to more principled arguments.

The study also emphasises leaders' deviation from the 'right' interpretation of the policy and therefore highlights them as active agents. Also, the symbolic conception of research management is 'strategic' in a sense that adopting that conception serves certain interests. Bringing the conceptions and rationales of academic leaders to the front can be justified by the fact that leaders are in a position to advocate their own interpretative schemes to others. As one dean stated, 'possibilities to influence in such a hierarchical system always go top-down'.

The concept of sensemaking is useful in understanding academic leadership and its political nature: different leaders make sense of the situations they face with the aid of different interpretative schemes (Smircich & Morgan 1982). In the process, leaders reflect their perceptions about the pros and cons of research steering (Oliver 1991; Brunsson & Olsen 1993). The focus of sensemaking is on the individual, underscoring the interpretative nature of decision-making; the actor is seen as enacting the environment in ways that reinforce understanding. As Jennings and Greenwood (2003) state, it is useful to combine intrasubjective sensemaking with institutional theory's focus on interorganisational and intersubjective dissemination: to combine analysis of the cognitive complexity of leaders with the political rationale of research excellence.

Although my aim was not to connect specific conceptions or rationales with individual leaders, to some extent leaders in the same organisation seem to have shared conceptions. The strategic conception is more prevalent at University B, whereas the symbolic conception is dominant at University A. Leaders at University B consider profiling a concrete change, albeit a logical continuance of previous universities' strategising, while most leaders at University A adopt the discourse to demonstrate their adherence to the national research policy. Top leaders at the predecessors of University B have been active in trying to determine the direction of research since 1990s. Thus, the ideas may be compatible with the historical-cultural traditions of the new university (Christensen & Laegreid 2001; Brunsson & Olsen 1993).

Although the rationales of leaders do not strictly follow disciplinary boundaries, the strategic view is more prevalent in hard sciences than in soft ones, due to the need for elaborate equipment, large teams, and substantial budgets. When research management is demanded in every faculty, the ideas extend isomorphically from the fields of 'Big Science' (cf. Neave 2002). The findings, however,

lead to questions concerning the Finnish policy's suitability to soft sciences with a wide range of themes and individualistic traditions.

In the future, how mimetic and normative pressures affect academic leaders' perspectives could be studied in more detail. For example, training institutions act as isomorphic forces (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). In the university sector, the European Research Area Committee's peer learning activities aim to diffuse best practices and awareness about the EU's modernisation project (e.g., ERAC 2010). How leaders' perspectives are affected by participating in these activities could be studied.

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