

(De)constructing power relations in the governance of European higher education: a Foucauldian analysis (0084)

Botas Paulo Charles Pimentel¹, Jeroen Huisman¹, ¹*International Centre for Higher Education Management (ICHEM), School of Management, University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom*

Context and objective

As the public higher education system ‘consumes an increasing level of state resources’ (Shattock, 2010) and ‘the increase in competition for scarce resources and the decrease in the public’s trust in higher education practices’ (Heck et al., 2000) have provided governments around the world with the environment for them to exercise their power over their HE systems. This power is exercised in many varied ways in order to make their HE systems more responsive to the economic needs of their nations and more accountable for its affairs. It can be exercised directly or indirectly, through different mechanisms and tools, over institutional autonomy and governance and management structures; funding and budget spending; quality assurance and control; accountability; strategic management and academic freedom.

Government control over their respective HE systems is the focus of this paper. Some studies in higher education have addressed the issue of power relations in the governance of HE institutions (Wright and Ørberg, 2009, Cornforth, 2003, Drummond and Reitsch, 1995, Marginson, 1997, de Boer et al., 1998, Kezar, 2000, Blackwell and Cistone, 1999, Mortimer and McConnell, 1978). However, none of them has deconstructed and analysed power relations in the governance of HE from a Foucauldian theoretical perspective, and this is our aim and objective in this paper.

Methodology

This paper is originated from a research funded by the European Union on the governance of higher education in Europe. The empirical data was gathered from in-depth structured questionnaires with senior officials from nine, out of 15, participant institutions. The scope of the questionnaires covered issues related to institutional autonomy, governance structure, stakeholders, decision-making process, communication, governing bodies and performance

indicators. The data was analysed from a Foucauldian perspective, where we (de)construct power relations in the governance of HE institutions.

Situating the theoretical framework

Concept of power

Power is a very controversial concept because of its omnipresence, its changeability, its reversibility, and its instability. For Foucault (1982) ‘power exists only when it is put into action’. These dynamic characteristics make power an utterly, irresistibly fascinating and attractive exercise that we, as human beings, unconsciously or consciously exercise in our encounters.

Categories of power

There are four categories of power: consent, domination, compliance and resistance.

Consent requires previous approval and responsibility for the decision from the party which is consenting. The parts involved in the consent both recognise the common purpose to which they ascribe.

Domination involves physical and/or psychological strategies where the possibility of resistance does not exist. Domination manifests itself in various ways: through the threat of funding reduction and the distribution of funding; through the humiliation of institutions by naming and shaming through the publication of the results of their quality assessments and reviews; and through the imposition of political beliefs and interests upon institutions’ agendas, and etc.

Compliance can be observed either when the relationship involves exchange: economic, political and social incentives, or when the relationship involves active or tacit complicity: laziness, ignorance and apathy (Bótas, 2000, 2004, 2008).

Resistance always implies a changing of strategies on the part of the one who is exercising power, as well as on the part of the one over whom power is being exercised.

The tools/mechanisms of power relations

Authority is associated with privilege and knowledge. Authority is also maintained by custom and tradition. Academics' authority is maintained by social and institutionalised mechanisms that allow them to exercise their power based on status quo and also based on their specialist knowledge or expertise.

Influence/manipulation is exercised when one individual is making suggestions, giving advice, persuading and convincing another individual to make or support some decision, to take some action or to join a group. It consists of the provision and transfer of information from one person to another. Transmission and provision of information from the executive team and administrators to the governing bodies are not value-free.

Bargaining/negotiation is exercised when **A** is negotiating with **B**, in order to get **B** to do what **A** wants him/her to do. In higher education, it is most frequently exercised as a disciplinary tool, where the government, or government organisations, controls the behaviour by attaching funding to policies that reflect the interests of the government and withdrawing it from activities which the government does not want the institutions to engage with.

Surveillance/supervision is exercised under a constant close control by observing, supervising and monitoring carefully an individual's activities, performance, product, etc., with the intention of increasing production. It can be manifested in various forms in HE: through demands of accountability and/or the imposition of the means of accountability; assessments of the quality of teaching and research; auditing reviews and mechanisms; students' evaluations of teaching; rankings and etc.

Coercion is exercised when **A** is capable of punishing or threatening to punish **B**, with the intention of having **B** comply with **A**'s interests. In HE, funding is the main means of coercing institutions to comply with the government's agendas. However, coercion can be

also manifested through the scrutiny requirements on how an audit function is to be carried out (Edwards and Cornforth, 2003) and by legislation requiring universities to recruit people with business experience to serve as governors (ibid:).

Conclusion

In this paper, one can see that governments exercise their control over the governance structure, the study programmes and teaching, the funding and the budgetary spending of their HE institutions. It is our conclusion that the control that governments have over the political, social, legal and economic environments, in which HE institutions function and work shapes not only the governance structure of HE institutions, but also their decision-making processes. Our findings support the work and findings of (Smart et al., 1977, Baldrige, 1971, Birnbaum, 1988, Birnbaum, 1992, Ashar and Shapiro, 1990, Cameron, 1983, Hatten, 1982).

References:

- ASHAR, H. & SHAPIRO, J. Z. (1990) Are Retrenchment Decisions Rational? The Role of Information in Times of Budgetary Stress. *Journal of Higher Education*, 61, 121-141.
- BALDRIDGE, J. V. (1971) *Power and Conflict in the University: Research in the Sociology of Complex Organizations*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- BIRNBAUM, R. (1988) *How colleges work: The cybernetics of academic organization and leadership*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- BIRNBAUM, R. (1992) Will You Love Me in December as You Do in May? Why Experienced College Presidents Lose Faculty Support. *Journal of Higher Education*, 63, 1-25.
- BLACKWELL, E. A. & CISTONE, P. J. (1999) Power and influence in higher education: the case of Florida. *Higher Education Policy*, 12, 111-122.
- BÓTAS, P. C. P. (2000) Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Pedagogical Styles in Higher Education. London, Unpublished Master's dissertation. Institute of Education - University of London.
- BÓTAS, P. C. P. (2004) Students' perceptions of teachers' pedagogical styles in Higher Education. *Educate*, 4, 16-30.

- BÓTAS, P. C. P. (2008) Students' perceptions of quality teaching in higher education in the UK: The MA in Education case. *Educational Foundations and Policy Studies*. London, Institute of Education - University of London.
- CAMERON, K. S. (1983) Strategic Responses to Conditions of Decline: Higher Education and the Private Sector. *Journal of Higher Education*, 54, 359-380.
- CORNFORTH, C. (Ed.) (2003) *The Governance of Public and Non-Profit Organisations: What do boards do?*, London, Routledge.
- DE BOER, H., DENTERS, B. & GOEDEGEBUURE, L. (1998) On boards and councils; shaky balances considered: The governance of Dutch universities. *Higher Education Policy*, 11, 153-164.
- DRUMMOND, M. E. & REITSCH, A. (1995) The Relationship between Shared Governance Models and Faculty and Administrator Attitudes. *Journal for Higher Education Management*, 11, 49-58.
- EDWARDS, C. & CORNFORTH, C. (2003) What influences the strategic contribution of boards? IN CORNFORTH, C. (Ed.) *The Governance of Public and Non-Profit Organisations: What do boards do?* London, Routledge.
- FOUCAULT, M. (1982) Afterword: The Subject and Power. IN DREYFUS, H. L. & RABINOW, P. (Eds.) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics. With an Afterword by Michel Foucault*. Hertfordshire, Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- HATTEN, M. L. (1982) Strategic Management in Not-For-Profit Organizations. *Strategic Management Journal*, 3, 89-104.
- HECK, R. H., JOHNSRUD, L. K. & ROSSER, V. J. (2000) Administrative Effectiveness in Higher Education: Improving Assessment Procedures. *Research in Higher Education*, 41, 663-684.
- KEZAR, A. (2000) Pluralistic Leadership: Incorporating Diverse Voices. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71, 722-743.
- MARGINSON, S. (1997) Steering from a distance: Power relations in Australian higher education. *Higher Education*, 34, 63-80.
- MORTIMER, K. P. & MCCONNELL, T. R. (1978) *Sharing Authority Effectively: Participation, Interaction, and Discretion*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- SHATTOCK, M. (2010) UK University Governance Under Stress. *International Higher Education*, 59, 21-23.

SMART, J. C., KUH, G. D. & TIERNEY, W. G. (1977) The Roles of Institutional Cultures and Decision Approaches in Promoting Organizational Effectiveness in Two-Year Colleges. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68, 256-281.

WRIGHT, S. & ØRBERG, J. W. (2009) Prometheus (on the) Rebound? Freedom and the Danish Steering System. IN HUISMAN, J. (Ed.) *International Perspectives on the Governance of Higher Education: Alternative Frameworks for Coordination*. New York, Routledge.