

Leadership, governance and management (LGM): a new ‘trilogy’ in higher education research? (0238)

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Outline

Introduction

In the mid-twentieth century, before the creation of a ‘system’ of mass higher education in Britain, universities were relatively few in number and, by modern standards, small in scale. Processes of leadership and governance tended to be viewed as part of the ‘dignified’ aspects of the constitutional world of the university whilst its management was generally referred to more as ‘administration’ – the efficient part of the constitution (Bargh et al 1996). Generally these affairs were not part of the public space of the university, but the private and were marked by assumptions of consensus and collegiality.

All this began to change, however, as the idea of the university began to change from an elite to a mass institution. Out of the collection of autonomous universities emerged a system of higher education. Universities remained autonomous institutions, but their core missions, their relationships with each other, and crucially society and the state, transformed into something different in scale and scope.

Turbulence and change, however, have been overriding characteristics of the emergence of mass higher education - manifest in alternating bouts of expansion and consolidation, together with periodic crises of funding. Indeed, in a new age of funding austerity it is not merely that we no longer agree what a university is for but we are no longer sure how or even whether we can afford it. How to run a university that does more for less is now an expectation of those responsible for the leadership, governance and management of institutions.

The rise of LGM research

In an earlier survey of HE research Tight (2003) identified ‘institutional management’ as a major theme or issue in contemporary higher education research. He suggested it encapsulated six overlapping sub-themes:

- Higher education management practice
- Institutional leadership and governance
- Institutional development and history
- Institutional structure
- Economies of scale and institutional mergers
- Relations between higher education, industry and community

Rather than anything as formal as a research trilogy, however, it was recognised that ‘the distinction between research on higher education management practice, and that on institutional leadership and governance, might be said to be a fine one, and these two topics do overlap’. The rise of this rather amorphous research category reflected the transformation of higher education institutions and the need to understand how they were managed (Tight: 2003: 136; 140). Whilst the themes, methodologies, data and histories associated with ‘institutional management’ were developing, ‘LGM’ lacked a more formal or coherent presence as a distinct research field, each part of the trilogy reflecting slightly different roots and drivers.

'Management' attracted increasing attention in UK higher education following the 1985 Jarratt Report - its salience confirmed by the rise of new public management. Universities were associated with many of the orthodoxies on public bureaucracies and the power of service professionals over service users. Accelerated by Jarratt's efficiency exercise, there was a progressive move to more purposeful management of both the institution itself and specific parts of its mission (research, learning & teaching, knowledge transfer, outreach etc) and the literature on management reflected this trend.

'Governance', on the other hand, has been altogether less prominent in the literature, although its salience as a public policy issue flared up following legislation associated with changes in the corporate status of former polytechnics in the late 1980s. 'Leadership', meanwhile, has come to prominence in UK higher education more recently, driven among other things by a rather critical external perception that there is rather too little of it and what there is could be improved (Smith and Adams 2008).

Researchers and research in LGM

It has become increasingly evident, however, that if the sector is to engage seriously not just in change management, but institutional transformation, it needs to move towards a more coherent and research informed view of its LGM policies, theories and practices. In a landscape dominated by diversity, multiple purposes, shifting boundaries and policy instability, getting LGM right has important implications for institutions and stakeholders at every level. The formation of the LFHE, for example, is one signal of the collective commitment of the UK HE sector to developing and improving skills and practices across the LGM field.

In order to establish a more detailed evidence base on researchers and research in the LGM field, the LFHE has funded an investigation to scope current activity in the area and the demand for a research network dedicated to supporting LGM researchers. Scheduled to report in autumn 2010, the project is currently consulting with UK based researchers, research users, related research funding bodies, organisations and stakeholders interested in the LGM field. Using a combination of desk-based approaches, surveys and face-to-face interviews, the research shall:

- Provide a preliminary mapping of the community within the UK
- Gauge demand for a research information network on higher education LGM
- Identify potential formats for the launch and future development of a research and information network

The main purpose of the proposed paper therefore is to draw on findings from this study to review the development and coherence of the LGM field. Analysis of the substantive findings of the research will form the evidence base of the paper. These data will enable an initial mapping of the views of those active in LGM research and indicate the coherence (or otherwise) of the emerging LGM 'trilogy'. The paper will conclude by posing some key questions about the potential need to give this growing body of research and researchers a more visible and coherent identity.

References

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