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Prism of Change? The academic middle manager and the transformation he accomplishes Ton Kallenberg Researcher Head Staff Department Education Research & Student Affairs Erasmus University Rotterdam (0031)

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) must innovate. HEIs that do not so, will lose their connection with a continuously changing market and will lose their raison d'être. Therefore they must try to develop strategic innovations in a focused way, which they can use to profile their position towards other institutions. Achieving innovation is a viscous process and does not always lead to the desired result. The academic middle manager plays an important role in whether or not this innovation is achieved. What is his role? And what organizational and functional related variables do affect this role? This research examines the variables which affect the roles of academic middle managers. This paper reports on the results whether or not there is cohesion between function related variables, organizational variables and the roles of academic middle managers. It is based on a survey among academic middle managers of institutions for Higher Education in the Netherlands.

Outline

Introduction and description of the problem

Universities are faced with a lot of challenges. They must compete with new markets, with new rules and against unknown international competitors. And they cannot use their previously gathered knowledge. They compete for subsidies, for externally funded projects and for the European framework programs; they attempt to win over the students' favor on the national and international educational market and they put a lot of effort into attracting and appointing the most talented researchers and teachers. Last but not least they are faced with an increasing necessity to prove the quality assurance and the design of governance structures.

All these changes influence the way universities function, in fact, they change the way universities relate to their surroundings. Nowadays it is an open relation, in which universities attempt to realize their objectives in a complex

force field that includes a wide range of stakeholders such as clients (students), competitors (other universities), employees, government and external constituents (like corporations).

Being able to adapt to a constantly changing environment and being able to anticipate the changes, demands the ability to think and act at a strategic level not only based on the perceptions, values and competences of the top level managers but also – and possibly even more so – on those of the (academic) middle managers.

As stated earlier, the academic middle manager plays an important role in whether or not this innovation is achieved. Academic middle managers hold a special position within the HE-organization. (In this study academic middle managers are defined as middle managers that bear the final responsibility for one or more educational programs/faculties within a university). Their main characteristic is that they are part of various information flows, all streaming into different directions: top-down, bottom-up, horizontal and diagonal. As a result of these information flows they know what is going on within their organization (tactic knowledge). Middle management is the traditional level at which university policies and strategies are effectively translated into practices and into concrete actions. This provides the academic middle manager with a great starting point to influence the strategic innovations within an organization.

A vast literature search has shown that academic middle managers' behaviors and courses of action and also their role in Higher Education contexts have not yet been examined.

Theoretical background of the problem or issue

Just like Higher Education institutions have changed, the role and function of academic middle managers in Higher Education has changed as well. Up to the 1990s, the role of heads of departments and academic middle managers was perceived as that of senior teachers / professors who also happened to engage in routine administrative processes, such as ordering stock and managing capitation budgets. Lately, however, external pressure has forced academic middle managers to focus more on the quality of teaching and learning and one of their tasks has become to intervene when appropriate, in order to encourage their colleagues to improve their work with students. Furthermore IT developments have liberated the middle manager from his paperwork and from the routine aspects of his job and leave him or her with a lot more time for creativity and innovation. Middle managers increasingly occupy themselves with ideas on education, searching for new opportunities, monitoring the quality of education, and so on. As a result they cross hierarchical borders, both inside and outside the organization. This has led to

the widespread recognition among academic middle managers of the fact that they must also operate strategically. Today, therefore, the influence of academic middle managers does not originate in their hierarchical authority, but rather in their unique knowledge base and in their ability to integrate strategic information with operating level information. However, as the role of the (academic) middle manager has become increasingly complex, the need to ensure that such managers possess the knowledge and skills to perform effectively has become even more urgent. The primary purpose of this PhD-research was, therefore, aimed to explore and declare what kind of roles they fulfill and what variables affect these roles. In the research two kinds of variables are distinguished: organizational variables, like context, structure and culture; and professional variables, like autonomy, engagement and educational leadership. This paper reports the results on whether or not cohesion exists between academic leadership and the roles of academic middle managers.

Methods

This research is based on the results of a written survey carried out among a random selection of academic middle managers.
This research was carried out in 2009 among academic middle managers working at 14 Dutch universities and 44 universities of applied sciences in The Netherlands. The analysis included 246 subjects (33,37 %) and adequately represents each HE-institution in The Netherlands. The paper discusses the results of this survey and elaborates on them.

The results

Starting point of exploring the roles of academic middle managers was the Competing Values Model. This model is a widespread and used management model for examining the roles of managers. It was striking to conclude that this model did not fit with academic middle managers in higher education. Four new roles were distinguished, namely: Guard, Guide, Diplomat and Constructor. Subsequently the way organizational variables (context, structure and culture) and function related variables (autonomy, engagement and academic leadership) affected these roles was investigated. Anova-analysis showed that specifically the organizational variables did not affect these roles, whereas the function related variables autonomy and engagement especially affected the fullfilling of the Diplomat and Constructor role.
Finally the preferences academic middle managers have for types of strategic innovations was investigated. The results showed that Diplomats especially

want to be involved with strategic innovations of the type "exploring" and Guards want to be involved with the type "revitalize".

The results of this research showed that the Diplomat role is the most interesting role of an academic middle manager in which role he can be the prism of change.

Implications or relevance of this work for others (including whether its results can be generated);

The relevance of this research extends not only to institutes of higher education in the Netherlands, but to European institutes as well. Besides that, this research could very well be interesting for comparable professional organizations, such as hospitals, wherein similar academic middle managers are faced with similar situations.

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