

From the “boys’ club” toward “a player of the managerial university”. The UCU in UK research intensive HEIs from the lay representatives’ experience. (0053)

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Introduction

In modern higher education the personnel committed in research and/or teaching are framed in most of the European countries in the civil servant status. This status brings not only a juridical trait, but even consequences in the way the personnel developed its identity and its relationship with the employer (Gordon, Whitchurch 2010; Whitchurch 2012): the national State. Since the beginning of the appearance of Evaluative State a couple of decades ago (Neave 2012) and the spread of practices and reforms inspired by the paradigm of the New Public Management (Deem 2008; Ferlie Andresani 2009), even higher education witnessed changes in human relations and human resources management. In particular, the emphasis of the *institutional autonomy* gives to the universities and colleges more discretionary power even in human relation issues.

Even though this changing process is still under investigation by many scholars (Kogan Teichler 2007; Whitley et al. 2007; Rhoades 2007), the actual role of a union of scholars is underestimated, whereas the few studies and reflections belong more in particular to the US academic system whose system is keen to discuss scholars conditions under usual human resources terms (Rhoades 1998, 2007; Smith 1992; Moriarty, Savarese 2012; Morgan, Kearney 1977; Brown, Stone 1977; Okpara et al. 2005; Breneman, Youn 1988; Birnbaum, 1970; Bellas 1994; Abbott 1988). As a matter of fact scholars are not simple public employees, regardless fixed term or in permanent position. They are members of epistemic communities strongly managed through collegial formal and informal committees (Whitley Gläser 2007). Their actual status cannot be totally reduced by that of a “complete organization”, even though literature agrees there is some convergence toward this model despite national path dependencies (De Boer et al. 2007) which may affect the relations among workers and managers-employers. Despite specificities, the issue of precarious employment conditions entered nonetheless the current academia (Kalleberg 2009; Lam, De Campos 2014).

The specific case of AUT-UCU

In this framework, the UK within Europe is a sort of exception or a forerunner in changes (Pernicka 2009) regarding the way scholars live difficulties and may protect themselves in cases of legal procedures. The traditional industrial relations looks to be peculiar in this case, having evidence that individualism and sense of privilege still are relevant values among scholars. Perkin (1969) and Stuttard (1992) respectively analyzed in an historical perspective the Association of the University Teachers (AUT) in different epochs. The possibility to establish a union from the bottom turned to have in the National Association for Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) a strong player. Despite the reform of the “polytechnics” into “new colleges” occurred in 1992, this union only in 2006 merged with the AUT (Carter 2008). The original core of the union of scholars, nicknamed by an interviewed as the “*boys’ club*” in reference of how it was some decades ago, turned to be part of a bigger union even though

without apparent substantial changes in terms of mixtures with the practices of its “twin” in FE. We refer in this study only to the HE part of the UCU. Currently HE within UCU is organized with branches and representative units at regional and national level, even in compliances of specific issues like those of minorities. Other unions may at institutional level be recognized and be summoned by the top-management of the universities.

Methodology

The research design is qualitative and based on the experience of the lays representatives (reps) from a sample of 10 research intensive HEIs. Interviews led at the current moment are 16 and are supposed to arrive at around 30 by the end of October. For each institutions, around 3 reps have been contacted and interviewed considering the specific responsibility and the epistemic community of affiliation in order to understand the possible differences.

Dimensions under investigation and the main scheme of interviews (subjected to modification in relation to reps’ specific role and institutional peculiarities) are as follows:

1. The structure of governance of the UCU at regional and national level.
2. The institutional dimension:
 - relations with HR and line management;
 - relations with Middle Managers and other Seniors
3. Membership strategy and activities;
4. The main causes of grievances and their treatment;

Aims of the article and expected results

The peculiarity of the UCU case restricted to its higher education sector let focus on the shift from a loose structure that aimed at defending individual cases and to promote the sense of belonging to a guild, toward a more modern player keen to play the game of the entrepreneurial university (Deem Brehony 2005) and its strategy, whatever the union might have a tackling stance or be in the search of win-win paths.

The other aim of the article is to describe the main reasons of grievances in labor conditions nowadays among some of the most distinguished research intensive universities of the country. This point was already touched by the union some years ago (Kinman 1998). To this regard the purpose is to understand if and how reps believe the current and hegemonic model of the entrepreneurial university is generating perverse consequences.

Preliminary results

According to the desk research and the first evidence collected, this empirical study will shed light not only on the deserving issue of casualization, grievances, general changes in shop floor level. The perspective of the study of lay representatives is resulting very enlightening to understand how the managerially led strategy of a HEI impact the fabric of scholars. To what extent the identity of a traditional guild committed to tackle managerialism can change scholars' identity toward a more "regular industry" industrial relations? Preliminary results let understand that the UCU may be a peculiar academic actor able to let scholars realize that line management is a rational player that plays a game and that a union may accept to play the game as well, by possibly *creating* the mobilization (Kelly 1998).

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