Departmental management:

Leading researchers to conform to University expectations

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The changes on the United Kingdom funding system of universities in general and of research in particular have certainly had a big impact on the organisation of knowledge production. Management practices have become more important in Higher Education as a result of institutional recommendations (for example the Jarrat Report 1985), resource scarcity, that often encourage the implementation of managerial practices (Pfeffer 1981) and as a consequence of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) (McNay 1999; Yokoyama 2006).
However, few research studies have shown how management and organisational factors have an impact on research production within a pre-existent context. In fact, on the one hand ethnographical research tends to delete the already settled organisational patterns, focusing “in the work, and the movement, and the flow, and the changes” (Latour, 2004) and on the other hand statistical works show that environmental factors, like departmental prestige and departmental social capital have an important impact on research productivity, without explaining how these factors have an impact.

University departments in United Kingdom are excellent centres to observe and understand the impact of the big changes in the organisation of science. In fact, university finances depend on department's capacity to recruit students, attract research grants and since 92 to perform well in the Research Assessment exercise (RAE). Moreover, literature have empirically shown that: when researchers changed departments their productivity soon started to reflect departmental productivity (Long 1978), that "organizational social capital matters more, and more consistently, than individual relational capital in explaining variations of performance" (Lazega et al 2006); and that departmental RAE performances depend on their capacities to achieve what appears to be their academic research potential (Hore 1995).

In this way, university departments are the places where researchers, managers, administrators and head of departments have to articulate pressures and create mechanisms to respond to the faculty and university requirements taking into account the state of student demand on the university and the specific discipline or sub discipline; the system of evaluation of research at the disciplinary level and at the national one (through the RAE); the demands of the different funding bodies; and finally the researchers willingness and preferences regarding research subjects and various activities.

In this paper I intend to show how the organisation, the management and the leadership within departments deal with university demands and the individual demands of staff members. In fact, even if there are characteristics of academic subject matter, that are related with the structure and outputs of university departments (Biglan 1973), in the higher education UK context, management and academic leadership appear to be a critical element to understand knowledge production processes and even the transformation of elements related to the subject matter's traditions.

Based on data collected from 4 longitudinal case studies of the research strategy and the organisation implemented by 4 departments in two universities and two disciplines, this paper addresses the process of institutional change in academic management.

The disciplines under study are Geography and Computer Science. Both are particularly interesting to understand the articulation between researcher's demands and expectation and those of universities, because both disciplines hide inside highly different sub disciplines. Following Becher (1989), in those cases specialisms rather than the parent discipline emerge as the fundamental unit of analysis.

The comparison between department trajectories show that management and academic leadership are gaining strength. Management appears as a response to failure or as an explanation of success in the discourse of head of departments, and in all the cases it becomes more rational and formal. As a consequence, and given that the institutions expect departments to fulfil similar aims (which are related with grant income, student recruitment and RAE performance), the organisation of work and the outputs of the different sub
disciplinary teams tends to conform with the institutional expectations at different levels, depending on the organisational factors.

Sub disciplines are of course also important to understand individual production and their willingness to fulfill institutional expectations, particularly because in some specialisms wining research grants is critical to carry out research when in others, research can be conducted without research grants. However, there are huge variations between departments and institutions which can be explained by the organisational structure, the departmental history, management tools and the leadership of particular departments. Researchers with the same specialism, but in different institutions, work in different ways and are more or less willing to apply for funding, partly because of the support they have from their department and university and the existence of managerial structures or/and institutional features that encourage researcher to work in a particular way.

References


