



The Culture of Middle-level Academic Management at a Comprehensive South African University

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Abstract

Using Critical Realism (CR), which emphasises the interplay of structure, culture, and agency, this conceptual article reflects on the culture of middle-level academic management at a comprehensive South African university which was the result of a merger of historically disparate institutions. It is important for the culture of this layer of management to be understood because it is at the nexus of senior management's strategic initiatives and the concerns of staff members and students. The article thus recommends the implementation of practices which embed the corporatist concerns of senior-level management into those aspects of the culture of middle-level academic management which are a function of the structural contexts in which the middle level academic managers operate as well as the managers' collective and individual agency. The result, the article envisages, could be an enhanced culture of middle-level academic management which makes for improved institutional governance in response to the multiple challenges being faced by the institution, such as the slow pace of transformation; increased student enrolments; student academic under-preparedness; the ever-present possibility of student protests; the demands of corporatism and the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) on teaching and learning as well as unanswered questions around the relevance of some academic programmes.

Keywords: middle-level academic management, university, governance, culture, critical realism

Résumé

Utilisant le réalisme critique qui met l'accent sur l'interaction de la structure, de la culture et du libre arbitre, cet article conceptuel réfléchit à la culture de la gestion académique de niveau intermédiaire dans une université polyvalente

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sud-africaine, résultat de la fusion d'institutions historiquement disparates. Il est important pour la culture de gestion qu'elle soit comprise car elle est au cœur d'initiatives stratégiques des autorités universitaires et de préoccupations des membres du personnel et des étudiants. L'article recommande donc la mise en œuvre de pratiques qui intègrent les préoccupations corporatistes des leaders dans les aspects de la culture de gestion académique de niveau intermédiaire qui sont fonction des contextes structurels dans lesquels opèrent les leaders universitaires de niveau intermédiaire, ainsi que de leurs intermédiaires collectifs et individuels. Le résultat voulu par le document serait une culture améliorée de la gestion académique de niveau intermédiaire qui permet une meilleure gouvernance institutionnelle, en réponse aux multiples défis auxquels l'institution est confrontée : lenteur du processus de transformation ; augmentation des inscriptions d'étudiants ; sous-préparation scolaire des étudiants ; latence des manifestations estudiantines ; exigences du corporatisme et impact de la quatrième révolution industrielle (4IR) sur l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de même que sur des questions sans réponse autour de la pertinence de certains programmes académiques.

Mots-clés : gestion académique de niveau intermédiaire, université, gouvernance, culture, réalisme critique

Introduction

The higher education sector in South Africa has been fraught with challenges since the advent of democracy in 1994. Some of these challenges have drawn attention to public university governance. However, as has been the trend globally, the focus of most of this attention has been on senior managers such as vice chancellors, their deputies and registrars (Nguyen 2013). Yet, the reality of governance, structures at universities is that they are layered. Constituting one of these layers are middle-level academic managers, such as heads of departments. These managers play a critical role in university governance as they are at the nexus of the strategic initiatives of senior management on one hand, and the concerns of academic staff, some support staff, and students on the other. There is, however, a paucity of research on this category of university management. Whereas the little research that has been conducted on middle-level academic managers has mainly focused on their roles and development needs, this conceptual article will reflect on the culture which characterises management at this level, with specific reference to a public university in South Africa. This reflection is based on the author's observations as a member of staff at the university in question since 2009.

Public University Governance in South Africa – Some Contextual Issues

An example of the challenges confronting the public university sector in South Africa is the slow pace of transformation. This is especially the case at historically white universities (HWUs) and those merged institutions where at least one of the forming institutions is an HWU. Areas in which transformation is slow include the composition of university governance structures and practices (Baloyi & Naidoo 2016). A case in point is the professoriate. According to recent studies, despite transformation in higher education having been identified as a key social imperative in the post-1994 dispensation, nationally in South Africa, three in every four professors are white (Govender 2016; Govinder, Zondo & Makgoba 2013).

In addition to the slow pace of transformation, South African public universities still face challenges associated with the need to increase access to universities by students coming from historically disadvantaged demographic groups. Although the actual national participation rate is still relatively low, this increase in enrolments has put a strain on university governance, for example, in terms of financial, material and human resources (Boughey & Niven 2012; Breier & le Roux 2012; Shandler 2009). In addition, throughput rates continue to be low with a recent study revealing that despite the government spending around twenty billion rand annually on university tuition fees, about 70 percent of the students enrolled at public universities are taking about seven years to complete undergraduate degree programmes which should be completed in three to four years (Nkosi 2019). A major factor to which this has mainly been attributed is what has been described by some scholars as dysfunctionality or a toxic mix in the basic education system as a result of which many of the students are under-prepared for university studies (Bloch 2009).

Juxtaposed with the need to grow the South African economy is the call for socially responsive programmes which mitigate the effects of apartheid's legacy on South Africa's majority. One area in which this is urgent is the reduction of inequality. For example, the country's gini coefficient (a measure of the difference in incomes between the poorest and richest citizens) is reportedly amongst the highest three in the world (Creamer 2018). Senior managers at South African public universities have been accused of not making sufficient progress on this measure, as universities continue to be run on corporatist approaches. This approach is grounded in neoliberal policies adopted by the government after it abandoned the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) on the back of promises of loans from the IMF (Baatjes, Baduza & Sibiyi 2014; Harrison 2010; Ismi 2016). Maistry (2012) laments the brutality which neoliberal policies visit on

university management, especially at the middle level as they advocate the prioritisation of performativity measures and push the social concerns of higher education to the periphery. Singh (2012:7) warns that a corporatist model for the governance of South African universities is neither sustainable nor desirable because, '[t]he narrowing down of the multiple social purposes of higher education to economic imperatives is particularly worrying in contexts where democratic dispensations are new or fragile'.

As happened in many other parts of the world, the adoption of corporatism in the management of South African universities saw the introduction of corporate practices such as performance management, budgetary cuts, and outsourcing of services deemed non-core (Giroux 2014). As a result of such policies, in South Africa, the national allocation to higher education before the 2016 decision by the government to provide free tertiary education in response to the #FeesMustFall protests was only 2.7 percent of GDP. This was lower than the global 3.3 percent at the time and it negated the notion of education as a public good. Rather, education in South Africa continues to be conceptualised as a commodity from which tangible economic returns needed to be realised (Leibowitz 2012).

Due to the long history of alienation from meaningfully participating in the mainstream economy, many South African families cannot afford university fees and related costs for their children. The #FeesMustFall protests which erupted in October 2015 epitomised students' disenchantment with this state of affairs (Booyesen 2016). The protests – which had devastating effects such as the torching of buildings, arrest of students and disruption of academic programmes, – caught the university sector unawares (Langa 2017). As a result, at many of the institutions, fire-fighting approaches were adopted to deal with the protests, albeit with limited success. Thus, the protests both literally and metaphorically disrupted governance structures and practices at the institutions.

In light of these challenges and having worked at the selected comprehensive university for ten years, the author's observation of the experiences of middle-level academic managers at this university is that they often find themselves between the proverbial rock and a hard place. This is because they must balance the competing interests of different stakeholders such as senior management, academic and support staff, and students. For example, they must contend with budgetary cuts in the face of increased enrolments; secure suitable venues for large classes in competition with other departments; and come up with strategies to improve throughput rates against a background of student underpreparedness for university. In addition to having to bear heavy administrative loads, middle-level academic managers are still expected to carry out research and publish if they are to qualify for promotion to higher academic ranks.

The institution's middle-level academic managers' responses to their myriad challenges generate complexities which aggregate into a culture of management that needs to be understood, both for the purpose of enhancing it and, by extension, to improve institutional governance. Adding to these complexities is the variation in the disciplinary backgrounds of the middle-level academic managers, many of whom are not trained in management. This is in keeping with the findings by Seale & Cross (2015) that many managers at South African universities assume management positions not necessarily through training in management, but experience in their academic disciplines.

Conceptualising the Culture of Middle-level Academic Management

The institution which is the focus of this paper is categorised as a comprehensive university. This is because it offers a diverse range of qualifications – from certificate to doctoral levels – across a variety of faculties. In other words, it does not focus on only one field nor level of study. The university was formed in 2005 through the merger of one HWU, one Technikon and one campus of a historically black university (HBU). With a student population of about fifty thousand, the university is hailed as an example of a successful merger as it continues to realise success in terms of rankings nationally and globally. Examples of middle-level academic managers at the university include heads of departments and centres, and campus programme coordinators.

Parallels can be drawn between the attempt to holistically understand the architecture of the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected comprehensive university and trying to repair a leaking roof. In order to effectively solve the latter problem, one needs to select the right tools from a hardware shop, or it will persist. In order to assist with explaining the architecture of the culture of middle-level academic management, it is necessary to use a theory which also provides a firm basis for the solution of any problems identified in the architecture. In the long run, this is expected to contribute not only to an enhancement of the culture of middle-level academic management but strengthening of institutional governance as well. One such theory is critical realism which will be discussed in the next section.

Critical Realism (CR) – The Interplay of Culture, Structure and Agency

Critical realism (CR) has evolved as a theory since the 1970s, mainly as a result of the challenges related to shortcomings identified in the positions adopted in empirical and naturalist paradigms (Mingers 2014). Amongst the most well-known early proponents of CR is Bhaskar (1978). In recent years, the theory has been expanded by others such as Sayer (2000), Witgren (2004) and Mingers (2014).

CR looks at the interplay of structure, culture and agency (Bhaskar & Lawson 1998). Its propositions are useful to deploy to a reflection on the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university. This is because it advocates a holistic approach to the study of social phenomena and their causal effects. The paradigm therefore enables one to go beyond normative institutional policies and strategic goals in investigating the form of this culture. This constitutes a rebuttal of the corporatist view that the management of organisations and their cultures and sub-cultures are solely shaped by the initiatives and activities of senior management.

The Role of Structure in Shaping the Culture of Middle Management

CR places emphasis on ontology, that is, the study of existence – ahead of epistemology, which is the study of knowledge (Fleetwood 2005). This is because, for critical realists, the existence of the world is independent of what human beings think or know about it. Bhaskar & Lawson (1998) refer to this as the intransitive nature of reality. Appreciation of this relationship is central in CR because it makes us as human beings accept that our knowledge is fallible. We can sometimes get things wrong.

Structures are institutions or entities which, because of their properties, cause certain things to happen (Mingers 2014; Archer 2006). For example, structures give direction to social activities (Westwood & Clegg 2003). In other words, within different structures are found positions and roles played by the members who make up these structures.

Vandenberghe (2014) asserts that structures do not necessarily have to be physical. They also manifest themselves in the systems of interaction that occur between members of different social groups (Dobson 2002; Spasser 2000). In turn, they influence both public and private behavioural patterns which themselves can continue to be reproduced in society (Mingers 2014). This is in keeping with Hess' (1988) view that human lives are inextricably linked to the social structures in which they live. Their positions in these structures shape people's experiences, attitudes and behaviours. This explains why, in the context of organisations, structures such as senior management which have the capacity to exercise power over others see legitimacy in having certain expectations of those structures subordinate to them. Other than being concerned with the multiplicity and layered nature of structures which shape social reality, CR also tries to identify the mechanisms by means of which they shape social events (Willmot 2005; Denermark 2002). Bhaskar & Lawson (1998) and Layder (1994) assert that there is a reflexive or mutually influential relationship between structures and the social reality to whose form they contribute. This enables people to both be made by, and make, culture.

Another salient feature of reality in the view of critical realists is that it is hierarchically ordered or stratified (Mingers 2014; Archer 2003). As alluded to earlier, specific layers of structures have causal powers which are generative of events at subsequent levels. Once we understand the nature of these causal mechanisms, we are empowered to explain the changes for which they are responsible (Zachariadis, Scott & Barret 2010). Also important to note, particularly about social structures, is that they are very context-bound. They apply only to specific times, space, cultures or sub- cultures in contrast with natural laws which are usually universal in nature (Mingers 2014).

Structures at the Selected Comprehensive University

Quinn (2012) says examples of structures in an institution of higher learning are faculties, deans, heads of departments, academic hierarchy as well as external examining bodies. To these layers can be added middle-level academic management. At the selected comprehensive university, senior management structures include the Management Executive Committee (MEC) and Executive Leadership Group (ELG). These structures exert an influence on those layers below them, such as middle management. For example, it is the responsibility of senior management structures to craft the strategy of the university. This is then cascaded to the middle and lower level managers. As a result, heads of departments and centres are expected to craft strategic trajectories for their departments and centres which are derived from the faculty, divisional and institutional strategic thrusts. With respect to strategy formulation, therefore, the culture of middle-level academic managers at the selected university can be conceptualised as a reflection of that of senior management, as there is very limited room available to the middle-level managers for strategic creativity. Any attempt at creativity might, for example, mean that the middle-level academic manager will not get material, financial or moral support from the senior managers. In this regard, Maistry (2012) laments South African middle-level academic managers' reliance on undemocratic top-down approaches to governance which do not directly consider the views of those who operate outside certain structures. This arrangement also contradicts the definition of governance which assigns power and authority to both those who govern and the governed (Booyesen 2016).

Structures such as the University's Council and Senate also make key governance decisions. Yet, few middle-level academic managers are members of these upper-level structures at the institution. There is therefore an extent to which the culture of middle-level academic management at the comprehensive university is a reflection of the governance culture of the upper level structures. Given that the professoriate at the comprehensive university

is still white male dominated, as indeed it is nationally, the culture of middle-level academic management can be conceptualised as being characterised by discontent over the slow pace of transformation at the university.

Notwithstanding the influence of senior-level management, there is an extent to which the culture of middle-level management could also be perceived as having a bearing on that of both their superiors and subordinates. This is in light of the view that there exists a reflexive relationship between members of different structures as a result of which individuals are both made by, and make, culture (Layder 1994). At the selected comprehensive university, this is seen in the input which middle-level academic management makes into policy making by senior level management through, for example, responses to policy initiatives or reports on the results of policy and strategy implementation. It is also demonstrated through the execution of management functions at departmental level by the middle-level academic managers.

In addition to the influence of institutional structures, the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university can also be viewed as a function of national management structures and practices. As Archer (2000) and Jarvis (1995) assert, social phenomena such as management are rarely free from the influence of societal institutions, such as national government. Debowski (2017) emphasises that higher education leadership, in particular, is a function of contextual factors. This is also in keeping with Bourdieu's (1986) idea of habitus which, among other factors, looks at how society is predisposed to think and act in determinant ways. An implication from this is that particular forms of social conditions produce particular forms of habitus. This is exemplified by a team of players who have to play according to the rules of the game they are engaged in (Manville 2004). In this regard, in the exercise of their responsibilities, middle-level academic managers at the comprehensive university, for example, have to conform with national legislation on academic programme development, labour and procurement laws, amongst other areas over which they have responsibility.

Also important to note about structures is the suggestion that there is always an extent to which a change in orientation at one layer may have a knock-on effect on the other layers (Bhaskar 1991; Danermark 2002). This is in keeping with the morphogenetic or changing nature of social structures (Archer 1996; Case 2015). This was seen at the selected university in 2014 when senior management decided to collapse all the strategic goals of the university into only one, 'Global Excellence and Stature (GES)'. As a result, middle-level academic managers had to formulate their departmental strategies around this one goal. In doing so, whatever strategic options they chose for their respective departments had to be embedded in GES.

The different components which constitute structures do not necessarily always work in harmony to shape the culture or sub-cultures in societies and organisations (Archer 1996; Witgren 2004). Sometimes, they pull in opposite directions. The individual, for example, brings his or her own assets and biography to the management role (Chia & King 2001; O'Mahoney & Vincent 2014). For middle-level academic managers at the selected university, these may be such that they are not directly congruent to the institution's strategic trajectory as directed by senior-level management. The culture of middle-level academic managers at the comprehensive university could therefore be viewed as being characterised by contradictions and tensions characterised in the relationship between middle-level academic managers and senior-level managers.

The Role of Agency – Intentionality and Choices

Agency has to do with the intentionality and choices which people have which enable them to behave in particular ways (Quinn 2012). In playing these roles, agents therefore make certain decisions and choices. In terms of organisations, Jarvis (1985:116) says agency is, '[t]he vehicle by means of which institutions provide procedures through which human conduct is patterned'. With respect to management, agency can be said to refer to the influence which managers at any level are capable of by virtue of the power or authority which they possess. This is, for example, what enables them to direct different structures, superior or subordinate to them, to behave in certain ways. Agency is therefore, '...embedded within, and dependent upon, structural contexts' (Wright 1999:110). Archer (2003, 1996) suggests that there are basically two systems from which structures derive their agency. The first of these are the normative regulatory systems, such as legislation and policies. The second are the informal systems which are established, for example, by managers in a bid to achieve some entity-specific goals (Mingers 2012). The culture of managers at any level in an organisation can therefore be looked at as a function of how they mediate the often-conflicting interests of formally recognised agents and the informal ones (Drinkuth, Reigler & Wolf 2003). For example, at the comprehensive university in question, middle-level academic managers often have to allocate resources for the execution of certain tasks in response to requests from informal agents at departmental level. It is not in all cases that this is in conformity with what is directed by formal agents such as senior management.

Another way through which structures exercise their agency is the discourse which they use to regulate the behaviour of other structures (Foucault 1980). The culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university

can therefore be seen from the perspective of the discourse which they use to craft rules and regulations on the basis of which they run the entities under their charge. It can also be seen in the discourse which senior managers use to interact with the middle-level management. Apparent in these discourses are power differences between managers at different levels. An example is the issuing of directives to middle-level managers by senior-level managers in language that suggests that certain terms of such directives and deadlines are non-negotiable.

Collective Agency – ‘I am because we are’

Archer (1996) and Drinkurth et al. (2003) point out that agents are inherently collective in nature. An individual's behavioural choices are deemed to be a function of those of the collective of which he or she is a member. The exercise of agency is therefore seen at the collective level in the policies, rules and regulations which members of different structures use to regulate the activities of either their members or those of other structures. This is in keeping with Jarvis' (1985:194) view that institutions, ‘...provide procedures through which human conduct is patterned and compelled to go in grooves deemed desirable by society’. In this regard, middle-level academic managers at the university exercise collective agency through the use of institutional rules and regulations which are commonly applicable to all their departments and centres. For example, in managing teaching and learning in their departments and centres, they largely rely on the application of the institutional policies, rules and regulations which are formulated by senior-level management. The same applies to how they manage resources, both material and human. Overall, therefore, the shape of the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected comprehensive university can be characterised as being reflective of how they implement the institutional strategies which guide teaching and learning.

Individual Agency – ‘I perceive and do because I am’

For a long time, the role of individual agency was overshadowed by the influence of social or collective agency, as it was largely assumed that activities such as management are largely influenced by the social context in which individual managers find themselves operating (Goodnow 1990; Pea 1997). However, since the 1990s, there has been a growing realisation that aspects of individual agency such as intentionality, subjectivity and identity play a critical role in shaping the cognitive experience of an individual, thus influencing their practice of management (Billet 2006). This is because there is a limit to the extent to which structures can influence the choices which individuals can make. This is why the tension between structure and

agency is acknowledged in critical realism (Archer 2006). Valsiner (2000) lists aspects of human personality such as perceptions, attitudes, motivation and attitudes amongst some of the key drivers of behaviour at individual level. Similarly, Cole (1998) suggests that personal agency contributes to the enactment, remaking and transformation of culturally-derived practices.

Lending support to the foregoing is the contention that although it is derived from the broad institutional culture, there is also an extent to which the culture of certain structures within an organisation or institution is so self-directed that it may not be possible to discern the influence of collective agency in it (Fleetwood 2005; Jarvis 1985). In this regard, the culture of middle-level management at the selected university can also be conceptualised as being reflective of the individual middle-level managers' own agency, rather than their conformity with the institutional culture of management. This manifests itself in the influence of the individual middle-level managers' biographies, personalities, aspirations and capabilities on their stewardship of their departments, centres or units. For example, some of the middle-level academic managers are members of racial groups which were discriminated against under apartheid. As a result, their management style is, to an extent, predicated on the social justice agenda which seeks to establish equality for all in South Africa. On the other hand, some of those who are members of racial groups that enjoyed privileged status prior to 1994 are often accused of perpetuating discriminatory practices of the past. Middle-level academic managers at the university therefore bring unique social and intellectual capital to the practice of management whose contribution to the making of their culture of management cannot be under-estimated. Jansen (2009) metaphorically refers to this deep influence of history and individual social biographies on individuals' subjectivities as 'knowledge in the blood.'

The influences of the middle-level academic managers' individual agency are also evident in the variations which characterise how different departments, centres and units are led. In spite of deriving guidance from institutional policies, rules regulations and strategic thrusts, there is an extent to which the individual middle-level academic managers' biographies, personalities and aspirations have a bearing on how they execute their leadership roles. Middle-level academic managers are promoted to their positions on the basis of their academic qualifications and experience, rather than management training. Due to time constraints, there are few management development opportunities for middle-level managers. This means that their management practices, notwithstanding the institutional framework and guidelines, are a function of their individual agency, for example, in the form of biographies, personality and aspirations.

Culture

According to Quinn (2012:29), from an Archarian perspective, culture is, ‘... the ideas, beliefs, theories, values, ideologies and concepts which are manifest through discourses used by particular people at particular times.’ A certain form of the culture of middle management and attendant discourses are therefore seen as emerging from the structural arrangements at the selected comprehensive university. The culture and discourses are also influenced by the level of both individual and collective agency which the middle managers possess. One aspect of the culture would be the middle-level academic managers’ beliefs and the discourses which they use to communicate. An example is the discourse which they use to talk about the rate of transformation at the university. Depending on factors such as race and level of academic seniority, transformation at the university might be talked about as either being too slow or progressing at just the right pace.

Another aspect of the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university might be beliefs and discourses about throughput rates. Closely related to this might be behaviours and practices aimed at improving or enhancing students’ academic success. In addition, the culture of middle-level academic managers might be seen through their responses to the demands of corporatism and student protests. In terms of the former, this culture might be seen in their acquiescence to the demand by senior management to implement performance management and, in some cases, effect budgetary cuts and the requirement for them to implement performance management. Encapsulating this culture might be forms of communication, such as circulars and memoranda sent to their own subordinates and reports sent to senior management. In terms of responses to student protests, the culture of academic middle management at the institution might be seen through their responses to demands to decolonise the curriculum and deal with disruptions to teaching schedules.

As a result of collective agency, the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university could also be characterised by similarities in responses to the requirement to implement certain strategies, policies and regulations. For example, middle-level academic managers rely on the same performance management system to rate the performance of their subordinates. Given that human beings are also capable of their own choices and intentionality, some of which are tangential to the dictates of the structures in which they operate, there is also an extent to which the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected university will be seen in unique responses to institutional governance expectations. An example might

be responses to demands to decolonise the curriculum which will vary from one middle-level academic manager to another, depending on such factors as academic discipline and beliefs around decolonising the curriculum.

The layered nature of structures leads to the culture associated with them also being layered. The figure below which the author calls the management culture onion is a representation of the layered nature of the culture of management at the selected university. As shown in Figure 1, one layer or domain has an influence on the next one. However, as a result of reflexivity, as discussed earlier, there is also an extent to which the culture found in one inner layer influences that found in the next inner or outer layer. The overall form of the culture of middle-level academic management is therefore mediated through interactions amongst the role players found in each of the layers. For example, the national culture of management influences the culture of institutional management, as seen in requirements for senior university managers to abide by national legislation governing labour relations and financial management. Of necessity, the provisions of such legislation are incorporated into institutional policies which are then implemented at faculty and departmental levels and, ultimately, by the middle-level academic managers. As earlier pointed out, such influence can move in the reverse direction when the middle-level academic managers, through either their individual or collective agency give input which is factored into departmental/faculty, institutional and even national policy formulation.

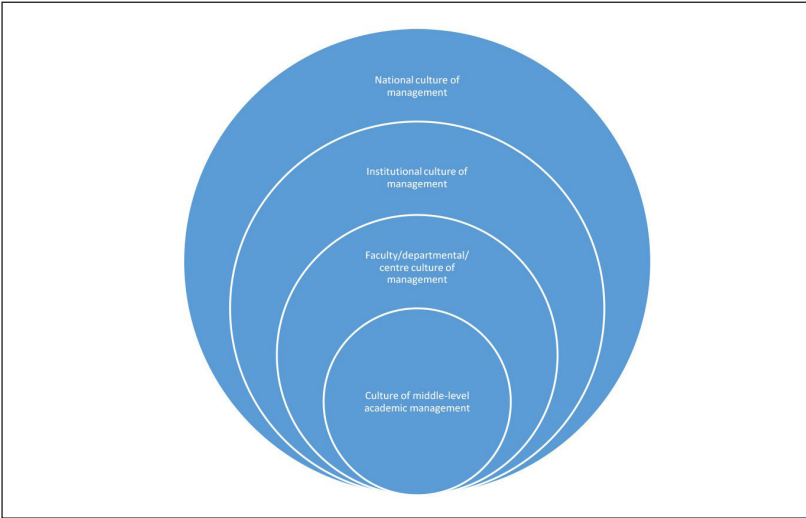


Figure 1: The Management Culture Onion

Towards Enhancing the Culture of Middle Management at the Comprehensive University

From the discussion on the interplay of culture, structure, and agency, the culture of middle-level academic management at the comprehensive university can be conceptualised as a function of a multiplicity of factors. At the institutional level, structures such as senior management, faculties, departmental boards and worker representative organisations play an influential role in shaping this culture. They achieve this, for example, through coming up with strategic initiatives, policies, rules or regulations related to the management of the university in the academic domains. As a result, the culture of middle-level academic management is shaped by collective agency, for example, in terms of the way in which the middle-level academic managers respond to the strategies, policies and regulations which are initiated by senior management structures such as the MEC, ELG, Senate and Council. However, the middle-level managers' biographies, personalities and aspirations are also productive of agency which has a bearing on their culture of management, for instance, as they navigate the transformation agenda or try to resolve challenges such as low student throughput rates and budgetary constraints. The way in which they do this, however, has the potential to generate tensions between them and senior management. Such tensions have the potential to constrain the effectiveness of middle-level academic management. The question therefore arises as to how, in light of such possible tensions, the culture of middle-level academic management can be enhanced at the comprehensive university. In response to this question, an overall suggestion is to search for the form of the culture of middle-level academic management in each of the layers or domains shown in Figure 1, identify any weaknesses and seek suitable ways of enhancing the culture.

Given the legacy of the selected university's forming institutions, the composition of senior governance structures at the comprehensive university appears to have limited space for middle-level academic managers, particularly those from previously disadvantaged demographic groups. This is likely to perpetuate a culture of middle-level academic management characterised by social cleavages reflective of the country's past. Yet, since 1994, it has been envisaged that the governance model appropriate for South African public universities is one characterised by democracy, which entails participative decision-making by all stakeholders (Mashabela 2011). This has been elusive in many cases as a result of which decision-making, for example, might be seen as being made in ways which are protective of the interests of certain racial groups or academic ranks. This calls for the reconfiguration of senior management structures in order to decentralise power and decision-making.

For example, instead of membership in the Senate being based on attainment of academic ranks such as professorship, even middle-level academic managers who are not professors can be incorporated into such a structure so that they can take part in decision-making. This will most likely contribute to the enhancement of their stewardship of the academic project at the university. At the same time, efforts to assist those academic managers who have not yet attained their doctorates need to be increased. In addition, a balance needs to be struck between their roles as administrators and opening up space for them to carry out research and to publish. Through attainment of doctoral qualifications and senior academic ranks such as associate and full professorships, their participation in the Senate, for example, will not just be on the basis of affirmative action, but merit as well.

Collective agency in the management of the South African university, as discussed earlier, is largely born of corporatism which itself is a product of neoliberalism. The selected comprehensive university is no exception to this challenge which Von Holdt (2012:203) says creates ‘...new hierarchies and distinction, new interests and new social distances’. These are often generative of conflict between different structures such as middle-level academic managers and senior managers, for example, as a result of budgetary cuts which, as earlier discussed, negatively impact on teaching and learning. Such tensions can only be reduced through a consultative approach to the budgeting process rather than a top-down one. This might assist in terms of giving a stronger voice, and therefore greater agency, to the middle-level academic managers, with respect to their budgetary requests.

Corporatism also forces middle-level academic managers to performance-manage their subordinates. More often than not, this process is also fraught with conflict and tensions, especially because of its association with performance ratings which are directly tied to monetary rewards. For example, while some middle-level academic managers are accused of consistently rating their subordinates’ performance very low, others are accused of being too generous. In the former case, such ratings have often been revised downwards by senior-level managers. The effectiveness of the culture of middle-level academic managers at the university might therefore be enhanced through the formulation of a performance management system which foregrounds performance improvement through employee development and more meaningfully incentivising performance than the current tokenism which many employees, including the middle-level academic managers themselves, have stopped taking seriously.

As discussed, CR advocates a holistic approach to an analysis of all the factors which have a bearing on the culture of middle management. Elements

of the individual middle-level managers' biographies, personalities and aspirations are therefore looked into for purposes of trying to establish their influence on the culture of middle-level management. As is the case with collective agency, the influence of individual agency on the culture of middle-level academic management is often characterised by weaknesses and tensions. This is seen, for example, in how individual middle-level academic managers' identities or biographies have not adequately prepared them for management positions. In such cases, continuous learning and development in areas like leadership and human resources as well as strategic and financial management would help to assist in enhancing the middle-level academic managers' effectiveness as leaders. Closely related to this would be team-building sessions aimed at, amongst other things, creating communities of practice amongst the middle-level academic managers; management exchange programmes; and benchmarking which would also help to address such deficiencies as the inability to manage diversity and lack of emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

Highlighted in this paper are the complexities which characterise the possible architecture of the culture of middle-level academic management at the selected comprehensive university in South Africa. The genesis of these complexities is in factors such as the slow pace of transformation; increased access to the university by students coming from previously disadvantaged demographic groups; corporatism; student protests; and the managers' own biographies and subjectivities. Given the critical role played by these managers at the institution, it is necessary to both understand the culture which characterises the ways in which they execute their functions, for purposes of seeking strategies by which this culture might be enhanced for improved institutional governance. Using CR, the paper has argued that for this to happen, the culture needs to be holistically analysed. This entails looking at all possible factors which influence it, instead of just looking at how it is shaped by the culture of senior management. Reflecting on the author's experiences as an academic member of staff at the selected university, the interplay of structure, culture and agency on the basis of which CR analyses social phenomena was therefore used to conceptualise and analyse the architecture of the culture of middle-level academic management. Highlighted in the conceptualisation and analysis are factors such as the causal influence of the layered nature of structures as well as the role of both collective and individual agency. Suggestions arising from this focused on the need to consider all possible factors which have a bearing on the culture of middle-level management. Examples include attending to

the possible structural tension between the middle-level academic managers and senior managers and the need to pay attention to aspects such as the middle-level academic managers' individual and collective agency as well as their career development needs. Debowski (2017) suggests this is a complex project. However, at the apex of the list of possible tools which can be used to drive it is an appreciation of the inescapable imperative of higher education management development. Middle-level academic managers can benefit immensely from senior managers who appreciate the need to professionally capacitate them through institutionalised management development programmes. On their part, the middle level academic managers should exercise both their individual and collective agency to cultivate a management culture which propels them, their subordinates, students and, indeed, the whole university towards a positive and continuous improvement trajectory. This is in light of the need for the university to effectively fulfil its mandate to contribute to socio-economic development in South Africa, the African continent and beyond, within the context of multiple challenges such as the ever-present possibility of student protests, the slow pace of transformation and the impact of 4IR on the relevance of many learning programmes.

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