

Planning for uncertainty/uncertainly planning: strategic decision making in UK Higher Education Institutions during periods of external volatility

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1. Introduction

This research project focuses on the impact of structure, culture, and agency on strategic decision-making during external uncertainty and volatility. It will use a morphogenetic approach to develop a framework to empower senior decision-makers in practice, especially those involved in Higher Education strategy, planning and leading an institution.

2. Justification

Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons (2013) argue that too many universities have difficulty responding quickly and accurately to future demands due to rigid infrastructures that make change inherently challenging which adds to the risk in operating a thriving, modern institution. The risk is not just to student education and knowledge creation; in 2017-18 total income across the Higher Education sector in the UK was £38.2 billion, generating £95 billion in gross output for the economy contributing £21.5 billion to GDP (UUK, 2019; Wadud et al., 2019).

In 2018, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC's) annual HE risk report stated that the sector was going through one of its most turbulent periods for a generation. In 2019 they reflected on that statement and concluded that the risks relating to the environment in which UK HE operates had further increased. Then in 2020, the whole world faced the same immediate challenge. COVID19 impacted all aspects of life, and the Higher Education sector felt the effects keenly.

In the space of six months, the sector dealt with unprecedented levels of change and volatility, often having to make a wholesale change based on government edict overnight.

Strategic planning teams in HE work to ensure that the impact of volatility is understood, monitoring immediate risks and concerns and horizon scanning to ensure that institutions are poised and ready to bounce forward once any external volatility is weathered.

3. Literature review

The impact of organisational culture and the influence of key actors involved in planning and delivering change within organisations are critical aspects often overlooked in favour of more tangible metrics (Jarzabkowski, 2003; Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009).

Schein (2012) describes organisational culture as the pattern of basic assumptions invented, discovered or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems and teaches new members the correct way to perceive, think, and feel about problems. This social perspective of organisational culture is found readily throughout further research (Gregory, 1985; Munduate and Medina, 2010; Bellot, 2011), with authors agreeing that assumptions and shared beliefs are vital for defining and understanding culture (Mullins, 2007). If shared beliefs and assumptions are the core of what makes culture, helping to form a sense of belonging and a place in a community, then the misalignment of beliefs and assumptions within an organisation could lead to issues. Culture misalignment can occur within universities due to a disconnect between senior leaders, staff and funders. Ask the Government, a regulatory body, a Vice-Chancellor, an academic or a student the question 'what is a university for?', and a range of responses will be received. Academic departments and professional service units have

different priorities, and staff, especially within academic departments, have individual agendas, which affords institutional priorities various levels of importance (Shattock, 2000).

The primary function of strategic planning is to determine the direction, mission, objectives and goals of an organisation over the long term, matching resources to the changing environment, markets, customers, and clients, to meet stakeholder expectations (Shepherd, 2005). As one of the eminent authorities on strategic planning, Mintzberg continued to evolve, challenge, and redefine the concept, with other researchers such as Andersen (2004), Grant (2003) and Jarzabkowski & Balogun (2009) moving it from its original inception grounded in the rational process towards a more realistic model, including those that centre on emergent and evolutionary planning. Strategic planning should reflect the internal organisation's conditions and respond to the external environment in which it is situated (Ansoff, 1965; Andersen, 2004). However, in many instances, strategic planning has become associated with inflexibility and an unhealthy reliance on the linear process, marred by a need to focus on agreed outcomes regardless of external events (Chaffee, 1984; Brews and Hunt, 1999). In HE, faculty and staff's academic nature makes decision-making more complicated than in other sectors. Issues can arise over politics, the scope of implementation, narrow policy latitude, unclear lines of authority and broad constituencies (Harrison, 1975). Rigorous debate, consulting all the evidence, and questioning the norm is routine in academia. This behaviour becomes complicated in a university setting when applied to a routine managerial decisions, more so when those decisions need to be made during volatile and uncertain situations.

4. Theoretical basis

This research uses the ontological lens of critical realism; epistemologically, critical realism aims to explain the relationship between experiences, events and mechanisms. The originator of critical realism, Bhaskar (1978), proposed that events or phenomena should not be the core focus of research, and instead, the focus should be on the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena. Mechanisms do not have to be material and can be social structures, cultures or organisations. The research project is rooted within critical realism and uses the morphogenetic approach, based on a belief that there are three primary causal powers; structure, culture and agency (Archer, 1995, 1996).

5. Research design

The research study will comprise a qualitative, embedded exploratory single case study, incorporating several units of analysis of varying sizes. The case study will focus on Liverpool John Moores University, a large, multi-campus, post 92 institution based in the North West of England, UK. Although the research is focused on a single case example, adopting a focus on mechanisms suggests the arguments can be used more generally in other universities. Stake (1995) argues that the approach is aligned to the argument that a case study is not a methodological choice but a choice for the object to be studied.

Semi-structured interviews will form the basis of primary data collection, with participants selected from the population by belonging to one of the following three target groups; i) Executive Leadership Team, ii) Incident Management Team, and iii) other critical senior leaders (staff may belong to more than one group). The interviews will focus on the university response to the COVID19 pandemic, and questions will be constructed to unearth perceived causal inferences using the framework developed by Brönnimann (2021). Secondary data sources such as policy documents, strategic plans, and meeting minutes will add further context and triangulation.

Data collection for the study will happen concurrently and be analysed holistically to build a complete picture of the data. By concurrently undertaking data analysis, the research is not influenced unduly and can guard against confirmation bias in future interviews, impacting research integrity (Plano Clark and Creswell, 2007; Doyle et al., 2009). Data analysis of the interview transcripts will follow a flexible deductive method to ensure the data responds to the research aims and objectives (Saldana, 2021). A second independent coder will be used to mitigate against coding bias when researching from the position of an insider to provide inter-rater reliability (Belotto, 2018).

6. References

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