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Managing 'academic value': the 360-degree perspective

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ABSTRACT

The *raison d'être* of all universities is to create and deliver 'academic value', which we define as the sum total of the contributions from the 360-degree 'angles' of the academic community, including all categories of staff, as well as external stakeholders (e.g. regulatory, commercial, professional and community interests). As a way to conceptualise these complex relationships, we present the 'academic wheel' to illustrate the structural nature of them. We then discuss the implications of the different – and sometimes difficult – perspectives of academic, professional and administrative groups in the context of a number of important social psychological processes. We ask whether it is possible to reconcile, what is sometimes perceived as, managerial Taylorism with the academic freedom of (Laurie) Taylorism. We conclude that recognition and active management of these processes are required for each university to optimise its own brand of *core academic value*.

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'Academic value' is sometimes seen as a nebulous concept, but it is real enough (e.g. in the student *experience* and the reputation of the university). As discussed below, in its various forms, it is critically dependent on academic, professional and administrative staff, as well as the involvement of the wider circle of stakeholders (e.g. regulatory, commercial, professional and community interests within which the university operates and, to a large extent, serves; Sabzalieva 2012). As we emphasise in this article, creating and maintaining academic value is increasingly dependent on the synergies afforded by the effective *inter-workings* of these internal and external groups. This is especially true in today's fast-paced HE environment, where challenges and opportunities are thrown up and call for novel and creative solutions – competition, league tables and reputation are the hand-maiden to these innovations. As highlighted below, these synergies are best achieved when the different perspectives of each category of staff and stakeholders are recognised and, then effectively, managed.

This article focusses on the different perspectives of academic, professional and administrative staff, their attributions and the consequences of them for the development of potential *division* and the creation of potential *dividend*. The approach we take reflects our own professional perspectives, one as an academic (PJC), the other as a university manager (MRW). Our experiences, as well as our discussions over many years – sometimes heated by the fire of our different professional perspectives – reinforce in our minds the need to take into account certain organisational

dynamics, which are as much psychological in nature as they are related to university policy, procedures and processes. These issues have been noted previously. As Gordon and Whitchurch (2010) note, there is now a broader university workforce with its own professional identities and this fact necessitates the 'sharing of space', physical and psychological. These authors also highlight the differing perspectives of groups and individuals and challenges presented by the complex interplay of them.

At the outset, we need to underscore the reality that these psychological dynamics are in the very nature of all organisational behaviour (Anderson, Ones, and Sinangil 2001), and HE organisational behaviour is no exception. Relevant in this regard is the fact that, where they exist, real perspectival differences are strengthened by social psychological processes (e.g. casual attributions): appreciation of these processes should help to increase our collective understanding of behaviours, attitudes and even emotions, and may suggest how best they are managed in the modern university.

But none of this operates in an organisational vacuum. Today, universities have to demonstrate how they engage and contribute to the external community – long gone are the days of the disengaged and indifferent 'Ivory Tower' (assuming it ever existed in its apocryphal form). Within the university, a complex of services must be coordinated, all aimed at, what we call, 'core academic value' – academics, professionals in marketing, finance, business, human resources, research administrators and so on, all have an integral role to play in serving this central academic concept. In

discussing core academic value, we emphasise that universities must be 'academic led', but this does not mean necessarily led exclusively by academics.

No doubt of no news to readers of this journal, but somewhat disconcerting to some academics (see below), professional and administrative staff have a central role to play in the decision-making of the academic-led environment. They are the ones with the up-to-date knowledge, expertise and experience in their area of specialism. Few of us any longer are Jack, or Jacqueline, of all trades, and this too includes academic staff who, in order to achieve career advancement, are compelled to specialise in their research and scholarly activities. This can – regularly often does – lead to demarcation disputes and tensions.

Creating core academic value

Our definition of 'core academic value' focusses on the intellectual wealth created by the totality of university activity – this concept goes a long way to answering the question, what is the purpose of a university? (Alexander 2005). To provide a way to visualise these components, and the relationships among them, we present, what we call, the 'academic wheel' (Figure 1). The hub of core academic value is surrounded by satellite academic values (e.g. teaching and learning, research and impact, and enterprise and engagement). These are the *specific* factors that comprise the *general* factor of 'core academic value'. It should be noted that these three satellite values may, and indeed will, vary between universities; and the size of the general factor of core academic value will differ too, reflecting the effectiveness of the organisation to harness its resources to achieve its specific academic values.

This visual model offers a way to conceptualise the relationships between different professional groups within the university, presented in the context of the wider circle of the external world in which universities operate. The angles of this 360-degree wheel express, in very approximate form, the relatedness of functions, but we want to stress that these structural relationships are not fixed and may vary between universities – and, indeed, may vary in the minds of different groups and people within the same university! We offer the academic wheel as nothing more than a way of *thinking about*, and thus articulating, core academic value.

The size of the three specific satellite values summates to determine the size of the general factor of core academic value (Figure 1 shows them to be equal). Different universities may want to adjust their focus on these satellite values (e.g. laying more emphasis on the student experience and community engagement in place of Research Excellence Framework (REF)-returnable research). As in all finite resourced organisations, there are opportunity costs to consider. But, irrespective of these preferences, the size of core academic value can

be reduced or increased by the (in)effective management of all academic, administrative and managerial functions.

Professional perspectives

In years past, the division of academic and, as they were then called, administrative staff was very real. It was accepted that 'admin staff' were there to enable and implement the decisions of academics (and, to some extent, pander to their whims) – this has been discussed previously in terms of the 'Upstairs/downstairs in the UK University' (e.g. Gornall 1999; also see Duncan 2014). However, the rapidly shifting landscape of the university sector is fast dismantling these boundaries. One tangible expression of this is seen in the blurring of professional roles. Administrative staff and managers in professional services now routinely take decisions that formerly were the (closely guarded) preserve of the academic; and, as a symmetrical development, academic staff are increasingly being required to assume administrative responsibilities.

In addition, the professional profile of administrative and ('professional') managerial staff has been raised; some are now educated to a doctoral level and most new entrants to, at least, the first degree level. Applicants and students must be getting mightily confused by what 'Dr' implies in the title of university staff. It is interesting to speculate whether this merging of roles will morph into a new category of staff – 'administrative tutor'? In fact, this has already started to happen with non-research 'scholarship' teaching-only academic roles, where a high administrative load is expected.

The raising of the professional status of administrative staff is to be welcomed – specific *professional* staff (e.g. accountants) already have this recognition by virtue of their external accreditation, while typically 'professional' managers do not have the same recognition. Thus, distinctions between administrative staff, managers, 'professional' managers and externally accredited professionals are blurred.

However, despite the recognised need for the raising of the status (e.g. Patterson 1998), arguably it has not gone far enough as there is still no wide-spread acceptance of prerequisite qualifications. Once attempted, it is easy to envision a dedicated career pathway via a Master or Professional Doctorate in University Management, with membership of a Society of University Management – contrast the current situation with the qualifications and accredited status of, say accountants or marketing personnel. This innovation would enable graduates in other fields to embark upon a defined administrative/managerial career in the HE sector.

Division and dividend

Perceived differences between academic, administrative and managerial and professional staff (and finer

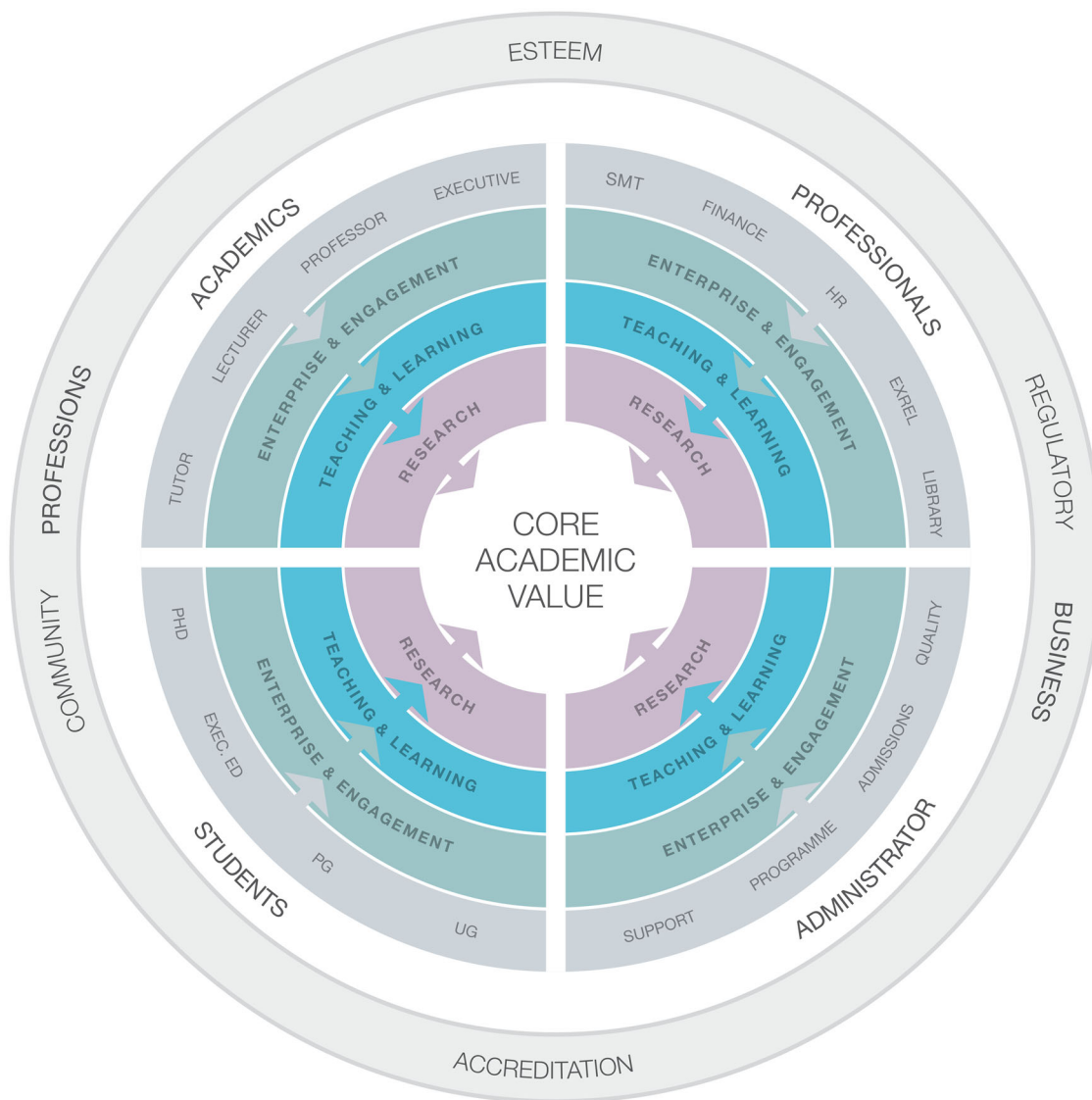


Figure 1. The 360-degree academic wheel. The figure is drawn to show that the four main sectors of the university, all of which make a significant contribution to each of the three main functions of the university (shown as concentric circles) – the precise contribution made by each sector to each function will depend on the specific university (for convenience, these are shown as equal). All sectors and functions contribute to ‘core academic value’, and this size of this general factor is determined by the sum of the three functions. The names given to each sector is for illustration only, and there will be overlaps, and often movement, between ‘Professionals’ and ‘Administrators’, and so on. It will be noticed that not all functions are included (e.g. Estates, Counselling and Chaplaincy Services) and their omission does not reflect their lack of importance. Also shown is how the university operates in the wider world of the Professions (e.g. NHS), Esteem (Research Excellence Framework), Regulatory (Higher Education Funding Councils), Business (commercial firms), Accreditation (e.g. Law Society) and Community (e.g. local schools), and their positions are not fixed in relation to the four sectors.

differences within these staffing groups) are attended by their own special set of challenges and opportunities – ‘division and dividend’, as we choose to label them. Although it may seem trite to say that there are significant benefits to be had from greater inter-professional collaboration, from our experience – in different universities (PJC in six, and MRW in five) – we believe that there are still significant barriers to achieving this end. None of this should come as much of a surprise to even the casual observer of organisational behaviour. As evidence that our views are not idiosyncratic, let alone perverse, some recent comments are revealing. David Palfreyman, Director of the Oxford Centre for Higher Education Policy

Studies (OxCHEPS), and Bursar and Fellow of New College, University of Oxford, says that only in universities such as Oxford and Cambridge are the ‘academic lunatics’ still ‘in charge of the asylum’ (Matthews 2015) – a benign, but perhaps revealing comment! The implication is that elsewhere such ‘lunatics’ are straight-jacketed by administrative and managerial staff.

Taylor (2015) has added to collegiate fun by his article in the *Times Higher Education* on how the two ‘tribes’ of academics and administrators ‘rub along’, observing that the latter’s ‘ranks continue to swell even though the UK is already one of the very few countries in the world where non-academic staff already outnumber academics’ – see Jump (2015):

according to HESA data, they are now in the majority in most (71%) UK universities. Taylor adds: 'No wonder that what used to be a mildly patronising relationship between dons and their administrative servants has now become more and more like a battle for control.' Reflecting on his address to the Association of University Administrators (AUA), where he recalls being greeted in a less than positive manner by the 'seething' attendees, 'no matter how effective each member of the audience might be at their respective task, the typical academic regarded them "as little more than pen-pushing"'. (PJC enjoyed a similar fate at a 'professional managers' conference where he put forward the perspective of the chalk-face academic.)

Warming to his theme, Taylor goes on to state: 'Neither could they as administrators ever hope for any degree of acceptance by academics as long as their roles might be characterised as management. The very word "manager" aroused academic hackles ...' – although appropriately enough, Taylor also says: '... even more of a barrier to any reconciliation between ... was the average academic's resistance to any form of enthusiasm. Being discontented was somehow a guarantee of academic seriousness ...' (Taylor presents a useful list of complaints academics may have about being 'managed'.) Turning to an theatrical analogy (with academics cast as the thoughtful, creative, but temperamental and sometimes difficult, actors), as he told AUA audience, might not administrators improve relationships if they: '... presented themselves not as managers but as support staff to those upon the academic stage, as producers, property masters, scene setters audience?' More 'seething' reaction!

On a more cheery note, in a recent article in the *Times Higher Education* by David Matthews (21 August 2015) a number of germane issues were raised. Despite oft-heard opinion to the contrary, the first is that the 'choice between overarching managers and collegiality in universities is a false choice', although 'For decades, scholars have feared that their power within universities has dwindled, with important decisions instead being taken by ever more overweening managers'. However, actual evidence shows this not be the case, as 'professional managers can actually boost collegiality among scholars' – although one cynical view of this outcome is that 'nothing gets academics working together better than a shared hatred of management'. Discussion of these matters is not restricted to university publications and forums; they also get raised in the general media (e.g. *The Guardian*, 'Academics, you need to be managed. It's time to accept that'; Friday 21 August 2015).

We do not want to dwell on negatives; it is far better to welcome the many positives that come from the dissolution of professional tensions. We pose the question, are the different world (not totally caricatured)

views of managerial Taylorism and academic (Laurie) Taylorism irresolvable?

Social psychological processes

All of the above is consistent with some well-established principles and findings from social psychological research which throw revealing (if sometimes displeasing) light on how professional groups in organisations work together. As most people already know by the popularity of various books in the genre of behavioural economics (e.g. Kahneman 2012), we are all prone to systematic errors of thinking and reasoning, and these have consequences for workplace attitudes and behaviours. We summarise below only two of the more important ones for university life – there are others!

The fundamental attribution error

One of the most important findings from social psychology is the 'fundamental attribution error' (FAE; Ross 1977). When thinking about the causes of *other* people's behaviour, we have the tendency to overweight *their* person-based features (personality) and underweight the situational influences on them. In contrast, when it comes to explaining *our own* behaviour, we tend to do the opposite: overweight situational influences, and underweight dispositional factors. The idea is that we are more aware of situational influences on our behaviour compared to other people's, therefore, we, too easily, assign personal causes (praise or blame) to them because of this asymmetry of perspective and information. This bias in thinking is writ large in universities: few of us find it difficult to attribute causes to others for their *personal* decisions. But, we often expect other people to understand the situational factors (e.g. deadlines or regulations) on our own behaviour: *if only* they would see things from *our* standpoint!

Linked to this FAE, is the 'false consensus bias', which states that, generally speaking, we assume other people share our own beliefs, attitudes, opinions, etc. Then, when they do not conform to our expectations, we try to make sense of it by explaining it in some fashion – for example, the other person is not committed or as flexible as us, or is simply pursuing their own agenda (which, of course, sometimes they are).

In-group/out-group bias

Most people have heard of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups', but fewer people follow through the implications of them for everyday life. Research from social psychology is truly disturbing and has wide-ranging implications for society (e.g. racial prejudice), and also for otherwise enlightened universities.

The major finding is that, not only do we have (automatic) prejudicial attitudes and behaviours toward out-groups (however, and they are easily, defined), but we have a strong tendency to favour our in-group – this operates, too, in the workplace. Worse still, these effects persist even when in-groups and out-groups are formed at random and we are fully *aware* of this fact (Tajfel 1970). Elegant and easy-to-interpret experiments have shown that, by randomly assigning people to, for instance, the red or green group (or whatever *arbitrary* label is preferred), this bias is still shown. PJC and colleagues have conducted one such experiment recently, and we find this, frankly dismal, effect without difficulty (Corr et al. 2015). This pernicious social effect runs rampant through all organisational behaviour; and, although it would be comforting to think otherwise, university life too.

In terms of university organisational life, the in/out-groups would comprise distinctions between academics, managers, administrators, etc., but importantly, too, within these groups there will be local in/out-groups (e.g. junior and senior academic staff). These biases have little respect for professional distinctions.

These are only two examples of how so much of our thinking and behaviour happens pre-consciously and automatically (Corr 2010); and in Rumsfeld fashion, we are not even aware that we are unaware! We may not *mean* to behave in this way, but sometimes we *just* do. Given the nature of these (nonconscious) psychological processes, we do not think it adequate to call simply for greater joint working and mutual respect, which all universities should be doing in any case and, as we have tried to emphasise, this has nothing to do with the best intentions of individual members of staff – psychologically speaking, things are not so simple.

For this reason, it is necessary to put in place purposeful mechanisms to reduce these potentially negative effects: to create *inter*-dependences between groups, rather than reinforcing *in*dependences. We think this can be best achieved around the coordination of activities to generate and secure the ‘core academic value’ (shown in Figure 1) to which all staff groups contribute.

A matter of perspective

The above psychological processes, too often, lead to unhelpful and incorrect attributions. In this section, we highlight some of these – we acknowledge that we are talking in generalities; however, we contend that they are not atypical characterisations and most university staff should be able to readily identify with them.

The perspective of managers and administrators

Managers and administrators know they must adhere to policy and procedures, often with external scrutiny (e.g.

QAA, HEFCE and UKVI), and often they have little latitude in how they go about their daily activities. They know also that they are sometimes perceived to be inflexible, rule-bound, etc., but adherence to systems is necessary to ensure that the wheels of the university keep turning (e.g. vital functions as student recruitment, management of courses, assessment, extenuating circumstances, financial management, etc.)

With some justification and not entirely inaccurately, managers and administrators may think that academics tend: to be, too, focussed on their own pet projects (e.g. research); not able/willing to see the bigger picture of university administration; lacking interest in regulations and procedures; unavailable when needed (‘working at home’); inflexible with respect to timetabling; and, even sometimes, arrogant, dismissive, superior in attitude – as, indeed, are some academics!

The perspective of academics

Things look somewhat differently to the academic. They see themselves as being under pressure to teach to a high standard of excellence, and this is assessed by students at the end of modules/courses as well as, often, by peer observation during modules/courses. They are expected to fulfil administrative duties, including initiating, developing, getting accreditation for, and running, academic courses – including recruitment activities, interviewing, etc. – and completion of numerous ‘monitoring’ and ‘evaluation’ forms. They are required to carry-out high impact REF-able research, and to secure grant funding, both of which have a bearing on promotion/appointment. And they have to supervise UG, PG and PhD students – which extends into the summer months, as do recruitment activities and so on. There is also external examining, which takes much but returns little. They also have to *think* in ways not expected of administrators or managers.

In addition, academics have to be resilient in the face of, often very severe, reviewer comments on their precious manuscripts – and then their research outputs, even assuming that they are published at all, may be deemed not to be ‘REF-able’, sometimes with serious and deleterious career consequences. And then there may be the writing of books, which consume valuable time in the evenings, weekends and holidays.

Little of this is seen or appreciated by managers and administrators; after all, why should they *really* care? The life of the typical academic is largely hidden from view (a different perspective to ‘working at home’).

Not infrequently, not only are managers/administrators sometimes seen as too inflexible as regards regulations, processes and procedures, they are sometimes seen as encroaching on academic judgement (e.g. the suitability of applicants for a PhD

programme, or consideration of extenuating circumstances in the case of examinations). They can also seem too loss averse, and not willing to take risks – as, indeed, are some managers/administrators! The situational forces imposed on the working life of managers and administrators are largely invisible to academics, who typically do not see much of the ‘behind the scenes’ work – with increased centralisation of professional services, they are often in different buildings (‘them over there’) and out of sight, and out of mind. Devolved managerial and administrative functions to departments and schools is one effective way to overcome these divisions – a quiet word is usually a more effective means of communications than a, often protracted, flurry of emails. Many universities have gone down the path of centralisation of ‘support’ services and whereas there may be short-term financial savings there are likely to be long-term psychological costs which are bound to lead to actual financial costs in terms of the opportunity costs of less effective interworking and communication.

These differences of perspective and opinion often get entrenched by the effects of ‘cognitive dissonance’. Findings in this research area show powerfully that when we are required to hold opposing beliefs or thoughts, or they contrast with our behaviour, then we experience this incongruence (‘dissonance’) as an unpleasant psychological state, and we do all we can to reduce it (Tavris and Aronson 2015) – this can easily be achieved by attributing blame to the other group so that now our beliefs/attitudes are back in line with our perceptions of the situation, and it is ‘them over there’ who are at fault.

Even in well-run universities, although these issues may not be foremost in anyone’s mind, they are surely not altogether absent in many people’s behaviour. The reader will need to reflect on the relevance of all of this for their own institution, as well as their own behaviour, and decide whether the distinctions between the two competing forms of Taylorism mentioned above are really inadequate caricatures that fail to characterise modern university organisational life.

Enhancing core academic value by goal alignment

Consideration of the psychological issues discussed above, presented in the 360-degree of organisational functions (which, it is worth reiterating, is designed to include *all* university staff and the wider circle of the academic community) leads us to conclude that there is a need for greater – or, at the very least, more transparent – consideration of the contribution of all university activities to create ‘core academic value’, which must be the main mission of all universities. Seeing the different ‘angles’ of each professional group, and

how their contributions are focussed through (as shown by the weights in Figure 1) specific academic values provides a useful holistic picture with which to think about these issues, especially as it calls attention to the, quite literally, indispensable contributions from the highest (paid) level of senior management (VC) to the lowest (paid) level of the junior gardener – how many times have we entered a university only to see dead flowers and what an impression that leaves!

Focus on the central mission of the university – however defined by the specific academic values of each university – requires strategies to be put in place to align the perspectives, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of *all* university staff. The successful implementation of what we might call ‘alignment goals’ should be expected to have significant impacts on this desired outcome (Cato and Gordon 2012). As university organisational life is truly complex, often with competing objectives (e.g. teaching vs. research), this focus is an effective means to foster a common spirit towards a single goal: core academic value, in which everyone can stake a claim of unique and valued contribution.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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