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Multi-level strategies in universities: Coordination, contestation or creolization?

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary research-intensive universities, strategies are not only found at the institutional level, but also at various sub-levels in the organization. In principle, such multi-level strategies are assumed to be a means for institutional coordination in the sense that more generic strategic objectives may give room for local adaptation within the broader strategic framing. Whether this actually is the case is another issue, and the current article analyzes the links and relations between institutional and sub-level strategies in a sample of public research universities. The findings suggest that – although introduced as integrating instruments – multi-level strategies may actually increase the complexity within the university as different strategies provide different actors with leeway for opportunistic behavior. This has implications for the coordination of the university's organizational sub-units and for the existing governance structures.

Key words: strategic planning, public research universities, coordination and control

Introduction

Developing universities into more strategic actors can be seen as one of the key aims of higher education policy reforms in a number of countries (Daiaco et al 2012). By shifting governance arrangements, many universities across the world have strengthened their strategic capacity through a more empowered institutional leadership, through developing new ways to allocate and distribute resources in the organization, and not least, through the creation of institutional strategies (Brint 2005, Wildavsky 2010).

In many universities this increased strategic capacity has been extended to lower organizational levels (Amaral et al., 2003), and has manifested itself through the development

of what we label as multi-level strategies - separate strategic plans found in faculties, schools, departments, institutes and centers. While strategic planning at different levels in the university is not a novelty as such, the scope and importance of this phenomenon has increased during the latter decade (Daiaco et al., 2012). Multi-level strategies are intended as more detailed and operational outlines of the institutional strategy, and take into consideration the specific characteristics, resources and ambitions of the sub-unit. In general, it can be assumed that the main intention of multi-level strategies is to strengthen the organizational coordination of initiatives and actions, an often noted challenge in complex organizations (Clark 2004, Tuchman 2009, Maassen & Stensaker 2011) while nurturing local innovation and adaptation.

However, it cannot be taken for granted that governance structures work according to their intention (Braun and Merrien 1999, Kaplan 2004, Huisman 2009) and that various organizational levels align their behavior (de Boer and Huisman 1999). Hence, in this article, we investigate this issue more in detail through the following three research questions: 1) What characterizes multi-level strategies in public research universities? 2) What is the relationship between institutional strategies and sub-unit strategies in public research universities? 3) What are the likely effects of multi-level strategies on the strategic capacity of universities? These research questions will be analyzed and discussed using data provided through the Flagship project – a comparative study of a five comprehensive research-intensive universities in Northern Europe, and how these universities balance societal demands such as scientific excellence and socio-economic relevance.

Three perspectives on the functions and effects of multi-level strategies

The development of multi-level strategies in public research universities can be seen as one of many attempts to address a classical problem in academia, the quite extensive local autonomy that is found in many sub-units throughout the university (Clark 2004). By creating a system of inter-linked strategies where the overall institutional strategy define the direction and the central objectives, and where lower-level strategies build on these, it is assumed that the loosely coupled characteristics of university organization can be overcome and that a stronger identity and joint actions are stimulated (Albert & Whetten 1985, Etzkowitz et al 2000). Hence, multi-level strategies can basically be conceived as tools for *coordination* and as instruments towards the organizational integration of the university. To create such integration, it can be expected that strategies at different levels need to adopt the same frames and similar ways of understanding problems and challenges, pull resources, as well as target and reach a set of shared objectives (Power 2007, Tuchman 2009). It can also be expected that in order to increase coordination there would be less space for pursuing alternative priorities at department level. If successful, such coordinated strategizing would lead to a more concentrated strategic capacity throughout the whole university, a concentration that would also strengthen the influence of the central level in strategic issues.

However, achieving better coordination through multi-level strategies can prove challenging, and alternative perspectives on multi-level strategies can also be developed. An important

element potentially hindering such coordination is related to the fact that much of the substantial work in research and education is conducted in the lower-levels of the university. There the academic staff still maintain much influence and control, and, through obtaining external funding, has the possibility of increasing these units' substantial autonomy (Clark 2004, Fumasoli & Lepori 2011). As even departments are expected to develop their own strategies in the comprehensive research-intensive university, this can also be seen as an opportunity for such sub-units to signal uniqueness and to further strengthen their competitive advantage within the university (Maassen & Stensaker 2011). Hence, in this perspective multi-level strategies are rather seen as opportunities for *contestation* and a way to secure local autonomy (de Boer and Huisman 1999, Whitley 2008). It can be expected that departments wanting to pursue such objectives would articulate strategies with different framing and content to differentiate themselves from – rather than comply with - the overarching university strategy. The result would most likely be a more fragmented strategic capacity developing throughout the university, although one can also imagine that such fragmentation can improve the ability of the university to adapt to rapidly changing environments.

Multi-level strategies could also be seen as a way for the university to stimulate to greater flexibility within the organization and to increase their legitimacy towards internal and external stakeholders (Fumasoli et al 2015). Strategy-as-practice research has suggested that the process of developing and not least implementing strategies should be seen as a quite dynamic process with plenty of room for creative disruptions, re-interpretations and new discoveries (Jarzabkowski 2005). We also know from analysis of strategic processes that 'copying' others is not a straight forward process, but a process filled with opportunities to develop quite unique adaptations (Czarniawska & Wolff 1998, Labianca et al 2001). As such, one could assume that multi-level strategies is a way to stimulate strategic processes throughout the organization, and to provide the management at lower-levels with a tool for discussing fundamental issues with academic staff (Dill 2012). Hence, in this perspective multi-level strategies are devices to stimulate local innovative translations of organizational strategic aims. Along this line we expect these strategies to undergo a process of *creolization* – a mixture stemming from emerging strategies, which do not resemble anymore either to the university or the sub-units defined priorities. It can be expected that local strategic plans having these characteristics would be partly linked to overarching plans, but would also contain elements that also challenge and transform ideas and the directions set in the institutional strategies. It could further be expected that such creative translations would strengthen the flexibility of the university to adapt to new and unforeseen changes in the environment.

Table 1 sums up the key assumptions and expectations related to each of the perspectives.

Table 1: Summary of key theoretical expectations

	Coordination	Contestation	Creolization
Characteristics of multi-level strategies	Similar framing and content	Different framing and content	Frames and content are partly similar and partly different
Relationship between multi-level strategies	Lower level strategies adapted to higher level strategies	Lower level strategies not adapted to higher level strategies	Lower level strategies are partly linked to higher level strategies What about “translated in framing and content”?
Likely effects of multi-level strategies on strategic capacity of the university	Strategic capacity is concentrated centralized	Strategic capacity is fragmented	Strategic capacity is flexible

The three perspectives are presented as ideal-type analytical constructions assisting us in shedding light on the functioning and impact of such governance instruments in a university setting.

Empirical design, data and methods

The article draws upon two sets of data collected in 5 Northern European public research-intensive universities, located in four different countries (Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands and Norway). For reasons of anonymity the names of the universities have been changed. The selection of countries and institutions was based on comparing countries and institutions with similar characteristics. Hence, the four countries are all small, relatively resource-rich, and with a well-developed higher education system that during the last decades have been exposed of a number of reforms to stimulate quality, efficiency and relevance. The five institutions selected are all among the leading research-intensive universities in their country, having a long-standing tradition of international collaboration, and with considerable resources available to realize their institutional visions and missions. Thus, the five universities can be said to share a quite similar policy environment in which key national policy priorities in all four countries for some time have focused on research excellence, internationalization, international competition for funding, and the contributions of universities to the national economy, including innovation and entrepreneurship. The five universities are amongst the largest and oldest institutions in their country, they are comprehensive in their educational and research profile, and all universities have a medical faculty. The institutional missions and key priorities of the five selected universities reflect the policy context to a large extent, and the strategic plans are all characterized by having a strong focus on excellence, interdisciplinarity, innovation and being part of a more globalized higher education sector. Our interest is related to how these strategic priorities are reflected at lower levels in the universities, and to account for disciplinary diversity within the universities, the current study has furthermore focused on and systematically compared 4 fields encapsulated at department level Chemistry, Psychology, Public Health, Teacher Training. Strategic plans have been collected and

analyzed at university, faculty, and department levels. The analysis has focused on comparing 1) the framing and the structure of such strategic plans and, 2) the content and the strategic priorities identified in the documents.

The documentary analysis is complemented by interviews conducted at the sample institutions with heads of department, professors performing significant amounts of research, as well as administrative executives. In total, 53 interviews were carried out between 2013 and 2014 on the topics of internal governance, strategy, research management, personnel policy, and research-based teaching. The present analysis is based specifically on the section concerning strategy, which addressed issues of strategic planning, internal coordination, implementation, as well as material and symbolic dimensions of strategy. All interviews (but one over skype) took place face-to-face at the relevant departments and were conducted by the project teams in Norway, Finland, and the Netherlands. This allowed for linguistic variety, according to the wishes of the respondents. 20 interviews were carried out either in Dutch, Finnish, or Norwegian; the rest in English. All interviews but three were recorded and transcribed. In the process Finnish was translated also into English, while Dutch interviews were equally summarized in English. On average the interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, the shortest being 34 minutes and the longest 140 minutes. The project team in Norway met several times to discuss the content of the interviews, while a two-day meeting was organized with all international partners to ensure that national and institutional specificities be shared and understood by all researchers. The transcripts comply with the Norwegian regulations for anonymity in social science research and can be made available by the authors upon request.

The transcripts were analyzed according to our framework on multi-level strategies, however we allowed at the same time for the identification of emerging themes shedding light on the tensions, pressures and mechanisms at play in the selected cases.

Table 2: Interviews

	Interviews	Heads of Department	Professors	Administrators	Departments
Akeso	6	3	3	0	Psychology
Bendis	4	1	2	1	Public Health
Hemera	9	2	3	4	Chemistry, Teacher Training
Leto	10	7	3	0	Public Health, Teacher Training
Opora	24	11	9	4	Chemistry, Psychology, Public Health, Teacher Training
TOTAL	53	24	20	9	

Findings

Key characteristics of multi-level strategies

We have analyzed 18 strategic documents at institutional (5), faculty (7) and department (6) levels for a total of 260 pages mainly published (also) in English, however some of the faculty and department strategic plans were available only in the national language. In the case of Akeso University, our research revealed that sub-unit strategic documents did not exist, while for Leto University strategic plans were accessible only to the university staff.

The format and length of the documents varies considerably, highlighting different types of formulations, which appear to be instrumental to showcasing the university, faculty, department, or to provide working documents with concrete objectives and indicators.

Table 3: Strategic documents selected for analysis

	Institutional strategies	Faculty strategies	Department strategies
Akeso	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>An Eye for Talent 2011-2014</i> (40p) 	n.a.	n.a.
Bendis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Strategy 2011-2015</i> (9 p) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>To generate new knowledge that promotes better health 2010-2014</i> (8 p) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Research Strategy of the Department for Public Health 2012-2015</i> (14 p)
Hemera	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Best for the World 2013-2016</i> (32 p) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Higher and Higher. Faculty of Science Target Program 2013-2016</i> (67 p) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Department of Teacher Training: Vision, Values, Development Targets</i> (2 p)
Leto	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Identity and Mission</i> (1 p) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Policy Plan of the Humanities and Social Sciences Group</i> (partly accessible) 	not accessible
Opora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Strategy 2020</i> (16 p) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>2020 Vision. A Strategy for the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences</i> (9 p) • <i>Faculty of Educational Sciences: Strategic Plan 2010-2020</i> (16 p) • <i>Faculty of Social Sciences: Strategy 2020</i> (14 p) • <i>Faculty of Medicine. Strategic Plan 2010-2020</i> (7 p) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Chemistry Strategy 2010-2016</i> (18 p) • <i>Strategic plan of the Institute of Health and Society</i> (4 p) • <i>Department of Teacher Training. Strategy</i> (1 p) • <i>Department of Psychology. Strategic goals</i> (1 p).

When it comes to the framing of strategic plans we can observe that institutional documents are similar across universities: they are all in English, available on the university website, and, despite the varying number of pages (from 1 to 40), with similar format. The latter is shaped as a downloadable glossy brochure with pictures and well-finished design including the university brand. To be noticed the exception of Leto university, which only offers a webpage and addresses to web links only accessible to university staff.

The structure of the institutional strategic documents is equally easily comparable: the plans are outlined according to vision, mission, values, objectives and actions. The three university missions - teaching, research, and services - are explicitly referred to, thereby reflecting the conventional model of university as providing education and learning environment, conducting basic research, and relating to its communities through dissemination, be it technology transfer, popular science, or social innovation. As such, the institutional strategy can be said to contain a series of more elaborated sub-strategies in more specific areas (research, teaching, innovation, etc.).

Another noticeable element shared by the strategic plans is the characterization of institutional positioning as part of the university vision. This said, the sampled universities aim all to be part of the “international” elite of higher education institutions. As we have studied public research-intensive universities with a leading role in their own countries, it comes quite unsurprising that they aim to consolidate and/or improve their position in the global higher education arena. None of the five strategic plans make explicit prioritizations with respect to disciplines or disciplinary field, and the plans are also similar in the weight they give to inter-disciplinarity, resource allocation according to performance, and to diverse and multi-cultural students and staff. Institutional collaboration is in general not restricted to other universities, and the plans contain many ambitions relating to stimulate partnership with private sector firms, to increase collaboration with public and not-for profit organizations, etc. Content-wise there are nonetheless some differences in the articulation of the actions to be taken to pursue the defined strategic objectives.

There is more variety in faculty strategic plans across universities, while they still, as expected in the “coordination” perspective, in general comply with the framing and content of the university strategic plans. Bendis University has, for example, a rather concise institutional strategy, which becomes even more concise at the level of the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry. Interestingly, the 6-page document addresses only education, dissemination and the relation with local and national professional, educational, and research partners. Research is only generally mentioned (“creation of new knowledge generated by research of high international standard” p. 3) without hinting to prioritized areas. Furthermore, at Hemera the Faculty of Science plan operationalizes the content of the university document in a very detailed and specific way, not least through providing a list of quantitative targets and indicators is provided at the end, such as number of students completing 55 ECTSs annually, ERC funding, level 3 publications. The faculty strategic plans at Opora University are also structured following very closely the university overall strategy and its 5 core objectives (path-breaking research, excellent education, societally active, efficient, staff and student motivating). However, what the strategic plans do is to decline in a rather general fashion the five objectives and inherent actions at faculty level.

When it comes to the departmental strategies, a multitude of documents types can be found. As of format, they vary from identifying one single objective on the department website (as in 2 departments at Opora, Psychology and Teacher training), to the sheer listing of prioritized fields (as at Hemera, Department of Teacher training); from a short document articulating (again) the university objectives (Opora, Department of Public Health) to detailed plans with

extensive introductions like at Bendis (Public Health) and at Opora (Chemistry). This variety indicate that the department, as the university sub-unit encapsulating the discipline, has most leeway and knowledge to shape a strategic document that can be detailed and operational enough to coordinate activities such as teaching, research and services. Hence, if we look at the strategic plans in isolation, the prerogative of formalizing strategic priorities and actions in an official document becomes a reality only in some departments.

What is the relationship between multi-level strategies?

The informants interviewed on the functions and effects of multi-level strategies in their universities display a wide range of perceptions and views. This diversity is found both across and within universities, and across and between disciplines and departments. Hence, it is difficult to find examples of universities showing more unified patterns and effects of multi-level strategies. However, there is much evidence supporting each of our three perspectives identified earlier.

One group of informants do, for example, confirm that their internal strategies at department level have been framed by and closely linked to the overarching strategy of the university as the following quotes from different department heads illustrate:

“We communicate a lot about the aims, the strategy, the strategy has been developed, and there's a long process. Of course very much of this was coming from university side...the big picture. But we are discussing a lot what we take as strategic aims. ...so we have five these kind of strategic aims [stemming from the university centrally] we decided in the process together in collaboration with the dean, at the same time we are doing it at a faculty level; at the department level”.

“...the process of making the strategy has gone from top towards down. We have selected two research areas on this department [stemming from the university strategic plan], and basically, we need a lot of equipment here, and it's quite hard to get funding for this equipment if you don't fall into these areas, as well. Personally, I do. Most of us actually do because we did kind of a wise choice of this strategy area so that most of the people are falling in these areas. They are more than symbolic, and we are very seriously taking that into account...we are following our strategies' choices while recruiting new people”.

This pattern of alignment at department level can be found in all four selected disciplines do report on similar adjustments and adaptation to the strategic plan of the university. It seems also quite common to communicate with the dean and the faculty level when developing such plans at departmental level. As suggested to in the latter quote, there is a tendency among departments aligning their strategies that they expose some external resource dependencies they hope can be solved through such strategic streamlining. This adaptation is not seen as a symbolic adjustment by the informants, but as a quite serious process, often accompanied by a number of intra-departmental meetings, consultations and discussions. One department head notes that the communicative processes of developing the strategic plan also have meant the introduction of a new form of governance tool, which have had a lot of implications at the department level:

“...Yeah, huge, huge, huge change, so we didn't have anything even close to what [the strategic process] we have now, so we are collecting the whole personnel, and we have these group meetings, and then we make the decisions. Such processes have been more or less absent and research-wise - a professor has been free to do research in areas he feels, to do what is best suited for him - so yeah - there has been lots of change”.

The statement indicate that strategic plans at department level may carry the potential for change, not just when the plan is supposed to be implemented, but also as part of the process of making the plan.

Interestingly, a couple of informants also note that the potential streamlining of the university one could imagine taking place as a result of multi-level strategies, also had wider implications. These informants claimed that multi-level strategies also align institutional priorities to the priorities of external funders and stakeholders as they perceived the institutional strategy very much reflected the overall priorities identified by the national research council. As such, they argued that multi-level strategies were not only a means to coordinate the whole university, but also as a way to coordinate the national higher education and research system.

However, reports about streamlining and adjustment to the overarching university strategy were contested by another group of informants that signaled a more relaxed attitude to attempts to streamline priorities through multi-level strategies. These informants stated that although they were well aware of central level strategies, the impact of such strategies at department level had been quite modest, or even absent, as illustrated by the following quote from a department head:

“...there's been some attempt centrally to get us to classify ourselves into particular research domains. I don't think it's been very successful. And I think we generally ignore it”.

The informants that voice these views tend to downplay the impact of all central level initiatives, not only in strategic affairs, but also in other areas. Typically, they perceive the strategic plans as a more symbolic activity, not related to or having any impact on the operational planning and decision-making that takes place at department level. These informants put more emphasis on developments playing out at local level, and the ability of the local level to keep central steering attempts at arm-length distance. In some cases, they rather argue that multi-level strategies have been established as a result of path-dependent and historical characteristics of the university, and not as a result of top-down strategic deliberation and prioritizing. For example, when asked about how strategic choices are taken at the university, one department head states that:

“To be honest I would not know – I should know since I am a member of the research council. This university has a strong research tradition and in a good in a number of fields. But these fields have not deliberately been chosen. They 'happened to have' a number of good people that managed to established viable research lines. It is more a push rather than a pull”.

Another informant echoes the view that local strategies are developed from the bottom-up and in a more organic fashion, and that they have grown to be more formalized expressions of the

informal and taken-for-granted research priorities that have existed in the department for years:

“...our strategy is based on the way we’re thinking so we started out with some plans that we had, and those were not too formalized, and then we formalized this and set the goals in the strategy. So, in a way the strategy ... you want to say that it more sums up what we have been discussing over the years”.

Although these informants seem to have similar views regarding the (absence) of impact of multi-level strategies, there are still interesting nuances found in their reflections about the possible implications of establishing local strategies at department level. Not least it is possible to identify how such formalized strategic plans impact resource distribution inside the departments, and the priorities made in the strategic plans are actually quite important. For example, when one of our informants was asked about how the department strategy affects his work, he responded in the following way:

“(Laughs)... haven't we had that question before. Fortunately, the department strategy goes very much in the direction of what I do. So I am in favor of the department strategy and I am lucky to want the same things as the department wants. Or to say it differently, they follow what I do and others. I am lucky to have many students”.

A third group of informants reflect the perspective of creolization, and these informants take the position that that strategic plans at department levels usually blend various interests and influences and that pragmatism characterizes the development of departmental strategies. These informants argue that departments are more selective in what they pick up from the overarching university strategy, as underlined by the following statement from one of our informants when asked how the department strategy is aligned with the university strategy:

“It’s well within certain topics of it, and I think that’s what department strategy should. It shall not address all of the priorities made in the central strategy. It shall address what’s within this egg mix of strategic items - we can take a few which are ours. I think it fits well.”

Another informant from this group shares the pragmatist approach, and expresses his ways of handling the situation in the following way:

“Well, we are now and then asked to make a strategy, I'm not very fond of strategies for the whole unit, but we have been evaluated and then we have to discuss our strategy. But my main strategy was trying to make the things going on as good as possible, trying to improve the quality of on-going activities, and trying to support the best and help them doing what they like the most...”

The statement illustrates that strategic processes are seen as something the department “have to be engaging in”, and that they are trying to make these processes as relevant as possible. Often, this implies a more selective approach to institutional strategic priorities. For example, if the department perceives a match between local ambitions in the area of teaching and learning, they tend to match these with issues also addressed in the institutional sub-strategy for teaching. However, among these informants, there is a clear attitude that strategic processes are not merely symbolic. Strategic planning becomes an event that is used in a more opportunistic way as sense-giving means that can also assist the department leadership in their job. One of our informants puts it this way:

“We tried this time to make a strategy document which is not only symbolic. We started a process at a staff seminar this winter, and we started the process for the first staff meeting in January where I stated my vision for the department, and then we used this vision as the basis of the personnel seminar there, a one-day seminar, where the staff could put in their goals or define their goals into the visions I had stated, and from that seminar, we made the first draft of our strategy document. We then brought the document to the board, and now it’s presented on our webpage, and it’s sent to every staff member, and we have asked for comments, so we hope that the staff will read the document. I don’t think we will get many comments, but I hope that the document will be read”.

By “presenting his vision” for the department, local strategy development processes can as such be an opportunity for the departmental heads to use multi-level strategies as a leadership tool, and as a possibility to discuss future priorities and development paths. Several of those interviewed having leadership positions at department level underline that the existence of an institutional strategy and the expectation that departments have to relate to that when developing their own strategies is seen as a legitimate “excuse” to put strategic issues on the agenda locally.

What are the likely effects of multi-level strategies in modern universities?

Our findings indicate that multi-level strategies seem to have multiple characteristics and functions. We find evidence that they sometimes contribute to stronger internal coordination, that central level strategies in some departments are ignored or contested, while they in other circumstances lead to local transformations that combine central and local ideas and priorities.

When looking closer at the possible coordinating functions of multi-level strategies it is interesting to note that the alignment between the institutional and faculty/school level is stronger than the alignment between the faculty and department level. This might reflect the different purposes of strategies at different levels, suggesting that strategies at department level might reflect a much broader agenda that merely reflecting institutional priorities. It is also interesting that some of our informants identify central level strategies as mimetic reflections of national priorities and strategies developed by external funders of research/research councils etc. As such, the development of institutional multi-level strategies can be seen as a part of the shifts in national governance arrangements where increased institutional autonomy is balanced with policy instruments that control institutional behavior in other respects (Daiaco et al 2012). Hence, multi-level strategies seem to open up the possibility for national authorities and external funders to increase their influence on the priorities of universities, not only at central level, but also at the shop-floor, especially if there are critical resource-dependencies at department level. An interesting twist in this respect is that while a lot of the university strategies at central level reflect national priorities and themes, and as such, tend to be more forward looking, many of the departmental level strategies are more retrospective – reflecting historical strengths and priorities. Multi-level strategies can as a consequence be said to reflect combinations of priorities, opening up for quite broad rather than narrow institutional priorities.

Our data still suggest that within many departments, multi-level strategies have quite limited effects – at least so far – in that central level strategies sometimes are ignored or plainly rejected locally. These departments do still develop their own strategies, but with quite unique priorities, reflecting local rather than central objectives. Interestingly, this development may cause further fragmentation within the university, as many departments develop separate strategies for teaching, research and innovation, and where the links between these strategies are at best loose, and sometimes, totally absent (see also Maassen & Stensaker 2011). In a number of cases, it also seems that departmental strategies contribute to cement historical priorities and power configurations inside the department. Hence, the departmental strategic plans sometimes formalize prior informal priorities and reward those that are already influential and successful. As such, one could claim that strategic plans also can become tools for conservation rather than for transformation.

Finally, we also have indications that multi-level strategies indeed carry the potential for long-term transformation – what we labelled as creolization. First, as institutional strategies can be split up in a range of “substrategies” in the areas of research, education, innovation, infrastructure etc., it is not difficult to find areas where institutional priorities and departmental ambitions match. Of course, a potential implication of such cherry-picking is that the uneven implementation of the institutional strategy throughout the organization. Second, as our informants underlined, many departments spent a lot of time and energy on discussions and deliberations with respect to how they could or should adapt to central level strategies and priorities. Hence, it is possible to argue that the most important outcome of this process is not the strategic plan as such, but the discussions and the interactions that have taken place inside the departments. Developing the strategic plan becomes an arena for the department leaders to engage the academic staff. As indicated by our data, these new arenas can sometimes lead to new internal collaborations and cross-fertilizing between different specializations and can as such be seen as processes stimulating innovation and creativity at department level. Third, the whole terminology related to strategizing processes may have a transformative effect in itself – not least illustrated by some of the informants in the current study voicing quite strong skepticism towards the idea of “institutional strategies” while they argue at the same time that “their own strategy” represent something different. Hence, to be “strategic” seems to have the potential of becoming a taken-for-granted concept in modern universities, and as such can establish itself as a way of thinking about how change processes are to be designed and implemented within the modern university.

Hence, as suggested, multi-level strategies may have quite diverse effects within universities, and that they carry the potential for very diverse consequences including alignment, but also antagonism and even new ways to adapt to a changing environment.

Conclusion

The aim of the current article has been to investigate the change potential of multi-level strategies in large comprehensive research-intensive universities, and whether multi-level strategies are ways to strengthen the hierarchical governance of research-intensive universities

through improved coordination. Although based on a small sample of institutions and departments, the findings do indicate that multi-level strategies actually carry the potential of further adding to the complexity of research universities. Hence, our expectation about coordination is only partly supported, and our alternative expectations - labelled contestation and creolization - find considerable support in our data. If, as our findings suggest, there are quite diverse effects of multi-level strategies, it is difficult to interpret this tool as having merely a coordinating function. As illustrated, multi-level strategies can also give voice to conservatism and cement existing power configurations inside departments rising tensions between the institutional and departmental level as a result. The fact that we can also notice hybrid ways to respond to central level strategies – what we have labelled as creolization – is another element that potentially could increase organizational complexity, although this process also can be seen as a form of innovation as creative interpretations may lead to new ways of thinking about knowledge advancements.

Our findings hint to the often paradoxical effects new steering and governance elements may have in higher education. At the same time, we should also acknowledge that multi-level strategies carry the potential for long-term change at the institutions. As indicated, new formal governance instruments may influence the sector in more informal ways, affecting how academic staff and leaders at different levels think about change and how this can be instigated. Here, we might also find yet another paradox related to the introduction of strategies in modern universities. While many within the academic staff see such tools as part of a greater managerial influence in the university, the processes that are organized in relation to developing local strategic plans may actually contribute to strengthen the collegiality and the academic interaction within the departments. Multi-level strategies seem to be something that both departments heads and academic staff have engage with and have opinions about – positively and negatively – and as such, they carry the potential of stimulating further engagement and interest articulation in the governance of the modern university.

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