Protecting Academic Freedom:
Two Case Studies of HoDs in a Research Intensive University

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Introduction

In this paper we present the findings arising from interviews undertaken with two heads of successful academic departments in a traditional, research intensive university in England. The study seeks to address the question of how in the neoliberal, market driven policy context, Heads of Department feel they can protect and support academic staff and their freedom to pursue their own projects. This is done by seeking to uncover the ways in which Heads of Department perceive their role. Thus the paper begins with a discussion of the neoliberal context in which universities operate, before considering academic freedom and the development of the professional identities of staff that are so important to research and teaching. The focus is then placed on the role of the HoD as a background to the research. With such a small scale study the findings can at most, provide a partial insight into university middle management. Heads of successful departments act as a buffer against and a conduit from the wider university, protecting staff so that they can get on with and enjoy their jobs. The wider question is how far HoDs are supporting change in the purpose of universities by accommodating to that change and in turn being changed by it.

Neoliberalism and the bounds of freedom

The spread of the neoliberal philosophy across the developed and much of the developing world is currently much discussed in the literature, and indeed the popular media. The BBC Reith lectures (Sandell 2009) entitled ‘A New Citizenship: a new politics of the common good’, presented a critique of the current emphasis on individualism and advocated a return to a focus on the common good. The neoliberal super tanker is likely to continue forward for a good while yet despite questions that the global recession has raised about the agenda. Questions’ assuming that economic prosperity is linked to the individual rather than society and therefore the social good is achieved through the use of market mechanisms in all human transactions. Across the world, economies have been deregulated, trade liberalised and health and education systems dismantled in pursuit of higher profits. Education, like any other commodity can be bought and sold.

The introduction of accountability systems and the publishing of quality measures provide the customer with the means to compare the market. The freedom of individuals to choose is, however, regulated so that organisations and individuals must operate within externally imposed boundaries of accountability. In order to ensure compliance, organisations need to introduce management structures of the kind that any respectable business might be expected to employ (OPSR 2002, Hoyle and Wallace 2005). Marginson (2005) argues that systems of accountability act to restrict freedom to within narrow boundaries reducing
individual agency rather than removing it altogether. Trowler (2001), citing Ball and Bowe et al, explores the proposition that the discourse of managerialism and markets invade the language of educational institutions, and in so doing can introduce discursive repertoires that may in turn limit the options available for thought and the sharing of ideas.

**Universities, change, and the language of the market**

Educational institutions have been subject to change both in response to the neoliberal turn, and as a result of explicit exhortations to change in order to better serve the prevailing hegemony. The 1988 report by the World Bank espoused principles that led governments to see traditional universities as obstacles to the marketisation of education and the management of knowledge produced by research (Clegg 2008). In the UK vice chancellors were encouraged to become chief executives creating strategic plans to manage the corporate enterprise that universities should become (Jarrat report 1985, Henkel 2004). Gaffikin and Perry (2008) demonstrate how the majority of institutions of a sample group drawn from the top 127 US research universities had developed strategic plans and adopted a neoliberal discourse of global markets and international ‘reach’. Similar shifts occurred in Australia where Davies et al (2006) suggest that management has replaced leadership as the primary role of presidents and vice chancellors. Such shifts achieved through system changes to streamline processes, thus making universities more efficient, competitive and entrepreneurial: ‘focusing on the bottom line’ (Marginson and Cosindine 2000, p28).

The Higher Education Funding Council presents its updated strategic plan 2006-11 as having an overarching focus on ‘Enhancing the contribution of HE to the economy and society’ (HEFCE May 2008). However the focus in the policy is on the economy rather than the wider contribution to society.

> In a fast-changing and increasingly competitive world, the role of higher education in equipping the labour force with appropriate and relevant skills, is stimulating innovation and supporting productivity and in enriching the quality of life is central.

(DIUS)

This same language is reflected in the documents produced by UK universities. Reflecting a similar tendency to that described in the US by Gaffikin and Perry (2008) with markets, enterprise and business friendly approaches seeming to dominate the language of universities, including those who count among the elite, research intensive group.
… foster an organisational culture which promotes enterprise and is characterised by creative thinking, innovation and discovery, in which the University’s academic breadth and strengths are used to the full.

(University of Birmingham Strategic Framework 2005 -2010)

… a member of the elite Russell Group, an association of leading research-intensive UK universities. Our research and teaching have a 'real world' focus and a survey by the Higher Education Funding Council for England found that we spend more time working with businesses than any other UK university.

(Newcastle University Website 2009)

There is however, a tension between the increasingly managerial approach to strategic change and the historically collegial nature of UK universities. Vice Chancellors continue to argue that the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake is a core purpose of the universities (for example Brink 2007). The freedom to pursue knowledge and to share with students the value of knowledge for its own sake requires academics to be free to choose their own projects in an environment that facilitates creativity (Knight and Trowler 2000). Traditional collegial structures, it seems, lend themselves to affording these freedoms. Gumport (2000), drawing on an extensive set of case studies in the US, goes as far as to suggest that we are at a defining moment in the history of Higher Education. She argues that the reorganisation of universities to meet modern needs of industry, marketisation, accountability and efficiency could actually change the purpose of universities. Similarly, Barnett (2004) raises questions about the purpose of universities in the changing world.

Is the university to be a site of democratic rights, of societal enlightenment, of knowledge production for a technological society, of inculcating skills for the workplace, of personal transformation or of critical analysis? Is it to get by through its own wits, transforming itself to take on the image of any client or state agency that comes its way or is it to maintain some kind of allegiance to a sense of an enduring entity? Are its internal processes to be characterised by tight managerial disciplines that enable it to live ‘in the real world’ or is it to forge, within itself, a new kind of organic community?

(Barnett 2004, p70)
Much of the literature where these issues are discussed tend to set the freedom of universities to pursue knowledge against the alternative of meeting market needs. What Barnett seems to be suggesting is that these alternatives may not be mutually exclusive.

**Academic identities**

The tension encapsulated in the questions posed by Barnett must affect groups and individuals within universities as they steer a course through their professional lives. As they form their academic identities, the enduring beliefs, values, motives and experiences that are characteristic of individuals who enact the same professional role (Iberra 1999, cited in Winter 2009) and as they relate to their university and their discipline. They are formed through the engagement of individuals within a wider group of academics, through mutual recognition of the status of members of the discipline and the subsequent sharing of myths and language of the group (Jenkins 1996). Hence professional academic identities are most readily established in relatively stable environments (Bernstein 1996, cited in Henkel 2005). Yet Higher Education is a fast changing, complex and demanding arena to work in. With increasing pressure from internal and external agendas acting in different ways where there is no single HE culture (Silver 2003) but subunits. These HE subunits are formed from a nexus of different cultures centered on the discipline and academic department. The particular academic culture experienced by an individual is the confluence of the knowledge or discipline based cross institutional culture (Williams 2008) with staff gathered together for convenience in academic departments that must then adhere to the norms of the university in which they find themselves. Thus academics define themselves from the ‘inside out’ based on their disciplinary culture but in turn must work within an ‘outside in’ definition based on university managerial systems and performativity (Stronach et al 2002). Hence the external definition of the professional group is based on quality measures such as the Research Assessment Exercise, National Student Survey results, Quality Assurance Agency Inspection reports and the various league tables that currently abound. Academics within universities inevitably find themselves steering a tricky path to find stability in the spaces between the competing internal and external pressures.

The key to this stability it seems is ‘the right of staff in higher education to determine the nature of their work’ (Neave 1988, p43). Henkel (2004) found this to be the dominant theme in an interview study of 300 academics and institutional leaders in England. Academic freedom here tended to mean the freedom to determine one’s own research direction and in being allowed to exercise a degree of autonomy in managing one’s working life.
This autonomy is challenged in a number of ways. For example over the last four decades research councils have adopted a more rationalist approach to making awards, with greater influence of industrialists and an emphasis on research with clear applications (Henkel 2004). Insight into the impact of these and other changes on the development of early career academics (under the age of 35) is provided in a small scale interview study by Archer (2008). The interviewees like those in Henkel’s study, valued academic freedom, criticality and collegiality as crucial to them as professionals. The study goes some way to support the notion that individual academic freedom is restricted by systems of accountability (Marginson 2005) and by the limitations of a discourse of managerialism experienced by this group (Trowler 2001). However, Archer does identify ways in which these early career academics, despite a sense of loss at the lack of time, were finding ‘spaces’ in which to develop their own ‘project’, to think critically, and to challenge accepted norms. Such ‘spaces’ are of crucial importance to the future of academia and therefore how these spaces can be afforded is a question of fundamental importance.

**The role of the HoD**

Hammersley-Fletcher and Qualter (2009 in press), considered two educational sites: primary and higher education. They concluded that in both cases the ability of staff to exercise professional responsibility and academic freedom must largely depend on managers protecting them from the encroachment of activities that would fill the spaces needed for creative work. Given the argument presented above that the academic unit is the key cultural subunit, it would seem then, as Ramsden (1998) argues that HoDs (or their equivalent) are at the critical point of academic influence.

Over recent decades the role of Head has changed as departments have grown, due to the increases in student numbers, but also due to amalgamations into larger units in pursuit of efficiency. The increasing complexity of the role has also led to the need for more administrative support; financial management skills and entrepreneurial abilities as the work of academic departments diversify and intensify (Hare and Hare 2002). Bryman (2007, p2) in a review of the literature supplemented by interviews with senior managers, drew up a list of ‘facets of leadership’ important for Heads of Department and other institutional leaders. These included personal qualities such as integrity, trustworthiness and credibility as a role model. Other facets included respect for the existing culture of the department and having the skills to support a collegial environment which is protective of staff autonomy.

Drawing on a large scale study Henkel (2004) argued that academic departments have, for the most part, been successful in accommodating significant, imposed, changes within their ‘overriding concerns to sustain disciplinary values and knowledge’ (p27). She does however suggest that the ‘strength’ of
departments to resist or reshape such requirements determines how far they are able to do this. Strength in this case tends to reflect descriptions ‘from the outside in’ (Knight and Trowler 2001) which currently lay significant emphasis on research productivity. Commercial value and reputation also contribute to the strength to resist interventions. It is likely that academics would be more or less able to find the spaces to pursue their own projects depending on the strength of the department and the ability of the HoD to make best use of departmental capital to achieve a working environment that is conducive to the needs of academics. Thus sustaining and developing their professional and academic identities. This in turn raises the question as to how Heads of Department see their role in the university of today. The study reported here represents an initial and very small attempt to address this question with a view to understanding better how HoDs might exercise their departmental capital to ensure that they are able to support staff.

**The Study**

Emerging from the above discussion is a recognition that formed from many factors; departmental cultures are different and unique. It is also likely that departments that are considered ‘weak’ in terms of their university are likely to be less able to resist the external pressures on them. For this exploratory study two HoDs from the same research intensive university were selected for interview, one from a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths) department and one from a HASS (Humanities, Arts and Social Science) department. Both would be considered reasonably strong in that they emerged well from the Research Assessment Exercise, have relatively healthy recruitment of students, have good scores in National Student Surveys and so, it is assumed, have been well led (Martin et al 2003). The departments are not unusual in size or structure when compared to other research focused departments in their discipline and are similar to many others in their university. Although they both have similar numbers of academic staff the STEM department has about half the number of undergraduates as the HASS department, but very many more research staff making it a much larger entity. This reflects the situation in similar universities, Sheffield, for example has roughly equal numbers of academic and research staff with the latter concentrated in the STEM areas (Madden 2009). As is common in pre-1922 universities the post of Head of Department is usually taken up by a member of the professoriate for a period of 3 or 4 years. In neither interview was the HoD due to step down, as in both cases the previous HoD remained in the department and could be called upon if required. One had been able to shadow the previous HoD for several months before taking over, while the other had very short notice. One had worked in the university for many years; the other had joined from another research intensive university within the previous five years.
Ethical approval was sought and received from the University for the study and HoDs approached via email by the author who knew both slightly. The HoDs were informed that the purpose of the study was to be an exploratory one to consider their perceptions of their own role. A set of questions was sent to each HoD prior to interview. These questions were as neutral as possible, beginning with some background questions and moving onto, questions about the role in respect of departmental staff, senior managers, and external bodies. The intention was to simply offer some structure to the interviews, but to allow the interviewee to set the agenda. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and returned. At this point the HoDs were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time, they were offered the option of adding any further points, withdrawing or amending any aspects they did not wish to have included. No changes were made and both agreed that the transcripts were an accurate record.

The two transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo software. The study was designed to be as open as possible; however this does not mean that the interviewer did not seek to answer a question. Indeed the question about the perceived role of the HoD emerged from extensive reading of the literature which in turn resonated with a personal experience of departmental headship. The intention in the analysis was not to provide thick rich descriptions of the role of a HoD, as this could compromise anonymity, but rather to ‘capture something important about the data in relation to the research question’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, p82). Hence the approach was not purely inductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data, nor was it purely theoretically driven, testing out a predetermined framework. Rather, certain ‘themes’ were anticipated and hence ‘looked for’, while others were identified as important to the question posed, but not necessarily anticipated. Although the temptation is to see a ‘theme’ as somehow more meaningful if it was identified in both responses, this was resisted as reductive, especially where there are only two interviews in different faculties of a large and diverse university.

Four main themes or topics were identified. These were ‘preparation for and support in the role’, ‘networks’, ‘research structures’ and ‘the HoD role’. Each broke down into a small number of sub groups, with significant overlaps, particularly between ‘preparation for the role’, ‘networks’ and ‘research structures’. The role of the HoD was coded into sub themes or topics which included, delegation, management structures, staffing issues, interface with the university, and delivery of teaching. However, themes more relevant to the research question cut across these topics helping to reveal the underlying conceptions of the role. Findings are discussed under the theme headings, with the first two discussed as one. The research structures theme is then covered in more detail with all three acting to set the context for the fourth.
Findings

Preparation and ongoing support, and networks

Both HoDs felt well prepared for their role, despite one’s lack of forewarning. In both cases they felt that they had learned simply by having been in the department for a while and having undertaken one or more of the departmental roles. However, the HoD who had little specific preparation commented that the job was completely different to the other roles with many tasks, such as finance, staffing issues, dealing with contracts and dealing with senior managers, that were new. Both HoDs had taken advantage of a training course offered by the university. This was not set up to teach management techniques, rather, it was described by both as a very good networking opportunity in terms of meeting and getting to know the roles of the various professional service heads, but also meeting other HoDs from across the university.

Both HoDs discussed their membership of and the value they gained from both internal and external networks. They were both part of disciplinary research networks, which were deemed helpful, although perhaps more for their own research than in terms of their role as managers. Both were also members of specific HoD networks within their discipline whose meetings were organised to discuss topical issues such as the recent RAE outturn and the upcoming REF.

Obviously to some extent we are competitors with regard to student recruitment …. but at the end of the day we are all facing the same challenges and it makes sense to talk things through together …. I always find that that helps because it’s always important to know whether something one has to deal with is a unique case that one has to find a solution for or whether something is actually reoccurring or you know, sometimes it’s just about the facts and figures in a …. how many students are the appropriate number on the (discipline) masters and these kinds of things….

(HASS)

The university has a number of systems in place to enable HoDs to meet regularly. Deans, for example, run regular meetings which both HoDs found useful, although the larger STEM faculty meetings were rather shorter and more about information dissemination than the smaller, lengthier more interactive HASS faculty meetings. The latter were seen as very useful, while the former were less so. The HASS HoD also described informal meetings with other heads of department to discuss particular common issues. These were generally linked to research groupings and joint degree programmes, but also to discuss changes in university structures that might have an impact on them. The STEM HoD saw
internal networking as rather less important, although there were some meetings to discuss, the well established, research teams that cross disciplines. The greater emphasis on internal research networking on the part of the HASS HoD reflects the greater overlap between departments in terms of research structures.

**Research structures**

The STEM department is organised along traditional science research lines with fairly autonomous research teams made up, in the main of lead academics, research staff, technicians and research students. Departmental staff meetings involve only academics (lecturers and professors) and senior teaching staff. Research team meetings are organised separately by the team leader.

Each group has their own meetings where staff interact with researchers and technicians and so on and we don’t interfere with those interactions really unless there is a problem of some sort. So research group leaders are quite an important part of the operation, for example for (annual performance review) processes we devolve those to groups to carry out.

(STEM)

Considerable value was seen as accruing from this system of research teams as sites of knowledge creation and of nurture and support of early career researchers and students and therefore how the discipline retains and reproduces itself (Delamont et al 1997). The independence of the research groupings from university interference is seen by the HoD as essential, indeed it might be said that the department is merely the host to separate self-motivated and self-directed individuals and groups. “Like rich peasants, they till their own patch but display little desire for collective action and little interest in the larger university” (Dearlove 2002, p267). Yet if independence from central control is valued, isolation from colleagues in the department is not. The HoD considered informal opportunities for interaction between colleagues to be essential to the vibrancy of the research culture. The departmental common room, particularly where tea is served at specific times to draw staff together, was something that the HoD was willing to defend against any and all challenges.

The HASS structures are rather more fluid than those described in STEM. There are much smaller numbers of research staff, hence most staff teach and do research. Traditionally HASS research is more of an individual activity. However, the greater amount of networking amongst fellow HASS HoDs described above reflects the way of operating; “it’s difficult to describe because it’s not just one clear cut structure,
it’s a kind of intersection of various activities”. Research groupings then reflect themes across the faculty and indeed beyond into the community with links at a range of levels of formality across and beyond departments.

So with some things you know they have to write their (publications) on their own, we can’t change that but other things it helps to work in a group for example funding applications, they require a lot of time and effort and it’s so much easier if one doesn’t have to do it on one’s own all the time. So that’s where we try to change culture in a way. Some colleagues are very happy with the idea, so some things are going ahead really well, others are a bit more skeptical - that’s fair enough because they’ve worked in different ways for a long time. We’re not forcing anybody to do anything in particular, we’re very good teachers you know, we’re trying to tell colleagues what could be done. Some people pick it up and do something with it and then the others can see how it works and can make their own decision whether they want to do this as well.

(HASS)

The HoD, reflecting Neave’s (1988) view of academic freedom, is respectful of the right of staff to determine their own work, and recognises the need to retain the community of scholars. However the approach also reflects changes occurring in the non STEM areas as described by Bakhshi et al (2008).

Yet the ‘lone scholar’ is a severely outdated model of the arts and humanities researcher. Arts and humanities researchers join with scientists to tackle complex societal problems. They work increasingly in collaborative teams inside and outside academia… Even in areas where individual research is widely used, the term ‘lone scholar’ denies the associations and exchange of ideas across the research community.

(p2)

The HoD is engaged here in a very gentle push towards culture change to better meet the changing external environment being created by funding councils. The funding councils are encouraging structures that engender greater collaboration “and the co-production of knowledge with researchers in other
disciplines and with non-academic stakeholders in the private, public and third sectors, both in the UK and internationally” (AHRC 2008, p2). The HASS HoD also commented that the existence of research groupings made it easier to negotiate with senior managers because they understand and can identify with this as many are from science disciplinary backgrounds.

The HoD role
In neither case did the HoDs see their roles as introducing significant change. The departments were successful and so continuity and keeping on top was the key.

As Head of Department you basically have to learn where everything fits together as quickly as possible. But as I’ve said, we’ve pretty much established structures although I’ve made some changes but nothing drastic.

(STEM)

HoDs had to learn systems as quickly as possible in order to ensure that the departments run as smoothly as possible. This meant spending a large proportion of their time dealing with administrative issues and solving problems that originated from the centre. Indeed this role, although at times frustrating, needed to be understood and negotiated. For example dealing with people on short term contracts: “because it’s people’s careers, people’s lives” (STEM).

This maintenance involves more than simply managing the systems, an important element involves ameliorating the effects of external changes that impact the department to ensure that there is no negative impact. Thus in one difficult situation a HoD said:

I tried my best to give them reassurance that we would find a way of dealing with this and working with this, and that there is a way of dealing with this, and I am starting to believe it too! …. but that is obviously my role.

(HASS)

The key role of communicator as described by both HoDs is also then, one of translator, and indeed careful presenter of issues that will impact on staff. The HoD is the conduit from the senior managers to staff.
I think if there’s one person in charge doing these things and all the others, all my colleagues can go about their research or their teaching and just enjoy their jobs and don’t have to need to worry whether this fits within the University Strategic Plan or not because there can be, well I mean obviously they all cooperate in making sure that we make the most of the Strategic Plan but you know, well how things actually fit together only I need to think about.

(HASS)

In neither case did the HoDs talk about any possible influence they might exert on wider university strategic direction. Indeed one talked about strategy in terms of the department as quite different from strategy at university level. Where there were questions about any changes to systems or structures they were in terms of how well they would suit the department rather than any real challenge to the changes. The HoDs welcomed any opportunities to get information direct from the senior managers, and valued opportunities to have discussions with them. They would have liked more direct contact with senior managers that the more hierarchical systems now in place allowed, both ruefully commented on earlier flatter systems. The HoDs in these two cases saw themselves as the protector of academic freedom and a mediator of change where mediation often means acting to find ways to deflect or ‘soften the blow’ of changes such that staff can get on with their work.

Conclusions
The two HoD’s interviewed do not feel threatened by the changes that are happening around them. They believe that the university will support them and enable them to continue as they have been doing. They see themselves as a buffer between the university and the department. They are fully in tune with the departmental culture and see no reason to change it, other than in ways that will maximise their successes. Thus these HoDs read the signs and consider ways in which they might support the department in accommodating to changes that might, in the longer run, give them advantage.

A strategy of accommodation may prove to be either one of accommodating [change] within existing frames of reference or accommodating to it. New languages and new modes of management may gradually be assimilated, leaving individuals and departments more in tune with, and able to adapt to, a changing environment but with their values, beliefs and agendas essentially undisturbed. New languages and
modes of management may, however, also exercise their own influence and create substantial long-term change in academic values and practices and in how they are regulate.

(Henkel 2004, p31)

The two HoDs interviewed did not make particular use of the language associated with managerialist, or neoliberal agendas. This does not mean that they are not familiar with, or do not use the language where it is appropriate. Neither expressed any difficulties with senior staff briefings, finding them useful sources of information. The findings of the current study concur with Kolaskar (2008) who suggests that universities have adopted and integrated the neoliberal agenda and the language associated with it. Resulting in managers that are comfortable with its use and accepting of the regimes. The HoDs did not comment specifically on the drives to increase knowledge exchange, to work with industry and to consider the employability of their students. They do, however, seem to understand the territory well. They see it as their job to try to assuage the university and the wider political need to satisfy these agendas, but believe that this is best done by keeping to the original purpose of the university as research and teaching, indeed they do not question this purpose for a minute. They seem, therefore to be in the business of ‘accommodating change within existing frames of reference’, rather than accommodating to it. How far they are allowing change to change them is less clear. In meetings with other HoDs for example, they discuss ways in which they will address the need to demonstrate ‘impact’ in the next round of research assessment (The REF), rather than discussions that might challenge the notion that impact can or should be measured. By not challenging or seeking to debate changes precipitated from the ‘outside’ they may, by small degrees be allowing their departments to be changed.

It may not be, as Gumport (2000) implies, that we are at some sort of tipping point for universities, but rather a gentle slide to a position where the purpose of universities has changed. Or perhaps the change is towards a new kind of organic community as described by Barnett (2004). However, it is surely important that these questions are fully debated as a community.

Supported by, and in tune with the wider university agenda HoDs of strong departments believe in the importance of protecting staff, ensuring that they have the space in which to pursue their own research and to develop as academics. They clearly see themselves as accommodating change. How far the academics in these departments feel able to pursue their own projects would provide useful insights into the extent to which the HoDs perceptions match those of their colleagues. How far the heads of ‘less
than strong’ departments are able to protect their colleagues and so ensure that they too have the ‘spaces’ in which to exercise their academic freedom and develop their professional identities needs additional and sensitive study.

**Bibliography**


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