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Neo-collegiality: restoring academic engagement in the managerial university

Stimulus paper

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Stimulus Paper Series

The Leadership Foundation is pleased to present this latest series of 'Stimulus Papers' which are intended to inform thinking, choices and decisions at institutional and system levels in UK higher education. The themes addressed fall into different clusters including higher education leadership, business models for higher education, leading the student experience and leadership and equality of opportunity in higher education. We hope these papers will stimulate discussion and debate, as well as giving an insight into some of the new and emerging issues relevant to higher education today.

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1
Parr (2013)

2
Times Higher Education
(30 January 2014)

3
Barnett (1999)

Executive summary

University staff are their institutions' key resource. They are an intelligent, articulate and highly educated group. Despite this, university staff in the UK have little say in how their institutions are managed. As the survey in this paper shows, they would like a more decisive and influential voice. It is over two decades since the collegiality of yesteryear was deemed unviable for modern universities and a new managerial approach became the norm. However, the managerial initiatives which seemed shiny and new then have lost both lustre and novelty now. Current management research argues that hierarchical models are outdated and inappropriate in knowledge-based sectors. Technological advances offer previously undreamed of ways for staff across universities to influence, interact and take decisions. Flatter structures enable greater autonomy and flexibility serving more effectively the needs of student and academic, teaching and research. Neo-collegiality is not about a return to some largely imagined cloistered past. It recognises the necessity of many of the changes wrought by the New Public Management reforms of previous decades. However, neo-collegiality asserts that the time is now ripe for managerial paradigms to shift. Neo-collegiality offers the restoration of broader, more collegial decision-making processes to create a professional, efficient and appropriately 21st century management approach. Such processes engage academic and professional staff across institutions, adopting and adapting a range of flexible and innovative means as appropriate to the distinctive features of individual universities in the UK's large and varied higher education sector.

Introduction

"Around four in 10 university employees feel unable to make their voices heard within their institutions, according to preliminary findings from the first Times Higher Education Best University Workplace Survey".¹ This figure was confirmed by the survey's final results.²

Excluding the "don't knows" from this 2013 survey, around half of all employees in UK universities say that they are unable to make their voice heard within their institution. So stark a finding is unsurprising, confirming trends noted for many years by research into management in the UK's higher education institutions.

Lack of surprise should not equate to lack of concern. Such voicelessness represents a failure of university management and governance.

University staff are – by and large – highly educated, intelligent and articulate people. They represent the key resource held by their institutions.

Alongside their disciplinary expertise, staff members' individual knowledge of the discrete subdivisions of their universities offers senior management invaluable insight into the component parts of what Ron Barnett has termed "supercomplex" institutions.³

- | In a sector increasingly called to, and willing to, renew emphasis on the substance of students' engagement with universities, it is staff at a distance from central management who, arguably, know best the specific concerns which matter to students within their department or unit.
- | Beyond the micro-level, the insights of intelligent employees, trained in research and problem solving, can contribute either individually or in aggregate to problem solving and envisioning at institutional level.
- | Current trends – in management literature and beyond – point to the possibilities of decentralised, multi-vocal and disaggregated approaches in motivating employees to engage and innovate. Denial of voice represents an anachronistic approach to running universities. Much management research demonstrates the advantages to be had, particularly in knowledge-based sectors, when self-managed professionals interact reciprocally with peers,⁴ and when the watchwords are autonomy, mastery, and purpose.⁵

Nor are staff merely a resource.

- | University management has a common duty to value employees. Lack of influence coupled with the imposition of excessive and unmediated expectations represents a stress-inducing combination, as many an in-house stress survey has confirmed in recent years.
- | Disempowerment promotes disengagement from the institution and its mission, leading to what Bruce Macfarlane terms “the retreat from academic citizenship”.⁶

This stimulus paper aims at a large target: the underlying principles of university management. Its central premise is that the time is ripe for a re-alignment of managerial approach in the UK university sector. Such a time occurs rarely, perhaps every couple of decades, but is now overdue.

The paper gives a name - neo-collegiality - to a viable and emergent management paradigm.

- | It takes a normative stance in favour of neo-collegiality, setting out its fundamental premises and advantages in the context of current management practices.
- | It draws on both a significant body of literature in management and higher education studies, and on a survey of staff across the UK higher education sector.
- | It sketches what neo-collegiality might look like in terms of structures and responsibilities within the sector.
- | It does not provide a blueprint to be followed as the sector is too diverse for that to be either appropriate or feasible. Instead, the paper proposes principles and potential reforms to set a path for future developments in university management.

Overarching all of the above, this stimulus paper seeks to spark debate among those who would lead and manage our universities.

4
Hamel (2007; 2012)

5
Pink (2009)

6
Macfarlane (2005)

Defining terms

“Collegiality” and “neo-collegiality” in this paper refer primarily to a structured form of collaborative decision-making.

It is important to be clear about this from the outset since the existing literature on collegiality is broad and the term collegiality is used and understood in different ways. In common usage we most often refer to collegiality as a mode of behaviour, having in mind relations between colleagues which are mutually supportive, geared to the good of the collective over the individual and not fixated on rank. In more specialised literature it can have the specific usage of “collegiality as colleges”, referring to those universities which “make considerable play upon the importance of their colleges in defining their identities”⁷

This paper’s primary definition of collegiality, as a structured form of collaborative decision-making, allows its application across the university sector. The central argument of the paper is that the voice of universities’ academic and professional staff ought to be heard with far greater decision-making and decision-influencing force than is currently the case. The paper’s focus therefore is the formalised structuring of a collegial decision-making process. Not “formal” in the sense of stiff and stuffy, but formalised and structured in the sense that (neo-)collegial means become the established way in which decisions are made. It is too easy otherwise for institutions and individuals to commit to or to urge collegial behaviour without anything actually changing in terms of decision-making (see Box 1).

Box 1

Discussing definitions

This paper’s focus is on structural rather than behavioural collegiality. After all, colleagues may behave collegially in a managerial setting or behave uncollegially in a collegial setting.

The difference between collegiality as collaborative decision-making and collegiality as collegial behaviour is exemplified in a survey response (for this paper) from a senior manager at a post-1992 university when asked about collegial practices in his institution:

“We are looking at more use of open-plan offices to support collegiality.”

By the definition used in this paper, collegiality here would mean a collaborative decision being made by the staff concerned to the effect that instead of having their own rooms, they would like to move into open-plan offices. Whereas what the survey respondent appears to have in mind is that senior managers might make the decision to deprive academics of their own offices, with the intention that working in an open-plan setting would increase collegiality in the behavioural sense between more junior colleagues.

Renewing the narrative of collegiality

There is a standard, well-rehearsed narrative about collegiality in UK universities. It is set out below and it needs updating.

The massification of higher education and ever-increasing demands for public accountability ushered the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm into the UK higher education sector in the 1980s and 1990s. Out went collegiality in its technical sense as an organisational form involving collaborative decision-making. Increasingly, so some of the literature argues, such organisational change sparked a corresponding decline in collegiality in its broader behavioural sense.⁸ Structures shape perceptions of what the institution values and rewards and so the decline of structural collegiality cannot but be reflected in a decline of behavioural collegiality.⁹

The Jarrat Report of 1985 led the way in recommending a reduction in the power of senates and the designation of vice-chancellors as chief executives. These principles were incorporated in the articles of governance for the post-1992 universities and, along with a decreasing role for departments, have been “increasingly percolating through to the pre-1992 universities in response to more managerial and target-driven agendas” ever since.¹⁰

In came new managerialism. Instead of decisions made by senates, decisions are made by senior management teams (SMTs). Senior colleagues have morphed into line-managers. Collegial behaviour has been skewed by targets and the measurement of outputs. There has been a “shift in power from senior academics and their departments to the central institution and the dominance of systems over academic values”.¹¹ The essential, oft-repeated critique of such a shift is that it prioritises questions of money over “intellectual, educational, scientific and cultural” concerns.¹²

At the same time, many declaim, with rational justification, the necessity of these changes. Universities as complex institutions with multi-million pound turnovers, admitting far greater numbers of students, engaging in national and international competition, drawing substantially on the public purse, require skilled managers and executive teams, accountability structures, performance management, corporate plans, and professionals in non-academic functions (financial, marketing, legal, estate management, and so on). To advocates of “new managerialism”, collegiality is romanticised nostalgia, seeking a return to some imagined cloistered past. Contrived collegiality is simply a mythologised reaction to managerialism deployed as a weapon against necessary change.¹³

The notion of neo-collegiality accepts elements of both sides in this story. However, before outlining what this means, let us revise and update the story a little. After all, the debates about a new managerialism replacing outdated and collegially conservative approaches goes back almost three decades. What seemed shiny and new then has lost both lustre and novelty now.

8

Hellawell and Hancock (2001); Hollis (2012); Rowland (2008, p356)

9

Twale and Luca (2008, p106)

10

Shattock (2008)

11

Kogan and Hanney (2000)

12

Collini (2012 px)

13

Fullan and Scott (2009, p29); Spiller (2010, p680)

14
Shattock (2008, pp194-195)

The narrative of university management needs updating with regard to four specific issues.

- | First, regret among university staff at their lack of voice can no longer be dismissed as nostalgia for the way things were. A combination of the huge growth of the university sector, particularly since 1992, and the fact that new managerialist approaches have been the dominant mode in the sector for a couple of decades or more, means that most staff have known nothing else. The overwhelming support for a more collegial approach, shown in the survey and literature discussed later in this paper, stems from contemporary judgement and observed need, not from conservative and nostalgic outlooks.
- | Second, NPM is no longer new. If the virtues of an imagined collegiality have been mythologised, then so too has the notion that the values of managerialism – expressed in approaches such as monitoring employee performance, meeting targets and publicly auditing quality – somehow represent the only way to deliver change in complex, 21st century, knowledge-based organisations.¹⁴
- | Third, UK universities, and the environment within which they operate, are currently experiencing changes (higher fees, less direct reliance on the state, an austerity-led stripping away of previous certainties about purpose and sustainability) of a nature fundamental enough to require a re-consideration of existing management and governance paradigms.
- | Fourth, if we accept – as the concept of neo-collegiality does – that some necessary cultural and structural changes were introduced during the era of NPM, these are now sufficiently embedded to allow the re-introduction of appropriate elements of collegiality, renewed to fit today's university.

Nailing the “neo” in neo-collegiality

The prefix “neo” before collegiality serves to emphasise that this paper has little truck with a “things were better in the old days” nostalgia for a time when universities were small communities of scholars, researching without state-imposed evaluation frameworks, teaching the intellectual elite of the nation's youth, and enjoying status and comparative pay levels well above those experienced today. Maybe things were better then for scholars and students so engaged, but we live in a different world now.

- | Neo-collegiality accepts that many of the changes introduced by NPM had a logical rationale. A range of managerial approaches were put in place in response to fundamental developments such as the massification of higher education, huge increases in the size of both the sector and of institutions within the sector, global competition, and responsibility for huge sums of money, much of which stems from the taxpayer.
- | Neo-collegiality recognises that the core business of universities is research and teaching. These define the university, and any management structure ultimately exists to support them.

- | Neo-collegiality asserts that a restoration of more collegial decision-making processes can work alongside the essential features of NPM to restore some of the virtues of collegiality while maintaining a professional and efficient management structure appropriate to the needs of the 21st century.
- | Neo-collegiality offers a menu of possible means by which to give voice to university staff. Majoritarian voting by elected representatives is not the only form, nor often the most effective form, of participatory decision-making. Different modes of collegial management will suit different universities, tasks, or institutional sub-divisions. (see “Structuring neo-collegiality” below).

15
Hellowell and Hancock (2001)

A sector surveyed

This paper began by noting the initial results from the first 2300 responses to a survey conducted by Times Higher Education, in which around a half of all respondents (omitting the “don’t knows”) reported that they could not make their voices heard within their institution.

In the Hefce-funded Underpinning Excellence in HE (2011) research programme, high-performing departments were identified from four UK institutions and a “holistic range of staff members” surveyed. All of these staff members highlighted collegiality as a key behavioural trait within their departments.

In Hellowell and Hancock’s case study surveying academic middle managers, collegiality was identified by respondents as the most appropriate form of academic decision-making.¹⁵

For this stimulus paper a survey of 48 academics from across the UK higher education sector was carried out (see Box 2 for survey details). The survey took a primarily qualitative rather than quantitative approach, asking two questions and seeking to gather stories, experiences and expectations as much as opinions. None the less, in terms of broad quantitative results, Table 1 provides a useful overview of the opinions gathered.

Table 1. Responses to survey on collegiality, 2013

	Strongly no (%)	No (%)	Yes but ... (%)	Yes (%)	Don't know (%)
Do the formal management structures in your university today allow all colleagues to participate in decision-making?	10	50	20	17	3
Would you value a more formally collegial approach to decision-making in your university?	---	10	3	87	---

16
Watson and Amoah (2007);
Watson (2009, pp52-53)

The vast majority of UK academics surveyed would like a more formally collegial approach to decision-making in their university. Of those who would not like more collegiality, the main reason given was that they do not want to be burdened with decision-making functions and committees, and would prefer that others continue to fulfil this role, leaving them free to get on with meeting the various demands of their job without the additional load of management responsibilities. Only 17% of respondents gave an unequivocal “yes” to the question of whether their universities’ management structures allow colleagues to participate in decision-making.

Box 2

Key survey information

The survey for this stimulus paper was not based on random sampling but, rather, following David Watson and Michael Amoah’s 100 Voices,¹⁶ it asked its two questions to 48 academics from across the higher education sector, targeting a mix of respondents in terms of seniority, institutional type and discipline. To bolster response rate and the quality of responses – and again following Watson and Amoah – those surveyed were nearly all academics with whom this paper’s author has had professional contact during more than two decades in academia. In almost all cases their views on collegiality were not known to the author before the survey. Close (that is, school and departmental) colleagues of the author were not surveyed.

The two questions asked were:

1. Do the formal management structures in your university today allow all colleagues to participate in decision-making? If so, how and at what level?
2. Would you value a more formally collegial approach to decision-making in your university?

Survey data:

- | The 48 staff surveyed come from 42 different institutions.
- | 20 of these institutions have become universities since 1992.
- | 33% of those surveyed are readers or professors.
- | 8% of those surveyed are in senior management positions (dean or pro-vice chancellor).
- | 17% of those surveyed are in middle management positions (heads of school, department, or unit).
- | The overall response rate was 75%, with 63% (30 academics) giving full responses.
- | Respondents were promised anonymity in order to encourage openness.

What follows is a distillation of the most common themes emerging from the accounts given in response to the survey. Setting out the responses thematically has identifiable purposes.

- | It provides a classification of common collegiality-related concerns. Unless specific issues are isolated, their resolution remains difficult and we are left with calls for greater collegiality being dismissed as abstract affectations with little “hard” managerial substance.
- | All of the themes identified from the survey responses are returned to when the paper considers potential solutions with regard to structuring neo-collegiality.
- | Detailing types of difficulties facilitates our understanding of the particular effect that these issues have on the management of institutions and on the staff within institutions.

The survey accounts condensed here emphasise common and continuing practice. One response might be that anybody who knows UK universities knows already that many staff feel this way. End of. Another, more engaged, response might be concern that *despite* the fact that such staff feelings are widely known, there remains as yet little sense in the sector that managerial practice might be re-oriented to address these questions. A key aim of this paper is to stimulate proposals stemming from this type of engaged response.

Themes emerging from the neo-collegiality survey

In theory ... in practice

Many respondents answered the first question (“Do the formal management structures in your university today allow all colleagues to participate in decision-making? If so, how and at what level?”) by noting the difference between what is theoretically the case and what actually happens in their institutions.

A senior lecturer from a pre-1992 university which retains its traditional collegial apparatus, notes that:

“In theory all of this [internal governance structure] allows for wide participation at various levels, but that is not really the ‘lived’ experience.”

(Respondent 23, senior lecturer, pre-1992 university)

In practice, even where collegial structures remain – for example, with a senate being the body with formal authority over academic matters – they often function not as a forum for democratic debate and discussion but as a top-down mechanism.

“It seems to be taken for granted ... that the real ‘strategies’ of the university are determined by the ‘senior management group.’”

(Respondent 15, reader, post-1992 university)

“The routine management structures currently in place in theory allow colleagues to participate in decision-making ... In practice the preoccupations of the senior management team (SMT) nearly always determine the direction of major decisions and the decisions that my colleagues make are largely about the way they will implement policy decided at SMT.”

(Respondent 17, senior lecturer, pre-1992 university)

The mechanisms by which ostensibly collegial governance procedures fail to manifest the power vested in them are varied.

Informal practice has a powerful influence. Where it has become practice for decisions to be made elsewhere and confirmed – some might say rubber-stamped – by a representative body, then it is a rare individual who might challenge, let alone successfully challenge, such practice.

Procedures similarly affect the ability of institutions to function in particular ways. Control over agendas, tactics when chairing meetings, the method by which assent or dissent are registered – all of these can be used to limit collegial practice.

Box 3

An example of collegial theory differing from institutional practice

One respondent tells of her surprise, as a new member of staff in a traditional pre-1992 university, at being introduced one summer by the outgoing dean of faculty to “the new dean, who will be taking over next term”, and then in the autumn term receiving notification that nominations were being sought for the position of dean.

On querying with the university authorities how it was that she had been introduced to the new dean before nominations for the post had even opened, she was told that in theory the elections were open but, in practice, a very strong candidate had already been identified.

This example not only reveals that the formal collegial procedure of election had been superseded by an informal selection process by senior management. Its key detail, of the dean’s successor being introduced as such months before the election procedure, indicates that the procedural norms had retreated so far into the background as to not even require lip service with regard to their vitality.

Hollow consultation

In the absence of formally collegial decision-making, the consultation has become a common tool in UK universities. A strong theme emerging from survey respondents is anger at hollow consultations.

When used well, what could be wrong with consulting across a wide range of relevant staff before decisions are made which affect them or their work? Actually, even when used well, the consultation undermines formal collegiality since it

functions as a favour granted from on high. Engagement and ownership would be better enhanced by formal participation in the decision-making process than by an invitation to participate in a ring-fenced, usually non-binding, consultative process.

The survey responses gathered for this paper show further that consultations are frequently not used well. Respondents reported consultations happening after decisions had been made and the opinions gathered in consultation exercises being ignored. What too often occurs might better be termed – to borrow a neologism from a former colleague – an insultation than a consultation (see Box 4).

“There is a lot of nodding/gesturing to consultation processes – but not that many ongoing attempts to really talk to people involved in day to day work affected by a specific change. I find that frustrating.”

(Respondent 9, senior lecturer, pre-1992 university)

“Consultations are there to try and persuade staff (and others) of decisions that have effectively already been taken.”

(Respondent 11, professor, pre-1992 university)

“I went to various consultative fora before these ideas were implemented and it was quite clear that although the ideas were fundamentally flawed, the decisions had already been taken and discussion was warranted only in the details.”

(Respondent 23, senior lecturer, pre-1992 university)

Box 4

Consultation or insultation?

Respondent 3, a senior lecturer in a post-1992 university, details a process in which key changes affecting his department were put forward by senior management for consultation. The department unanimously rebutted the proposals, providing detailed reasoning which set out what they saw as their potential negative effects on students and staff.

The changes went ahead and the department’s members received no response to their objections.

Irrespective of the internal arguments in the case, as a consultation this process does not stand up to scrutiny. Those consulted had their views rejected without response, no amendments to the proposals were made, their voice was not heard.

Respondent 3 concluded that “there is no point whatsoever in engaging with such consultations, as to do so only dignifies and gives credence to a sham process.”

Different levels, different conversations

A third common theme among survey respondents was that of distance between senior management and lower levels within the institution. In the large super-complex 21st century university there seems a degree of inevitability about

this finding. However, one respondent from a presumably less complex small institution (one of about 40 UK higher education institutions with fewer than 3500 FTE students) reported

“an almost complete shutdown of communication between the institution's senior management team and staff in general ... any discussion taking place only between those who sit at the 'high table.'”

(Respondent 8, professor, post-1992 university)

Table 1 shows that 20% of respondents to question 1, regarding whether all colleagues can participate in decision-making, gave answers recorded as “yes but ...” These responses tended to point to the distinct modes of behaviour at lower (usually departmental) level and at senior (institutional) level, noting that they are able to participate in decisions at the departmental level but not the institutional.

Respondent 10, a senior lecturer in a pre-1992 university, sums up a common feeling well:

“participation in decision-making at the very highest level seems very remote. I am not even aware of how I would try to connect with the senior management team for the university even if I wanted to.”

More collegiality “would help to reduce the ‘them and us’ culture which affects the working environment in university spheres. It often appears as if important strategic decisions are taken at the most senior level with no input from colleagues who are working ‘at the coal face’ ... New procedures could be established in order to encourage these feedback loops, which could ultimately inform better decision-making at the highest level.”

Respondent 15, a reader at a post-1992 university, reports a similar gap between different levels in the university even where committees are supposed to act as a link between them:

“representatives tend not to ... serve as conduits between mutual conversations at different levels and are rather individuals appointed to go to particular themed meetings and report back information that is ‘cascaded’ from higher layers of management in order that departments and individuals can ‘understand’ it better in order to implement whatever new decisions are made at the level of these committees.”

Respondent 23 (senior lecturer, pre-1992 university) talked of a “mismatch between decisions made remotely at top level and the grassroots experience of those carrying them out”.

Throughout the survey's responses the idea of “the university” as a separate entity from the respondent or her department prevails. Collegiality – or the lack of it – goes both ways, of course, and Professor Sir David Watson, former vice-chancellor of the University of Brighton, notes that

“one of the things, in my experience, that most infuriates senior managers is when quite senior members of the organisation say ‘why doesn’t the university do something about x?’ as if they have nothing to do with it.”¹⁷

Unfortunately this paper’s survey reveals a widespread feeling that staff often want to but are unable to “have anything to do with it” due to the disconnect between centralised decision-making and the wider staff body.

Respondent 28 (reader, pre-1992 university) argues that

“re-introducing practices that encourage community and collegial discussion seems to be a very important thing. Helping people at the lower level feel genuinely responsible should be a priority for managers at the top end. It requires some imagination to do that.”

Disincentives to participation

A recurrent theme in the survey’s responses was that participation in existing university management structures can have a negative effect on individual careers. To put it bluntly

“good citizens’ don’t get promoted. Those who don’t teach or contribute to admin but get bought out for research grants do. This creates a lot of resentment and undermines collegiality further.”

(Respondent 23, senior lecturer, pre-1992 university)

Respondent 5, a professor at a pre-1992 university declared that

“hiding is a strategy for personal survival ... collegiality can look like a recipe for losing control over one’s academic life, since voluntarily engaging with important issues will result in the burdensome overload of endless amounts of data ... initiatives ... forms to fill and monthly data checks. Too much!”

This is especially the case given that at his institution,

“collegiality is not recognised as a value, certainly not by my HoD! Sitting on committees and being a good citizen is regarded as an individual choice.”

As well as drawing out accounts of difficulties that academics have experienced in getting their voices heard, the survey’s two questions also prompted some more up-beat engagement with the possibilities of a (neo-)collegial future. Two particular themes emerged: institutional flourishing and the common good.

Calls for collegiality I – institutional flourishing

Several respondents commended the potential for the enhancement of collegial processes to breathe new life into an institution’s activities.

“As for valuing a more formal collegial approach: yes, I think it would make a difference. I think it might be just the thing to get us out of our rut...”

(Respondent 18, lecturer, pre-1992 university)

17

Watson (2009, p48)

18
Hil (2012, p10)

19
Middlehurst (2013, p290)

A more formally collegial approach would serve “specifically to re-energise and redefine the academic project at the university”

(Respondent 25, professor, post-1992 university)

Opening up institutional decision-making processes to a wider cohort of staff than simply the senior management team would create a more multi-vocal university. It would encourage new approaches and possibilities developed by individuals and groups with diverse perspectives, priorities and experiences. It would enable the university to engage with different generations and with those working across the institution’s disciplinary and functional range. It would foster and develop the practice – among staff and students – of open and critical communication with institutional power. This in turn enhances institutional governance - when management goes unchallenged, efficacy atrophies.

Calls for collegiality II – the common good

This paper makes a management case for neo-collegiality. The question of the common good receives scant attention in university management literature. None the less, the survey respondent who argued that neo-collegiality would “diffuse the idea of the university as a space for the public good” (Respondent 25, professor, post-1992 university) was not alone. Richard Hil, writing from an Australian perspective but describing changes instantly recognisable in the United Kingdom, baldly summarises the issue when he states that:

“the notion of universities as institutions for the collective good has been largely usurped by the need to survive in an increasingly cut-throat marketplace.”¹⁸

Ideals such as the love of knowledge, the development of wisdom and the freedom to speak truth unto power retain too little purchase in the discourse of academic management. Neo-collegiality’s contribution here would be to engage a wider range of voices in creating strategy and mission, and so develop and prioritise goals beyond the important but narrow concerns of institutional flourishing.

Neo-collegiality and wider management literature

Robin Middlehurst has recently investigated whether the management structures in UK universities are fit for the future. Her research, drawing on a range of management literature, similarly homes in on the need for “disruptive innovation” in contemporary organisations:

“Hamel suggested that there is a need to challenge the status quo in organisations. Interestingly, ‘challenging the status quo’ is one of the five leadership practices of exemplary leadership in Kouzes and Posner’s model (2003), also identified as relevant for higher education settings.” (Bryman 2007).¹⁹

Gary Hamel's research into successful innovative organisations, as further elucidated by Middlehurst, shows that challenges to the way things are done can be combined with appropriate discipline and responsibility where specific conditions are met. These conditions centre around frontline colleagues having responsibility for outcomes backed up by decision-making authority over the factors which influence those outcomes.²⁰

The results of this paper's survey of academic staff do not, to say the least, immediately shout "give us disruptive innovation". The feeling is widespread among university staff that there has been too much innovation and disruption for too long. Indeed, 15 years ago Mark Chater, in back-handed acknowledgement of Charles Handy's lauded book *Gods of Management* (1978), identified Systemania, the cult of constant change, as one of the "gods of mismanagement" in the UK higher education system. "In the cult of Systemania ... every new year brings a new system ... she brings exhaustion as her changes exceed human speed and defeat human rationality."²¹

Most criticism of change among the survey's respondents is, however, couched in terms of it being detrimental to the successful performance of their jobs, and being imposed on them from above without genuine consultation or engagement with the underlying decision-making. As one respondent had it:

"I do object to being expected to defend decisions that I have had no input into making ... If I'd been part of the process that had crafted this decision, well, I think that'd have been fair enough, but I wasn't - and yet I am supposed to defend it in public. I, and many other faculty, simply refused to do so. I certainly didn't go around banging a drum telling the world it was crazy, but I am not going to look my students in the eye and lie to them."

(Respondent 12, professor, pre-1992 university)

Hamel's prescription for challenging the status quo, while no doubt in need of some culturally specific amendments in transit from pioneering US corporations such as Google and Gore-Tex to your average British university, advocates precisely the opposite of what irks this survey respondent. Hamel argues, on the basis of his research, that top-down approaches do not make the grade in today's world.

"Frontline employees may be smarter and better trained, but they're still expected to line up obediently behind executive decisions. Lower-level managers are still appointed by more senior managers. Strategy still gets set at the top ... Why does management seem stuck in a time warp?"²²

The provocation of this stimulus paper is that neo-collegiality represents an appropriate mode of management for the 21st century university. In line with Hamel's contention, many staff members are tired of the old ways of hierarchical management which too often leave unheard the intelligent, articulate voice of the frontline academic. Far from being a nostalgic hankering for the old days, neo-collegiality represents a call for university management to get up-to-date.

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Hamel (2007, p136); Middlehurst (2013, p290)

21

Chater (1998, p233)

22

Hamel (2007, p2)

"Many people are well nigh desperate for collegial governance, lament the lack of it and often explicitly express frustration that it is not collegial desires which are lacking but institutional possibilities to act in collegial ways."

(Respondent 15, reader, post-1992 university)

To slightly amend Hamel - and with due British academic apologies for brusqueness - why does so much university management in the UK seem stuck in a time warp?

Structuring neo-collegiality

Having made a case for enhancing collegiality in UK higher education management, the paper turns now to proposals for introducing or strengthening neo-collegial structures in today's university.

However, before essaying potential ways forward for the development of neo-collegiality, one central caveat deserves emphasis. No management paradigm solves everything. The case of this paper is that appropriately increasing collegiality will make a contribution to better-run universities, smarter strategic decisions, more satisfied students, the enabling of research, enhanced staff engagement with their institutions, and universities' commitment to the public good. Note well – "make a contribution to". Managers will still mess up, students will still complain, academics will still lament limits on autonomy, budgets will still be limited. Difficult management decisions remain difficult management decisions, however made.

Neo-collegiality is no cure-all. Shifting the management paradigm in UK universities towards a more collegial approach would represent an improvement, not an omnisolution.

Diverse collegiality in a diverse university sector

In proposing a range of ways in which neo-collegial structures and practices might be introduced into today's university, this stimulus paper makes no attempt to be prescriptive. The UK higher education sector is so diverse in terms of institutional size, mission, articles of governance, national policy framework, structure, history, student body, geographical location, ethos, mission group membership, leadership style, and much more, that there is a decreasing number of circumstances in which it is helpful to conceptualise it as a unified sector.²³

This stimulus paper offers therefore a menu of possible neo-collegial means through which to give voice to university staff.

Although it represents the traditional approach, majoritarian voting by elected representatives is not the only form, nor always the most effective form, of participatory decision-making. Tapper and Palfreyman argue – not, I think, approvingly – that the notion of collegiality put forward by such doyens of university management studies as Burton Clark and Michael Shattock takes “a particular form with consultation, exhortation, partial incorporation and tangible incentives as its drivers rather than the exercise of authority”.²⁴

This paper argues similarly that, without embedding real authority and power in collegial structures, those structures are susceptible to becoming window dressing, irrelevant and ignored when matters of substance and contestation are to the fore. None the less, the paper seeks also to offer ways forward towards the renewal of collegiality that are practical, innovative and flexible. Different modes of collegial management will suit different universities, tasks or institutional subdivisions. What is more, not all universities share the same formal charters and statutes. In pre-1992 universities the senate (or equivalent) remains - de jure if not de facto - the supreme academic body, whereas in post-1992 universities, more power lies with the governing body.

In setting out possible forms of neo-collegial initiative, the paper does not expect some great shift in management paradigms in the short term – that's not how paradigms shift. The intention is rather, in line with the aims of the stimulus paper series, to offer new ideas in order to provoke discussion about the foundational paradigms of university leadership and to facilitate movement towards a renewal of collegiality. Even if successful in this aim, it is surely inevitable that change will take years and will often involve the incremental introduction of collegial – or at least “more collegial” – decision-making features into existing arrangements.

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Filippakou et al (2012)

24

Tapper and Palfreyman (2010, p108)

25

Rowland (2008, p357)

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Tapper and Palfreyman (2010, p158, pp170-171)

27

Middlehurst (2013, p291)

28

Spiller (2010, p689)

29

Taylor (2013, pp91-92)

30

Elton (2008, p232)

Box 5

Neo-collegiality in recent literature on higher education management

This paper is not a lone voice in calling for neo-collegial approaches to university management.

- | Stephen Rowland has advocated a “renewed collegiality”.²⁵
- | Tapper and Palfreyman talk about “collegial rejuvenation”.²⁶
- | Robin Middlehurst writes approvingly of institutions endeavouring to “update collegiality”.²⁷
- | Dorothy Spiller argues that the term collegiality itself is “too tired, too muddled and misused” and that what matters is finding “fresh ways of articulating these common aspirations”.²⁸
- | Mark Taylor, drawing on US models, makes a strong case for wider staff engagement in university governance structures, arguing that the “centralisation of decision-making to the exclusion of academics is likely ... to foster academic alienation from institutional strategy and objectives”.²⁹

The call to restore something of what has been lost in academic culture, but in a renewed, updated, fresh incarnation, is put well by Lewis Elton in urging the continued recognition of Humboldtian ideals of academic freedom in today's universities.

“Such recognition would not take universities back to an unreconstructed past, but it would recognise that the necessary changes will have to be achieved in a non-dirigiste manner and arise from the by now well known principle of complexity, according to which changes at the lowest level of an organisation, ie at the level of individual members, led through the complexity mechanism to changes at the institutional level.”³⁰

A commitment to neo-collegiality might well begin with discussion within a university over appropriate areas for and modes of collegial decision-making. In terms of areas, should the focus be at university level or department level? Should it cover academic questions alone, or wider issues of institutional policy and mission? A potential area of collegiality which arises often in the literature is that of a collegial appointments process for senior university figures.

In terms of mode, neo-collegiality could embrace a number of principles and take a number of forms. The approaches set out below are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. As with the paper as a whole, they seek to stimulate thought and debate about emergent possibilities for restoring and recasting collegial practice. A number of these approaches involve the enhanced use of technology (see Box 6).

Box 6**Technology-enhanced collegiality**

Neo-collegiality is about updating management practices in universities. New technology offers new possibilities for staff voices to be heard and for a wider range of individuals than at present to engage in decision-making. A number of the suggestions made in this paper with regard to the implementation of neo-collegial structures and practices involve using technology to enable staff voices to be heard and to facilitate structured decision-making – not just discussion – within universities.

Many universities already employ new technology to engage with staff. Too often, however, such technology is under used and employed in support of outdated approaches to management, typically in a one-way process run from the centre with no decision-making authority. Think of the regular vice-chancellor's or dean's report, or the ubiquitous staff survey whose outcomes too rarely result in reformative response.

Web-based or app-based engagement potentially offers the opportunity for staff to be far more involved than at present in institution-wide discussion and decision-making.

One survey respondent advocated the development of a "public sphere" in universities where key issues might be discussed by the staff body as a whole, preferably facilitated and formally recognised by the university, enhanced by features such as:

- | senior management endorsement and participation;
- | time-limited policy- or problem-based consultations;
- | advisory or mandatory voting;
- | online petitions to mandate discussion at senior levels, similar to those introduced by the UK government to mandate parliamentary debate;
- | easy availability of university-wide management data, with a presumption of transparency replacing the current password-protected secrecy.

Such examples represent but a few from many possibilities for using technology to open up communication between senior management and the wider staff body and to enable the staff body as a whole to participate to some degree in decision-making.

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Bacon (2009); Whitchurch (2013)

32

Department for Business
Innovation and Skills (2011)

Two principles of neo-collegial initiative

Institutional inclusivity. The collegiality of bygone years revolved around a dominant professoriate. Neo-collegiality promotes a more inclusive approach. First, non-academic professionals have become key staff members in today's universities, bringing expert input across multiple functions.³¹ Neo-collegial proposals would usefully include both academics and non-academic professionals. Second, student participation in neo-collegial decision-making processes fosters a sense of institutional membership, appropriately dilutes the notion of student as customer, and meets government's intention that the student should be at the heart of the university sector.³²

Collegial processes emphasise the status of institutional membership, rather than the hierarchy of line management. This is not to say that members of staff are not employees or that line managers are not line managers. It is rather to highlight and develop the appropriate complexity of roles in a university. In pre-1992 universities, academic staff are formally members of the university. There is no contradiction here between being both an employee and a member of a university, although the status of university member is so seldom mentioned these days that most academic staff are unaware of it. Formal status aside, the notion of being a member of a university as well as an employee fosters commitment to and engagement with the institution.

Management position can be envisaged as both functional and pertaining to rank. The roles of employee and manager are not compromised by collegial governance structures. Neo-collegiality would seek to hold together the functionally different positions of employee and member, line manager and colleague. In many institutions this would not represent too great a cultural or structural innovation, as, for example, the existence of term-limited revolving departmental headships, where colleagues effectively take it in turns to line manage one another, remains in much of the university sector, particularly in pre-1992 universities.

Promoting collegiality. Taking on managerial responsibilities represents a dilemma for many academics as time for research and teaching becomes squeezed, and too often such commitments are not rewarded through promotion, particularly in research-led universities. Prominent among the few counter-arguments to the enhancement of collegiality revealed in this paper's survey stands such an unwillingness among busy academics to take on the extra responsibilities, committee meetings and administrative engagement which they associate with collegiality. Survey respondent 5 is illustrative in this regard:

"I am certain that if I put up my hand for ANYTHING (say further recruitment of pg students) I would be incorporated into a process that prevented me from doing anything but that."

(Professor, pre-1992 university)

As the next section of this paper sets out, neo-collegial practices can take a number of forms and are not tied to existing structures and representative committees.

Collegiality as defined here primarily concerns collaborative decision-making, which need not necessarily involve engagement in the carrying out of those decisions. Of course those who choose to, or are expected to, take on particular management and administrative responsibilities will, under a neo-collegial process as under existing arrangements, find that they take up time. The difference with neo-collegial processes will be that staff have more of a voice when it comes to institutional policy on promotions, workload, and so on. Furthermore, as a number of respondents to this paper's survey noted, collegial structures encourage commitment to collegial activity. As Bruce Macfarlane argues:

"commitment to service has never been purely about reward and promotion. There is a long and rich tradition of faculty embracing their citizenship responsibilities as an integral part of their academic identity serving a variety of communities".³³

Such a commitment flourishes more readily in a university which privileges membership over hierarchy, develops a collaborative ethos and pursues a genuinely shared mission.

Forms of neo-collegial initiative

The following section sets out a menu of the potential forms that moves to neo-collegiality might take.

- | **Concordat on collegiality.** Lewis Elton suggests that "a concordat between management and academia under present circumstances might benefit their relationship."³⁴ As a starting point for the introduction or renewal of collegiality, such a concordat might make a positive contribution by committing senior management to collegial principles and approaches, and clarifying the location of such renewed collegiality in terms of the issues, level, areas of responsibility and so on where it will be operative.
- | **Reviving existing structures.** As several survey respondents noted, many institutions have a structure which is collegial in theory but in practice does not function collegially. For these, a starting point might be the revitalising of existing processes by, for example, a formal, well-publicised management commitment to genuine debate and democratic process, backed up by identifiable action, such as changes in the conduct of committee business to facilitate wider engagement and the voicing of alternative opinions.
- | **Transparency and collegiality.** Widening staff engagement in decision-making requires greater transparency in terms of the workings of universities. As with other aspects mentioned in this paper, the degree of transparency varies between UK universities. None the less, it is broadly the case that much of what is hidden behind firewalls and passwords need not be. From institutions whose staff email directories are not available without a log-in, to multiple electronic barriers between departments, units, schools, and faculties within universities when it comes to accessing management data, the current preference for secrecy over transparency is widely apparent. An important neo-collegial measure would be an institutional review of what information is kept hidden from whom, with current practice being replaced by a presumption of transparency rather than a presumption of secrecy.

33
Macfarlane (2005, p309)

34
Elton (2008, p232)

- | **Collegiality on demand.** This would involve the introduction of a process by which lower level units (for example, academic departments) or groups of staff (for example, via an online petition reaching a certain proportion of signatories) could mandate discussion of an issue at senior level, either within the senior management team or within the university's senior representative body. The introduction and promotion of such a process by senior management would serve to emphasise its normality and utility, undermining narratives of "us and them" divisions or discontent which petitions or departmental dissatisfaction would tend to generate in most current university management systems.
- | **Consensus collegiality.** Despite being the standard mode of traditional collegiality, representative committees and majoritarian voting as decision-making tools can serve to undermine collegial behaviour as particularly divisive issues lead to conflict, resentment from those on the losing side of debates and the deepening of internal divisions. In some settings a facilitated process of consensus building might be more appropriate. Such a process involves a recognition from participants that a compromise position will be sought, which is acceptable to everyone but might not meet all the wishes of anyone. Facilitated consensus takes time and commitment. It would be unwieldy as an institution's primary decision-making procedure, but represents an alternative approach suited to particular settings, for example, away days for colleagues who work together.
- | **Temporal variations.** A rapid "big bang" neo-collegial transformation in UK universities would face barriers such as vested interests, habitual practices, managerial conservatism and staff resistance to seemingly constant reorganisation. A staggered programme for the (re)introduction of collegial practices might involve setting a timetable for this over, say, a five-year period. Similarly, one approach to striking a balance between current managerial practice and the introduction of collegial decision-making would be to focus the latter initially on longer-term processes. For example, an annual or biennial institution-wide binding consultation on the university's strategic plan, including a formal process for confirming its broad approval through mechanisms such as majoritarian voting, or the consent of discrete units (faculties, schools, departments).
- | **Subsidiarity.** The principle of subsidiarity holds that decisions should be made at the lowest level capable of making them effectively. A neo-collegial commitment would prefer the principle of subsidiarity to centralisation, encouraging a paradigm shift whereby untidiness, disaggregation and cacophony might not always be seen as inferior to uniformity, control and homogeneity. The application of such a principle in university management would enhance collegial decision-making by enabling colleagues across the institution to engage with and make decisions on issues which directly concern them. Current levels of centralisation in decision-making vary between institutions, with a high level of central oversight in some institutions discouraging initiative and responsibility, and undermining performance. Examples range from the comparatively insignificant but still disempowering insistence that staff use the corporate font and email signature template, to more significant matters such as the imposition of rules on research organisation taken at a level sufficiently removed from departments to be unaware of disciplinary specifics.

- | **Collegial appointments.** This paper's survey saw several respondents relate cases of a lack of collegiality in relation to appointments (see Box 7). Traditionally, collegial processes have paid particular attention to appointments, drawing on the notion of electing members into the "college" rather than appointing employees of an institution. There were problems with that approach, not least around the tendency for those doing the (s)electing to choose people like themselves and so perpetuate an elite closed shop. None the less, survey responses demonstrated some resentment at appointment processes being too tightly controlled, both at departmental and at senior management level. As a letter in Times Higher Education sets out, academics in most continental European universities elect their deans and vice-chancellors, whereas "UK academics do not seem to mind that they are no longer able to elect officers of their universities and do nothing to counter their disenfranchisement".³⁵

35Times Higher Education
(23 January 2014, p32)**Box 7****Appointing and not appointing colleagues collegially**

In terms of processes of particular significance and long-lasting impact to a university, there is not much to match the appointment of new colleagues, or of existing colleagues to new roles. Universities realise this, employing human resource professionals to facilitate the process and keep it within complex, and often changing, legal boundaries. There are some notably collegial processes in place too, with candidates to departmental appointments in particular often finding themselves required to present to the department as a whole.

Survey responses showed, however, that non-collegial practices also continue.

- | One respondent from a pre-1992 university complained that departmental colleagues not on a selection panel were refused permission to attend presentations by prospective lecturers, despite some strong lobbying for this to be allowed.
- | In another pre-1992 institution, a respondent noted that senior internal appointments are habitually made without any advertising or application process within the university. As a result, senior posts are filled only by those known to and recognised by the vice-chancellor, before any other potentially suitable colleagues are even aware that there has been a vacancy.

36

Dearlove (2002); Lapworth (2004); Shattock (2006); Taylor (2013)

- | **Veto collegiality.** Veto collegiality would not represent an ideal model for behavioural collegiality, but rather a “red button” approach to collaborative decision-making, enabling a designated element of a university’s staff (for example, a simple majority, a majority of departments, a majority of the senior management team) to exercise a veto over a decision or appointment. The intention of such a provision would be that the existence of a “veto collegiality” process proves sufficient to ensure that no decisions likely to be unpopular enough to invoke the process are ever made and, instead, consultation and collective decision-making are encouraged.
- | **Shared governance.** The role of university councils and governing bodies lies largely outside the scope of this paper. None the less it is appropriate to note the timely development of a body of literature advocating “shared governance” of universities.³⁶ Many of the arguments on which such advocacy bases itself are similar to those presented in this paper, including the notion that bottom-up rather than top-down processes better nurture success in knowledge-based enterprises, and that academics engage more readily with institutional missions if they have a role in developing them. In addition, calls for shared governance note the dangers of too cosy a relationship between vice-chancellors and chairs of council. A mutually supportive bond between the two individuals in whom most institutional power is vested can transgress into the shutting out of all other voices, even those of senior colleagues.

Conclusion

The preceding sections have established that too many academics across the UK higher education sector today feel that their voices are not heard within their institutions. Universities’ greatest resource – their highly educated, intellectually smart, often eloquent staff – remains underused in institutional decision-making. The notion that the staff body as a whole ought to have, indeed might usefully have, decisive input into key management decisions has died a death in most UK universities. A common complaint within the sector is of inappropriate change being imposed by managers (and by external bodies) against the advice of those who work at the academic frontline and to the detriment of their work in the core business of research and teaching.

This state of affairs is broadly recognisable, although not universally applicable. A standard explanatory narrative argues that super-complex 21st century universities require efficient business-style management, particularly in difficult times, and that old-style collegiality produces conservative and ineffective management. Survey evidence shows that most staff feel the lack of collegial institutional management to be detrimental and excessive. Contemporary management research, particularly in knowledge-based sectors, makes a strong case against hierarchical, centralised control, arguing that initiative, creativity and commitment all flourish where frontline colleagues have appropriate decision-making authority alongside their responsibility to deliver.

The overarching argument of this stimulus paper is that the time is ripe for a paradigm shift towards a more collegial approach appropriately updated to 21st century realities. There exist both need and opportunity for the renewal and reinvention of collegial practices in the UK university:

- | Too many staff feel voiceless.
- | Current university management structures and practices are often outdated.
- | Current management literature emphasises the disadvantages, particularly in knowledge-based sectors, of top-down hierarchical structures.
- | Current management literature emphasises the advantages of frontline staff having increased autonomy.
- | The desire for more collegial decision-making is widespread across the UK's university sector.
- | Collegiality improves decision-making, bringing with it an awareness of the front-line activities and priorities which matter most to students.
- | Neo-collegial decision-making can take many different forms, often enhanced by new technology.

At the same time, this paper emphasises that neo-collegiality is not an omniscient solution to management problems. It offers an improvement in process, but the difficulties facing any university management structure – that is, the difficulties inherent in managing any university today – still remain. The diversity of the UK higher education sector, as well as the internal logic of collegial approaches, means that the appropriate forms of neo-collegiality vary between different universities.

Above all, the purpose of this stimulus paper is to stimulate discussion and provoke change in a collegial direction. The debate about collegiality has been too hackneyed for too long. *Neo-Collegiality: Restoring Academic Engagement in the Managerial University* represents a viable and up-to-date starting point from which to push off the often glacial process of paradigm shifting.

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Biography

Edwin Bacon

Over more than two decades Edwin Bacon has worked in several UK higher education institutions, among them large Russell Group universities and a small teaching-led “new” university. During his career he has combined his academic specialism (politics) with strategic and management roles and wider sectoral engagement, including higher education consultancy and directing the Leadership Foundation-supported Management of Small Higher Education Institutions Network for over ten years. He has an MBA in higher education management and has published on the role of non-academic professionals in UK universities. Alongside work on and in higher education management, his primary academic and research focus continues to be in the field of Russian politics, where he has published six books and numerous articles, as well as serving as a specialist adviser to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee and as a senior research officer in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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