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Higher Education Leadership
Current Practices and Challenges in Austria and Britain

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Introduction and Background

(European) Higher Education has been changing in terms of

study structures, funding of research, labour regulatory frameworks, reporting systems, increasing competition and governance mechanism

"the university is no longer expected to fashion a cultured elite, but to fuel the engines of economic competitiveness and survival" (Harley et al. 2001, p. 330)

Though these changes seem to be a general phenomenon, national differences in pace and scale of and resistance to reforms are observable.
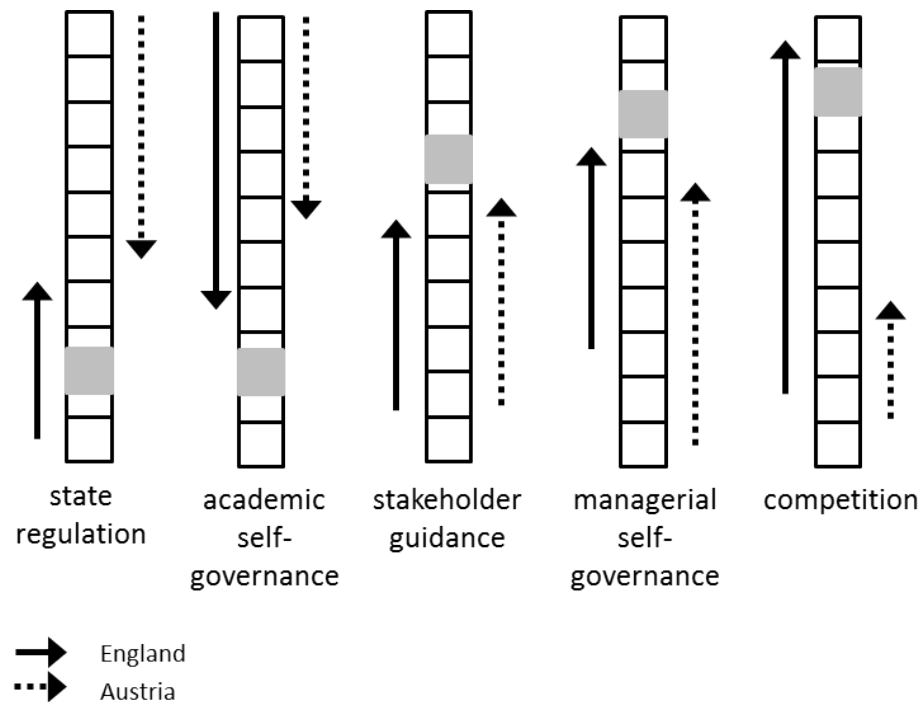
For this presentation we will contrast the HE governance background in Austria and the UK with focus on its influence on HE middle-management leadership practices.

How do academic middle-managers in Austria and GB perceive current changes and challenges of HE management and leadership and how do the cope with them?

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Introduction and Background

Comparison of HE governance alterations in Austria and Britain

De Boer, Enders and Schimank 2007, p. 149, adapted by the authors

state regulation   academic self-governance   stakeholder guidance   managerial self-governance   competition

→ England
⋯▶ Austria

Introduction and Background

HE systems of Austria and Britain:

Duality of two different types of HE institutions (HEIs)

Austria (formal partition since 1993/94)	Britain (informal partition since 1992)
"traditional" universities	"pre-1992"/"old" universities
Universities of applied sciences (UAS)	"post-1992"/"new" universities

Both, UAS (A) and "post-1992" universities (GB) *"emerged from a rather more bureaucratic and hence more hierarchical and rule-bound local authority tradition than their more collegial competitors."* (Deem 1998, p. 48)

Research Question and Methodology

Research question

How do academic middle-managers in Austria and GB perceive current changes and challenges of HE management and leadership and how do the cope with them?

Methodology

Comparison of two related studies carried out in GB and Austria with focus on gaining in-depth knowledge on current leadership practices in HE:

Britain: Bolden/Petrov/Gosling (2008)

Austria: Ehrenstorfer/Sterrer/Preymann/Aichinger/Gaisch (2015)

- Results on HE leadership in UK were compared to the findings of the Austrian study.
- Differences and similarities were analysed in due consideration of the different national HE contexts.

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Findings

Structural and organisational context of HE leadership and management

Fundamental changes in terms of marketisation and steering mechanisms (in line with the ideas of New Public Management)

- Stronger in GB, but also prevalent in Austria

Critically discussed in both national contexts: the fit between new governance mechanism and traditional academic self-perception

- Degree of acceptance of changes (higher in GB)
- Vehemence of defending traditional academics ideals (higher in Austria)

Both studies *"perceived a greater acceptance of 'managerialism' (or the need for top-down management) within the 'new' than 'old' universities which still showed a preference for 'collegiality' (or consensual decision-making)." (Bolden et al. 2008, p. 4)*

Findings

Attractiveness of leadership and management positions

GB: difficult to fill the position of head of department

               not challenging to recruit to more senior levels (Deans, PVC, etc.)

Austria: not difficult to fill the position of head of study programme (UAS)

               challenging to fill the position of dean (more negatively connoted)

> This finding hints to a nationally different perception of HE leadership and management as a promising career option.

Common denominator of both studies

HE leadership positions have a "detrimental effect on research profile" (Bolden et al. 2008, p. 2) and HE managers "are likely to have reached the pinnacle of their research career" (ibid).

Findings

Key tasks of academic middle-managers

Common denominator of both studies

High variety of functions which range from strategic to operative duties - both are externally and internally oriented

National differences

GB: professional managers tend to assist heads in their operative workload at their academic units

Austria: this service is not yet common in all Austrian HEIs (at the 'traditional' university even less than at the UAS).

GB: decentralisation of professional services (HR, Estates, Finance, IT, etc.)

Austria: centralisation of these services

In any case, the objective of both strategies is to support "manager-academics" (Deem/Brehony 2005) and **professionalise HE management**.

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Findings

Necessary set of skills and competences of manager-academics

Common denominator of both studies

- Social skills

- Professional and scientific expertise

- Teaching competences

- Leadership skills

- Management skills

Professional development

Similar ways to enhance professional development of HE manager-academics but a difference in

- awareness and progress of leadership development (higher in GB than in A) and

- emphasis on the development of future HE leaders (higher in GB than in A).

Findings

Predominant form of leadership

Common denominator of both studies

- **Cooperative/distributed leadership** which means that "both strategic and operational responsibility and influence are taken at all levels, from top-level strategic initiatives to the delivery of programmes and bidding for research funding" (Bolden et al. 2008, p. 39). This kind of leaderships seems to meet the demands of both, adaptability and flexibility of HEIs best.

- **Transformational leadership** which can be related to a "strong and inspiring leadership from individuals in key roles [… which can] give a sense of common purpose and direction, engender a sense of trust and openness, encourage communication and dialogue and create an innovative and supportive culture in which initiatives can flourish." (ibid, p. 3)

Discussion and Reflection

- British HE manager-academics seem to accept 'managerialism' to a greater extent than their Austrian equivalents.

- More elaborated perception of HE leadership and management position as promising career option and necessity of institutionalised ways of professionalisation in Britain than in Austria.

> more competitive character of HE governance affiliated with a stronger efficiency pressure, the longer tradition of NPM or a generally more neoliberal mind-set in the Anglo-Saxon context

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Discussion and Reflection

Despite these variations, transnational similarities overweigh the differences (in terms of understanding of proper forms of leadership, the distribution of leadership at the different levels within HEIs, the required leadership competences of HE leadership and the demands for leadership development).

> This supports the perception of a universal nature of HEI as expert organisations and the isomorph development towards a higher level of 'managerialism' in HEI

Despite the differing level of progress and system resilience in Austria and Britain, corresponding challenges for HE manager-academics appear to be very similar.

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Many thanks for your attention!

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