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Power, Protected Spaces and institutional entrepreneurs in higher education

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Contribution

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With recent changes in European university governance arrangements and with financial stringencies, it is possible to observe university as tighter organization, where decision-making is more centralized and the boundaries between different units are increasingly blurred. Numerous studies show significant university transformation (de Boer, Enders & Schimank, 2007; Leišytė & Dee, 2012; Paradeise et al., 2009). These changed conditions at universities have had serious repercussions for what academic work is about, and where, how and under what conditions academics can pursue knowledge creation and dissemination activities. The accountability following the quasi-market logics have increased the oversight over all academic activities. The tensions for academic work in such context abound. This paper aims to unravel some of these tensions, with specific emphasis on the tensions between profession and organization – and tensions between the logics of quasi-market and collegiality. Academic profession is seen as threatened by the quasi-market logics and the related governance regime. It has been portrayed a 'victim' of organizational standards and performance monitoring while managers are portrayed as the 'carriers of neo-liberal reforms and organizational control' (Noordegraaf, 2011, p. 1350). The reaction to the threats results in professions creating protective spaces in their organizations by a 'return to professionalism' (Freidson, 2001; Noordegraaf, 2011; Rip, 2011). However, studies examining such responses to changing governance have so far limited understanding of how academics in different disciplines and at different hierarchy levels respond to them and how they maintain their

professional autonomy and power (e.g. Leisyte, 2007, Teelken et al. 2012). Specifically, we aim to answer the questions: How do academics respond to the threat of their academic protected spaces?

We argue that academics respond to the institutional reform processes which threaten their professional autonomy in various ways depending on how much room for discretion they have and in which organizational unit they are embedded. Here discretion is understood as the power academics possess to assert authority over the content and methods of their work as well as the prestige they hold within the academic community (Chreim et al., 2007; Leisyte, 2007). Discretion may also be influenced by the prestige of their discipline in the discipline pecking order – in which physics would claim the first place (Rip, 2012), thus even though a professor can have high prestige in her/his community, it is not necessarily the case that this person has high discretion organizationally- as the power of other disciplines may be higher in negotiating the autonomy and resources organizationally where academics from different disciplines meet.

Method

The current study examines the case of bioengineering academics in one group at a technologically oriented university in the Netherlands. The data includes 15 interviews conducted in 2010-2014, observations of the group in the period 2010-2015, a range of organizational documents, website materials, organizational reports as well as CVs of the studied academics. We have selected the group which in strategically important discipline for Dutch science and industry-bioengineering. The group is highly regarded in the field as seen from research evaluations and awards received by its academics.

Expected Outcomes

We can observe that bioengineers use a range of protected spaces at different organizational levels. The protected spaces are build not only through basic financing from the institute and university, but also through constant diversification strategies in acquiring research funding from different public and private sources, such as industry and diversifying staff who works on what kind of research projects (risky or mainstream). Although the junior academics and postdoctoral researchers see these spaces as vulnerable and uncertain, they seem to be socialized to build confidence and entrepreneurship behavior to ensure that these spaces can be maintained and even enhanced in their own future groups. Further, the responses to the pressure to perform and flourish in a managerial university are strategic from the group director, who is capitalist par excellence. In 5 years he managed to increase the group significantly and to set agenda for the institute's research direction. When he tried to reassert his institutional entrepreneurship at the university level his whole group was poached by another university in the country. This elite academic negotiates the order of worth of his group and his discipline within the organization and in the broader national scientific and university context and does so successfully taking up the management role of the research institute at another university. This move shows the increased power of this group and the strong institutional entrepreneurship in ensuring the discretion over the academic work on the other hand, and the protected space to carry out this work on the other.

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