

From Loosely Organized to Tightly Managed?

Evidence from the Analysis of Research Evaluation Processes in the
UK and the Netherlands¹

*Contribution to Sub-Theme 17: Organising Science: The Increasingly Formal Structuring of
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Elke Weyer

Centre for Higher Education Studies (CHEPS)

E.Weyer@utwente.nl

1. Introduction

Concerns about rising costs and mediocre performance of tertiary education institutions in Europe have caused policy makers to modify their internal governance structures. Over the last decades, European universities have received a whole new set of rights to create a regime of managerial discipline and control of academic work. Internally, the new face of the university expresses itself in new lines of authority and responsibility in university management (see e.g.(Clark 1998; Braun and Merrien 1999; Henkel 2000; de Boer, Enders et al. 2007; de Boer, Enders et al. 2007; Paradeise, Reale et al. 2009) . At the same time, accountability requirements have been driven up, requiring the university to assume responsibility for its actions vis-à-vis the state and other stakeholders in industry and society.

Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) argue that the reform endeavours aim at turning public sector organisations into complete organizations with an own ‘hierarchy’, ‘identity’ and ‘rationality’. remains unclear, however, as to what extent new public management (NPM) has transformed the university into a type of organization with firm-like strategic

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Grit Laudel for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.

abilities. In particular, serious doubts have been expressed about the ability of university managements to take over control over the strategic direction of research. University managers are ultimately dependent on the scientific judgment of scientific communities who do not only determine what shall be researched, but also what quality standards the research is expected to meet (Musselin 2007; Whitley 2008).

Doubts about the steering abilities of universities indicate that there is no clear-cut answer to the question whether new public management reforms have transformed the university into a new type of organization. In a previous paper², I suggested to tackle the phenomenon of organisational change³ in higher education with the following research question: *can the organisational transformation of the European university be explained as transition in archetypes?* To this end, I suggested a conceptual approach which allows for investigating whether higher education reforms have brought about another *archetype* of university organization where managerial control of the two key activities of universities is indeed possible. The research question to be explored in *this* paper is to what extent this transformation has taken place in the area of research. The study of real-life decision-making processes relating to research evaluation at two universities in England and the Netherlands shall enable me to gain deeper insights into the magnitude of organisational change.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: the second part starts with a quick overview on the framework of organisational change that will be used. The third part elaborates on the methodological framework of the study, shedding light in the different methods applied to build empirical evidence. Part four presents empirical findings from the analysis of decision-making processes in the field of research evaluation at a Dutch and at an English research university. The paper concludes with comparing the real-life authority patterns of performance evaluation processes in England and the Netherlands to the idealized authority distributions of the post transformation archetype *Managed University*.

² Weyer, E. (2011). Making Sense of Organizational Change in European Universities- Archetypes as Ideal Patterns of Authority Distribution. EGOS Conference: Gothenburg, Sweden (July 7-9, 2011).

³ This paper treats “organisational change” and “organisational transformation” as interchangeable concepts.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Explaining the Meaning of Archetypes

Acknowledging that organizational transformation is an inherently vague and ambiguous concept, I define organizational transformation of higher education institutions as transition in archetypes. To this end, I investigate whether new public management inspired higher education reforms have brought about another archetype of university organisation which I termed the “Managed University”.

I define an archetype as an organizational prototype which represents an idealised **authority distribution** in various decision-making areas that relate to the management of teaching and research.⁴ The term *authority distributions* refers to the spread of decision-making powers among interdependent organizational actors that operate within the higher education institution or in its wider environment and that affect decision making outcomes through their acting. The term *decision-making powers* denotes the capability of actors to shape decision-making results according to their personal preferences or to define an organizational goal of the decision process under consideration.

The herein suggested concept of archetypes brings the **authority relations perspective** (Whitley et al.) to the fore, which is one promising way to conduct an integrated assessment of changes in public science systems. Its basic assumptions are (a) that the changes that public science systems go through have implications for the relationships between actors and the way that they are able to realize their interests and (b) that authority relations as regards the selection of research goals are the main channel through which changes in the knowledge production system are effectuated (Whitley 2010). I consider the authority perspective to be superior to the concept of governance for one particular reason: the **governance concept** in its sociological meaning refers to the need of a set of mutually independent actors to devise coordination mechanisms for ‘coping with their interdependence’ and describes these mechanisms. The authority relations perspective goes one step further by trying to explain *how* individual and collective actors at all levels of aggregation draw on a wide set of action

⁴ Given that the limited scope of this paper does only allow for the study of one decision-making area (namely research decisions), the forthcoming analysis does not look at authority distributions in teaching decisions.

resources to shape organizational outcomes, thus manifesting their authority in a given context.

2.2 Explaining Organisational Transformation with the Help of Archetypes

Archetypes are characterised by a particular authority configuration that is typically bound in time. It is for this particular reason that archetypes are deemed considerably useful for the study of organisational transformation, as the occurrence of certain environmental phenomena such as a major policy reform can have a lasting impact on the authority distributions of that type. Significant changes in the authority configurations can eventually give rise to a new archetype. The trigger to organizational transformation does not only have to be sought in the organisation's external environment; it can also stem from within the organisation (e.g. by an organisational leader that takes the lead in re-organising the operational procedures of the university).

Last but not least, archetypes serve as a levelling board for the impact of organisational transformation in real life decision-making processes that take place in universities. By comparing authority distributions in real-life decision-making processes to the idealised authority distributions of the archetypes, it is possible to see how reality diverts from the idealised authority configuration of the archetype.

2.3 Authority Distributions in the Managed University

The account of the *Managed University* builds on several strands of literature as well as personal deliberations. The authority structure (see table 1) of the *Managed University* draws partly upon the normative agenda of New Public Management as a narrative of micro and macro-level change of institutional forms and their underlying cultural rationale (Reed 2002, p.165). This narrative celebrates the almost 'unlimited' exercise of managerial authority within the modern private and public sector corporation. However, considering that NPM as a management ideology is of little guidance for modelling the authority relationships of/inside universities, this particular strand of literature was complemented with higher education research on the effects of NPM- driven reforms on higher education institutions (see e.g.(Schimank 2005). This type of literature shows the emergence of a new executive system

that marks a clear shift away from traditional academic collegiality to more independent university managers (Ferlie, Fitzgerald et al. 1996; Marginson and Considine 2000; Duke 2002).

I do not consider the strengthening of the managerial steering core of the *Managed University* to be an end in itself, but argue that it serves the overall purpose of making the university more steerable in a way that it can respond more quickly to environmental challenges. This in turn emphasizes the importance of adding those actors to the “authority equation” that are associated with these challenges. To take account of the role of these actors in the *Managed University* archetype, I made two assumptions that are based on Whitley (2008). On the one hand, I agree with Whitley that the formulation of research goals within the university cannot occur without the expertise of the **(inter)national scientific elites**. The same holds true for **funding agencies** that provide crucial funding sources for university research and whose objectives and procedures determine the resource patterns of universities. The second assumption is linked to the first one. Given the rising importance of funding agencies, universities are less financially dependent on the **State** and may therefore determine their own patterns of resource use and purposes.

The second column of table 1 contains the authority distributions of the Managed University archetype in the decision-making process “research decisions”. As regards the actors that operate from within the university (called “internal actors”), the archetype template draws a distinction between the **top management** (e.g. rectors, central administrators), the **middle-management** (e.g. deans) and **academics**. Latter category also includes the organisational elite of the organisation.⁵ Based on the argument made above, the centre of authority among these “internal actors” resides within the top –and the middle-management, whereas academics have suffered from a considerable loss in their decision-making authority.⁶ As far as the university’s external authority relations are concerned, **(inter)national scientific elites**

⁵ The category ‘organisational elite’ includes both professors and heads of departments.

⁶ The Managed University places more authority into the hands of mid-managers than in the hands of the top-managers: although a strengthened strategic apex enables top-managers to determine the university’s key policy lines, they reside too far away from the technological core to translate these policies into practice and thereby shape the content of these policies. This task is “reserved” to mid-level managers.

as well as **funding agencies** exercise considerable authority on coining research decisions, whereas the **State** has no strong voice in shaping the research agenda.

Recalling that the herein suggested archetype approach explains organisational change as transition *in* archetypes, the third column of table 1 highlights in what respect the *Managed University* deviates from pre-new public management (NPM) archetypes such as the Bifurcated Hollow University.⁷ Whereas research decisions in pre-NPM archetypes was dominated by the rule of the ‘dons’, the authorship of performance-related goals in the *Managed University* must be sought within the university management. In terms of the university’s external authority relations, the decreased financial dependence of the *Managed University* on the state funding has lowered the involvement of the State in research decisions. By contrast, the authority of the (inter-)national scientific elite as well as funding agencies has been enhanced.

	Internal actors			External actors		
	Top-management	Mid-level management	Academics	State	(Inter-)national scientific elite	Funding agencies
<i>Managed University Archetype</i>	medium	High	low	Low	high	high
<i>Net gain/loss of authority with respect to Pre-NPM archetypes</i>	gained	gained considerably	lost considerably	lost considerably	gained	gained

Table 1: Authority distributions in the decision-making process “research decisions” according to the Managed University.

⁷ For a full account of the authority relations of the state-chartered employment university and the bifurcated hollow university, see Whitley 2008.

3. Research Methods

The archetype approach seeks evidence for the organisational transformation of the university through the study of authority patterns in real-life decision-making processes relating to the management of research and teaching objectives (in *this* paper: research evaluation). The reconstruction of a real-life decision making process is a promising way to learn more about the authority structures of universities, because the authority of an actor can then be determined by the role s/he had in a particular process.

Decision-making has appropriately been described by Harold Lasswell (1936) as the process of “who gets what, when and how”. The literature indicates a decision-making process of several steps, typically consisting of identifying the problem (also called “agenda-setting”), framing the boundaries of the decision (decision formulation”) selecting solutions (the stage at which a decision becomes produced) and implementing the decision (Rowley and Sherman 2003; McKenna and Martin-Smith 2005)cited in Rixom 2011). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to treat the decision-making process as a linear model, as latter typically spreads over various stages and involves different actors that dispose of various action resources and have their own view of a desirable decision-making outcome.

Recalling that a decision or a policy originating from the top-or mid-management level of the organisation can be worthless if it becomes ignored by individual researchers on the shop-floor level, the fourth part pays particular attention to the **effects** of the decision made: did the research evaluation criteria put forward by managers affect the research practices of academics and if so, how?

Case-study research was considered to be the most promising way for gaining insights into the multi-faceted nature of decision-making in higher education institutions. As regards the selection of countries, the Netherlands and England were chosen on grounds of their early adoption of new public management-inspired governance reforms in tertiary education. The assumption goes that if archetype change in Dutch and English higher education systems is for real, the effects should be evident by now in the research and teaching practices of academics in the sampled universities.

The selection of universities being located in two different countries furthermore serves the purpose of gaining insights into the territorial validity of the archetype *Managed University*. If universities had only been selected from one country, it would be difficult to assess the claim that the *Managed University* represents an authority configuration that is not entirely shaped by the specificities of national higher education systems, but has a universal character.

One university was selected per country; they resemble each other in terms of their geographical location, age and size.

If the epistemic properties of research and teaching limit the re-distribution of authority, the organisational transformation of the university should proceed unevenly in the various research cultures. For instance, the resource intensity of the experimental sciences requires researchers to finance research projects with external project funding. As university managers cannot control the use of these resources, they lack an important authority channel to shape research decisions in that area. This paper therefore studies decision making processes in a life sciences- and in a humanities faculty.

The evidence presented in the fourth part of this paper is based on a mixture of documentary analysis and data from sixteen semi-structured interviews with members of the university top management, mid-level managers, heads of department and academics at different levels. Interviews became analysed with the help of qualitative content analysis, a method being particularly suitable when mainly the content of the assembled information matters more than the sequence of information. The structuring and processing of data can then significantly contribute towards reducing the complexity of the gathered information (Gläser and Laudel 2011).

Two sets of interview guides were being used to take account of the hierarchical position of the interviewee:

- One interview guide had exclusively been designed for individual researchers without management positions who were asked about their research practices with a view to

determine the impact on research evaluation procedures on individual publication behaviour

- The other interview guide was targeted at interviewees in management positions and hence contained specific questions about the interviewee's insider knowledge about decision-making processes and formal rule systems in the area of research evaluation. The emphasis of the interview was on back-casing these processes in order to identify the role of the various actors that had participated in them and to learn about the instruments they drew on to shape the decision-making outcome

Limitations to the Study of Decision-Making Processes

Faculties and departments had been chosen on grounds of their humanities- respectively their life sciences orientation and not for the occurrence of an eventful decision-making process in the field of research evaluation (see case selection criteria above). The trade-off of this choice was that I also had to accept a negative answer to the question whether there had recently been a decision on evaluation criteria. Whenever such a situation occurred, the interview dealt with exploring the *routine process* of individual performance appraisals.

The decision-making processes that interview partners reported on vary in terms of subject of decision-making, actors, length and scope. Although this diversity compromises the comparability of the four cases, they can still be compared in terms of the authority distributions that characterise them and hence fulfil the most important objective of this research.

The detailed and correct reconstruction of university decision-making processes would require talking to all actors that participated in the process under consideration.⁸ Doing so turned out to be difficult in practical terms, as the participants of several decision-making processes were not known beforehand and interviews with more interview partners could not be arranged spontaneously. As a consequence, the empirical presented down below contains some information gaps that can only be addressed by conducting a second round of interviews.

⁸ In the case of collective actors, one actor of the actor constellation would be sufficient.

4. Presentation of Results

To facilitate the reader's understanding of the decision-making process that was studied, every case description in part four contains an illustration that sheds light into the hierarchical layers of the university that the process encompassed. As a decision can be the product of several interlinked decision-making processes that take place on different hierarchical levels of the organisation, the analysis zooms into one process (e.g. the definition of a publication list) on one hierarchical level that is marked by a red box. The illustrations furthermore provide insights in the various actors of the decision-making process and specify their decision-involvement.

4.1 Research Evaluation at a Dutch University

4.1.1 Development of a Publication Policy at the Faculty of Humanities (NL)

The first decision-process that was studied at the Dutch university regards the definition of a publication policy at the Faculty of Humanities. At the time of the interviews, the Faculty of Humanities had a publication policy in place that was very concise about scientific output expectations of staff members. As such, the Faculty conducted research evaluation of academic staff with the help of bibliometrical indicators that became reviewed in individual performance appraisals. The output expectations that academic personnel were confronted with were very concise in that they did not only contain detailed prescriptions as regards the number of publications to be produced (three publications per full-time research FTE per academic year), but also defined in which journals the research ought to be published. As the formulation of the publication policy had not occurred long ago, the interviews dealt with reconstructing the process that culminated in formalising the faculty's publication policy. The analysis focuses on the mid-management level of the organisation as the location of the red box in Figure 1 shows.

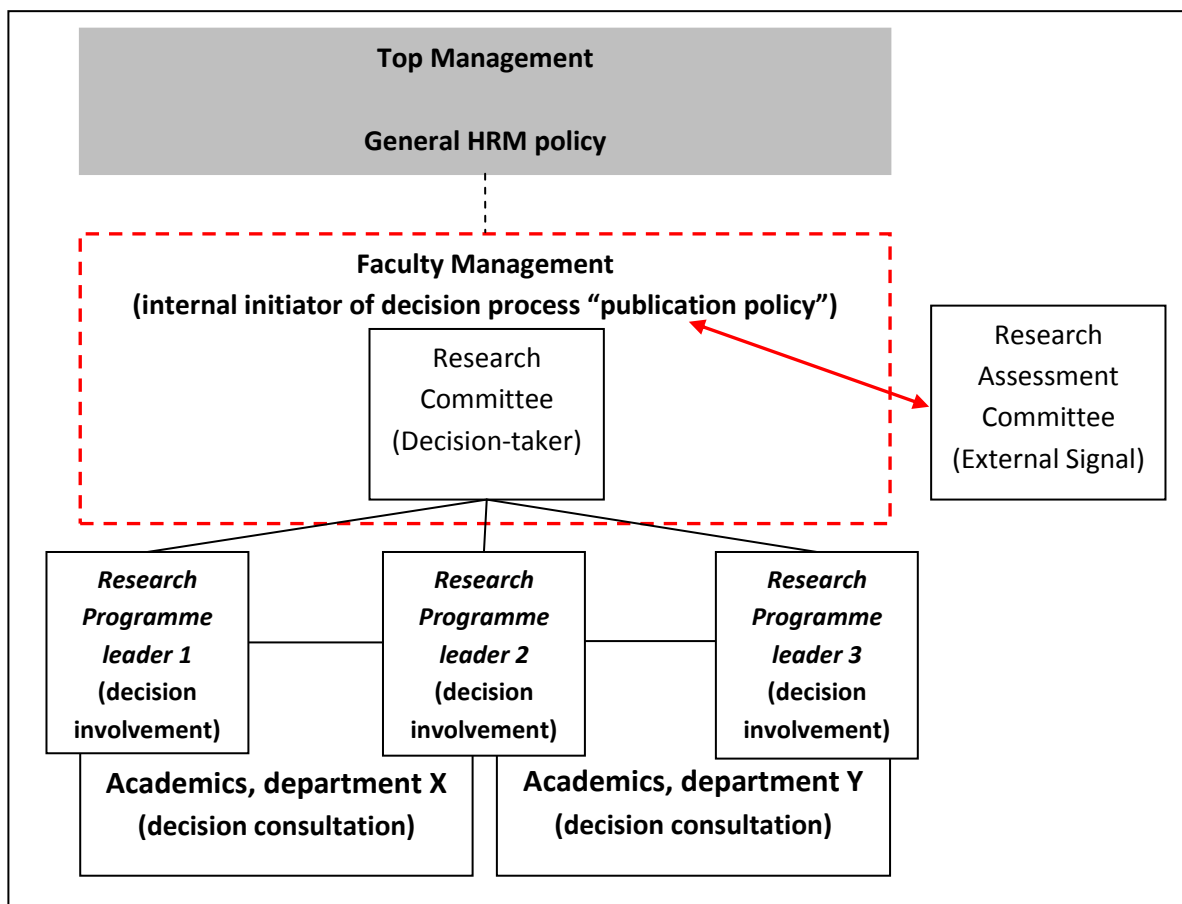


Figure 1: Decision Process “publication policy” at a Dutch humanities faculty

The discussion about the Faculty’s publication policy fell into a time when the university’s top management had just implemented a new Human Resource Management policy. According to that policy, academic staff were to be evaluated according to a variety of performance indicators to be defined by the faculties themselves as long as these would stay within the framework of general standards of the university.⁹

Inside the Faculty of Humanities, the discussion about a faculty-wide publication policy was initiated by the dean, who was concerned about the visibility of the Faculty’s publications in the wider academic environment. In particular, certain types of publications such as international journal articles and peer-reviewed publications should receive more attention in the Faculty members’ publication strategies. This particular recommendation stemmed from

⁹ Whether the faculty’s publication policy must be considered as the response to this more general policy could not be answered from the interviews conducted so far.

an external review committee that had visited the Faculty some years ago, providing latter with a set of organisational actions on how it could enhance its overall research performance and making its research staff fit for international competition. The committee's recommendation hence created a legitimation base for managerial action in the area of research evaluation.

The Faculty's Research Committee, consisting of two members of the Faculty Management team (dean and vice-dean research) and all programme leaders of the multidisciplinary research programmes became entrusted with the task of working out new publication guidelines. This is noteworthy insofar as the Faculty's departments were mono-disciplinary in nature and the heads of these departments thus had to trust the programme leaders for representing their department's interests in the committee meetings.¹⁰

Taking the more general recommendations by the external review committee as a point of departure, the Research Committee was ambitious to set up a faculty-wide publication policy with clear-cut standards both in terms of the quality and the quantity of journals. After several meetings, the committee suggested a policy that favoured some of the disciplinary research groups, but disadvantaged others. The history department was particularly resisting the suggested publication policy. In the framework of an information session, they argued against it by pointing out that historians are expected to publish books and that books were much more time consuming and should hence be counted much higher than journal articles. Besides, they did not approve of the list of "top journals" the policy was suggesting, and confronted the Research Committee with the compelling argument that most of these journals were attractive for political- and social scientists but not for historians.

The two or three history journals in the list were deemed as highly exclusive in the sense that hardly anybody who was not invited to do so or did not hold a professorial position would be able to publish in these journals. Finally, the historians criticised the policy's emphasis on English journals, arguing that for them publications in French, Italian or Dutch would highly

¹⁰ Research programmes are a distinct feature of the Dutch higher education system that were introduced with the first evaluations of university research in the early 1980s. Research programming implies that the research being conducted in a faculty becomes grouped into one or several research programmes. They function as a social cluster of staff members whose research displays similarity and therefore allow for discussion and debate.

be appreciated by their own scientific community. Regardless of this criticism, the dean who was chairing the Committee announced that the policy would remain unchanged, hence drawing upon his positional authority.

How come that the Research Committee called a policy into being that bluntly ignored the publication practices of the Faculty's own disciplinary groups? Part of the response must be sought in the composition of that Committee which was joined by the programme leaders instead of the heads of department. Since there were fewer multi-disciplinary programmes than departments, heads of department needed to forge alliances with the programme leaders to ensure that a voice was given to them in the negotiation process. As head of the history department was good friends with one of the programme leaders, he had great trust in that person and used him as a communication channel to clarify his department's position and particular interests whenever a decision about research had to be made. Unfortunately, however, the formulation of the publication list happened at a time that the head of department withdrew himself from administrative affairs and hence could not lobby intensively anymore for his department.

There was also another reason explaining the decision-making outcome of this process: the other disciplinary groups being located in the faculty resembled themselves in terms of their research (and particularly publication-) practices and therefore found it much easier to reach a compromise on the final journal selection. The multi-disciplinary composition of the research committee hence allowed those parties with common research practices to realise their interests vis-à-vis those requiring more attention for the epistemic properties of their discipline, namely the historians.

4.1.1.1 Impact of Decision on Research Practices

Which implications did the now formalised publication policy have for the publication practices of academics? Individual researchers from the department of history claimed not to be paying too much attention to the policy when seeking publication channels for their research. It must be added, however, that the interviewed researchers did not have concrete plans to get promoted. Human resource decisions such as promotion can provide an important

channel of authority for managers to create a body of scholars that meets the performance expectations of the university management. As a consequence, interview partners were asked if they were aware of any denied promotions. One interviewee who happened to be a professor answered this question in the positive and reported on the following incident:

The interviewee was sitting on a promotion committee that had to decide whether the applying candidate was to be promoted or not. After reviewing the candidate's scientific accomplishments, the dean who was chairing the committee decided to deny the promotion to the applicant although latter claimed to have fulfilled all performance requirements laid down in the promotion policy. The professor took sides with the candidate, drawing on his reputational authority to convince the dean that all promotion criteria had been satisfied. Still, he could not make the dean's mind change so that in the end, the promotion failed.

The example indicates that the formalisation of promotion rules has not contributed towards removing the game-playing element out of the decision-making process, because in spite of a fairly concrete rule system of *how* the scientific output should look like, there was still room for interpretation. The dean took advantage of this interpretive leeway to shape the decision-making outcome according to his own preferences.

Although the denied promotion can be considered as a manifestation of the dean's central position in one of the key decision-making bodies of the faculty, it remains unclear whether the promotion policy caused the candidate to adapt his research practices in a way that he thought were more conform with the expectations of the faculty management. In this respect, the herein described process remains stuck in a black box and a question mark needs to be put behind the steering capacities of the mid-level management in the context of promotion decisions.

4.1.2 *Individual Performance Appraisals at the Faculty of Life Sciences (NL)*

At the Faculty of Life Sciences, the interview partners were not aware of a recent decision-making event in the area of performance evaluation that culminated in the determination of performance criteria. The interviews therefore focused on the routine process “individual performance appraisals” that are conducted rather informally at the research group level.

The research group leaders were in charge of conducting these performance appraisals and also set performance objectives that varied with the position of the researcher. Performance appraisals generally included an encouragement to target high impact journals of the respective (sub-) discipline in which the researcher was working, although a list of “top journals” as was observed in the Faculty of Humanities had never been formalised. The researchers claimed to know themselves best of what the most renowned journals in their field are, and that, as one researcher put it, it was a sheer necessity to publish in these prestigious journals for sake of career progression. As one assistant professor argued:

If you want to proceed, if you want to get PhDs and post-docs to continue doing your research, then a publication is very important (...). There is more and more competition on the grants, because first stream money [direct government funding] has been taken away from the universities and has been given...it has been decided to give it to NWO¹¹ to distribute it, and now, money is cut at the level of NWO and there is more and more competition. So if you want to continue to do research, you need to have a good publication record, you need to have good skills in grant writing and a bit of luck to get grants (Assistant professor, Faculty of Life Sciences).

The quotation highlights that a researcher’s publication records form a strong basis of decision-making for funding agencies when it comes to rejecting or supporting grant applications. In times of decreasing government funding, the authority of funding agencies and disciplinary elites is growing, because researchers critically depend on the availability of

¹¹ Netherlands Organization of the Sciences

external resources and the recognition of their scientific community for carrying out their research.

Although performance appraisals were shown to have a rather informal character at the Faculty of Life Sciences, evaluations of individual research performance inform decisions about promotions. The study of promotion decisions could therefore generate valuable insights about the internal authority relations in the Faculty/ department that the analysis of individual performance appraisals was not able to provide. To this end, further interviews must be conducted.

4.2 Research Evaluation at a UK University

At the English university, decision-making processes in the area of research evaluation were dominated by the university management's planning for the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (henceforward called REF). REF, which is going to replace the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), has a strong emphasis on the economic and societal impact of research, and will employ a greater use of metrics in various science subjects with a view to inform peer review and more consistency among panels (Corbyn 2009).¹²

RAE/ REF brings the State and its agencies (in particular the Funding Councils) as important authoritative actors into play. They did not only call selective research funding into being, but continue to shape the rules of this competitive funding game and also determine its financial outcome (Whitley and Martin 2010). Considering that performance-related research funding constituted a crucial income source for research intensive universities, they felt considerable need to participate, although the exercise as such is voluntary (Broadbent 2010). Apart from forfeited financial gains, low research scores would not only damage the overall reputation of the organisation, but it could also have adverse effects on student recruitment, since highly

¹² More information about REF can be found at <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>.

competitive, international students made their choice of institution dependent on the university's research reputation.

The university where the interviews were conducted was well aware of the adverse effects that mediocre research performance could have and therefore felt a considerable pressure to dedicate considerable organizational resources to the preparation of REF. With a view to maximise staff performance in the real REF, the top management formed a REF steering group, consisting of administrative staff, the vice-chancellor research as well as all vice-deans for research. The REF- steering group became charged with organising an internal **mock exercise** that turned out to be a detailed copy of the official REF assessment process.

In the first round of the mock exercise, the faculty management asked all research-active staff to submit what they thought of would be their four best publications. Departments conducting science and technology research were furthermore called upon by their faculty management to develop publication lists of journals where they would like to see their research to be published. The management was thereby acknowledging that the forthcoming REF would include a greater use of bibliometrical information for assessing science and technology subjects, and the university management wanted all research-active staff to be prepared for this new challenge.

In a second step, the various units of assessments were being reviewed by an external research assessment panel. By contracting scientists that had been sitting on a 'real' RAE panel, the faculty management endeavoured to obtain a realistic assessment of their staff's research performance and hence get a taste of what the overall institutional result would look like if the mock exercise had been the real exercise. Thirdly, the mock assessment panels marked the submitted research output on a one- to four star basis and discussed the results with the respective faculty management teams. All academic staff members were finally notified over their mock-exercise performance in a letter, indicating their overall quality score (categories went from A to D, with an A standing for outstanding quality). Fourthly, the faculty management got back to the individual members to tell them what their result looked like,

whether they would be returned or not¹³ and to identify organisational actions in case there was still room for improvement.

In what follows, I will zoom into decision-making processes being related to the implementation of the mock exercise at the faculty/ department level. As the Faculty of Humanities that was just finishing the fourth part of the mock exercise, I will look at what type of feedback the faculty management provided on the submitted publications and how this feedback was received by the individual researchers. As regards the Faculty of Life Sciences, I take the analysis down to the department level and look once more into the decision process of a publication list that needed to be produced for the mock exercise.

¹³ In this particular context, “returned” means that there was still room for improvement as regards the submitted output, so the researcher needed to submit again

4.2.1 Decision Process “Submission Advice” at the Faculty of Humanities (UK)

At the Faculty of Humanities, the authority of mid-level managers in the mock exercise became evident in their advices to individual researchers about the quantity and type of publications that they should submit. Although the feedback could in principle build on the evaluation input by the mock exercise expert panel, a representative of the faculty management (in the forthcoming example the vice-dean research) took the final responsibility of giving a recommendation to the individual researcher.

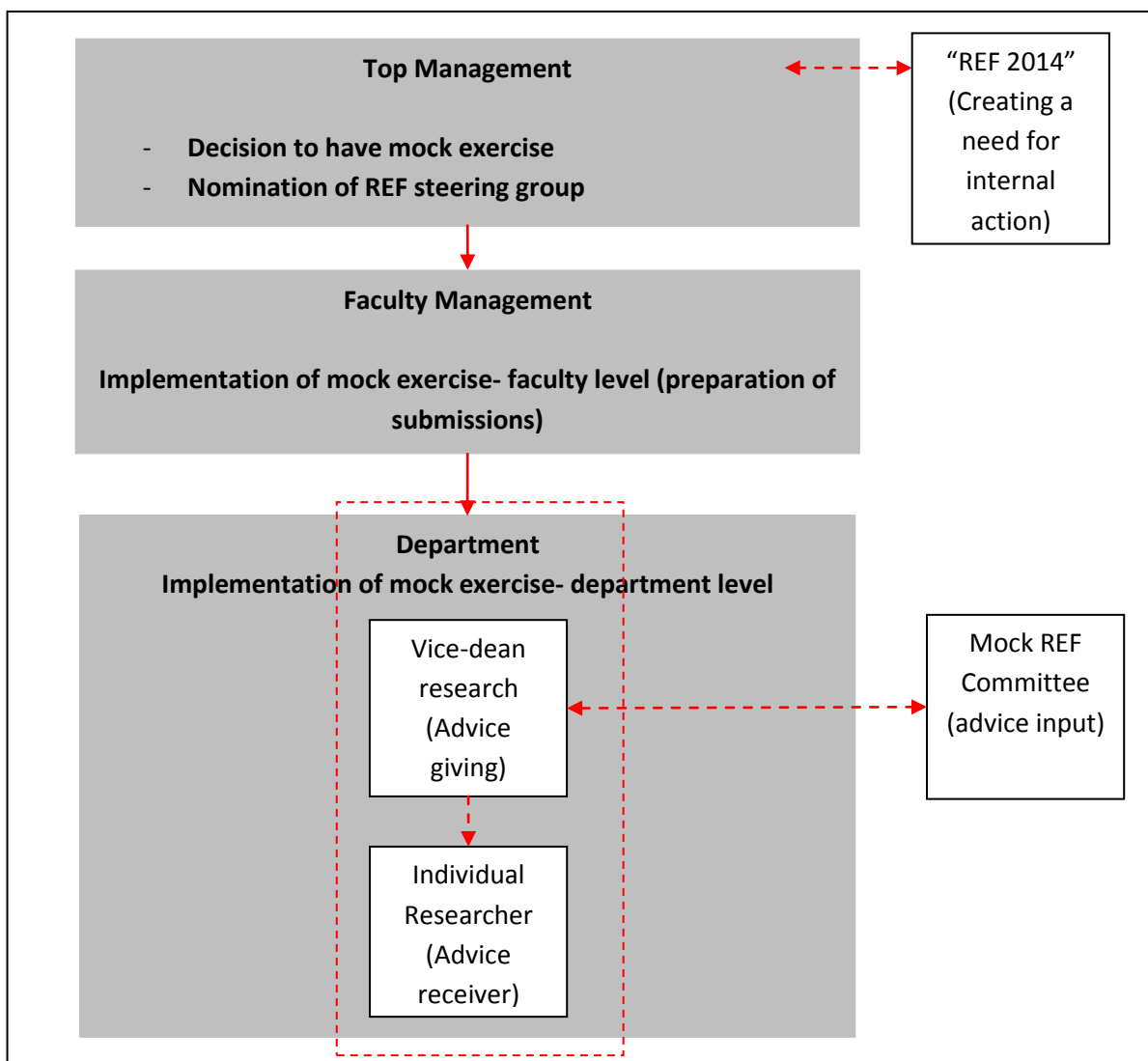


Figure 2: Feedback process on mock exercise results at a UK faculty of humanities

The faculty management's role in influencing the quantity and type of submissions shall be demonstrated by the following example: although researchers doing humanities or social research could request for having a book counted as two articles¹⁴, book (chapter) submissions found little acceptance by mid-level managers in light of quality concerns. Several staff members were recommended to leave their monographs aside and instead focus on the writing of journal articles. One professor reported that the vice dean research had given him the advice to produce a journal article instead of the book chapter he had submitted:

So in the last two months I have written and submitted another article simply to go into the research assessment exercise and I was told that it would be published. Actually, I quite enjoyed doing it. And I think it's an interesting article but it's not something I would have done because it's not what I am thinking about at the moment. It's actually using data from the project I did 4 years ago. I knew I could easily write it. So as I said wrote it in couple of months for a journal that had a call in that area, that will be published in May before the deadline, so I was entirely driven (Professor, Faculty of Humanities).

According to the professor, the faculty management preferred a peer-reviewed journal article over a book chapter, because latter was not peer reviewed the same way even if the content of the article and the book chapter was the same. Besides, the management wanted its staff members to publish in specific types of journals, namely those that are getting read and cited by a maximum amount of people. The recommendation of the management was hence not about content, but about the type of output that they wanted their staff members to produce. Although the faculty management could accept a book instead of an article, it knew that in the end, the "real" REF-committee was the content expert and would decide on the quality of the publications. Preferring a peer-reviewed article over a book chapter seemed to be a saver way for the management, because the availability of second-hand indicators allowed them to make a quality judgement without going into the content of the output being produced.

¹⁴ This rule system must be considered as a concession of REF to do justice to traditional publication channels of the arts, humanities and social sciences, where books have a higher degree of importance for scientific knowledge production than in Science, Technology and Industry (STEM) subjects.

4.2.1.1 Impact of submission advice on research practices

One outcome of RAE/ REF preparations on the department level has been that it brought a certain short-terminism into the scientific production process and incentivized at least some of the researchers to change the output type of their publications as the example of the professor shows (see also(Otley 2010). Researchers opined that REF's emphasis on journal articles was not suiting the publication traditions of their discipline, but rather aimed at a standardization of assessment procedures that is clearly driven by the role model of the sciences. The REF assessment criteria for the social sciences and humanities were considered to reflect a poor compromise between the functional requirements of the discipline (the need to need to publish books) on the one hand and pragmatic deliberations of the panel on the other hand (namely on how to keep the submitted volume of publications manageable for the peer review process).

4.2.2 Decision Process “Publication List” at the Faculty of Life Sciences (UK)

As regards the Faculty of Life Sciences, the REF steering group had decided that all departments belonging to the Faculty should define a list of top journals in their disciplinary fields. The choice of journals was left to the departments-, respectively to the research groups themselves, considering that only they had the content-wise knowledge to make a wise selection for their own disciplinary field.

To see how the Faculty Management's order was translated into practice on the department level, the forthcoming analysis will once again zoom into a decision-making process to trace back the evolution and application of such a publication policy in a department belonging to the Faculty of Life Sciences.

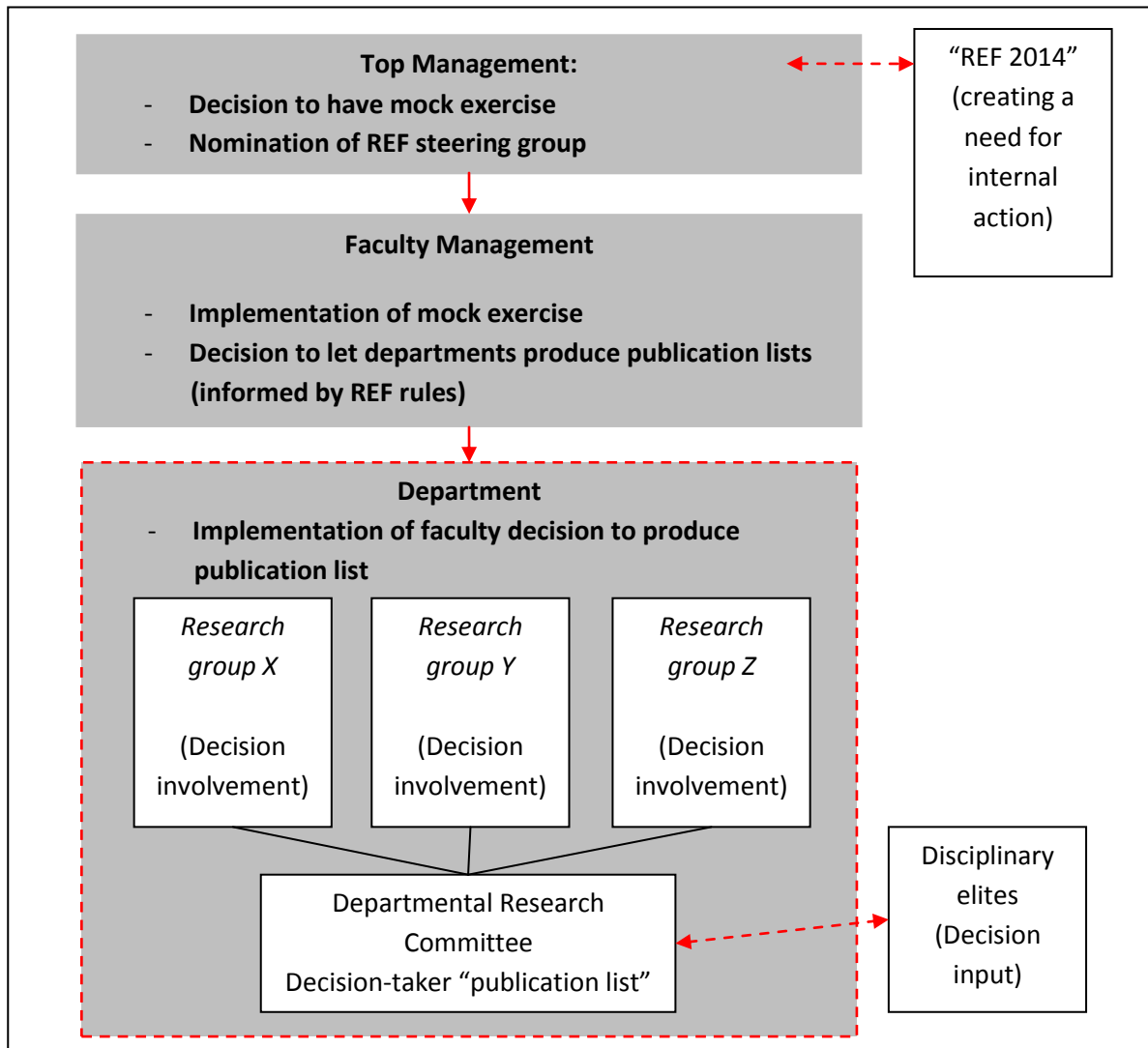


Figure 3: Decision process "publication list" at a department of life sciences (UK university)

In the reviewed department, the journal selection was carried out by the departmental **Research Committee**, headed by the research director of research and attended by representatives of all key research fields of the department to ensure that equal attention was given to the sub-discipline perspectives.

In response to REF's announcement to draw on bibliometric information when assessing some science-based units of assessment, the Committee had partly adopted a metric approach for its selection procedure. Although it was acknowledged by the Committee members that this was a rather inexact approach to indicate the quality of any research output being produced, publications in certain types of journals came to be seen as "a good thing". Next to

that, research active staff from the department talked about the particular work they had done and how they felt about the quality of their pieces and fed these qualitative statements into the journal selection process.

Over the period of one year, the Committee sorted publications into two types of categories, namely general and more specialist journals. According to one interviewee, the identification of the more general journals turned out to be rather straightforward, but when it came to selecting journals of the sub-disciplines, the selection process became much tougher, as these were also the areas where the overall focus of the department had been too broad. It hence took the Committee quite some effort to select about five to six top journals from the more specialised sub-disciplines, taking into consideration, however, that applying for higher ranked journals always implied the risk of becoming refused by the journal editor. Still, the greater reputational and financial gains associated with publications in those top journals seemed to justify the choice that the committee had made.

“So we identified those generalist journals quite easily, that is working out what the top journals are in the more specific sub-disciplines of Discipline Y and that is why we tended to perhaps overpopulate specific areas with too many journals (...). Of course, at the end of the day, it matters what your research paper is actually about and whether you’ve done original and robust work that has significance, but you are certainly more than halfway there if you have published in one of those top journals because they have such cash associated with them” (Professor, Faculty of Life Sciences).

4.2.2.1 Impact of Decision on Research Practices

The department’s selection of top journals leads to the important question which effects the publication list had on the publication behaviour of the individual researchers of the department. Although department staff claimed to be aware of the existence of such a list, they did not consider it to be carved into stone and mainly regarded it as a framework of reference. In fact, it constituted another formalization process as to what important journals of the discipline were without necessarily pushing the publication practices of researchers into that particular direction.

“I am sure we don’t all remember what the journals are on it, but in a way it I suppose ratified what we already knew as being what the top journals are. The ones we should really be prioritizing. That was useful and that’s got to be more part of our consciousness of our department” (Professor Faculty of Life Sciences)

“I do not see it [publication list] as a fixed, immutable sort of index. (...). [It might emphasize] the value of certain journals or outcomes, but not in any deterministic way.”(Assistant Professor, Faculty of Life Sciences)

Researchers who had not been sitting on the selection committee took a critical stance to the formulation of a publication list, because they knew of the variety of views of what constituted a good journal in a particular field. As one interviewee argued, particularly people outside the area might have ‘a lousy view’ of it and hence would not be capable of judging the quality of other sub-disciplines. They also criticized the overt emphasis that research assessment committees within and outside the university tend to put on so-called high impact journals. According to their own experiences, the journals with the highest impact were not necessarily the most appropriate ones to reach their target audience. The interviewees deemed this tension to be problematic for their own research, given their prior ambition to reach their peer community with their publications.

Some researchers sought a strategic solution to the *audience versus impact* tension by following various strands of research of which at least one type of research could be published in top-, respectively high impact journals. The diversification of the research portfolio hence constituted a crucial adaptation strategy for living up to the expectations of different audiences, namely the funding agencies on the one hand and their own peers on the other hand.

Although the decision-process “publication list” was shown to have only marginal impact on the publication practices of the researchers, the use of journal hierarchies as proxies for research excellence can have other types of effects for the production of knowledge in a

research unit. This shall be demonstrated by another example which occurred in the department shortly after the conclusion of the last research assessment exercise. Around that time, the department underwent a periodic research assessment review which was quite eye-opening for the management for spotting various problems and weaknesses in the departmental research strategy. The assessment panel therefore gave lots of recommendations for ways in which the departmental leadership needed to think about restructuring its research activities. By doing so, it created a strong legitimisation basis for university managers for devising new strategies that would bring the research agenda of the department into focus again.

Amongst other things, the assessment panel spotted performance weaknesses in one area, henceforward called sub-discipline Y¹⁵. Sub-discipline Y was in an interdisciplinary domain that bridges the gap between the social sciences and the natural sciences. Tragically, sub-discipline Y happened to be located in an area where it was difficult to publish in top-ranking journals with a natural sciences orientation and where researchers found it hard “to make an impact” that is so important for getting good results in the research assessment exercise. The fact that the respective research group had hosted some of the most eminent scholars in their field could not prevent that the weak overall performance of the department became associated with the publication performance of that group. The response of the affected research group followed rather quickly: two of the most iconic scholars of the group moved away to find positions elsewhere where they felt that their research would be valued more. The interdisciplinary nature of their research enabled them to move away from the life sciences into a social science department where they would become part of a different assessment panel and therefore find it much easier to receive top ratings.

The case is representative of the dangers of a metrics-based approach, where an organisation’s financial well-being is completely at the mercy of a number system. There is no real questioning of the legitimacy of the system, but the signals it produces are taken for granted and form the basis for further action. What tends to be overlooked by the advocates of top-journal rankings is that some disciplines find it easier to produce high impact publications in

¹⁵ The author of this paper acknowledges that not stating the name of the (sub) discipline compromises the explanatory power of this research. However, according to an agreement with the interviewees, the result of the empirical investigations may only be published if the name of the (sub) discipline is not mentioned.

light of the generalist aspect of their research than those whose high degree of specialization cause them difficulties to reach a broader public. The case clearly points out to the downside of impact-driven research evaluation, particularly when a performance measurement instrument takes on a life on its own and becomes the sole basis for uncritical decision-making with long-term consequences for the affected units.

The scientific community being represented by the assessment panel just reproduced this signal instead of issuing a recommendation that would have kept the multi- or even interdisciplinary integrity of the department. Speaking in general terms, the case is indicative of the worrisome influence of ranking systems which goes back to the belief of decision-makers that 'impact' captures quality. In the above case, it was not even necessary for university managers to draw on their positional authority and to intervene into the process: By choosing the 'exit option', the affected researchers had already provided for this "corrective action" themselves.

5. Conclusions

This paper concludes with recapitulating the authority patterns that were found in the Dutch and English case study universities and compares them to the idealised authority distributions of the *Managed University* (see table 2).

	Internal actors			External actors		
	Top-management	Mid-level management	Academics	State	(Inter-) national scientific elite	Funding agencies
<i>Managed University Archetype</i>	medium	high	low	low	High	high
<i>Case Study NL</i>	low	medium	Low - medium	low	Medium	medium
<i>Case study UK</i>	medium	high	low	high	High	high

Table 2: Authority distributions in the decision-making process performance evaluations.

One of the most notable findings of the English case study is the increasingly important role of the **State** when it comes to shaping research evaluation procedures. Against the predictions by the *Managed University* which saw state involvement in higher education affairs on retreat, empirical evidence highlights that the State and its agencies have safeguarded themselves an important channel of authority in research evaluation by setting the rules for resource allocation (Whitley and Martin 2010). This dominance has found its most drastic expression in the UK Research Assessment Exercise/ Research Excellence Framework that research intensive universities need to play well in order to secure their organisational well-being.

The Dutch case study revealed quite a different authority pattern in this respect. As such, it might have struck to the reader that the State was only mentioned with respect to its decision to shift more direct government funding to the Dutch Research Council NWO (Netherlands

Organisation of the Sciences). This does not surprise insofar as research evaluations in the Netherlands show a clear dominance of academic and institutional actors; the government is practically absent (Leisyte, Westerheijden et al.).

In both England and the Netherlands, the State's inability to take the full bill of higher education has enhanced the authority status of **(inter-) national funding agencies** that increasingly decide on the allocation of research money. In the Netherlands, a nationwide research assessment exercise that renders the (level of) funding of research activities entirely dependent on the performance of research units does not exist. The level of competition between universities is therefore also considered to be less intense in the Netherlands than it is in the UK (Dawson, van Steen et al. 2009).

In English and Dutch higher education, the importance of the **(inter-)national scientific community** in determining research quality has increased, implying that real-life authority distributions coincide with the idealised authority pattern of the *Managed University*. In the Dutch Faculty of Humanities, the external expert review committee provided the stimulus for managerial action on the mid-management level by pointing out to ways in which the faculty's overall research performance could be improved. The expert judgement hence created a strong legitimation basis for the faculty management to formalise their performance policy. At the Dutch Faculty of Life Sciences, recognition of research accomplishments by the respective scientific community was an important pre-requisite for acquiring project resources. At the English university, scientific experts that had been sitting on REF- panels fed into management-led performance appraisals that were carried out in the framework of the mock-exercise.

Changes in the formal governance structure of universities enhanced the authority of **top managers** and in particular that of **mid level managers** in England. In this respect, the empirical findings coincide with the idealised authority distributions of the *Managed University*. Whereas the top-management in England played a decisive role for setting the overall course of action in the run-up to REF, mid-level managers took the responsibility for working out the practical details of the mock exercise. The mid-level management faced a wide scope of competences when preparing their staff members for the forthcoming research excellence framework. The decision whether a staff member was to be submitted to the final

exercise or not was ultimately in their hands, although they could back up their judgement on the quality feedback provided by the mock exercise expert panel. At the same time, they were acting under the pressure of making sure that the output submitted by individual staff members would meet the quality expectations of the REF panel.

In the Dutch case, the top management defined a general policy framework for research evaluation, but let the faculties decide on the details of the policy. The decision-making process ‘publication policy’ in the Faculty of Humanities imparts the impression that academics can ignore the performance expectations by mid-level managers without adapting their own scientific knowledge production. On the other hand, the example of the denied promotion highlights that the more mid-level managers couple performance evaluations of individual researchers to other human-resource-management processes, the greater their authority will be in terms of shaping organizational decisions.

The *Managed University* considers **academics** (including the organisational elite) as the net losers in shaping the outcomes of research evaluation processes. The empirical evidence gathered so far shows a biased picture in this respect: At the Dutch Faculty of Humanities, researchers of the history department largely ignored their faculty’s publication policy when seeking publication channels for their research, so it seems that they maintain control over their own research practices. Still, the denied promotion to a candidate indicates that they sit at the shorter end of the lever in decision-making areas that traditionally belonged to the “authority territory” of the organisational elite.

As regards the English university, individual researchers at both faculties found themselves being exposed to increasing pressure to perform in a way that would meet the expectations of the REF panel. In the Faculty of Humanities, individual researchers were facing more constraints with regards to their choice of publication channels for their research as was the case in the Faculty of Life Sciences where it was fairly normal for research to publish research results in journal articles. Still, the pressure felt by Humanities researchers did not keep them from producing other types of scientific output that was more in alignment with the publication traditions of their discipline. This shows that individual researchers are keen on protecting their technological core from outside influences. How long they will succeed in

doing so depends first and foremost on their research time, a resource which unfortunately is getting very scarce in a university setting.

6. Outlook

Considering that only area of decision-making has been studied, it is not yet possible to answer the question whether organizational change at Dutch and English higher education institutions can be explained as transition in archetypes. More research into other types of decision-making processes relating to the management of teaching and research is required to determine whether a shift has taken place into the direction of the Managed *University*. This shall be the goal of future research efforts.

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