10. INTERACTING SPHERES REVISITED

Academics and Administrators between Dualism and Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

Loosely Coupled Systems

Some time ago, Weick (1976) described the organisational characteristics of educational institutions as ‘loosely coupled systems’. He described this system on the basis of different tasks and the (hierarchical) positions of academics and administrators, in which many actors did as they wished and were not overly concerned with each other. This may still be an on-going situation. Although there is interaction between academics and administrators, each group is strongly committed to its own identity. Academics and administrators are in themselves not to be perceived as unified groups. It would be better to think of them as an interlinked patchwork of coalitions. This applies to academics, who are divided into departments, branches or institutes, that each fight and compete for a satisfactory volume of educational and research projects. It applies equally to the administrators, who are divided into all kinds of services, staffs and sections concerned with different areas (e.g. finance, human resources, strategy, housing, marketing).

The existence of coalitions and the presence of weak links resulted in the situation that, for many years, higher educational institutions have formed a strongly ‘ecological’ whole, with great stability and resilience against external and internal disturbances (Kovac et al., 2003; Stensaker, 2015). Educational institutions may adapt from the outside, that is to say ceremonially, to rules and procedures in order to gain legitimacy. This adaption is at odds with the nature of the primary process: education and research. To prevent tension, a disconnect occurs in which the primary process is covered and kept out of sight of superiors and the outside world (Meyer, Scott, & Rowan, 1983). This covering serves, among other things, to protect against upheavals. It can also be a conscious decision by the administration. Middle managers in particular can act as a buffer between primary activities and upheavals (Kallenberg, 2013). Departments or faculties have their own freedom of policy in terms of shaping their educational program and pedagogy.

Universities are also a good example of organisations where the administration is unable to control and standardise in detail the goings on of academics. Within the educational organisation, professors can avoid scrutiny and too much influence from...
managers by withdrawing into their specialty. Academics work closely with their clients (patients, students) and with their colleagues. They often feel most affiliation to their self-governing associations which set their standards (Teelken, 2012). Knowledge is power, and knowledge lies with the academics. This ‘craftsmanship’ stands for well-functioning day-to-day business at the university. However, the fact remains that lecturers are often seen as a potential source of resistance to change at universities (Chandler, Barry, & Clark, 2002). Due to the weak links, the separate parts of the organisation can focus on their own environment and thus respond well to the complexity of that environment. They have sufficient flexibility, partly because the organisation does not need to adapt to changed circumstances as a whole. However, a negative effect is the difficulty that discrete units have in influencing other parts of the organisation. The weak links thus apply to both academics and administrators as separate groups, as well as within these groups.

Organised Anarchy and Garbage Can Model

The loosely coupled system and this lack of commitment brings unclear decision-making processes within the universities. The university is seen as an organised anarchy and the decision-making process as a garbage can model (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; In ‘t Veld, 1984; Selmer-Anderssen, 2013).

Organised anarchy has three general characteristics. First, there are problematic preferences in which people act without clearly defined goals. The danger is that if they do define their preference with some precision, it quickly leads to conflicts. Second, there is an unclear technology. The organisational processes are not very well understood by the different actors in the university. They do understand the purpose of their own job, but they do not get the bigger picture of the organisation. Third, there is a dynamic participation. Employees can participate or exclude themselves from the decision-making process. The boundaries of the process are therefore dynamic. The time and energy spent by employees on different subjects varies. Even within a given area their involvement will vary from time to time.

Factually, you can identify four flows, namely problems, solutions, participants, and choices. Each of these flows takes on a life of its own, largely unrelated to the others. Metaphorically speaking you could say that this type of organisation is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they may be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be an answer, and decision makers looking for work (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 1).

Organisational Transformations?

Although the concept of loosely coupled systems has also been criticised for its inability to make the concept meaningful in improving the functioning of educational organisations (Boyd & Crowson, 2002; Rowan, 2002), the concepts of loosely coupled systems and organised anarchy (De Ruijter, 2014) cannot yet be dismissed.