5
The Organisation: University As ‘Ideas Factory’?

As described briefly in Chapters 1 and 2 the university sector has, along with major public services in the UK, undergone significant change in their ideologies as well as in the way they have become organised as a business entity. Although still relatively autonomous from the UK public service sector, during the last twenty years universities have developed new systems and processes that reflect the changing nature of their services to students, public and government. We have described some of these changes in an historical as well as current context, and also made close associations with theories and ideologies rooted in a social science context, such as organisational management and behaviour. New Managerialism (NM) is a distinct field of study concerned with the organisation and management of businesses (in this case the university) in ways that reflect the need for flexibility and adaptation of the strategic and operational (Clarke, Gewirtz & McLaughlin 2000; Ferlie et al. 2003; Deem & Brehony 2005). It requires the organisation to be highly adaptable, to reflect and learn, and most importantly, to consider change as an ongoing re-invigoration of the institution as an organism. This is a rare occurrence, in business as well as in higher education.

Unfortunately the university is subject to increased, continual review and audit that somewhat hampers its ability to fully embrace and manage large-scale change in culture as well as management infrastructure. As Deem, Hillyard & Reed uncover in Knowledge, Higher Education and the New Managerialism (2007) there is a burgeoning need to ‘identify and assess the endemic contradictions, tensions, and conflicts within and between these discursive strategies and control technologies, as well as their broader implications for longer-term institutional change and organisational innovation’. We are at the very early stages in being

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able to say something meaningful about how KT plays out in our institutions, but what we do perhaps know is that in looking at some of the tensions at a more micro level, we can see that it too is proposing an ‘endemic contradiction’ to some current scholarly practices. Where academic uptake of KT is generally poor among the arts and humanities, we can expose a number of common denominators that suggest a number of institutions lack flexible and adaptable strategies for engaging traditional scholars in KT.

If the higher education institution is viewed as a similar organism and a parallel business model, might we also view the academic as an employee who has particular behaviours that can affect the growth or productivity of the business? Perhaps the study of the linkages between behaviour and environment might also resonate with the slow uptake and growth of the KT agenda in the arts and humanities. Wiklund and Shephard (2003) suggest that staff behaviour and the work environment are inextricably linked and therefore have the power to moderate and influence one another. In terms of KT, the capacity to magnify activity might therefore be reliant upon a greater empathy between academic and institution, and in turn their behaviours and aspirations toward external interaction.

Karl Weick (1979–2005) sets the scene on much of the work around organisational behaviour and explores the organisation as an organism adapting and adjusting to its environment. Most organisations seek to find a balance between internal and external forces and in doing so act upon the systems and processes to adapt to change. Organisational behaviour as a distinct area of study offers us insights into the way such organisations set themselves to respond to these forces, as well as how the dynamics of their history and current practices inhibit or support those interactions. In a climate where research is required to reach beyond academe, institutional behaviour is undergoing a parallel transition. Pettigrew et al. (2003) and Zlotkowski (2002) suggest that such knowledge of an organisation can also transform higher education practices, transforming current faculty structures and disciplinary boundaries to adapt to future change. As Deem, Hillyard and Reed (2007) suggest, this required internal flexibility and is complex and difficult to achieve. This chapter therefore will not address change, but look to exposing some of the structures and boundaries of KT support as in one Russell Group setting. As in the last chapter much of the evidence draws directly from the responses of 24 academics questioned about KT in the context of their own institution.

While transformation and change has become a twenty-first century mantra in Higher Education, in particular regarding studies around