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**“Sensegiving and strategic management in HEIs:**  
the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of top level managers”

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## **Abstract**

The top level management tier in many European higher education institutions have been strengthened significantly, as Rectors and Deans have become “strategic managers” with the responsibility of turning HEI's into more active, entrepreneurial actors in society. This paper examines how these strategic managers simultaneously attempt to make sense and give sense in the face of these changing circumstances, and how new and old ideas, values and norms play into these processes. The findings suggest that while traditional academic norms may still be very influential, new ideas about HEI's have found their way into both sensemaking and sensegiving efforts.

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## Introduction

Strategic management and leadership has been a vital catchphrase in most European higher education reforms over the past decade; most often presented as a means to ensure that higher education institutions play a more active, entrepreneurial role in society – for the good of students, staff and not least the national economy (see e.g. Folketinget 2003; Bayenet et al. 2000; de Boer & File 2009). The demand for interaction with society is linked to the increasing coupling of higher education institutions and the performance of national systems in the globalized economy – the knowledge economy (e.g. EC 2005). This increasing focus on strategy, coupled with rising demands for responsiveness, has in many European countries resulted in a significant strengthening of the power of the top tiers of the internal governance structures, cf. Rectors and Deans, to enable them to make ‘the tough decisions’ and be held accountable for them. These tough decisions often include constructing and implementing visions, reform programs and organizational transformations, to make higher education institutions more customer oriented, responsive and competitive (de Boer & File 2009; Meek et al. 2010). The top level managers<sup>1</sup> are in this way required to take on and inhabit the role as strategic managers to a much higher degree than ever seen before in higher education systems. This role, apart from being new to many of the managers, is at the same time complicated by the upending of the traditional governance structures, and the rigorous defense of the very same structures stemming from the academic staff.

In Denmark, as well as in other European countries, the straight line between the top level managers and the strategic decisions made is curved by the simultaneous implementation of external majority boards as the supreme authority in higher education institutions, and the demand for academic reputation as a means for obtaining legitimacy amongst the academic staff (Degn & Sørensen 2012). The present paper reports from a study that set out to explore how the top level managers (Rectors and Deans) in two Danish universities attempt to navigate between sometimes conflicting demands, and simultaneously make sense of their new role, while acting in it.

## Background

In higher education, top level managers have in many countries gone from being “*primi inter pares*” leaders, chosen amongst their peers, to appointed, and in most cases more “professional” managers, indicating that the importance of having the “right manager” has not

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, Rectors and Deans are referred to as strategic *managers* as opposed to strategic *leaders*. The Danish language holds only one word which covers both English terms and the term *strategic manager* has been chosen in the present paper - not as an indication that leadership elements are not prevalent in the roles of Rector and Dean, but because it to highlight the links with such concepts as New Managerialism and New Public Management, which have been highly influential on the higher education sector in Denmark.

gone unnoticed by policy makers. Strategies are assumed to “reflect the values of top managers” (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, p. 434) which means that the recruitment at this level is of vital importance to the strategic direction of the institution. The values and norms of top level managers are therefore now a political concern, as the trend towards institutional autonomy, professionalized strategic managers is coupled with the growing belief in the “knowledge economy” concept, which connects higher education institutions closely to the value-producing apparatus (Bayenet et al. 2000; Stensaker et al. 2007).

These extensive changes at the top tiers of the university management system have created an air of uncertainty within the higher education institutions, as they represent a part of a massive upending of the traditional academic governance system and have introduced new positions, new legislation and new values into the higher education system and particularly into the management structure. Several studies have however suggested that the academic values and norms are still very influential and “constricting” even for external top level managers (e.g. Meek et al. 2010; Deem et al. 2007), and that the new ideas about strategic capacity, accountability, responsiveness etc. may not be as pervasive as they were expected to be. The managers of the new structures are also, in many countries, mainly recruited from within the organisations – or at least from within academia – and are thus to a high degree ‘brought up’ with the academic values of academic governance, collegiality and self-management. They are thereby navigating between demands from without and within; attempting to implement strategic changes in highly institutionalized organisations (Scott 1995) to achieve goals defined (partially) by external stakeholders, e.g. by the political system, while at the same time maintaining the respect and legitimacy needed to actually carry out the changes within the organization

## **Sensemaking and sensegiving in higher education – a framework for analysis**

This complex situation calls for both sensemaking, i.e. the creation of meaning from the flux of impulses that the managers are confronted with, and sensegiving, i.e. the communication of a vision or plan, in a way that maximizes the possibility of success (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991; Weick 1995; Weick et al. 2005; Rouleau 2005; Hope 2010; Bartunek et al. 1999). Sensemaking and sensegiving as theoretical concepts are seen as highly relevant in studies of higher education institutions, as they provide concepts for looking at how disruptions of existing practice, uncertainty and ambiguity leads people to rethink and reorganize how they perceive themselves and their role within the organisation (see e.g. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), Humphreys and Brown (2002) or Smerek (2011) for examples of sensemaking/sensegiving studies in higher education settings). In this study, I follow Karl E. Weick, who claimed that sensemaking “unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make

plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances" (Weick et al. 2005, p. 409). There are many discrete elements in this definition, but for the purpose of this paper only a few of these will be highlighted.

First, sensemaking is about identity construction. When faced with an ambiguous or confusing situation, people tend to respond with questions of identity, like "who are we" and "how do we do things" (Mills et al. 2010, p. 1889). The process of constructing answers to these questions can be seen as sensemaking processes, where individuals (or organisations) connect cues (events, ideas, etc.) with frames (cognitive frames, mental models etc.), aiming at self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency (Weick 1995; Brown et al. 2008; Erez & Earley 1993). These processes of identity construction are also guided by other, more structural factors, such as 'an organization's rules, routines, symbols, and language [which] will all have an impact on an individual's sensemaking activities and provide routines or scripts for appropriate conduct' (Mills et al. 2010, p. 185). This identity-perspective is important in the context of the present paper, as it speaks to the way the top level managers come to inhabit their role as strategic manager, and how this shapes and is shaped by their sense of identity. By examining how they attempt to achieve self-enhancement, self-efficacy and self-consistency, we gain insight into the cues that are deemed important and the frames that are drawn out and made relevant.

Second, sensemaking is a social process, which means that it always takes place in the imagined or actual presence of others – making sensemaking a social process that is performed while taking into account the imagined scripts, mental modes etc. of others. The importance of this characteristic is clear when looking at the role of the top level managers, and the different audiences that can potentially be emphasized in the sensemaking processes. Staff – academic as well as administrative -, students, society, the political system etc. all constitute potential audiences to a top level higher education manager.

Third, sensemaking enacts meaning back into the environment by creating order and categories from which future sensemaking processes can extract meaning. In this way the sensemaker is an on-going co-author of his/her own "reality" and sensemaking becomes about choosing which cues are to be noticed and dealt with and thereafter organizing these elements, e.g. by creating categories, and labeling them. This thus also becomes part of a sensegiving process, which describes the other side of the coin; the way managers (or others) attempt to "sell" a message and gain influence on how others make sense. Sensegiving is often conceptualized as the strategic or intentional side of sensemaking, where an individual (or group) try to sway or influence the sensemaking of others to obtain certain goals. Gioia and Chittipeddi describe sensegiving as the management's attempt to provide the employees with a "viable interpretation of a new reality" and influencing them "to adopt it as their own" (1991, p. 433). It is in this respect important to note that this "viable interpretation" is itself a result of a

sensemaking process and therefore a contingent construction. A vital perspective entailed in this is that sensegiving speaks to the way that the audience is perceived, i.e. to the way that the manager believes the employees will accept the message. However this also means that sensegiving is a constitutive part of sensemaking, as this is as previously mentioned, always performed in the face of a perceived audience.

In this way, sensemaking and sensegiving are considered to be highly relevant concepts in relation to the investigation of how top level managers 'inhabit' their roles as managers in the changing higher education system. This particular study deals with how the new as well as established and institutionalized ideas about higher education management and governance are used in sensemaking and sensegiving processes, and how this affects the way they act as managers, i.e. the goals they set, the means they employ to reach these goals etc. At the same time this provides insight into the meanings that are projected back onto the environment, which ideas are seen as viable in a higher education setting and why.

## The study

The present paper reports from a study of the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of top level managers from 2 Danish universities. 10 Deans and Rectors (former as well as current) were interviewed about their perceptions of higher education management in general, their own role as strategic managers (sensemaking), and about how they go about the task of producing strategies for the university (sensegiving). The interviews were designed as semi-structured with much room to digress from the interview-guide and pursue subjects and themes that the respondents deemed meaningful. The two universities were chosen due to their quite distinct individual characteristics – one relatively traditional Mode 1-university and a newer construction, more Mode 2 oriented-university - in order to investigate differences in the way that sensemaking and sensegiving processes play out in different organizational settings.

The narratives that these interviews represent are seen as specific sensemaking and sensegiving exercises. They are snapshots in the ongoing sensemaking and sensegiving process that the managers engage in, but it is also vital to remember that the verbalization of this, as it plays out in an interview situation is also a sensemaking/sensegiving process in itself. I, as an interviewer, thus elicit the sensemaking process by asking specific questions, but by allowing the respondent to digress and construct a personal narrative, the interviews are seen as a good window into the continuing sensemaking processes of the managers. The following sections will illustrate and analyze the findings of the study and discuss the implications of these findings.

# The sensemaking and sensegiving of the top level managers

## The role as strategic manager

An important part of the sensemaking perspective is as mentioned that sensemaking is about identity construction. In the following this will be examined by looking at which cues and frames are drawn out when the top level managers describe themselves and their role, and how this affects the way they act as managers, i.e. the goals that they set up and the means they use to achieve them.

One common trend is constructing oneself as being a strong academic person. All the respondents highlight their background either as a strong researcher or as a dedicated teacher, and very often link their role as a manager with this background. Descriptions of their time as an active researcher and relating these experiences to their current management practice is very common in the interviews and seems to be vital cues in the sensemaking process of the respondents. One respondent speaks of the importance of having “paid ones dues” and “knowing what it takes”, while others highlight how they “use” their background as researchers/teachers in their practice as managers.

This indicates that the background and personal experiences as a researcher lend meaning to their sense of personal strength and to the storyline that they construct. When one respondent speaks of “paying one’s dues” it helps create a story of belonging, of being “entitled” to the position that is currently held. It also illustrates the importance of constructing a sense of self-consistency, as the respondents draw out past experiences to give meaning to the present situation and the challenges that are experienced in these situations. This tendency among the respondents to bring forth past experiences, is often linked to descriptions of being met with mistrust or a sense of alienation from the academic staff, and the academic background, e.g. descriptions of “paying their dues”, references to their vast publication record or extensive teaching experience and reputation etc., thereby serves as a very powerful frame which helps them ‘dismiss’ such cues (mistrust and alienation) as unjustified. Another frame that could have been evoked to dismiss mistrust or alienation could be distancing oneself from the academic frame, e.g. by evoking external, new ideas about responsibility and societal engagement, but this does not seem to be a vital part of the identity construction.

At the same time however, this construction of linkage between present position and past achievements serves another purpose, more closely connected to sensegiving. The managers namely tend to connect their academic background to the legitimacy that they need in their role as a top level manager.

*“... I found that it was very important that you (...) were able to demonstrate that you had some knowledge about what was going on [in the research field of the employee]. Otherwise I don't think that there will respect surrounding the managers. So your authority*

*is tied, of course mainly to you as a person, but also to the fact that you have an academic background and know the conditions in terms of being an employee at a university."*

In this way these elements from the past are brought forth and aid the managers in telling a story about the importance of the traditional academic norms and values – and in a way evokes the traditional notions of academic governance, i.e. the *primus inter pares* principle. Even though this principle and the collegiate management system are seen as significantly flawed, the respondents all none the less employ ideas from this system in their sensemaking/sensegiving processes, and we thus see that the respondents perceive it as necessary to have this academic link in order to 'get things done' or to even be taken seriously as a manager. Many respondents perceived this as symbolic, but the legitimacy that is perceived to lie in the academic background is very important to most of the managers in the study.

This illustrates the resilience of the academic ideas about higher education governance and management, and how they are still valued highly and employed actively in both the sensemaking and sensegiving of top level managers. The academic norms and principles may be explicitly criticized by the managers, but they seem to implicitly influence the way they construct themselves as managers, and the way they feel they need to appear to others.

Another key element in the sensemaking processes is how the managers see their own power and place in the structures. As mentioned their formal power and authority was strengthened significantly in the reforms of the new millennium, but the question is how this formal authority is used in the sensemaking processes.

Perhaps surprisingly, formal authority is mentioned very little in the narratives – for good or for bad. The notion of authority is on the other hand almost consistently linked with legitimacy and culture as we saw above.

*"I have tried sometimes to make some 'top-down' initiatives, which has always been met with friendliness and understanding from the people I have approached, and then they told me: I honestly think that you should do that yourself, because I am busy with something else"*

The quote illustrates a common perception that authority comes not from structures, but from the support and help of the staff. However even though the strengthening of formal authority is hardly mentioned, most of the managers speak of their personal vision or the strategic ideas. Formal authority is in this way transformed into a matter of vision – of wanting to change things and needing the power to do so. As the quote below illustrates these visions, or ideas, are used as a frame in which formal authority makes sense. Formal authority that lies in the strengthened position in itself is meaningless without the frame of wanting to improve things.

*"... I had quite a few ideas about how to improve things (...).it really didn't work very well.(...)And you see, I have never concealed the fact that I like to have power, but it is not*

*for the sake of power. It is because you have ideas about things, and it is not like you have a halo or (...) that you get to go to fancy parties or receptions, which I hate. It is more a question of wanting to change things."*

## **The practice of strategic management**

The next question becomes how this sense of self and of 'others' affects the practice as a strategic manager, i.e. the goals that are set and the strategies that are followed to reach them. The narratives reveal three distinct categories of goals, highlighting the complexity of the top level manager role.

First we see a set of normative goals, where the external impulses and ideas about higher education play a vital role.. These goals are often described as goals that are 'naturally necessary for the society at large', that are 'obviously reasonable' etc. They are in other words described in a somewhat de-personalized manner and not as personal goals or linked to the sensemaking process. These goals might be named the externalized strategic goals, and be seen as linked with a sensegiving process and thus to the story that the managers wish to tell about themselves and their organisation. They are typically connected to societal frames or to more normative frames, as goals that the universities are obliged to work towards, but not as goals that the managers see as personally fulfilling. This is often illustrated when the respondents speak of the core "tasks" of the higher education institutions, i.e. research and teaching, as in the quote below:

*"My main point is that universities are primarily put in the world to raise the level of education and scientific knowledge (...) Research would be here if we were not here (...) but there wouldn't be new generations that were better educated than the previous ones. There, we are the only ones who can deliver"*

This goal is not a personalized goal of the respondent – it is a more generalized goal construction used as part of a sensegiving exercise, which is directed at a specific audience. This type of goals, even though they vary in specificity and direction (e.g. to be "excellent in research", "contribute to the knowledge society", are mainly concerned with legitimizing the practice of the universities to an external audience – and perhaps also play into the story that is told to the internal audience, namely the members of their own organisations, in that they also tend towards constructing future challenges for the universities, such as being able to compete with other institutions in order to remain in existence.

The second group of goals is often, as with the normative goals above, described in very loose terms and frequently framed as the things that "make a difference".

*"Well, my goal was basically to strengthen research in the university, so we could get a boost in prestige and also introduce a culture where people prioritized research"*

However, despite the fact that they might seem somewhat vague, these goals are nevertheless closely linked to the perception of personal strength, and also to the academic background described above. This is what distinguishes them from the first set of goals – the externalized strategic goals, which were de-personalized – namely that they are constructed and linked to a personal frame. The goal in the quote above was expressed by a manager whose identity construction was closely linked to a previous career as a distinguished researcher. Research and research excellence were critical frames in this manager's sensemaking process and the goal is clearly influenced by this sense of self.

This illustrates a common tendency in the narratives: namely that the external impulses and ideas about higher education (e.g. their role in the solution of grand challenges, the need for accountability, value-for-money etc.) are less influential than the sense of personal strength in the construction of what could be named personal strategic goals, i.e. they are goals that the managers want to achieve, not because they feel obliged to, but because it is connected to sense of personal fulfillment. In this way these personal strategic goals are more connected to their need for self-enhancement and feeling of self-efficacy, i.e. the need to maintain a positive self-image and feeling of being competent within their role.

The final group of goals that we see in the narratives is what one might call operational goals. These goals are aimed at the organisation as such and towards strengthening the structures and operations of the organisation. Often they are described as “cleaning up the mess” or “sorting things out” – often in the economy of the organisation/faculty, but also improving the structures and frames, which are perceived as vital in order to achieve the strategic and the necessary goals:

*“... first of all to get the economy in control, so we knew what we had to deal with and subsequently implement the economic model that works.”*

These goals are also closely connected to the perception of personal strengths and can thereby also be seen as an effort to enhance the feeling of self-efficacy, i.e. the need to feel competent in the performance of tasks. Interestingly, many of the operational goals also seem to be influenced by new notions of accountability and responsibility – and also in many cases ideas about good governance or creating a good psychosocial working environment. This might be an indication that at this level of goal formulation, new ideas have had some impact. It is clear that in the formulation of operational goals, the top level managers attempt to address some of the structures and cultural aspects that they perceive to be counter to the implementation of the strategic goals, but also that these obstacles/challenges are connected to the a perception of the existing structures and culture as rigid.

## Conclusions and further questions

The primary questions of the present paper were how the top level strategic managers make sense and give sense of their role as strategic managers, particularly how new ideas about higher education governance and management are balanced with more established ideas and frames, and how this sensemaking and sensegiving affects the practice, i.e. the goals that are set, and the strategies that are employed to reach these goals. The study has shown even though traditional norms and values are still very influential, newer ideas about accountability, strategy and transparency have certainly found their way into the goal-setting and identity constructions of higher education managers in Denmark.

One interesting finding of the study has been the degree to which the academic background is consistently used as a frame in the sensemaking processes, and how this affects the cues that are extracted from the changing circumstances. This illustrates how powerful frames academic norms and values really are – or at least that they are still perceived to be important, both in personal sensemaking and in organizational sensegiving. As illustrated above, the collegiate governance idea and the *primus inter pares* principle still acts as a frame when constructing a sense of self-consistency, i.e. when highlighting 'having lived the life' and the importance of being able to speak the language and understand the conditions of being a researcher, even though the ideas and principles are simultaneously described as symbolic and even as expressions of 'academic arrogance'. The seeming inconsistency in simultaneously criticizing and utilizing the academic ideas and principles in a sensemaking process should not be seen as a type of 'cheating' or deception, but merely as a sensemaking element – it is a good example of the difference it brings to connect a cue to different frames.

In general the study has shown that the sensemaking processes of the top level managers seem to serve a vital purpose in that it helps constructing themselves as agents by setting their own goals – translating the ideas and impulses in relation to their own sense of self. In this way sensemaking can be seen as a means for empowerment.

At the same time we saw that the sensemaking and identity constructions impacted the goals that the managers set up – and thereby how they inhabit the practice of being a strategic manager. Even though the 'actual' goals differed, there seemed to be three similar patterns of goal constructions, namely externalized strategic goals, personal strategic goals and operational goals. The personal strategic goals can be seen as the managers' translations of the externalized strategic goals; a personalization of depersonalized visions. The externalized strategic goals are often part of a powerful social discourse that any strategic manager would be hard pressed to circumvent – and thereby the recognition and articulation of these goals act as sensegiving to the external (political, societal) audience. The personal strategic goals can on the other hand be seen to represent the managers' attempt at creating a meaning that allow them to maintain a positive self-relation, but also one that they believe to be "digestible" to their

internal audience, i.e. the academic staff that should help achieve the goals. These more abstract goals are accompanied by more concrete goals like 'sorting out the economy', 'making the organisation run smooth' etc.. Interestingly new (externally constructed) ideas seem to have the highest impact on the externalized strategic goals – but also on the operational goals. The strategic goals are more closely connected to the sensemaking processes of the individual manager, and thus to their perception of personal strengths and the need for self-enhancement and self-efficacy.

The question that remains is how the goals that are set up by these managers are 'received' and made sense of on other levels of the organisation. Further research into how sensemaking and sensegiving plays out amongst academic staff and how the goals of the top level managers play into these processes would be of great value in terms of understanding the complex relationship between highly institutionalized norms and values and powerful new ideas.

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