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Mutuality, metaphor and micropolitics in collaborative governance: a joint venture in UK higher education

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Abstract

As market-led higher education systems become the “new normal”, a wider variety of organisational forms is likely to emerge. This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative and historical study that aimed to explore the meaning of collaborative governance in a unique and longstanding higher education joint venture in England. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior-level stakeholders from both participating institutions: architects of the joint venture, institutional leaders (up to 2012) , and faculty managers. Interviewees frequently referred to the metaphor of marriage and described the institutions as partners who don't live together but have responsibility for the children! The paper offers reflective insights on governance, leadership and management and highlights the tensions of balancing mutual interests, the use of metaphor to make sense of critical incidents and the role of micropolitics of enacting leadership at multiple levels. The paper contributes to conceptual understanding and knowledge of collaborative governance in higher education.

Key words

Collaborative Governance, Partnerships, Leadership, Mutuality

Mutuality, metaphor and micropolitics in collaborative governance: a joint venture in higher education

Introduction

In England the university sector is experiencing strain and uncertainty. The withdrawal of public sector funding and introduction of fees is exacerbating competition for students, research grants and encouraging institutional scrambling for reputational advantage. Since 2010 the sector has seen acceleration of the marketization of higher education (Callender and Scott 2013), and current government policy in England is consolidating the conditions for competition (Department of Business Innovation and Science 2016), which will have consequences for reconfiguration and the emergence of new organizational forms in higher education. This paper is timely as it explores the origins, progress and impact of a higher education joint venture that is twenty years old. In the 1990s universities benefited from marketization in health (Le Grand et al 2004), as the responsibility for education of the non-medical health professions moved from the NHS (Burke 2006, Ross 2013). We tell the story of how these market changes triggered an “arranged marriage” between two universities, which produced a new “organizational form”, run as a joint venture. Taking a historical perspective, and using evidence from interviews with key architects and stakeholders, we offer reflective insights into the governance, leadership and impact of the joint venture. Here we define the joint venture as a business entity, set up for an agreed purpose, with a legal agreement to share ownership of returns, risk and governance (Collins Dictionary of Law 2006). In the paper we draw out the tensions experienced, and the successes achieved, by two universities with very different histories, identities and cultures.

Changing organizational forms

Universities in the UK have enjoyed relative stability, compared to the restructuring experienced by health services and local government. This is set to change as the consequences of austerity policies, competition, and uncertainty, resulting from the 2016 referendum result of “Brexit” play out, leading to likely market failures, particularly for small and specialist institutions. In our view the discussion of new organizational forms, up to, and including mergers, will be increasingly on the agenda. To provide a theoretical context for our study we briefly discuss literature on new organizational forms and mergers to provide the lens through which we explore the meaning of collaborative governance.

Not surprisingly the study of mergers and acquisitions has a longer and livelier history in the private sector than in higher education; and although the context and funding is radically different between

private and public sectors, there are some useful general messages for this study. For example, Cartwright and Schoenberg (2006) reviewed thirty years of academic literature, which showed only moderate performance advantage from merger and a less developed understanding of softer benefits such as strategic fit, resource sharing and knowledge transfer. In health care, which is a professionalized service with more similarities than differences with higher education (Ferlie et al 2008), a recent review of mergers between NHS Trusts in England found they largely resulted in complex and costly negotiations and provided little benefit in savings (Collins 2015). Both these reviews from outside higher education suggest there are important questions to ask beyond the ones of structure and cost, to the “softer benefits” and the staff experience, which is the focus of our paper.

The UK higher education literature on changing organizational form is patchy. There are isolated and normative reviews of institutional change, such as Rowley (1997), descriptive mapping (Harman and Harman 2008, Goreham 2011), and also good practice guidelines on critical success factors for collaborative advantage (Baird 2010). In Europe there is more literature to draw from, probably because the higher education policy drivers are different with strategic “excellence initiatives”. These system wide strategies have influenced organizational change, new divisions of labour, integration and merger (Stensaker and Fumasoli 2015). Case study evaluations of these examples and others, for example Puusa and Kekale (2013), have accumulated evidence that can be mined to generate generalizable lessons. The DEFINE study (Privot et al 2015) has also mapped some of this case study literature identifying good practice, challenges and pitfalls of institutional mergers and “concentration” schemes, as well as drawing out themes of governance, communication, management and students.

The joint venture

The UK literature has even less to say on the governance of collaborations, alliances and other examples of new organizational forms (Greatbatch 2014). Although more of a policy review than research, the Hefce (2012) study of CAMs or Collaborations, Alliances and Mergers (CAMs) is something of an exception. It describes the spectrum of collaboration with illustrative case studies. However, these are descriptive and provide limited critical analysis. Hefce (2012) describes a joint activity as when two or more partners work together in a particular area of business, which may involve combining existing operations, pooling areas of expertise or creating something entirely new and thus achieving collaborative advantage (Lowndes and Skelcher 1998). Stanfield (2011) notes that legally there are only three ways in which one institution can interact with another: first, on a contractual basis, secondly as a legal entity and thirdly as a merger of two bodies or one taking

over another (acquisition). This paper describes the joint venture as the first mode of operation, which as noted earlier is defined as a new business entity.

In 1992 Kingston and St George's responded to a National Health Service (NHS) competitive tender to provide nursing and midwifery education for South West London. As the institutions were seen by the commissioners to have complementary strengths they were invited to work together. For two higher education institutions (HEIs) with no prior relationship, different organizational identities, academic cultures and histories, this was something of a shock, akin to an "arranged marriage" or "shotgun wedding". After a period of relationship building, negotiation and intense development - a joint agreement and not an entity (JANE) was set up in 1995. Underpinned by a joint venture agreement (JVA) with schedules for HR, research, finance, facilities, estates and academic administration, this provided the business model through which the Joint Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education (formerly known as the Faculty of Health and Social Care Sciences and in this paper called the Joint Faculty) operated. The JVA allowed institutional autonomy and a separate joint management structure overseen and chaired alternately by the institutional heads with the Dean reporting directly to both (Figure 1). The legal agreement set out shared contractual responsibilities in terms of risk, contribution and surplus returns.

Historical context - the Joint Faculty in numbers

At the start, in 1995, the Joint Faculty contract value was worth £8 million for delivery of sub degree programmes in nursing, midwifery and a range of post qualification certificate and diploma level modules. By 2012, when the interviews for this study were undertaken, income had nearly trebled to over £23 million, there were 6,794 students (head count) enrolled on a range of foundation degree, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in nursing, midwifery, paramedic sciences physiotherapy, radiography and social work. Excluding the 40% studying CPPD modules, around 75% of students were enrolled at Kingston and 25% at St George's. Overall 80% were undergraduates and 20% postgraduates or research students. In 2012 the Joint Faculty absorbed the Kingston University School of Education, although this sits outside the joint venture.

The Joint Faculty has pioneered educational innovations in workforce development (e.g. physician assistants and paramedic practitioners) and postgraduate programmes supporting clinical/academic pathways. The quality of education has significantly improved based on external assessments such as the National Student Survey (NSS) (2011/12 average total satisfaction was 82%) and NHS league tables, which measures metrics such as attrition (average 9%). There were also notable early successes in research. The universities did not inherit any research active staff in the NHS transfer

so appointed two Professors (1995/6) to build capacity. In 1997 the Joint Faculty won a £600k research grant to conduct a large multi-centre study, which at the time was the largest grant Kingston had ever received. Research in the Joint Faculty achieved successful outcomes in successive UK research quality assessment exercises (the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the Research Excellence Framework (REF)). In the 2001 RAE nursing achieved a 3A outcome; in 2008 45% of research was rated 3* and 4* and performed better than other units at KU (exception of business) and SGUL (exception epidemiology). In the 2014 REF nursing was entered into a combined Unit of Assessment for Allied Health Professions and included two impact case studies from the Joint Faculty. Nursing also had outputs rated as performing at and above the university targets of 3* and 4*.

Despite these tangible successes, the collaborative governance model underpinning the Joint Faculty has remained hidden from view. There has been neither an institutional evaluation nor any sharing of lessons learned. This paper aims to fill that gap.

Definitions and aims

Governance in higher education is generally understood in terms of constitutional form, structures and processes of power between different stakeholders through which universities govern (Shattock 2008, 2013). In this study we were interested in understanding the meaning of collaborative governance within a joint venture, therefore we focused less on formal structures than in the social relationships that sit in the governance hinterland and influence its shape and function. Middlehurst (2004) describes governance covering the internal management structures, decision making arrangements, leadership roles and the relationship between internal functions and the governing body as important, but not sufficiently comprehensive to capture the true nature of HE governance. Governance is not a static, but a dynamic process which, plays out within the context of partnership, is part of the process of change that may influence and shape emerging and new organizational forms (Davies 2007). Our focus is on this “messy” governance territory (Middlehurst 2013) and the relationships of academic leaders as they work across boundaries.

The research was designed to answer the following question: what is the meaning of successful governance within a joint venture partnership context in a higher education setting? It sought to explore how two higher education institutions (described as “host institutions” in this paper) with different histories, cultures, and management styles have worked together in a joint venture through organizational structures and the relationships that span institutional boundaries. It took a historical

perspective and explored concepts of governance, partnership, success, and opportunity, expectations and the experience of partnership working.

Approach – methods and analysis

The Joint Faculty arrangement was used a single case study (albeit embedded in two institutions) and the empirical research sought to investigate issues of governance, partnership and opportunity through a qualitative research approach that was designed to be both exploratory (about future opportunities) and reflective (about past achievements and structural and policy constraints). Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Kingston University.

Data was collected via desk research and semi-structured interviews with senior-level stakeholders from within and outside the universities who had been involved in the formation, leadership and operational management of the joint venture and the Joint Faculty since the initiation of the negotiations in 1992.

The desk research focused on identifying and analyzing key documentary data (available from the Joint Faculty records back to 1992) providing important contextual information to inform the identification of core themes and critical events that were explored in the semi-structured interviews, and helped to illuminate and test the themes that emerged from the empirical research. Themes that emerged from the desk research included: the design of the joint faculty; personalities; the possibility of future merger; institutional structures and cultures; and defining success.

A total of twenty-eight interviews were undertaken between February and December 2012, 10 from Kingston, nine from St George's, three senior NHS stakeholder employer representatives, and six Joint Faculty senior managers. In the two universities this involved the then current (at time of interview in 2012) and former heads of institution; Vice-Principals and Pro Vice-Chancellors; Directors of Academic and Administrative Services. In the Joint Faculty Heads of School and Faculty Administrative Managers were interviewed. The Dean of the Joint Faculty at the time (FR) commissioned the project, but was not interviewed or involved in the analysis. Previous Deans were unable to participate in the study.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face (25) and by telephone (3) by the project researcher (SW) who was unknown to the study respondents and had a very limited prior experience with the

Joint Faculty. The interviews were recorded but not transcribed. Detailed notes were taken from each interview and this formed the basis for the analysis. Respondents were provided with information about the purpose of the research and the focus of the interviews. It was made clear to respondents that the research focus was on partnership working and governance, rather than on evaluating the outcomes of the Joint Faculty and they were assured their views would be anonymized.

The approach was based on framework analysis (Srivastava & Thomson 2009), a qualitative method that is well-suited to research that has a specific questions, a particular time frame, a pre-designed sample and a priori themes. The interview data were coded and analysed at a factual level, in relation to roles, critical incidents or events; at a conceptual level around pre-defined, emergent, and explanatory themes; and at a theoretical level, in relation to the role of governance in partnership working.

The study findings and draft paper have been commented on by the current heads of both Kingston and St George's, Dean and the steering group.

Results

The findings are presented below in the form of key themes. We have not attributed any comments to individual respondents and kept direct quotes to a minimum, because of the need to respect confidentiality of distinguished former leaders, senior members of staff (past and present) who are all well known to each other and who might be familiar with each other's use of language.

Temporal context

The comprehensive nature of this study meant that temporal and contextual issues emerged as a strong theme in the analysis since many respondents were involved in different (and in some cases all) phases of the twenty year development of the Joint Faculty, and therefore had a strong personal and emotional investment. Those involved in the negotiations and initiation demonstrated significant pride in its continued success and 'keeping the show on the road'. Most respondents engaged with the study themes either through the lens of 'critical incidents' or through particular bounded periods of time or developmental phases. These included: the Joint Faculty's establishment phase; tenures and departures of Deans and Heads of Institution; 'tricky' or 'turbulent' periods where one partner considered merging with a different institution; and intense and focused tendering periods for crucial healthcare education contracts, where the future of the Joint Faculty

was at stake. This contextualization enabled respondents to provide examples to support their observations, and to reflect on why particular events happened and how particular decisions were made. We use this temporal context in the following analysis and draw out meaning from the metaphors used by respondents to describe critical incidents.

Organizational culture(s)

The interview data revealed three main dimensions of organizational culture: institutional culture(s); management culture(s); and the existence of a Joint Faculty ‘third culture’. Interviewees across both institutions highlighted - mostly stereotypical - differences of history and reputation. St George’s is a small health sciences university. It is a former single faculty medical school, that is part of the University of London, and it has a strong reputation for innovative medical education and research. While its size and independence is part of the reason for its achievements, successive Council and institutional leaders have identified significant risks in terms of financial sustainability and research power, compared to its large multi faculty competitors. Kingston is a comprehensive modern university (post-1992), which grew significantly in the “noughties” as a direct result of its commitment to widening access and increasing HE participation for non-traditional students. Whilst it ranks low in institutional ‘league’ tables it is financially strong and describes itself as “led by learning” with pockets of research excellence identified in the RAE and REF. Respondents perceptions of differences in status was striking, especially as expressed by the, long since retired, negotiators of the joint venture, but over time these views attenuated so that for some, the differences were not seen as significant, except perhaps in research quality. The history, tradition and prestige of St George’s was highly valued in the partnership, but paradoxically was seen by some as limiting the possibility of future closer working arrangements or merger with Kingston.

There was general agreement that the management structures used in the Joint Faculty were developed using a Kingston-orientated model that drew on New Public Management (NPM). This is based on a ‘tight-loose’ management approach, balancing central control and decentralization to the faculties (Deem et al 2007). In the Joint Faculty’s development phase, Kingston had more established and streamlined management practices and decision-making than St George’s. At that time St George’s collegiate ethos was characterized by a ‘hands on’ role for the Principal, a strong centralized administration, multiple academic/clinical units, and relatively slow and ambiguous decision making. However, there is evidence of convergence, as St George’s has transformed its institutional management structures and processes. Some interviewees suggested that engagement in the Joint Faculty may have influenced this process, although there remains a strong legacy influence

of the Kingston management culture on the Joint Faculty.

Despite the significant influence of the Kingston approach there has (so far) been resistance to a wholesale adoption of Kingston management control, even where Kingston systems are used (HR and Finance). For example, rather than offering joint degrees, the institutions have opted to preserve their independence by offering separate awards through the vehicle of the Joint Faculty. While this is pragmatic and safeguards institutional autonomy, it means the Joint Faculty has to manage dual systems of validation, academic quality monitoring, research and knowledge transfer strategies, increasing complexity, duplication and reporting burden. Therefore ‘getting on with things’ and making the partnership work on a day to day basis was a common theme and may have contributed to the view of the Joint Faculty having a ‘third culture’ or ‘semi-detached’ ethos. At the same time it was seen as important by senior managers in the Faculty for it to be proud of its ‘unique identity’, and to utilise the collaborative advantage of ‘jointness’, or being part of two institutions, for example in its separate branding and logo.

At the inception of the Joint Faculty, the host institutions largely viewed it in transactional terms as a ‘delivery mechanism’ for the NHS contract. The joint venture agreement offered mutual advantages for maintaining independence, opportunity for growth by working with another partner, healthy contribution and surplus return from the activity and offered a safe distance and exit strategy to unbundle the joint venture agreement if needed. However, there was some recognition that attitudes have changed over time and that the “public purpose” and wider contribution of the joint faculty activities such as research and inter-professional learning were also seen as adding value. Some respondents suggested that the limited development of research, in particular, was an indication of a lack of a coordinated and coherent joint university strategy and evidence of ‘unfulfilled potential’ or ‘missed opportunities’.

Organizational structures

Although the Joint Faculty organizational arrangement is considered to be a ‘softer’ type of collaboration, akin to a partial merger and “more easily unwound” (HEFCE 2012), the interviews revealed differential impacts of two elements of structure: management and governance arrangements; and systems, policies, processes and procedures. As noted above, many respondents suggested that the Joint Faculty’s management and governance arrangements have had limited impact on the host institutions since they were developed quickly, and were narrowly focused on delivering the NHS contract. From 1996 to 2012 the Joint Faculty was overseen by an overarching group (the Joint Planning and Finance Group (JPFPG) and its successor body the Joint Strategic

Executive Committee (see Figure 1), which comprised membership from both host institutions (including Heads of Institution who took the Chair alternately), but crucially did not involve lay governors. This body was designed to be strategic and act as a bridge between the two host institutions. However, some respondents suggested its membership (without external independent governance perspective) and limited terms of reference, has meant that it has tended to be more operational than strategic. Furthermore, the relative invisibility of the Joint Faculty from the strategic agendas of the governing bodies of both institutions was highlighted, coming to prominence when there were worries about financial risk, for example when the NHS commissioners required all eight universities in London to retender for their nursing education contracts. At this critical point there was concern from both governing boards, and serious questions were asked about the viability of the joint venture agreement. Fortunately the Joint Faculty was rated highest for quality against all other higher education providers in London, which resulted in growth and a renewed sense of confidence in the joint venture.

Below the senior management level, the Joint Faculty was perceived to engage with the host institutions organically. This pragmatic approach allowed significant independence but was seen to have consequences in limited integration. Many respondents valued the “what works” or muddling through approach to systems, policies, processes and procedures in preference to disruptive and expensive change. One respondent described this in terms of a family avoiding having the ‘difficult conversations’ about how to identify the necessary action that would be required to improve their relationships. Some respondents considered this flexible and pragmatic approach reduced the intensity of collaboration across the two institutions below the senior management level. In particular, they identified limited motivation or high-level support to tackle any ‘big problems’ in these areas (e.g. related to student data, digital learning platforms, etc.). Preserving institutional authority over, for example, student data, was seen as a trade-off between administrative burden and duplication of activity for the Joint Faculty, which in turn raises further questions about cost-effectiveness.

Defining and measuring success

All interviewees reported that although, the Joint Faculty’s strategic planning has consistently sought to align with the broader strategies of both host institutions, the overriding focus has always been on growth and sustainability in its core business. In other words the priority has been on winning, delivering and expanding contracts for training healthcare professionals, and diversifying into other areas is a secondary focus. Many respondents’ suggested that they were not convinced of any strong strategic direction from the universities that went beyond the commodification of

contracts, institutional income targets and NHS Contract Performance Indicators (CPIs). Using the family analogy, the Joint Faculty was seen as the child who was ‘doing OK’, generating generous surpluses for both institutions and as a result given limited attention or investment - perhaps for reasons of institutional self-interest, not wanting to rock the boat, ask awkward questions of the “other parent” or undermine the principle of shared risk and benefit in the joint venture. Other indicators of success such as consistent levels of academic quality via the CPIs and the National Student Survey (NSS) results, increasing research income and the quality of research outputs were often mentioned, but respondents were keen to highlight that these were ultimately of secondary importance, particularly for the host institutions.

Although the Joint Faculty was perceived to be mostly invisible in the strategic focus of the host institutions, it was suggested there were critical moments when its existence suddenly loomed large and was used, for example as a “bargaining chip”, when one or both partners explored new strategic alliances such as St George’s and Kingston establishing the South West London Academic Network (SWAN) with Royal Holloway, University of London. Here the Joint Faculty played a key bridging role and led the development of one of the alliance’s three interdisciplinary academic institutes. More problematic for Kingston, and inevitably the Joint Faculty, was the challenge from a new Chair of St George’s Council who drove successive forays into exploring potential mergers with the University of Surrey and then more seriously with Royal Holloway (another member of the University of London). After two years of negotiations, and having reached the final stage, the merger was aborted. These “Liaisons Dangereuses” were particularly challenging for Kingston. The common Kingston view was the university had been loyal, and had contributed significantly to a stable and enduring relationship without being considered as a possible merger partner. Inevitably, hidden tensions and perceptions of relative institutional status, rankings, prestige and reputation rose to the surface during these periods, but of course could not be confronted directly nor resolved. A common perception from St George’s was that Kingston was of lower status to the Medical School (one of the more striking observations was that it was ‘below the salt’) and would never countenance a formal merger. Maintaining the status quo of a ‘partial merger’ might be the best that it could hope to achieve.

Leadership

Respondents were specifically asked about the impact of leadership on the Joint Faculty over time. Responses focused on two key dimensions of leadership, the importance of particular leadership roles and also the impact of individual leadership style and approach. Across all interviews, the

roles of ‘Head of Institution’ – Vice-chancellor at Kingston University and Principal at St George’s – and ‘Faculty Dean’ were consistently highlighted as crucial.

The institutional and faculty leadership has been remarkably stable over a twenty year history. At Kingston there have been three vice chancellors, at St George’s four Principals and three Faculty Deans (the fourth Dean was appointed in 2014). Respondents considered that the heads of the institutions have an important role personally and strategically in setting the tone for the relationship and also in signifying the importance of the Joint Faculty to other parts of their institutions. This was particularly highlighted (as noted above) by the destabilizing impact of “leadership churn” at St George’s, which resulted in marked strategic shifts and instability in relationships. Although formal roles are important, some respondents considered that for collaborative governance to be successful, a different style of leadership was required. For example, it was important for institutional leaders to develop a good working relationship with their counterpart, to provide clarity about the goals of the joint venture, and to value the contribution of both institutions.

Many respondents considered that the Dean has a particularly challenging role. In addition to their core leadership and management tasks, respondents highlighted a range of key activities for the Dean across the two host institutions including: navigating and brokering between the two institutions and across the three campus sites; shaping links and developing relationships; being the ambassador and champion and ensuring the best academic and financial ‘deal’; building credibility in both teaching and research; liaising with key external stakeholders (e.g. the NHS, and professional and regulatory bodies (PRBs) (Ross et al 2013) and often managing the ambiguity and organizational anxiety on behalf of, and for staff, at times of institutional change and uncertainty.

Relationships and working practices

Respondents emphasized that the ‘glue’ that binds the Joint Faculty together, and with its host institutions, is formed of the relationships and working practices between key members of staff. All respondents suggested that there have been mostly very positive formal and informal working relationships at the senior management level between the Joint Faculty and two host institutions. This has helped to provide the informal space for any major governance issues or concerns to be resolved, or at least discussed, before they reach the formal governance structures.

However, some respondents suggested that successful ‘working together’ has relied on senior managers in the Joint Faculty and in the host institutions acting as a conduit or interpreter of

information between the two institutions in a context of limited, and variable, formal and informal engagement. Faculty senior managers often described the institutional relationship through the metaphor of two separated parents, bound together by a child. The two ‘parent’ institutions have ups and downs in their relationship, with variable levels of agreement and communication.

Respondents described how children of separated parents often have to broker the relationship, support communication and stay loyal to both. For example they highlighted their role in representing the interests of one of the host institutions in committees and working groups of the other institution. In some cases – depending on their School – respondents’ identified more with one host institution, but were still at pains to communicate their commitment to both. At times of tension between the institutions related metaphors emerged around impending divorce, how individual staff felt ‘caught in the middle’, not feeling fully part of either institution and at times being a ‘problem child’ of both.

Discussion

The findings from this study provide a new perspective on governance in a joint venture. In the discussion we take the debate beyond structuralist debates on governance and organizational form to its academic heartland (Middlehurst 2013) and to the way in which organizations and the people within them relate to each other (Davies (2007). Our findings give rich descriptions of the way key actors manage complexity and paradoxes through pragmatism and “muddling through, deliberating on events and making practical judgements” (Greenhalgh 2015 p.209).

The discussion considers the interview data thematically as they relate to notions of mutuality, metaphor and micropolitics. Firstly collaborative governance relied on mutuality and reciprocity or collaborative advantage (Lowndes and Skelcher 1998), which was formalized within the joint venture agreement. As discussed earlier this defines the universities as equal share-holders in the risk and rewards from the “business”. The agreement was subject to external legal review in 2012 and was commended for providing flexibility and the conditions for a mutually beneficial and sustainable partnership. In practice the agreement has been a vehicle for joint management of contracts, run through the entity of the Joint Faculty, while at the same time legitimizing institutional autonomy for academic awards and allocating joint responsibility for management and performance of the Dean. However, as the dominant narrative in the interview data suggests, achieving mutuality was problematic in the daily challenges of joining up two systems and processes influenced by different cultures, traditions and priorities, but also at times when external challenges threatened the fragile status quo, for example at the time of the proposed St George’s merger. At these ‘critical’ times, power, organizational identity and status issues rose rapidly to the

surface, getting in the way of mutuality and becoming encapsulated through interpersonal tension in the leadership. Balancing the private and public persona and providing the right tone as a “critical friend” for the “other” became an issue at these critical points, as institutional leaders understandably needed to protect their institution’s interest in the “business” of the joint venture. These empirical findings support the conceptual work of Fumasoli et al (2015) who argue organizational identity is strongly associated with the central character, distinctiveness of an institution and can be used to “legitimate the narrative for change” or in other words encourage behavior that is risk taking or in other circumstances risk mitigation.

Secondly, the respondents frequently drew on metaphor to illustrate the complexity of the governance arrangements and for “sense making” Weick (1995) of navigating between two worlds with different histories, organizational behaviours and working relationships (Locke 2007). This involved members of the joint faculty giving meaning to their unusual working experience through exhibiting a pragmatic ‘third-culture’, focusing their energies on day-to-day operational practice, based on Faculty core business and working around problems, and without asking more strategic or philosophical questions such as ‘how did we get here?’ and ‘where are we going?’. This culture is exhibited by the constant use of the child/dysfunctional family metaphor, but appears to represent the Joint Faculty as an adolescent that finds ways to make sense of their situation, to adhere to the family rules, whilst lacking enough power to significantly change their situation.

Metaphors such as the “shotgun wedding”, arranged marriage and separated parents, demonstrate how this arrangement can impact on the “child” joint faculty when one parent considers commitment (i.e. merger) with another partner. Feelings of being used as a commodity or part of the trading negotiations was highlighted by Faculty staff and reflects the anxiety and insecurities that children may feel going into a new relationship with a ‘step-parent’. Metaphors can be a way of dealing with emotions and managing organizational ambiguity, which for many of the Faculty senior managers was a significant challenge. These findings suggest that emotional investment in collaborative governance should not be underplayed.

The third theme of micropolitics draws attention to the less visible activity that lies behind formal leadership (Lumby 2015). The interviews were full of stories of leadership behind the scenes, working around challenges, being pragmatic and being a conduit between the two university structures (Mumford and Van Doorn 2001). In the case of the Joint Faculty this required faculty senior managers to develop strong relationships with counterparts in both institutions, using influencing skills to build on the best of both, occasionally as one respondent admitted, ‘playing the

two institutions off against each other' and finally taking advantage of unexpected chances or opportunities to get the best outcome, as a child might do with their divorced parents.

We argue that while formal leadership is of course an important feature of collaborative governance (HEFCE 2012) and effective organisations (Bryman 2007, Middlehurst 2012), what matters more perhaps is what Greenhalgh (2015) calls social practices, which are enacted at the micro level and are not always rational and strategic. Future research on governance should explore it in practice to explain leadership roles, styles and interpersonal skills for navigating the complexities of differing organizational structures in a distributed leadership model (Bolden et al 2012, Bolden et al 2015). Secondly, further research in collaborative governance should address power and politics explicitly as noted by Fumasoli and Stensaker (2013) and the subtleties and tensions flowing from the interplay between organizations working together, but with inevitably contrasting identities (Fumasoli et al 2015) .

The findings are important for three reasons. Firstly they are relevant to higher education systems in the UK as they move to market based systems, seek to balance the twin goals of prestige and massification (Fairweather and Blalock 2015, Blackmore 2015), and consider new organizational models that will provide financial sustainability . Secondly, we offer insights and a uniquely (twenty year) long view into collaborative governance exemplified in the hybrid Joint Faculty, that some saw as a “third way”. The hybrid nature reflects features of the two cultures that together were able to respond effectively to competition in the health care market (Paradeise et al 2009). Finally the learning from this case study sheds light on collaborative governance as a mode of social co-ordination (Reale and Primeri 2015 p.20), which has resonance with the conceptual framework guiding merger decisions suggested by Kyvik and Stensaker (2013). Our findings support Kyvik and Stensaker (2013) in highlighting the importance of structural, cultural, academic values and identity factors, which both adds to comparative European literature and has practical application for institutions considering risks and benefits of collaborations as a precursor to acquisitions and mergers for reasons of efficiency, effectiveness, and value for money (UUK 2011, 2015).

A strength of the method was the combination of in-depth desk and empirical research that captured perceptions and experience from actors involved at different levels of institutional leadership and at various stages since the early nineties. The data was collected and analysed by an independent researcher, who was knowledgeable about the two institutions, institutional management, and medical education, but had no prior engagement in the Joint Faculty. This reduced the possibility of

bias in the data collection process, and enabled respondents to talk freely and confidentially about their engagement with the partnership. Indeed, it was clear that the timing and nature of the respondents' engagement with the Joint Faculty strongly influenced their responses. Those who had been involved since the inception of the collaboration (the 'architects') had a strong personal involvement in the development of the Joint Faculty, and a key research challenge was to ensure that all perspectives were considered against the context of the respondent's engagement and their recall of events given the passage of time. The fact that none of the Faculty Deans were interviewed, nor were they involved in the analysis, strengthens the authenticity of the findings as it removes any suggestion of bias and highlights the crucial leadership role of the Dean in collaborative governance reflected by a 360 degree perspective from senior leaders of institutions and their direct reports, and external stakeholders, rather than relying on personal experience.

Conclusions

The paper offers important insights on governance in practice, as it develops over time, navigating relationships and complexity in the context of a long-standing HE joint venture. The Joint Faculty of Health, Social Care (and now Education) is a well-established and valued part of the academic portfolio of two UK HE institutions. It has demonstrated capacity for growth, diversification and financial strength. Issues such as leadership, organizational culture and communication are relevant to HE management in any context, but the findings from this research suggest that they have a particular, and complex, character in the context of a legal entity and joint venture. The importance of working front of house, and behind the scenes, finding pragmatic solutions to organizational challenges, the emotional investment in overcoming challenges and ensuring the success of the partnership from those who were part of designing the joint venture, providing oversight and its management should not be underestimated. The learning from this case study enhances our understanding of how collaborative governance encompasses not just organizational structures, but also the people and relationships who work within and across institutional boundaries. It will be of interest to policy-makers and senior leaders considering options for new organizational forms. However, more research is needed to explore further the conditions that support and hinder collaborative governance as applied to other HE settings. A cross case analysis in UK HE and beyond would build knowledge and provide the framework for workable cost effective approaches.

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