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Strategy as practice or parody? A case study of the strategic plan in a university

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ABSTRACT

The paper shows, based on a case study of the production of a strategic plan at a fairly traditional university, the problems and potential meaninglessness of working with strategic plans in this type of setting, characterized by strong professional norms. Senior people involved in the strategy work raise strong doubts over, and distancing from, the process and outcome. Possible meanings of the strategic plan, in addition to having a ('real') strategy for the university, such as communicating a brand image, identity construction, or producing an image of rational management, backfired. The paper raises doubts about the strategic planning view, but also about strategy in practice or as process. An alternative understanding of strategy is proposed: strategy as parody.

1. Introduction

What is strategy? Of course, there are thousands of views, definitions, empirical examples and understandings of 'strategy', even if we limit ourselves to the organizational context. These range from the top-level planning and ordering the troops according to the battle or business plan, to emergent, gradually more or less synchronized patterns, from analysis and plans to practice in which people 'do' strategy – often framed as strategizing/organizing – or to strategy as discourse with occasional disciplinary impact on individuals and organizations. Sometimes strategy is about moving an entire organization in a specific direction, sometimes it is more about sub-functional issues, e.g. strategic HR or an IT strategy, or the planning of a unit.

Historically organizations have not been very much preoccupied by strategy in any distinct sense, but strategy is now institutionalized as 'normal' business (Knights & Morgan, 1991). It went more seriously into the corporate world in the 1950's, have then expanded into public sector and have fairly recently also been a practice in the university sector. The latter partly because it is often said that also higher education institutions are facing an increasingly complex world with a variety of stakeholders that needs to be acknowledged by the help of concepts – such as strategic planning – traditionally seen as belonging to the corporate world. A development often framed as the emergence of academic capitalism or the corporatization of higher education (Huzzard et al., 2017; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). Following that, most organizations today seem to work with strategy. However, it is not self-evident

that strategy is necessary, important or work smoothly in the university sector, where a large variety of disciplines and professionals expected to be autonomous and drive their own ideas and projects may not align with the possibility of overall university strategies. Whether a specific structure or practice exist because of functional necessity and benefit, or because organizations feel they need to live up to expectations for legitimacy reasons (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) or mimic others and are into isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) is important to consider. An interesting research question is then how – and if – strategy work function in a university. Many researchers claim the value and necessity of strategic management in universities while others see this as unnecessary and futile. The need for responsible management, order, integration, synergy effects and planned change accomplished by strategy as well as combination of bottom-up and top-down strategy – local initiatives and central pruning and coordination – can be contrasted by ideas that strategy is more or less superfluous and lack meaning in pluralistic organizations such as (traditional) universities, where academic networks, external funding and cosmopolitan ideals are central and most faculty members are more oriented to their peers than managers, often seen as doing household work.

This paper examines formal strategy formulation work at a large university in Europe. It is based on interviews with key actors participating in the hands-on work – in a series of workshops – of the design of the plan. Following that, we examine the participants' views on the strategic planning work in its final stage, just prior to being completed in terms of a formal strategy document. This includes their views on why

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such planning work may be (ir-)relevant and whether it has some substantial impact on the governing of the university. We also critically investigate why people feel it important to participate in such formal work. We thus address questions like: what can a strategic plan in a university be about and why do people engage in this? How do they look upon the work involved and the final product? Inspired by the interviewees we suggest the idea of strategy as parody as a way of capturing strategic work, being quite far from ideas of the significance of formal strategic work as occasionally suggested (Whittington et al., 2006). The paper then opens up for seeing certain types of strategy and strategic work in a novel way, adding to the imaginary of how to understand organizational phenomena.

2. On strategy and strategic planning

Below we review strategy by firstly discussing the planning and process approaches and then, secondly, by taking a more critical approach in viewing strategy as an institutionally anchored discourse. We discuss these both in general and in the context of higher education.

2.1. Planning and process approaches

Conventional economic writings – based on micro-economic approach – on strategy are typically highly abstract and decontextualized with aims at facilitating for effective strategy formulations and performances. Although being quite theoretical, this view of strategy has had a large impact on how strategy is viewed in many organizations, also in higher education (HE). Indeed, strategic planning in HE is seen as increasingly important by many taking a more managerialist view on strategy, also suggesting that the characterization of the university as an organized anarchy (Cohen & March, 1974) should be abandoned (Buckner, 2017; Immordino et al., 2016; Teece, 2018). For example, Siegel and Leigh (2018:7) emphasize that ‘Strategic management concepts such as competitive advantage, organizational capabilities, and sustainable performance will help university leaders’ identity problems, formulate strategies, and determine what capabilities they need as leaders to respond to challenges and achieve strategic goals’. Many suggest a systematic strategic planning in higher education, traditionally characterized as controlled by professional norms, demonstrating a development of what we above called an ‘academic capitalism’ or ‘the new managerialism’ (see Chance & Williams, 2009; Dooris et al., 2002; Keller, 1999; Kotler & Fox, 1985; Kotler & Murphy, 1981; Nemetz & Cameron, 2006; Rhoades & Slaughter, 2009; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009; Teece, 2018; Yuan et al., 2018).

Closely related to the emergence of academic capitalism and managerialism is also talk of an increased marketization of higher education and, as many have critically suggested, an increased commodification of higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2009). A development that also has made market positioning in strategic planning more prominent and common, most often in terms of branding and the possibility for HE institutions to create a favorable and attractive image among central stakeholders, including students (Huzzard et al., 2017; Naidoo & Pringle, 2014). Mostly international and national competition along with accreditation demands is said to trigger HE to put substantial resources on ways of creating an appealing image in the eyes of stakeholders (Chapleo, 2011; Vásquez et al., 2013). Branding here refers to how HE-institutions try to organize the relations to stakeholders by drawing upon appealing concepts and language – in visions and missions’ statements as well as in strategy documents and related forms of communication. The brand images that HE institutions want to establish typically include popular and fashionable concepts such as globalism, diversity, sustainability, egalitarianism, innovation etc. (Sataøen, 2015; Stensaker, 2007). This is also something we could observe in our study.

In general, studies of strategic planning in practice in HE is mixed in terms of assessment of its actual impact. Immordino et al. (2016) argue that planning may be beneficial by assisting departments and

educational programs to develop visions, objectives and action programs. This positive outcome is seen as a result of a broad participation of faculty in strategy work, assuring commitment. Others show fewer positive outcomes. Gordon and Fisher (2015) suggest that universities fail to recognize the importance of strategic planning – especially reviews and analysis of performances. Rather, it seemed as if universities use strategic planning as a branding tool, partly as a result of increased demands for accreditations and positioning among stakeholders as suggested above, but without any substantial impact. This overlaps with Chance and Williams’ (2009) study that universities start out strong in planning but fail to complete the work in terms of assessment and thus end weak. Emphasis is placed on the design while the implementation receives less attention. Conway et al. (1994) suggest that a key problem in strategic planning in HE organizations in UK included an inability to understand the role of students or of those who constitute the market.

But even though the studies above recognize the problems with planning they mostly conclude that it is – properly done – still important since, it is suggested, the market is becoming increasingly competitive. Gordon and Fisher (2015:5) state that it provides managers with the appropriate control and is crucial. Many argue that universities need to employ strategic planning in order to improve their operational processes and results (Chance & Williams, 2009). Whether this view expresses a self-evident, proven fact or an ideology or myth is uncertain.

In contrast to the planning approach, a more process-oriented and organization centered research was established some decades ago to capture the emergence of strategies in organizations, to unpack the ongoing strategic work underpinning strategies, thus injecting blood and flesh into the equation (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Mintzberg, 1994; Pettigrew, 1985). This research has since taken many different paths, one of which is the development of a more comprehensive and in-depth research – strategy as practice (SAP) – of what is said to be the actual strategy-work in organizations (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Kohtamäki et al., 2022; Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Whittington, 1996;). The aim of this research is to deal with the black-box of strategy by investigating the actual work of strategic planning and formulations (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011; Whittington, 2003; 2004). During the last decade the SAP research has increased considerably to include a variety of different themes. In a recent review, Kohtamäki et al. (2022), organize the research themes in five clusters: praxis, sense-making, discourse, sociomateriality and institutionalism. Some of these, of particular relevance for this study, includes formal strategic practices such as planning, workshops and meetings (Healy et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2010; MacIntosh et al., 2010; Seidl & Guérard 2015; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). For example, strategic work that occurs in workshops – framed as workshoping (Whittington et al., 2006) – is seen as real and with substantive outcomes, although of course not all such work leads to full scale implementation of strategies. Some have suggested that workshoping may be more about ritualizing strategy than about actually trying to implement it (Johnson et al., 2010). Rather than assuming that strategic practice produces substantive outcome we follow the latter and conceptualize so called strategic work in more critical terms.

Process-oriented studies explicitly recognize the particular processual and contextual conditions of strategic work in HE, including culture, history and the loose coupling of researchers and their projects (Deem, 2001; Holstein & Starkey, 2018; Mintzberg & Rose, 2003; Shattock, 2000). For example, Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) show how strategic planning work as a communicative process – an iterative talk-text dynamic occurring in sequential meetings – facilitate the materialization of authoritative and legitimate strategic plans that may also overcome the problem with the use of buzzwords and other meaningless acts. Similarly, in a study of internationalization in a UK business school, Sillince et al. (2012) argue that ambiguous formulations of strategies may permit people – academics and managers – to attribute a meaning that is aligned with their interest. Ambiguous language (rhetoric) could thus be drawn upon in order to persuade people that their preferred way of action is acknowledged as the rhetoric can be

stretched to include different meanings. [Spee and Jarzabkowski \(2017\)](#) also developed the concept of ‘joint account’ – i.e. ambiguous formulations of a proposed strategic change in a UK university – in order to describe how various meaning-making of a proposed change can co-exist and facilitate for those involved to maintain their role and identity. Strategic changes may thus not require common meaning in order to be taken seriously.

Some process studies focus on the significance of drawing on business models in strategic work in HE. For example, [Holstein and Starkey \(2018\)](#), show how universities can accommodate new business models – framed as narratives of the enterprising university – with more classic ones – framed as traditional research orientation – while maintaining a viable strategic direction without clashes between ideals. It acknowledges paradoxes and contradictions rather than employing a linear management logic as expressed in the planning model ([Meister-Scheytt & Scheytt, 2005](#)).

Somewhat differently, [Mintzberg and Rose \(2003\)](#) conducted a longitudinal study of the history of McGill University and found very little of an overall strategy – intended or emergent – when it comes to the central activities such as the academic offerings (faculties, programs etc) and research. Their conclusion is that strategic management fits universities quite badly when seen from a broad university perspective. They subsequently suggest that universities should avoid engaging in strategic planning. Also, [Buckland \(2009:529\)](#) states that the planning model invites a top-down view of strategy that is counter-productive as it counters creativity.

2.2. Critical approaches

Although being a bit different when it comes to the significance of university-wide strategies, many of the studies above still share a basic assumption that ‘strategy’ is important and ‘real’ for organizations and their performance. Such a view is challenged by [Meyer and Rowan’s \(1977\)](#) idea of formal arrangements reflecting institutional myths and, from another angle, also [Knights and Morgan’s \(1991\)](#) Foucault (1977, 1980) inspired thesis of the strategy discourse having a firm grip over people’s – managers and academics’ – constructions of self and reality ([Knights & Willmott, 1989](#)). Organizations are turned into objects of the strategic management discourse, as planning and/or practice, but this is about symbolism rather than the objective moving of organizations. Institutional myth-thinking assumes that the practices are ceremonial and decoupled from ‘productive practice’. Foucauldians see the impact is mainly on the self-constructions of people involved, constructing themselves as strategists.

A few critical writings suggest that strategic planning represents a fad or fashion that higher education organization feels obliged to adopt, especially in times of increased accreditation demands. [Williams \(2000\)](#) suggests that strategic planning in HE may be more about paying lip service to what is popular without having a substantial impact. [Birnbau \(2000\)](#) also argues for that strategic planning in HE merely represents a shallow fad that could be abandoned. In a related vein, [Sevier \(2003:18\)](#) states that ‘most colleges and universities look at strategic planning as a path to pain, rather than a path to plenty’. This is partly overlapping with the critique by [Mintzberg and Rose \(2003\)](#) above.

The critical approaches ‘desubstantiate’ strategy work and see it beyond or outside what is ‘natural’ or ‘given’ in terms of functional requirements and ‘real work’ with clear positive effects on organizational direction and material outcomes. Both approaches are also broadly in line with our position as the allegedly formal ‘strategic work’ in our case is seen by those participating as being more symbolic and with less of substantial impact.

Following this, the paper draws on critical conversation with various literatures rather than applying a specific, pre-established framework and/or ‘find and fill a gap’ in the literature ([Alvesson, 2013](#)). We recognize the value of the strategy as practice tradition, ideas of the subjectification effects of strategy work (turning managers into

‘strategists’) as well as strategic planning legitimization aspects but take a more problematizing approach than many of the traditions discussed, mainly based on the empirical input. We thus follow some of the ideas of the practice orientation – such as recognizing the potential value of formal strategic work – but take this a bit further by framing the study in terms of critical reflexivity in order to recognize how strategy as practice may be more problematic and also less of ‘practice’ than what is commonly assumed. Most studies of strategy in HE still takes strategy, both planning and processual, for granted and assume that strategy in some way is necessary and lead somewhere ([Nemetz & Cameron, 2006](#)). Based on this, we think that there is still a deficit of open studies of planning that don’t necessarily assume the necessity or positive or negative substantiality of the strategy talk now increasingly informing HE. We think that this paper offers an interesting case of how participants in a strategic planning project viewed this work in its final stage. Based on an interpretative and a critical platform it provides a contrasting view to the often taken for granted nature of the relevance of strategic planning in higher education.

3. Method

Method is typically viewed as being about design and data management. We agree that this is of importance, but are not necessarily sympathetic to current emphasis on neo-positivist methodological principles on procedure, techniques, objectivity, transparency, theory/data separation etc., as for example expressed in some versions of grounded theory, stressing that ‘the matching of theory against data must be rigorously carried out’ ([Strauss & Corbin, 1994:273](#)). We see data as inspirational for generating thick description, with a strong element of interpretation and guided by researcher’s intuition and imagination ([Alvesson & Sandberg, 2021; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018](#)). Pseudo-transparency tends to hide this. For social science to having something novel and relevant to say is more about being interesting and avoiding the partitioned descriptions that data management principles such as coding typically lead to ([Cornelissen, 2017](#)). There are plenty of critique of organization studies for its ‘technocratic unimaginativeness’ ([Van Maanen, 1995:375](#)). Our approach emphasizes thick description and we save space through a briefer method section and use it for a hopefully richer account of the case study.

3.1. Empirical setting and interviews

The empirical study was conducted at a larger traditional European state university following the decision by the university management to embark on a process of producing a new strategic plan as the previous one was seen as becoming out-of-date. The decision also stems from governmental mandates that require state universities to formulate strategic plans consisting of objectives, values and guidelines for different faculties to implement. Following the decision to produce a strategic plan the university management assigned a project leader – called the main architect below – to a project group consisting of representatives for each faculty of the university in order to assure broad participation and efforts at anchoring the strategic work among the university faculties. This particular case offered us the possibility to study strategic work at fairly close-range in a professional setting, often seen as less used to being governed by classic management concepts and something we believe justifies a case study ([Lindgreen et al., 2021](#)).

We thus had a unique possibility to follow the strategy work while it was still alive, although being in its final stage. Based on this, the empirical material is mainly based on interviews with 11 people – all involved in the work of designing the strategic plan. We also draw on the final written plan and informal conversations with numerous people at the studied university, mainly with senior academics. The interviewees were selected for interviews on the basis that they were part of the project group – reference group – that were asked, on a more regular basis, to provide input to the suggestions of a very small task group that

had the main responsibility for writing the plan. We interviewed at least one from each of faculty (except one) that participated in the reference group, as well as the head of the project (main architect). The number of interviews may, of course, appear as small, but we cover the majority of people involved in the project, the patterns found were very clear and there were signs of saturation. We also believe that quality is more important than quantity in qualitative studies and we hope the reader agrees that our respondents were quite open-minded, sincere and uncensored in their accounts, perhaps not very common among deans and other senior organizational members.

All interviews, except one, were conducted during the final stage of designing the plan. The interview with the head of the project took place some weeks after the work ended and a final design of the plan had been published. Interviewing people being actively involved in the strategy work allowed us to gain fresh insights about the process dynamics as such - discussions, interactions, views, responses, reactions, etc. - including recent interpretations of its content. All interviews were assured confidentiality in order to facilitate for establishing openness and trust between the researcher and interviewee. The total amount of audio-recorded interview data is between 60 and 90 min with each participant, and all interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were semi-loosely structured so as to assemble ongoing experiences of the meetings of the project group and work in-between meetings. We proceeded from an interview protocol that provided focus to the interviews but were also keen on maintaining flexibility to allow for surprises and less expected themes to emerge during the interviews. These were thus formed as conversations about the plan, its background and problem, purpose, potential as a governing tool for the university, touching upon areas such as the concept of strategic plans and its role for universities in general and to what extent it may be necessary and/or significant to employ such a device in a university. We also discussed the role of the participants themselves as well as significance of the project group for the design of the plan. The conversations thus tried to develop an understanding of how the participants made sense of the strategic work in a specific university context in terms of meaning and relevance. We worked hard to establish good contact and open up interviewees for frank accounts.

3.2. Data analysis - interpretative approach

Our approach follows hermeneutical principles where we try to locate a 'deeper' or non-obvious meaning of a phenomenon (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018). We try to understand what the strategy and strategy work is all about, beyond the conventional constructions and the reported views (surface data) of informants. There is a strong and unfortunate tendency for all qualitative research to be forced into a 'factor analytical' style of working with data, with an emphasis on very narrow coding and reducing rich meanings to categories to be correlated, obstructing other styles of doing research (Cornelissen, 2017). As suggested by Saldaña (2013:4) coding is an 'interpretative act' and a crucial aspect is here the underlying, implicit meanings: what is it all about? Pointing at root metaphors or cognitive images behind what is explicitly said is here one possibility (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2021; Morgan, 1980). In the process of analyzing the empirical material we thus worked with interpreting and identifying salient patterns, trends and eventually themes and phenomena that frequently occurred in the interviews, as well as brought to light in informal talk with many of the senior academics. These dominant themes and phenomena subsequently formed a more in-depth understanding of the meaning of the strategy work. By systematically identifying these patterns and themes we were able to form a thematic structure of the empirical material around some specific themes - such as yawns, sarcasm, watered down formulations - that pointed at the strategy work as parodic.

We think that, acknowledging for the risk of overgeneralizing, that our interview material offers a rich and interesting case which allows us to generate ideas of strategic plans in a higher education context. We

were positively surprised by the uncensored nature of the interviews.

4. The study

4.1. The strategy work and the main architects' view

The studied strategic plan states that the university needs a plan in order to cope with a variety of societal challenges such as climate change, sustainability, migration and digitalization. It suggests that a strategic repositioning of the university is necessary in order to develop a reliable knowledge culture, to formulate a unique positioning and a compelling advantage, particularly in relation to other institutions of higher education. It indicates distinctiveness and high status that people may find exciting and are willing to identify with.

The plan consists of a few prioritized areas - a connection of research & education, interdisciplinary cooperation, internationalization, leadership as a success factor, attractive work environment and optimized infrastructure - under which a number of different points are highlighted. For example, the readers learn that education and research should strive for highest quality. The formulations are rather vague and follow contemporary standards - rather than being distinctive and unique or tackling local and situational problems - for what is important to express as a university.

After its completion the main architect behind the plan said optimistically in an interview that designing the plan as a variety of lists of action points should facilitate its implementation on faculty level. He characterized the process as open and inclusive:

The engagement among employees for the new strategic plan has so far been very strong. During almost one and a half years the work with producing development areas and formulated the prioritization has attracted a lot.

He says the process was stimulating and that 'with so many suggestions, opinions and views it has been a big job to sort out the inherent core. Now when it's ready we have heard from many that they think it's good, that they recognize themselves in the formulation and we are glad about that'.

Not surprisingly, the key architect expresses optimism about the significance of the plan and that people have been engaged and viewpoints recognized. This should facilitate its implementation and everyone should be reasonably happy about the outcome, reflecting a combination of considering views and the need for selection and focus. But is this view also shared among those participating in the work and contributing to the outcome?

4.2. The participants' understanding of the strategic work

The plan is less positively viewed among those involved in it. The respondents find it empty, unhelpful and even ridiculous. Although the rationale was said to be a repositioning of the university in relation to the societal challenges mentioned above, many of those participating had not a common view of whether there was an actual problem identification constituting the work. Indeed, some participants said there was no particular problem that justified the strategic plan, as expressed by one of the participants:

No, things are going alright here, there's no concrete problem. (Toby).

This is written by someone that don't have problems really. That is how you need to interpret it since...it is a rather high quality in the education ... no I don't think one has been problem-driven in this case like, typically we have a challenge and an opportunity, I really don't think that. (Buster)

Of course, some of the participants talked of general problems or imperfections at the university such as lack of cross-disciplinary

coordination and organizationally strong vertical isolation but these problems were not the focus of the strategic work by the reference group. In general, less of actual local problems, weaknesses or risks were concretely identified. Issues that would possibly call for attention, clarification and a plan for dealing with these were not addressed. This vagueness of the rationality of the entire project is reinforced when listening to the participants talking about its content, the process and possible outcomes.

4.2.1. Content: Funny and watered down

Some suggest that the plan is a *strange and funny mix* of different elements. A participant suggests ironically:

I mean from point one to four...it is research and...cooperation and.... education and world class, world class, world class....and... then it's a good work environment...and there is collegiality. And then they just squeeze in (some) optimized infrastructure at the end as well and that is really like apples and pears (Hanna).

Another participant suggests that 'the content feels very strange' and that the document is a funny combination of very general ideals and infrastructure investments, lacking real substance. Yet another participant says that: 'This mix of content is like talking about George, Ringo, John, Paul and then bus-stop...he he...' (Buster). These interviewees are also ironic about the idea of 'world-class'. Participants say that the plan could be equally applicable for any university, rhetorically asking if the plan 'is really so unique for this particular organization?' (George).

Being a funny mix of elements, *watered down*, with no *distinctiveness* people view the plan as insignificant and impossible to work with.

'But how do you mean that I could take this plan to my own department and tell people that we shall work according to it when it doesn't say anything? The document won't do anything. The question is what one chooses to do, if one chooses to do anything with the document. It has become watered down. (Wally).

It's not that you put this in the hands of colleagues and things start to happen. That's not what it is. (Buster)

The lack of substance is indicated by the formulations of overall values:

(Ethnic and social diversity, curiosity..., and self-distance based on humor.) I can't take that part...the regulation for higher education had been sufficient. I just browsed past the ground values and noted that they have squeezed in the magna carta, squeezed in UN...and it's totally watered down concepts like democracy. This being so self-evident that it is embarrassing that it need to be formulated' (Buster)

Another participant says that many of the formulations, including overall values, is *ridiculous*, creating a comical effect

Well, I think that this about whether we should be glad or we should laugh or...but does this belong in a strategic...you can't mix apples and pears in that way. That was really strange...and everyone laughed at it...it was really silly' (Toby)

Most interviews use the expression 'watered down'. Some find it comical.

4.2.2. Process: evoking yawns, laughs and sarcasm

In the strategic work process, a gradual skepticism took over.

The impressionis that Teodor (the main architect) has written down what he thought about. I have not been asked and devil knows whether the deans have been so bloody implicated in this. We were to possibly provide opinions so in that way we have been involved, but it is totally watered down. We provided opinions at least but everyone yawned. We take his with equanimity but I can understand if it turns into sarcasm (Buster)

He also states that:

It turns into a yawn because...someone has...cracked an idea and says that, for reasons of legitimacy we need a document to show...so (addressing the main architect): 'you can write this boring together...'. It turns into a yawn and laughs and you think that now some bastard has had a field-day on some conference facility. Well, you can have fun with this.

Buster says that people were ironically smiling during the presentation of the plan. The strategic plan is met with indifference, distance and irony.

Some suggested that the process was open in terms of opinions, but were less optimistic about their impact, claiming that 'It wasn't that easy to provide input...it is difficult to influence that much somehow' and talk about a process that was 'not that easy to maneuver'. (Karl) Others suggests that the openness was more apparent than real as many opinions were never acknowledged and that the process became increasingly closely managed. One participant suggests that some themes in the plan just surfaced at meetings without any of the participants – except possibly for the project leader – knowing where they came from: 'It became a controlled process in the end ... There were some things popping up at the end, just came up, and don't know from where'. (Toby)

Others are more explicit:

Initially I lost my gist...as it turned out that there were already six, seven, eight focus areas that.... management had identified. It felt like it was rigged, like....'you can participate and have opinions but the frame is ...given. The main features....is already here'. I remember from one meeting that a few...were almost offended...cheated is perhaps too much...but yet (Hanna).

All in all, the process is broadly seen as being a fairly centralized, perhaps suggesting the existence of an agenda beforehand and that the invitation of faculty members being symbolic and about legitimation. At the same time also, these appear to have a lukewarm interest, many assuming the process and outcome were not that serious. The project leader and the others seem to have been engaged (or not so engaged) in different projects and/or living on different planets. This is not atypical – the senior person and subordinates often diverge in how they understand (or at least talk about) the 'same' process (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2025; Spicer, 2018). Following this contrast one can ask about the significance of this plan – in the eyes of those participating – for the university.

4.2.3. Result: less useful for universities?

Most interviewees are skeptical about the possibility of managing the university through a document. A view is that the content of the plan is difficult to translate to specific actions and refer to the design as 'the parodic extreme of strategic plans', referring to 'words and concepts that... are impossible to translate to what people are doing on an everyday basis' (Donner). The informant refer to 'a mismatch between the ideals between we all subscribe to and what should and could be done: 'we don't really know how this should be translated, that is a huge problem' (Donner). He continues by saying that: 'There are very, very, very few that devote themselves to correlating their daily work to the strategic plan'.

The statement reinforces the problem of making it meaningful for everyday reality:

I think like...the dean that take this and just reads 'oh damn what fun, this is good, I haven't thought about this'. Really, that dean

really... doesn't exist. Really that would be like an idiot. A case where the Peter principle had set in totally. (Buster).¹

Buster adds laughingly that you can't put the plan in the hands of people and expect something to happen. The plan is seen as vague with a strong feeling of 'so what'?

It will be printed and all the employees will receive a copy. Then it will be put in some paper collection or in a drawer, at best (Hanna)

Indeed, many of the interviewed expressed doubts about the possibility of governing universities in general with strategic plans. This emergent insight seems to lead to a gradually more and more lukewarm engagement in the process. This stands in sharp contrast to the view of the project leader stating that the plan as an appropriate way of coordinating the university operations.

Following many of the participants' view we could sum up that the plan contains a range of watered down and funny formulations that hardly trigger serious thinking, encouraging positive emotions or guiding action. This captures some significantly comical aspects of the process that may motivate a somewhat novel metaphor for the strategic work: *Strategy as parody*. As there is a large stream with the abbreviation SAP (strategy as practice), often studying managers in workshops and meetings), we could call this approach to the strategy practice as SAPa. Of course, you can study SAP as SAPa, i.e. looking at the somewhat comical work of 'strategists' in practice. Sometimes people struggle in order to live up to the ideal of being 'strategists'. This would be different than most other SAP studies, viewing strategy as serious business.

4.3. So, what is the strategic plan about?

The 'logic' or lack thereof behind the strategic plan seems not to be about identifying problems and specifying a plan for dealing with these leading to organizational change and improvement. So, what is the strategy about, if not about means and routes to reach objectives, a master plan for providing direction and guiding for the workforce? Based on interviews, and our own imagination, three meanings emerge; a marketing device; a social-integrative ritual; and 'playing organization' (impression of a 'real' and managed organization).

4.3.1. The strategic plan as brand image work

People talk about the plan as a branding device to create an image of the university as contemporary and fashionable. One interviewee says the text reminded him of 'a little advertising agency' (Buster) while another referred to branding: 'Some discussions concerned how we want to market us, where do we want to be?' (Melvin). However, there is a clear feeling of the branding effect not working so well:

There was (in the design) a mix of....things that are contemporary and it was a mix of real problems and on this....buzzwords and to go with the flow. I think that you can see this at other places too, that this is something that is well-timed now (Karl)

Well-timed suggests drawing on buzzwords which, however, seldom facilitates distinctive market positioning and brand image. The difficulties in saying something more than 'mumbo-jumbo' is highlighted by many interviewees, e.g.:

It would have been good if it could solve.... what the university wants; what the university stands for. Also, the engineering school has a strategic plan....and it's better....but it's a lot of mumbo-jumbos there as well. If you go out on town and ask people... what is the engineering school good at. Looking at home pages and you neither see what the university is good at or the engineering school, it's damn not easy (Wally)

The branding efforts thus result in a variety of empty and sweeping buzzwords and use of popular discourse with weak significance or obligations (Buckland, 2009; Gordon & Fisher, 2015). As said, the strategic plan could apply to any university as also noted by Watson (2000) in terms of a mix of empty vision and mission statements at UK universities. Less polite commentators refer to this as business bullshit (Spicer, 2018).

Branding efforts of course often have a somewhat ridiculous under- or overtone (as when totally different objects/qualities are combined – like sport stars and underwear or soft drinks and popularity) but the parody aspect is even more pronounced when faithful and senior servants of the university find the branding effort so vague and even ridiculous. Branding meanings trigger some distancing from the people in our study.

4.3.2. Socio-integrative mechanism: efforts at uniting to a collectivity/identity

A second view is that this is an effort to create social integration and form a university identity. The diverse and fragmented academic sub-tribes are supposed to join in a university celebrating ceremony and reinforcing community through the plan as a manifesto.

One participant says that the message is that 'it is one university and appears externally as one university' (George). This is broadly echoed in others emphasizing the need to feel part of something. The meaning of the plan is that 'it shall gain some sort of gathering effect that we are still one (university). I think it is a way for people to feel that you are a part of something bigger.' (Toby)

However, people doubt that this strategic plan has that unifying role. For example, following the quote above the interviewee Toby says that s/he doesn't think the plan makes people see themselves as part of something bigger. As suggested by Donner above there is a certain naiveté (wishful thinking) about its significance and importance for employees in general.

I don't think really that it says something meaningful about what a university is, how one should deal with questions of quality or.... societal presence or anything like that. It is a mixture of listing things but.... there's no overall idea (Donner).

The plan apparently does not work as source of inspiration for those working with it. The integrative element or base for identification appears to be non-existent, thus undermining the plan as a social-integrative mechanism.

Given the dominant responses of disappointment, light frustration and cynicism – some people even feel the process being rigged and them being cheated – neither the symbolism of the planning process nor the document worked well. It even appears as people involved became clearer about how difficult it is to find something that is commonly meaningful. The plan seems to contradict its (possible) purpose: creating cynicism and disidentification more than trust and integration.

4.3.3. Playing organization – efforts at exhibiting rationality and order

A third view that emerges is the want to appear as an organization, integrated and led. The plan indicates that management is in control, demonstrates rationality and provides the impression of a 'real' organization. The university is not only a research hotel or a fragmented collection of autonomous lecturers but something that is organized and managed. The senior actors think of themselves as part of an elite if they contribute to the strategy, doing highly important organizational assembling work.

However, this idea is for the participants weakened during the process and discarded when they see the outcome (and lack of 'real' results beyond vague formulations). Interviewees relate strategic planning to fashion: 'This is something in line with our times ... having a strategic plan'. The idea of management rationally controlling the organization gradually fades away as the strategic planning work continues. Informants realize that confirmation of the rational project 'disappear along the way' (Melvin). They agree that a strategic plan may not be the

¹ The Peter principle says that people are promoted until they reach one level above their competence.

most rational way of organizing a university:

No, of course planning is needed but the question is whether it has to be a strategic plan. And its relevance diminishes if we look to research which is a major part of that which we need to cooperate about. (Toby)

It all appears strange, foreign to the national university context: ‘... the question is where it comes from. Doesn’t this come directly from the private business way of thinking?’ Toby asks rhetorically. Consequently, the play becomes untrustworthy and participants find their participation almost embarrassing and want to distance themselves from the project. The script is wrong – the university can’t be managed – and the actors are not cast correctly. They lack the right preconditions and competence – and are facing great difficulties in producing something credible, given so many varied interests, public exposure and small possibilities for senior management to influence that much. The serious play turns out to be a comedy, with elements of tragedy, i.e. a satire (Skoldberg, 1994). A project bound to fail – mission impossible.

4.3.4. *Why the strategic plan did not work*

Several in the references group – representing the key individuals that could be expected to take the plan seriously and work with it (deans and heads) – thus thought the strategy lacked value and relevance and was unlikely to have impact. It may still have the function of a document to show to possible externally interested groups and thus live up to the demands of legitimizing formal structure (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), but is something else than functioning as strategy.

The espoused aim of the project to produce credible, legitimate and meaningful objectives and orientations for the university that also could serve as substantial inspiration and guidelines for the future was hardly met. This means something much more substantial than a formal document of which existence is unknown or irrelevant for most employees.

There are several explanations for the failure of the strategy, possibly doomed from the start. As said in the interview with the architect a large number of views were put forward, hard to accommodate and synthesize. The bottom-up approach was thus hard to work with – partly related to the large differences between faculties and groups. This leads to a rather selective and possibly arbitrary inclusion of aspects and, perhaps more important, abstract formulations that can incorporate a wide variety of views. Abstractions and positive statements that few people can object to – high quality – also come from risk of public scrutiny of the document. It needs to be ‘politically correct’ as one interviewee put it.

Perhaps most significant is the domination of a historically fragmented and highly independent nature of the different parts of the organization (faculties, departments, research groups and individual researchers) paired with a strong emphasis on collegial – horizontal – coordination in contrast to managerial line – vertical – coordination. A strong document implying a strategy that would steer and control faculty and faculty members would lead to opposition and conflict. As top management is elected by faculty, students and administrative personnel, their position is not so strong. An additional aspect is that sharpening strategy in key respects such as high quality in research and education would lead to problems. If one takes ‘high quality’ seriously then all those instances of not so high-quality research and teaching should be addressed, a far from easy task as mediocre researchers and teachers with tenure are not so easy to radically improve or get rid of.

In other universities, with less of traditional university qualities, such as autonomy, professional values and pluralism, and a higher level of managerialism and more compliant faculty, the situation may be different, but this is outside our scope to address.

4.4. *Why then engage in strategic work?*

Following the meanings above – brand image, socio-integration and

management rationality – we can note a disconnect in relation to the social challenges previously mentioned, all more or less absent in the actual strategic work. None of them was discussed at any length by the interviewees when asked about the reasons for developing the plan. In contrast many pointed at the lack of real problem or tried to point at concerns, but failed to find good reasons beyond producing a strategic plan as an objective in itself. Ideas of branding, identity and hints of management rationality were mentioned, but not found convincing. A quote from one interviewee sums up the parody:

But it is also missing here (problems) so it’s not any intellectual thought, but damn, it’s Teodor (main architect) who have written this on a Sunday afternoon but.... I wonder where the hell the idea came from (Buster)

Based on this one may wonder why a strategic plan is necessary to work with and why those involved engaged in the process. Some research suggests that increased coherence about purpose and direction in heterogenous organizations could potentially be managed with the concept of strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1999) as a rhetorical device in order to make strategies more integrated and understandable (Mantere & Sillince, 2007). This may increase the attractiveness of strategy work. There are also suggestions that the potential benefits from workshops are not only related to the broader organizational level (visions, espoused strategic direction, business plans as in Whittington et al., (2006)) but also to interpersonal benefits such as cohesion between managers, shared sense of purpose and identity (Hodgkinson & Healy, 2008; Johnson et al., 2010). People may feel important and get a status and identity boost from working with and believing they shape strategy. Also, cognitive benefits such as better understanding of strategic issues or enabling talk of core beliefs of an organization is suggested by Healey et al. (2015). Hendry and Seidl (2003) argue that separate strategy workshops enable for people to step out of established routines and mindsets and engage in broader questions. In a case of digital change towards increased omni-channel retailing, Do Vale et al. (2021) investigate the significance of micro-level practices among operational and middle level managers for how the process developed. For operational managers these practices meant informal, local and pragmatic actions that enabled caring for and serving customers while middle managers mainly facilitated interaction and understanding between operational and top levels. The process could thus be seen as both a bottom-up and top-down process, experienced as meaningful and relevant for people involved. This forms a contrast to our case.

As suggested above, these drivers, motives and interests do not seem to have mattered much very much in our case, apart from initially. Many interviewees suggest they started with enthusiasm, but then lost much of the interest and felt cynical about the outcome. The bottom-up practice lost momentum because people were unable to identify themselves with or feeling inspired by the process and its outcome and it seemed difficult to accommodate all suggestions. Strategic work and other grandiose projects are attractive and meaningless at the same time, pointing at the triumph of emptiness (Alvesson, 2022; Hallonsten, 2022). Workshopping in so called prestige projects is often flattering, people can associate themselves with the strategy makers at the top. Even if hollow, the feeling of being selected, but then not necessarily doing much in terms of making sure there are good ideas (or preventing bad ideas) and a meaningful (or unproblematic) document is perhaps a good combination for avoiding too much work while still boosting your ego. This narcissistic element is presumably often a key driver for strategy work (Alvesson, 2022).

It is a good substitute for ‘real work’, an organizational spectacle (Flyverbom & Reinecke, 2017), but at the end of the day the absence of ‘real work’ backfires. The positive feeling of being part of something potentially important fades away and people disidentify with the outcome. Based on this it would seem that participating in detached workshops do not always have positive outcomes and are even seen as meaningless (Hodgkinson & Wright, 2002). Some authors have

suggested that the very separation of the workshops from everyday routines might effectively hinder them from being effective in terms of transfer ideas back to the organization (Johnson et al., 2006).

We can also connect to neo-institutional theory that has pointed at imitation, legitimation and decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; 1991) as most people involved did not seem to see this logic at work, at least they did not refer to any legitimation effect, but expressed frustration. Why this unsatisfying outcome?

Many suggests that plans are expected in order to look up to date, but this did not seem to have been addressed positively, but as related to imitation and conformism. One participant explains:

I think that someone in the board said, damn....or the Chairman who have read in some newspaper somewhere that one should have a strategy. It feels like that and nothing suggests otherwise. Somebody has hatched an idea that, damn, for legitimacy reasons we need to have a document to show and put forward. So Teodor (main architect), you need to write together this boring....and there is the UN sustainability objectives and like that and it is oozes of politically correctness. (Buster)

The persuasiveness of fashionable words – strategy, leadership, sustainability, internationalization etc. – and the temptation felt by some people to draw upon them is what often leads to problems of distinctiveness, relevance, sharpness and action implications in designing plans. The plans become general and are not seen as saying anything of relevance. It is a classic example of empty rhetoric that ends up as a parody. The signifier ‘strategy’ covers everything and thus nothing, among practitioners as well as academics (Blom & Alvesson, 2015).

Conventions behind the way in which strategic plans are made and also seem to live its own life. Strategy rituals and conventions are just more or less instrumentally reproduced as one participant says: ‘Because everyone else does it. I think it’s because of that, isn’t it?’ (Toby)

Strategic work – such as workshoping – are thus part of the conventional order of board (or management) work. There is occasionally limited reflection about purpose in favour of unquestioned ‘musts’. A gentleman wears a hat, a dean engages in strategic work and has a strategic plan. Without it something is missing. There is a type of knee-jerk activism here, signaling a form of limited reflection when it comes to critical thinking. Alvesson and Spicer (2016) refer to this as functional stupidity. Senior people seem to want something apparently robust and valuable to do, apart from dealing with an endless number of routine and administrative issues. Why not a strategic plan? Great idea, it seems. But it is not easy to fill it with material that leads to anything productive. In contrast, their use in this case – sweeping, abstract and standardized rather than distinctive and unique – seem parodic. But when the bandwagon has started moving it seems difficult to realize or acknowledge that this was a bad idea that should be stopped.

For example, a major problem, overlapping with the other ones, is that the expectation is to avoid anything controversial or deviating.

We’ve been thinking about if it (the vision) should change or not but nobody came up anything better. It is difficult to find a better one. (Interviewer: Why a vision) Yes, one can ask oneself that. I also thought, it should be that we question our world as well. But it’s not there, no. Now it’s more that playing along....one follows this contemporary race. It’s not like you take a deviating view.... the first thing that you do, with that vision, you don’t do that (Toby).

So perhaps the point with the strategic plan is that it should simply look good and be uncontroversial. But this seems to leave a bitter aftertaste for the people involved, quite unhappy about the outcome. It may look good, but it does not taste good.

5. Discussion

The overall majority of strategy researchers, including process and

practice students, emphasize the significant and substantive nature of strategy. Our case of a large research university challenges some broadly shared assumptions and claims in strategy research and points at strategy work sometimes not leading to much and not taken very seriously by people involved. They may see it as a form of pseudo-work, at least in some cases such as a traditional university characterized by strong decentralization to departments and independent research groups. This may not be an easy target for strategic planning.

The strategy as practice literature has pointed at strategy work as rhetoric, sense-making, bottom-up work etc. All tend to share some functionalistic assumptions. Our case points in a different direction. It would seem that the strategy work in our case hardly qualifies as rhetorical device facilitating the emergence of a collective intent and thus integration and coherence (Mantere & Sillince, 2007). In contrast to the case of Spee and Jarzabkowski (2017), the ‘strategy’ work in the project group did not result in a joint account facilitating various meaning-makings or understandings (Sillince et al., 2012). Although being vague enough to potentially allow for various views, the planning process and rhetoric drawn upon thus failed to bring legitimacy (Spee and Jarzabkowski (2011) or real commitment from the participants (Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007). Neither did we notice any micro-level practices of bricolage (Do Vale et al., 2021) among participants in order to facilitate the emergence or implementation of the ideas in the strategic work and its formulations. The strategic work hardly seemed to provide inspiration and encouragement among participants to combine different capabilities and resources for coordinated, long-term action. There were thus no signs of bottom-up productive strategy work. Following this, we think our case motivates critique against the ‘pretentiousness’ of strategic management and also the rethinking of established ways of working and social practices more generally (Kenny, 2009; Pullen & Rhodes, 2012).

In the case, several of the people involved, apart from the project leader, distanced themselves from the strategic planning, and thought it came out in an embarrassing way. The common view was that nobody can object to the vague formulations in the plan, but this also leads to widespread disinterest and even sarcasm. ‘We all want a better world... that is basically what it says’ (Buster). This type of view was expressed by several people involved in the strategy process. But they more or less opted out, thus turning the strategy as practice into something parody-like.

It seems motivated to question strategy work not only in its official, espoused sense, of substantively steering or integrating the troops, but also for illuminating the more or less hidden functions that may be part of its rationale (marketing, legitimation, organizational integration, identity support). Also, as a branding tool, social integrative rite or as an ego-boosting site for people involved to feel as the elite doing important work, there are clear elements of dysfunctionality. As an organizational symbol or a reflection of ‘institutionalized myths’ (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) it does not carry the right credibility, a degree of meaning-making and legitimizing force that is needed for it to do the trick. As increasingly seems to be the case, organizations are flooded by activities and practices, including mission statements as a way of mobilizing identity (Palmer & Short, 2008), promising either rationality, improvement and goal achievement or, more modestly, some degree of mobilization, commitment, identification and meaning-making (Alvesson, 2022; Flyverbom & Reinecke, 2017). But when the discrepancy between ideal/promise and actual delivery becomes too obvious, credibility becomes weak and also ‘positive’ organizational symbolism gets lost and the ideal ends up as a parodic spectacle (Sveringsson & Alvesson, 2016).

Playing organization – acting as if one is believing in, and accomplishing, order, integration and managerial or bureaucratic control – may have its functions (creating a sense of some meaning and trust, feeling important), but a ‘serious play’ needs to be reasonably credible (Nemetz & Cameron, 2006). A serious play seen as a comedy does not create a good feeling for the actors, but triggers – as our case shows – distancing and disidentification.

In addition to empirical accounts and interpretations of some examples of strategy work, our study opens up for a general, different understanding of 'strategy', *strategy as parody*. This conceptualization arguably has a potential as the phenomena of strategy (talk, hope, practice, direction) often can be understood in this way. As with all perspectives and concepts, they sometimes work well in understanding a phenomenon, sometimes they are less relevant. We limit our knowledge claims to a conceptualization and view that seem relevant and valuable in some, perhaps many, cases similar to the one studied. Our study in combination with the literature indicate great variation in the workings (and non-workings) of strategy.

Parody is, according to *Oxford Living Dictionary*, 'an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect'. In our empirical case it may appear less deliberate, but we use the term 'parody' in order to capture the critical and comical views and experiences of people involved in a 'strategy process' and to highlight the 'parodic nature' of (much) formal strategy work. Parody is a metaphor, the term is not to be understood literally: the strategy was hardly intentionally written as a parody, but is addressed by some participants as if it was. We follow the literature using tropes to illuminate organizational phenomena (e.g. Hodgson, 2005; Jeffcutt, 1993; Skoldberg, 1994). There is, for example, significant literature discussing how culture media – films, movies, cartoon etc. – employs parody to illuminate the occasional ridiculousness of organizational life (Kenny, 2009; Pullen & Rhodes, 2012). Our case suggests the value of the concept of parody as adding to the understandings of formal strategic work in (at least certain) organizations. Arguably, it adds to the repertoires of concepts and ideas of value for understanding organizations and strategy, dominated by serious, even pretentious texts.

Kenny (2009:221) suggests that: 'Parody is generally understood as an imitation that aims to make fun of, critically comment or ridicule the original'. Considering the responses of our participants – ridiculing, criticizing, giggling, and making fun – we think that strategy as parodic captures key experiences of the strategy work. By making fun of the content and process the respondents undermine the seriousness and value of strategic work, something often the case with parodies (Rhodes & Westwood, 2008). In our case the interviewees express views supporting the idea of strategy as parody, e.g. 'This mix of content is like talking about George, Ringo, John, Paul and then bus-stop...he he...', 'it is research and...cooperation and... education and world class, world class...and...then it's a good work environment...and there is collegiality'. Interviews refer to experiences of a widely shared view that it 'was really strange...and everyone laughed at it...it was really silly', to refer to some of our quotes in this paper. The view of the play as parody 'liberates' actors from full responsibility – it is a part of the disidentification.

Strategy seen as a parody of an ideal – expressed in the strategic management literature, MBA educations, executive statements and in many consulting presentations – that is hard to live up to in many organizations. The absurdities of a lot of organizational life is very seldom recognized by strategy researchers, also strategy as practice scholars claiming to be close to strategy work tend to take it mostly seriously and work based on reproducing an assumption of acts with substantive effects. Researchers seldom consider the symbolic, ceremonial or spectacle qualities of strategic management work (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Oliver, 2015). Strategy work is assumed to be sites 'of structural reproduction, resistance and occasional innovation' (Seidl & Whittington, 2014:1414) that 'actually change the technologies, knowledge and economic and social institutions with which they connect' (ibid. 1417). Even strategic documents are assumed to 'have a central role' in strategizing and constituting organizational effects (Vaara, 2015:494). Sometimes they have, sometimes perhaps not. The study also challenges critical, Foucauldian understandings (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott, 1995; Blom & Alvesson, 2015; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Knights & Willmott, 1989). In our case, the strategic management discourse seems to have weak subjectification power – people involved do not normalize strategy

in the university context and do not seem to, possibly with the exception of the project leader, view themselves as 'strategists'.

Strategy as parody may be used as theoretical research perspective, where the analyst makes a case for this interpretation based on more distanced, 'objective' analysis, irrespective of participants' views on the meanings of the strategy. This means focusing on parodic elements that the researcher can highlight, even if participants do not see it in this way. Of course, as with all perspectives, the parody view may be more or less relevant in different contexts. Sometimes trivial, administrative work may be beefed up through strategy jargon, managerial meetings may be upgraded to 'strategic decision making' by participants wanting to see themselves as important. Here SAPa may work as an analytical perspective. But parody may also be employed, as in our case, more 'phenomenologically', where the participants' skeptical or ironic meanings are more central and guide the research. Of course, in some cases a clear distinction between strategy as such and how specific, external groups, e.g. low-level employees, relate to this is possible. In other cases, including ours, participants in the strategy work may be self-ironical or cynical and then the strategy work 'as such' and involved participants' views can't be distinguished. Strategy work does not exist outside the workers and their meanings doing it. Parody then captures the strategy work as seen by involved participants, i.e. their meanings, without the researcher 'imposing' a theoretical perspective going beyond participants' meanings.

5.1. Spectrum of strategy work

The view on strategy as parody has a broader, theoretical relevance in the general understanding of 'strategy'. There is, most likely a 'real', serious notion of strategy in some organizations, similar to a general and his/her staff, in more or less full control over the troops, commanding a unitary force expected to follow orders and implement the plan. And sometimes there are versions that combine top-down and more participative, flexible and emergent forms of developments (Do Vale et al., 2021; Sillince et al., 2012). Or even local initiatives that gradually become transformed into more organization-wide behaviors through management nudging and pruning (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). But all these versions do not fully account for what is being done in the name of 'strategy' in contemporary business and public sector organizations. Strategy as practice (SAP) can be supplemented, and in some cases perhaps even be replaced, by strategy as parody (SAPa). We see SAPa not as a full-fledged theory, but as an approach for thinking about 'strategy' in at least some, possibly many cases. SAPa can of course be studied in multiple ways; focusing on actual (parody) work, where people who possibly see themselves as serious actors are perhaps better seen as a bit comical in playing strategy work. The parody aspect can be pushed more or less strongly, different types of parodies can be identified and combination of parody and 'real' work (with substantive strategic work) can be imagined. In many cases, there may be some participants being serious about strategy while others approach it more in a parodic manner. People may shift position, between being involved and then distance themselves from it, seeing it more as play and pretense. We see how our participants moved from the former to the latter, as initial aspirations seemed problematic to realize.

Researchers that remain positive to strategic work in higher education despite signs of failures suggest that the work has not been taken seriously enough, often because of a lack of leadership and/or good communication (Gordon & Fisher, 2015) or because managers lack implementation skills (Chance & Williams, 2009). This view typically assumes a top-down approach to strategy that we think is misplaced at (many) universities and that one should remain skeptical about because of the professional character of work in higher education (Buckland, 2009; Deem, 2001), relying on autonomous research groups and horizontal coordination. More effort can easily backfire, making it even more comical.

Some universities that are more top-run may be more into 'serious'

strategic work than our case. However, ours is far from unique. A former dean at a UK university, presumably more into management and hierarchy than the one we studied, remarked: 'It is managerialist ideologies put into practice in complex organizations'. As managerialism embeds itself, 'you get entire cadres of academic staff whose job it is just to keep the managerialist plates spinning — strategies, performance targets, audits, reviews, appraisals, renewed strategies, etc. etc. — which happen in an almost wholly and entirely disconnected fashion from the real-life blood of universities — teaching and education'. (Cited by Graeber, 2018). In characterizing higher education as loosely coupled and not very appropriate for planning, Weick (1976:4) suggests that: 'Unfortunately, organizations continue to think that planning is a good thing, they spend much time on planning, and actions are assessed in terms of their fit with plans ... administrators are baffled and angered when things never happen the way they were supposed to'. As stated by the vice-chancellor of McGill when asked to mention the major issues facing him (Mintzberg & Rose, 2003: 286): "in my opinion, staff relations and staffing policy" followed by "working conditions" and "salary policy"'. Following that, Mintzberg and Rose (2003: 286) comment: 'No mention of mission. Imagine such a statement from a corresponding executive of a corporation'. Our case is thus not unique. Also, outside universities and other sites where strategy is less obviously motivated than in the military at war, the meaning and relevance may sometimes be questioned. As a president of an IT consultancy firm said, the direction of the company may be less a matter of strategic planning and more a result of who you sit next to at the airplane, which could turn out to be the next major client, affecting the direction of the firm (Alvesson, 1995). Walander (2003), former CEO of a large, successful bank and board director of many companies claimed that listening to CEO's and others talking about visions and strategies often had a tiring effect on him as the talk often was disconnected from the specific issues they were to work with.

In this sense we may benefit our understandings of 'strategy' in (many) organizations through supplementing SAP with SAPa, i.e. consider strategy as practice as well as strategy as parody. Sometimes strategy may gravitate towards the former, sometimes to the latter. While realizing the enormous variation of 'strategy' and 'strategy work', both 'as such' and how people relate to, and thus 'do' strategy, much of these are better seen in terms of play and parody than as the pretentious and performative activities that management researchers (as well as practitioners) are perhaps too fond of imposing on reality, looking at plans and doings, but not so much on what strategy or perhaps rather 'strategy' means.

Of course, a case study such as ours can't be generalized. Further research could study other universities, perhaps those of a less traditional and more 'modern' or managerialist nature, in terms of parody. Also, strategy work in companies and other organizations where strategy ambitions may find more fertile ground may include significant episodes or groups where the way of relating to it is ironic and people do not take it seriously. Generally, organizations have their sides of experienced stupidity and irrationality and sometimes invite very different responses from those typically captured by the strategy literature. Future studies could benefit from adding parody to plan, process and practice as key elements in the conceptual repertoire. And perhaps work with developing a parody theory on strategy and other aspects of contemporary organizations.

6. Conclusion

Much of the process and strategy as practice literature often take managerial meetings and copied behaviours as well as corporate talk and text (too) seriously. The literature conceals the parodic nature of many conceptualizations and instances of strategy. The common assumption is that 'strategy' is important and substantive. While so is often the case, it is sometimes better seen as a parody of the imagined 'original' strategic management of top management and/or the major part of the organization agreeing upon and steering efforts in the same

direction and leading to goal accomplishment.

In this paper we make three contributions.

First, we show the problems and potential meaninglessness of working with strategic plans in an university context, at least a more traditional one typically governed by professional norms as also discussed by Nemetz and Cameron (2006). This does not only raise doubts about the planning view, but also about strategy in practice or as process perspectives, emphasizing 'strategy' as 'real work'.

Secondly, we show how managerial initiatives and practices easily backfire and lead to the opposite of what is intended. Instead of legitimation, social integration and creating an image of the organizations being managed (and not just being administrated), participants may experience close to the opposite: cynicism, irony, doubt and dis-identification. The university demonstrates amateurism rather than something that may appear as 'professional management', in the eyes of those involved. Arguably, this is not uncommon, but here is further research called for. We here add to knowledge through pointing at backfiring not only among low-level employees, sometimes cynical to top management initiatives, but also about senior people, e.g. deans and heads of department. Interestingly enough, such backfiring may go on undetected, the deputy VC (chief architect/project leader) in our case talked about a positive process and reception. Often senior levels live in an isolated world, with filters for feedback.

Thirdly, we suggest parody as a way of conceptualization strategy. Some strategy as practice researchers such as Johnson et al. (2010) have suggested that workshoping (and meetings) may be mostly ritualistic and with less substantive impact. In our case we can see that idealized notions of the top management after consultations and dialogue commanding the troops through a set of guidelines are turned into not only symbolic rituals but something of an involuntary comedy. Strategy is only one example of this, the idea of parody has a strong bearing on many management ideas and practices, including leadership, organizational development, equal opportunity initiatives and quality improvement. This is worth exploring in future research. Hopefully our story and the conceptualization inspire others to investigate other topics with a sharper eye for the absurdities of contemporary organizations and consider organization as parody.

In organizations in general there is often hope for 'strategy'. People often stretch the signifier 'strategy' and try to make themselves into 'strategists'. In many companies, there is a disconnect between strategy and what actually goes on. Plans and PowerPoint presentations may live their own lives. Some people – top managers, staff people and consultants – may take strategy seriously, but outside those doing (or claiming to do) 'strategizing' most people and activities are not too much bothered and they may then re-write the strategy plan or process into a parody – and this may form a broadly shared view on the subject matter.

In addition to strategy work as a path to plenty and to pain (Sevier, 2003), we add to parody. We also suggest serious consideration of the value of paying attention to various instances and combinations, of strategy: considering it as plan, as process *and*, at least sometimes, as parody will enrich our understanding.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Stefan Sveningsson: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Mats Alvesson:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Data Availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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