



From:
Higher Education Management and Policy

Access the journal at:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/17269822>

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Please cite this article as:

Sá, Creso M. and Merli Tamtik (2012), "Strategic planning for academic research: a Canadian perspective", *Higher Education Management and Policy*, Vol. 24/1.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/hemp-24-5k9bdtj6b0r6>

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Strategic planning for academic research: a Canadian perspective

by

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This paper reports on an empirical study of research planning in Canadian universities. Drawing on data compiled during interviews with senior administrators from 27 academic units in 10 universities, the paper analyses how strategic planning has been applied to the research mission over the past decade. Findings reveal variability in processes and attitudes about planning, while suggesting that the scope of planning activities in most cases has been somewhat narrow and short-term. The implications of these findings for the administration of research are discussed.

La planification stratégique de la recherche universitaire : une perspective canadienne

par

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Cet article rend compte d'une étude empirique sur la planification de la recherche dans les universités canadiennes. S'appuyant sur des données issues d'entretiens avec des cadres supérieurs de 27 unités académiques de 10 universités, l'article analyse la façon dont la planification stratégique a été appliquée à la mission de recherche au cours de la dernière décennie. Les résultats révèlent une variabilité dans les processus et les attitudes, tout en suggérant que, dans la plupart des cas, la portée des activités de planification a été quelque peu étroite et à court terme. Cet article présente les conséquences de ces résultats pour l'administration.

Overview of the problem

Over the past few decades, research universities in North America and beyond have attempted to organise themselves more strategically (Clark, 1998; Kruecken and Meier, 2006; Whitley, 2008). This trend is fuelled by an increasing emphasis on competition for resources and prestige, and the growing use of evaluation systems, performance indicators and ranking mechanisms (Dill and Vught, 2010). Government accountability agendas also compel universities to be more transparent on how well they carry out their missions, generating a need for institutions to rationalise their choices and make them public. Scepticism and criticism of these efforts to develop strategy abound. They range from an outright rejection of the idea that universities should be subjected to the principles of bureaucratic rationality that underpin strategic decision making, to pessimism about the likelihood that strategic decisions will be made and implemented (Rhoades, 2000; Birnbaum, 2000; Gumpert, 2002). Nonetheless, strategic planning has gained a strong foothold in the operation of universities, being applied to an ever-larger number of areas including research (Keller, 1997; Taylor, 2006; Dooris *et al.*, 2004).

Since the late 1990s Canada's federal government has adopted an increasingly assertive role in regard to university research. Although it had historically been the primary sponsor of academic science, many agree that over the last decade significant institutional changes have taken place (Prichard, 2000; Cameron, 2004; Shanahan and Jones, 2007; Doern and Stoney, 2009; Fisher and Rubenson, 2010). Essentially, the federal government moved away from a relatively *laissez faire* approach emphasising the funding of field-initiated projects through the country's three research councils. Over this period, a series of measures were taken giving rise to major strategic investments in large-scale programmes, research infrastructure and human resources. Such measures have entailed the creation of new funding bodies and programmes, as well as new modes of support for university research. Scholars have attempted to grapple with the multiple implications of this research boom for universities, whether in terms of their external relations with provincial and federal governments (*e.g.* Cameron, 2004), or the outcomes of major policy initiatives (*e.g.* Atkinson-Grosjean, 2006; Siler and McLaughlin, 2008).

The federal government's enhanced role has been accompanied by regulatory changes. The Canadian Foundation for Innovation (CFI) and the

Canada Research Chairs (CRC) programmes are perhaps the clearest illustrations of its new approach. CFI supports research infrastructure in universities and research hospitals and the CRC programme funds 2 000 chairs on a competitive basis. This constitutes a new form of support for universities whose operating funds come from provincial governments (Doern and Stoney, 2009; Fisher and Rubenson, 2010). To be eligible for support from these programmes, universities have been required to formulate and submit research plans. Over the past decade, such plans have been produced and are now publicly available. At least formally, universities have complied with funding agency requirements. Considering the importance of CRC and CFI support for universities, some analysts foresaw potentially important impacts on how these operate (Cameron, 2004; Shanahan and Jones, 2007). Universities may not only have started to consider institutional priorities and resource allocation decisions in different ways, they argued, but they might be aligning their activities with federal research priorities. Others have claimed that these federal initiatives have helped bring a greater research focus on smaller universities (Lopreite and Murphy, 2009).

There is no evidence, however, on whether institutional planning has been of any substantive consequence to universities. Besides the information provided in planning documents, little is known about the impacts of research planning efforts within universities. What happens inside academic units when research plans are produced and submitted to federal programmes? This study examines the nature of universities' research planning processes and outcomes. It seeks to elucidate the implications of changes in the institutional environment for academic science in Canada for the organisation of universities. More specifically, it aims to clarify:

- how research planning has been conducted in universities;
- whether and how research planning has changed previous organisational practices (*e.g.* priority-setting, resource allocation, etc.);
- what the outcomes of planning efforts, if any, have been.

Methodology

This study examines how research planning is conducted within major academic units in universities. While institution-wide research plans may be important, faculties are key units when it comes to making important decisions that shape the research enterprise.¹ Such decisions include recruitment, the organisation and support of academic departments and the delivery of graduate programmes. Investigating developments at this organisational level allows us to go beyond the obvious – and sometimes superficial – response of universities to regulatory requirements, and possibly

unveil diverse organisational behaviours within “loosely-coupled” universities.

The study involved two main methods and data sources. First, institutional strategic research plans of Canadian research-intensive universities were reviewed, involving “medical-doctoral” (N = 16) and “comprehensive” (N = 11) universities (Research Infosource, 2010). A content analysis (Weber, 1990) was carried out, identifying several themes concerning the nature, focus and targets of these strategic documents. Based on this analysis, a semi-structured interview protocol was designed.

The second step involved conducting semi-structured telephone interviews with senior administrators at the faculty level. These interviews with key informants examined the organisational impacts of research planning on various campuses and disparate academic settings. The objective was to understand how planning has been conducted in different faculties, to determine whether changes have taken place in organisational practices and to probe outcomes of planning efforts – whether flowing from the goals and strategies stated in the plans, or not.

The sampling procedure involved a stratified random selection of universities (Tables 1 and 2). Ten institutions were randomly selected, including seven “medical-doctoral” and three “comprehensive” universities. The emphasis on “medical-doctoral” universities was driven by their greater research intensity and commitment to doctoral programmes. Within each institution, three faculties/schools representing disparate fields (natural sciences and engineering, biomedical and health sciences, social sciences and humanities) were randomly selected. Table 1 presents the number of informants from each university across the three fields; Table 2 summarises the participating faculties by fields.

Table 1. Universities and the number of faculties, by broad field

University	Science/Engineering	Biomedical/Health	Social sciences/Humanities
Dalhousie University	1	1	1
McGill University	1	1	1
University of Alberta	1	1	1
University of British Columbia (UBC)	1	1	1
University of Manitoba	1	1	–
University of Saskatchewan	1	1	1
University of Victoria ¹	1	1	1
University of Waterloo ¹	1	–	1
University of Western Ontario (UWO)	1	1	1
York University ¹	1	–	1

1. Comprehensive universities.

Table 2. **List of participating faculties**

Science/Engineering	Biomedical/Health	Social sciences/Humanities
Faculty of Science and Engineering	Faculty of Health Sciences	Faculty of Social Sciences
Faculty of Engineering (4)	Faculty of Dentistry (2)	Faculty of Arts and related fields (5)
Faculty of Science (3)	Faculty of Medicine and related fields (4)	Faculty of Law
Faculty of Computer Science	Faculty of Nursing	Faculty of Social Work
Faculty of Agriculture		Faculty of Education

The offices of the deans concerned were contacted to identify two or three individuals who were centrally involved in research planning. Thus, a total of 34 interviews were carried out between July and September 2010 with the following senior administrators: deans or equivalents (18), associate deans engaged in research/graduate studies (14), other (2).² All of the interviewees were centrally involved in, and highly knowledgeable of, the faculty's research planning process. Despite multiple invitations and follow-up contacts, we were not able to recruit representatives from three sampled faculties, as detailed below.

The interviews, which on average were 30 minutes long, were recorded and transcribed. Detailed summaries were produced and sent to informants for validation, in order to ensure accuracy. Thereafter, standard qualitative data analysis techniques were employed to organise, codify and analyse the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss, 1987). First, open coding of the research results was carried out and a list of initial thematic categories was drawn up. The second step involved axial coding; here, the numerous categories related to research planning were refined and merged into similar and fewer groups, forming a coding paradigm. These new categories represented themes such as drivers of the research planning, key actors and interactions, the context of the planning process and outcomes. Finally, selective coding was used to integrate the categories, interpret data and present the research findings.

Findings

The interviews revealed a recent outburst in various planning activities related to research. What is considered "planning" or "strategy" in the research realm is variable though, and research planning is approached in different ways across faculties and universities. Overall, 23 of the 27 faculties are actively involved in research planning activities, 19 of them have created a strategic planning document. Of these, 3 had a specific research planning document; others have built a major research component into the academic plan. There were some exceptions too: 4 faculties from different fields (2 from a comprehensive university, and 2 from medical-doctoral universities)

indicated that they do not intend to develop any kind of formal research planning process or document. Five main findings emerged from the data, and these are discussed in relation to the study's research questions below.

How is research planning conducted?

Drivers of research planning

Interviewees repeatedly referred to the factors they believe are driving their efforts to engage in research planning. As expected, the most valued outcome of research planning at the institutional level is success in federal grant competitions. Representatives from 15 faculties across different fields reported that the planning process in their faculties has been focused on the Canada Research Chairs (CRC) programme. Several interviewees from various faculties indicated that all their research planning efforts at the university and faculty levels revolve around the application for support from the Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) and Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI). As a dean in a health faculty notes, "The only benchmark [for research] that our university recognises is tri-council funding". These findings point to the obvious effects of the regulatory changes implemented by these federal research programmes in the early 2000s.

However, judging by our data, research planning has become an important management tool even in universities where it had not been conducted some 10 or 15 years ago. In our sample, we found that internal university resources are usually allocated to the faculties, at least in part, based on their research plans. The following quote is illustrative: "In our next planning process we're going to focus on persuading the university that we need more faculty positions and to try to obtain funding from the university for additional faculty positions" (health science faculty at comprehensive university). At the University of Western Ontario, planning has been conducted every 4 years because for the past 15 years it has been tied to internal budget cycles. These examples indicate that research planning helps the senior administration of faculties to provide evidence of strategic direction and demonstrate that they deserve support by the central administration.

Not surprisingly, new senior administrative appointments within faculties or at the central administration level (*e.g.* president, vice-president, dean) provided a further impetus to launch research planning processes. In five faculties representing different universities and fields, a freshly recruited administrator undertook research planning to chart new directions (Alberta/health sciences and social sciences, University of British Columbia (UBC)/social sciences, The University of Western Ontario (UWO)/science, York/social sciences). "I am new and usually with the appointment of a new director people expect some changes in all these matters", explains one

recently hired administrator. It is a common belief that strategic planning helps a new leader to get to know an organisation, define its strengths and weaknesses and set future courses of action. Such beliefs have been translated into the realm of academic research, with administrators indicating during interviews that it was a natural thing to do to employ planning as a tool in the event of a new appointment.

For three health science faculties in Manitoba, UBC and Alberta, research planning is linked to strengthening their regional research agendas. As an informant notes: “The academic faculty is at [name of the main campus] and it is not really near any other health care facilities, so there has always been a geographic gap as well as some practical gaps in terms of our communicating and being able to collaborate with our clinical colleagues.” The three faculties aim to develop collaborative and broader ties with clinical faculty, public agencies and other relevant stakeholders. By increasing their visibility and positioning themselves as serving large populations through their research activities regionally, they can better demonstrate their value. This is viewed as ultimately helping to secure necessary resources from the provincial governments and federal agencies.

These findings illustrate the increasing rationalisation of research administration. From the perspective of faculty administrators, research planning is predominantly viewed as a tool to negotiate resources. The planning process is a complex undertaking and influenced by several factors such as the nature of the university’s planning process and the dean’s administrative style, as discussed below.

Different planning styles

The study responses showed that research planning is not a uniform process for faculties, even within the same university. In some cases there was inconsistency among academic units as to how their research planning efforts related to the university’s senior administration. While in most cases they are expected to align their research plans with those of the university, there were also a few cases where the university co-operates closely in planning activities with representatives from faculties that are particularly successful in obtaining sponsored research. In some cases, faculty administrators decided to conduct research planning independently. In most cases, setting up the institution-wide plan involves consultations with faculty representatives, primarily the senior administration. The practices reported by informants are complex, each incorporating its detailed nuances, sometimes described as messy business (Saskatchewan/health) or quite a complicated process (Alberta/health). These variegated experiences can be synthesised under three distinct approaches to characterise the relationship between the

university and faculty-level research planning: top-down, integrated and bottom-up.

The most common approach has a **top-down** nature. The university typically develops its strategic plan, usually involving faculties in the general consultation process and, as a result, sets the overall institutional strategic priorities. The faculties create their own plans independently but are then expected to align them to the university's vision (*e.g.* University of Alberta, UBC, UWO/science field, University of Manitoba, University of Waterloo, York University, University of Victoria). Generally, however, the universities' strategic research priorities are relatively broad, enabling the faculties to easily position their research strengths under them: "All of our research can actually be targeted under some university signature areas", stated one interviewee. Broad research themes, listed in institutional research plans, consist of areas such as "biotechnology and genomics", "human health", "culture and society" and "sustainability".

One case exemplifies a top-down research planning process, described by the informant from a science faculty: "The entire university's strategic plan was written out of the president's office in consultation with the president's executive team, [who] are all VPs. It was brought forward to the faculty members and the senate for review... [it] was discussed and there was feedback given, and it was formally endorsed by Senate." However, the experience of other faculty administrators is less hierarchical. All the other informants indicated that the university had asked faculties to contribute towards the institutional plan.

Some faculties were involved in a more **integrated** planning process. In those cases, faculty planning takes place in parallel with the university's planning process through extensive back and forth communication and co-ordination (*e.g.* University of Saskatchewan, UWO/social science faculty, Dalhousie/social science faculty). The most illustrative case of this approach is the University of Saskatchewan, which refers to its current strategic planning initiative as the "Third Integrated Plan". As one informant described it, "The university has set up a collaborative process and colleges have to submit a strategic plan. Now, as we start the third integrated planning process, it is coming closer to a university-provided structure but with the content being from the college level." The planning exercise is seen as an evolution from earlier iterations. Another version of this type of integrated activity is when the faculty's research plan feeds into the university plan; that in turn guides the faculty (*e.g.* UWO social science). There is constant back and forth communication between the faculty and the Office of Research to develop and refine various research areas.

A few faculties had engaged in an essentially **bottom-up** research planning process. This approach is characterised by their initiative to create a research plan which aims to promote self-improvement. The informants reported cases where research planning was conducted by the faculty in order to drum up support for research teams, to influence the university's research priorities or just to have a more systematic approach to reinforce research strengths (e.g. Dalhousie/health, McGill/science, UBC/social science, UBC/science). For example, a comment made by the informant of a health faculty characterises this view: "perhaps it's about time for us to look at our own research achievements, initiatives, research centres, strategies and so forth. We need to identify the kind of issues, strategies and work to be done. Those are more important components than a published document."

Some strong and competitive academic units – such as the science faculty at one of the large medical-doctoral universities – even have the power to influence what the strategic priorities for the university should be. In this case, the university has shaped its strategic vision around the faculty's research strengths. One informant noted:

The university's plan reflects what the departments think the strategy should be, instead of the university writing the strategy and the departments following. It may not be the same with other faculties. Being the strongest [science] faculty in the university and in the country, we strongly believe in the grass-roots approach. We justify this approach by the [academic unit's] strengths based on the key [research] performance indicators.

Planning processes within the faculties

Another source of variation across the faculties stems from internal planning processes. More than half of them (15) have conducted a formal planning process over the past two years. Interviewees were thus able to provide very up-to-date information on their planning processes. However, when it comes to recalling previous research planning activities, most interviewees were not as knowledgeable. Only 7 interviewees out of 34 were able to report on previous planning processes (Manitoba/science, Manitoba/health, Saskatchewan/health, Waterloo/social sciences, Waterloo/science, UWO/social sciences, York/science). Seven interviewees noted that they were appointed as deans or associate deans within the previous two years; in most cases they were recruited externally and had little knowledge of past experiences. In such cases, there seemed to be little institutional memory on previous planning efforts. Others pointed out that such a formal planning process had not taken place in the faculty before. Hence, in most of them, planning is still not institutionalised through systematic routines, processes

and impersonal rules. To a large extent, it is conditioned by the degree of initiative and the style of administrations in charge of research portfolios.

The scope and the level of formality of research planning efforts vary among the faculties. In some cases, all faculty members are provided with an opportunity to fully contribute to the planning process; in other cases, selected faculty representatives are able to participate. Some faculties – according to their size and the administrative style of the dean – may opt to form a committee, while others prefer to conduct informal planning processes. This involves conducting a planning exercise without having a formal committee or delineated process. Smaller faculties tended to conduct the planning process in a rather casual manner, usually driven by the dean.

Several informants described more “selective” planning processes, noting that they sought to burden faculty as little as possible (*e.g.* UWO/science, Dalhousie/health). In these cases, a group of professors represented the faculty. The number of professors sitting on committees in bigger faculties could be larger than the total faculty body of smaller ones. More “inclusive” processes were reported by faculties who organised retreats or open sessions to provide opportunities for all professors to participate in planning efforts. An example of a formal and inclusive approach was described by a dean from a health faculty: 8 faculty members at a time were invited to lunch meetings to discuss the directions the faculty should take in its strategic plan (8-9 groups in all over 18 months). Formal planning exercises following this approach involve extensive consultations among various administrative bodies. The importance of involving faculty members was emphasised in several other cases. One interviewee from a science faculty argued: “The second most important thing that wasn’t in focus before is the objective to [ensure] faculty’s ownership in the strategic research plan.” Informants assumed that faculty’s involvement in the process helps later with implementation of the plan.

In several cases, informants stressed the ongoing and informal nature of strategic concerns about research. They described a range of interactions and activities involving other academic administrators and professors as part of their “planning” for research, which is unrelated to producing a formal planning document. In other words, interviewees distinguished between a product and a process orientation in strategic planning (Mintzberg, 1994). A few claimed that research planning takes place at the individual researcher’s level and that the role of the administration is merely to facilitate research, not to plan it formally.

Organisational changes and the outcomes of research planning

Shifting cultures and practices

All but four of the faculties reported on the tangible outcomes of their planning processes. The impacts of research planning were largely described in terms of success in federal research grant competitions, more recruitment in strategic areas and administrative initiatives to facilitate research. These include allocating resources such as space, research release time and support mechanisms, *e.g.* grant editors. Some noted, however, that it is hard to ascribe certain outcomes to the research planning exercise. While there were only a small number of informants who were able to detail specific long-term outcomes of the planning process, most confirmed that a major shift has taken place in institutional research culture.

In terms of changes in organisational practices and processes, research planning has helped shape faculty hiring at four faculties (in the three fields listed in Tables 1 and 2) from different universities. Notably, they reported allocating new recruits primarily to strategic research areas identified through research planning exercises. As an informant from a science faculty at Alberta notes: “We identified our priority areas, and all our staffing decisions were influenced by these decisions.” Another administrator contends: “The upper administration has given three new professorial appointments for each of the CERC areas” (Waterloo/science). The informants raised concerns over limited resources for hiring new professors needed to strengthen research areas, thereby providing a rationale for the use of planning. Clearly, for the faculties which made planning a required tool when negotiating new recruits with departments, the research plans have led to tangible outcomes.

The faculties are also providing a variety of administrative support mechanisms to facilitate research; these recent initiatives are linked to the drive to maximise federal research funding. Faculties have introduced positions such as grant editors and research co-ordinators specifically to enhance their competitiveness in federal grant applications. One health faculty at Western Ontario has developed a model called the “Tri-council Initiative” that is now being emulated across faculties in the university. A review team evaluates proposed grant applications internally, provides feedback to the researcher and makes seed money available. Other faculties have also implemented similar schemes. Another common approach to increase the success of grant applications, as reported by seven interviewees across different fields, has been to institute a mentoring system in the faculty. Senior professors who have extensive experience in writing grant applications provide advice to others, especially junior faculty members. In three cases this would also include training sessions and seed money for grant applications.

The explicit objective of obtaining large collaborative grants has driven faculties to broker partnerships and stimulate research across academic units and disciplines. Because the tri-councils are leaning towards collaborative grants, informants from 12 faculties stated that, in their research planning, they are focusing more on large team grants than small individual grants. One interviewee from a health faculty at Victoria noted that professors in the unit were strategically recruited to work in groups and that this has helped them to obtain external grants. As another dean from a health faculty at McGill university asserted, “We are beginning to look at how we can structure ourselves to support those group grants and allocations, as well as being involved in them. This would be one of our priorities”. Six faculties emphasised the importance of encouraging interdisciplinary research teams across faculties and disciplines. Supporting collaborative research has become common practice, as funding agencies emphasise these modes of support.

For the social sciences faculties (*e.g.* Alberta, Dalhousie, York, Western Ontario, Waterloo), these shifts have been particularly noticeable. According to five informants, all from social sciences faculties across various universities (including three from medical/doctoral universities and two from comprehensive universities), heightened awareness of conducting sponsored research among faculties is a particular outcome of research planning. They reported making focused efforts to develop a research culture within the faculty and raise awareness among faculty members to strategically pursue research funds (Alberta, Dalhousie, Saskatchewan, Waterloo, York). The shift in research culture is apparent in the following statements by informants from social science units in different universities.

The engagement of faculty members [in] the research piece is something that has relevance to the institution as a whole [and] has changed, I would say, from 10 or 15 years ago. (...) One observation I might make is that I think everybody in the institution has a much stronger sense of the relevance of research to the university’s functioning and its contribution to society. (small medical-doctoral university)

There has been a major shift in the culture setting in the faculty as a result of the government shift. If one goes back 10 to 12 years before the existence of CFI, the type of research activity was much more of individuals seeking funding for their own research laboratory primarily. And the creation of CFI has led to much more group-type (...) activity. (comprehensive university)

These reactions were accompanied by concerns that federal agencies are increasingly emphasising the need for large research teams along the lines of a “big science” model. Comments concerning increased attention to performance indicators in social science academic units suggested a

heightened awareness towards measurable research outcomes used in the sciences to justify grant funding.

There is also greater awareness about building graduate programmes; this stems from research planning practices in several of the less research-oriented faculties. Graduate students are an important element in facilitating research. As an informant from the social sciences at Dalhousie states: “That’s something we don’t often think much about, that having those [groups of] researchers in the classroom presenting their cutting edge research work actually helps to change the views of undergraduates and that interaction between teaching and research is one thing we often forget about.” Facilitating opportunities for graduate students to get more involved in research serves as an expected long-term outcome of the planning process.

The perceived value of research planning

As discussed above, research planning is common to most faculties we investigated and has generated changes in organisational practices and processes. However, attitudes towards research planning vary among interviewees and range from scepticism to enthusiasm. Most interviewees fell somewhere between those extremes, seeing some value in attempting to approach decisions about research in a more systematic manner, but recognising the limitations of planning in shaping the research process.

At one end of the continuum, research planning is welcomed with great enthusiasm and seen as a necessary tool for administration. For example, one informant from the social sciences remarked: “I would say that planning is desirable, planning is needed and also planning allows us to proceed in a kind of a systematic manner.” This view was endorsed by five interviewees: they believed that a formal planning exercise helps to raise awareness and address organisational challenges in an efficient way. In three cases a formal plan was seen to be a helpful tool in making administrative decisions in the faculty. In their opinion, having defined research goals would oblige senior administrators to support these goals through specific initiatives. The supporters of planning, however, frequently pointed out that the implementation of the plan can sometimes be difficult. The most common obstacles seem to be a lack of resources and the fact that the faculty shows little interest in it.

The faculties where there had not been a formal research planning process were represented by sceptics. Administrators from two faculties in the same university objected to formalised research planning; this was viewed as having the potential to infringe upon academic freedom. In one case, a research plan had been drawn up but the result was not acceptable to the university administration. The informant who led the planning process

expressed a sense of “helplessness” because it was conducted merely to comply with institutional strategy. However, refusal to do so would have meant a financial loss to the faculty. As he noted, “it has been made quite evident to us that unless this plan is truly strategic you’ll be less than successful in resource allocations”. In this case, research planning was seen as merely conforming to institutional strategy.

Five informants questioned the value of research plans, referring to the overly generic nature of goals and outcomes. A participant from a science faculty at a medical/doctoral university remained sceptical about the effectiveness of planning, given the considerable amount of time and resources required to produce a planning document: “I am not sure how useful these things are. If, after spending a lot of resources, I am asked by senior administrators to come up with a fairly generic strategic research plan, I will not be too enthusiastic.” In one case, the faculty’s extremely diverse research areas raised scepticism about having a research plan. As an informant explained: “If we tried to produce a document that would summarize everything, it is either leaving a whole bunch of people out or being so vague that is not being very useful” (social sciences faculty, comprehensive university). Three other informants from different universities were concerned about how to make a plan that is neither too generic, as it would lose meaning, nor too specific, as it would preclude other research.

The perceived value of the research planning and overview of the outcomes illustrates the variety of organisational changes resulting from research planning processes. It is evident that most of these initiatives, as described above, are designed specifically to address the requirements set by federal granting agencies to enhance faculties’ competitiveness through research. In this environment, the administrators interviewed were of the opinion that there is a need to develop stronger research cultures. These should be construed as a more active and deliberate involvement in sponsored research, even in fields where funding is not as paramount as in science and engineering disciplines.

Discussion

This study has explored the dynamics of research planning across various faculties in selected universities, revealing a range of organisational responses. It concludes that although all the universities in the sample have generated institutional research plans, the impacts of research planning are uneven across universities. Furthermore, the nature, process and outcomes of planning vary considerably within them, *i.e.* across faculties.

Our analysis reveals that research planning means different things to different audiences. Some faculties, primarily in “medical-doctoral”

universities, indicated that they conduct explicit research planning processes. Faculties from less research-intensive “comprehensive” universities have added research components to their academic plans. For some of them, research planning implies a formal large-scale exercise, involving a range of internal and external stakeholders, while others conduct planning in a more informal manner. A few faculties indicated having only a facilitator role in supporting individual staff members’ research and they underplayed research planning as a process. While some of them are conducting strategic comprehensive assessments of their units, listing priority areas and demonstrating alignment with the institutional plan, other faculties and universities are focusing on tactical endeavours, explicitly targeting CRC funding and other major external grants. Their research planning takes place more in an *ad hoc* manner and they are making substantial efforts to succeed in grant competitions.

Success in sponsored research is, of course, a universal marker of quality and prestige for universities. In Canada, the increasing rationalisation of inter-institutional competition for funding from federal councils and foundations is reflected in the flurry of initiatives reported above. By and large, there were no notable differences in research planning across faculties in the fields of science/engineering, biomedical/health sciences and social sciences/humanities. Only some administrators of social science faculties in different universities noted increased pressure to develop stronger research cultures in their units. Such faculties were pressured to generate more external funding for research and to provide evidence of productivity following measures applied to the natural science and engineering fields. Overall, some issues play a critical role in understanding the dynamics of research planning: how planning takes place within institutions, the dean’s leadership style and the extent to which the faculty is motivated to succeed in internal and external funding competitions.

Overall, it seems that there is a link between the intensity with which faculties undertake research and their past performance in relation to grant competitions, and their reaction to research planning. Some of them are accepting the need for it since it has brought them some tangible benefits, whether from the central administration or from external agencies. Other faculties are complying with research planning mandates in order to enhance their legitimacy, as is the case of faculties where research has traditionally not been a central focus. Still others face conflicting institutional demands: pressures from the university as well as internal resistance; all of this in an environment which compels the use of planning techniques in research. Senior administrators hope to compromise by balancing the interests of both groups. Finally, a few faculties are implementing planning in a ceremonial or symbolic way but do not really intend to implement their plans: these are

produced in a formulaic manner simply to meet the requirements of federal research programmes such as that of the CRC or the university. During the interviews they were sceptical about planning and expressed reservations about the overall value of planning.

In our sample, four faculties claimed that research does not lend itself to planning; second, pressuring faculty was seen as a serious infringement of academic freedom. Administrators did not accept research planning as unchallengeable, *i.e.* a standard way of conducting their administrative work. They questioned the view that research planning – as an activity to direct research – would be useful. In one case, the faculty distinguished itself as a professional faculty set apart from the university in several respects.

Examining planning at the faculty level proved useful: here, it is more readily translatable into changes in resource allocation, recruitment, administrative support mechanisms or development of programmes, whereas institutional-level research plans are often quite generic. While research indicators are increasingly used by university administrations, the long-term outcomes of research planning are hard to grasp for most interviewees. The nature and outcomes of the research process are highly uncertain. As noted by Whitley (2008), strategic behaviour in universities is constrained by broader social structures and the very nature of the research enterprise. As such, administrators use institutionalised indicators that serve as proxies to performance. A list of recent changes was mentioned that related to an increase in internal and external funding, new hires and increased emphasis on research activities in general. Long-term planning outcomes were hardly mentioned, as several of the respondents had been recruited recently and, in general, there seemed to be a lack of institutional memory to support comparisons. Therefore, it is anticipated that research planning in the Canadian universities investigated in this study will primarily lead to outcomes in sponsored research performance as opposed to meaningful organisational changes with a longer-range perspective.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all interviewees for generously sharing their views with us. Without their input this project would not have been possible. A previous version of this manuscript was presented at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Indianapolis, Indiana, 17-20 November 2010.

This research has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through a Standard Research Grant and a University of Toronto Connaught Matching Award.

Notes

1. We employ the term “faculty”, even if on a few occasions such units are called “colleges” or “schools”.
2. Other roles include a former associate dean research and a research officer. One interviewee preferred to provide his answers in writing and the questionnaire was sent to him by email.

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