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Understanding strong academic microcultures : an exploratory study

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UNDERSTANDING STRONG ACADEMIC MICROCULTURES

– AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

LUNDS UNIVERSITET

CONTEXT

Enterprise

Saga

Torgny Roxå & Katarina Mårtensson
Lund University, April 2011

Contents

Summary

Responsibility for the quality of teaching rests to a large extent within small groups of academic teachers in their disciplinary and professional context. This report presents the results of an explorative study undertaken at Lund University, Sweden, where a small number of strong academic contexts – here called microcultures – successful in both teaching and research were studied.

Some of the main findings of the study are:

- Academic microcultures can be studied with a socio-cultural perspective.

- Leaders at levels above the microcultures lack a shared value-system in relation to quality of teaching and education.

- The microcultures in this study display a very high degree of internal trust, i.e. between the members of the MC. This includes trustful relations between leaders and teachers as well as trustful relations between teachers and students.

- The microcultures take teaching very seriously; it is highly valued as both a collective, collegial responsibility and as a matter of high personal mastery at the individual level.

- The microcultures provide a collegial supportive engagement with new teachers, and with teachers that – occasionally – do not keep up the high standards of teaching that is expected from within the MC.

- Leadership is very varied between the five studied microcultures, and yet very active in all sorts of ways. Various leadership functions are secured in different ways.

- The microcultures themselves are actively externally oriented, and collaborative but mostly so based on their own underlying value system and initiatives. The formal organisation (faculty/university) as such is rather invisible in relation to the core of the microcultures.

- The microcultures show a strong enterprise, a shared sense of the purpose of their work, and its future direction. This appears tightly related to underlying basic values within the groups.

- Although all five microcultures differed somewhat in character, the similarities above seem to be valid across different faculty-organisations.

The purpose was to understand more about how these academic microcultures function mainly in relation to teaching and learning quality. The study was part of a major

initiative at Lund University – Education Quality 2011 – aiming at assessing and enhancing the overall long-term educational quality processes (EQ11) at the university as a whole. A starting point for the study reported on here is that the results from decades of top-down- as well as bottom-up initiatives have varied tremendously, much dependent on what goes on at the local level of academic culture.

Therefore, the key questions asked in this study are: What characterises strong academic microcultures and how do they function?

In this particular project a case study approach was used (following recommendations from Eisenhardt, 1989, and Yin, 2009). The theoretical framework follows a socio-cultural perspective, and is based on concepts such as culture (Alvesson, 2002; Ancona, Kochan et al. 2009, Trowler, 2009), organisational learning (Schein, 2004; Senge, 2006; Stensaker, 2006), communities of practice (Wenger, 1999), and leadership in a competing values framework (Quinn et al, 2011; Vilkinas & Carten, 2001).

In the first phase of the project, 11 interviews were conducted with academic leaders and student unions in order to select strong educational contexts to study. Various documents of evaluation were also used in the selection process. The five microcultures that were finally selected represented three different faculties. They displayed a wide array of teaching, from beginners level to doctorate level as well as different teaching methods; a fairly large size of teaching mission (i.e. numbers of students per year), and a reputation as being good (as opposed to not good).

In the second phase of the project semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from each microculture: formal leaders, senior academics, junior academics and students. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A total number of 22 interviews were conducted, 4-5 in each microculture. Altogether 45 persons (17 academics and 28 students) were interviewed.

This project has explored five strong academic educational contexts, and described some significant features in terms of internal and external relations, development and innovation, and leadership. Issues for future research could be to look further at successful microcultures, perhaps in other contexts. Other interesting ways forward could be to explore less successful microcultures; or microcultures that have shown a clear improvement in teaching quality. Together with the results from this study, such further research might provide more valuable knowledge about differences in quality processes, internal relations, personal development, and leadership and thereby contribute to an improved possibility to lead academic organisations more effectively.

<div align="center">☙</div>

This text is written as a report from our project within the overarching EQ11-initiative at Lund University. It is therefore mainly aimed at the steering committee of EQ11 at Lund University and the national and international advisors who are committed to this initiative. We therefore consider this text as somewhat preliminary and open for feedback, comments, questions and suggestions. It is our ambition to use the material from our study in further publications. We hope, however, that the present text is of interest also to academics, leaders and academic developers, in our own as well as in other universities, wherever understanding and developing the teaching and learning of the academic culture is relevant.

We want to express our deepest gratitude to all leaders, academics and students who in this study so willingly shared their experiences of their contexts with us. Special thanks to Professor Bjørn Stensaker, Oslo University, Norway for being a critical friend in discussing early findings in this study, and to Dr David Green, Seattle, USA, for intriguing comments and questions on a draft version of this report.

Lund University, April 2011

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Abbreviations and definitions of words/concepts used in the text

HSV	Swedish National Agency for Higher Education
EQ11	An institutional initiative in 2011 at Lund University aiming at enhancing the educational quality in the university as a whole.
MC	Microculture
MCs	Microcultures
Artefacts	observable and overt behaviour, speech, or things that are constructed continuously by cultural members of a group/an organisation (from Schein, 2004)
Absorptive capacity	a group's capacity to orient itself in a constantly changing context, includes group members' understanding of their group's direction, what it is trying to achieve; internal communication, and the ability to rapidly transport crucial information to the relevant co-worker (from Cohen& Levinthal, 1990).
Community of practice	groups of people joined together by a shared interest (from Wenger, 1998)
Enterprise	the shared interest, or future practice of a community of practice (from Wenger, 1998)
Espoused theories	things that a person or a group say that they do, as sometimes opposed to what they actually do, see theories in use (from Argyris, 1977, and Schön, 1983).
Personal mastery	an identity driven urge to constantly improve the result of what one is doing (from Senge, 2006).
Saga	members' memories of previous events within the organisation (Clark, 1998)
Theories in use	things that a person or a group actually do, as sometimes opposed to what they say they do (from Argyris, 1977, and Schön, 1983).

Understanding strong academic microcultures – An exploratory study

This report is written from a perspective that acknowledges that quality enhancement in education relates strongly to academic culture. It argues that the resulting perspective has the potential to explain, at least partly, why academic teaching has proven resilient to various reform efforts made by university managers and politicians. Through a socio-cultural perspective this study investigates five academic *microcultures* in a research-intensive university in order to explore how they function in relation to teaching and learning. The five milieus, all chosen for being good at both research and teaching, represent quality within the most common academic practices in the university. By deepening the understanding of these cultures the study may contribute to further insights into how quality in academic teaching and education relates to the underlying assumptions of academic culture. The findings presented in this report will aid further attempts to enhance the quality of higher education.

Introduction

At Lund University[1] a major quality enhancement initiative – EQ11[2] – was launched in 2009 aiming at a University-wide development of education. "EQ11 is forward looking and is to form a central part of Lund University's own longterm quality assurance work." (Vice-Chancellor, 2010). As the project has unfolded, focus has shifted from quality assurance to quality enhancement. It focuses on three key success factors: alignment, management and scholarship. The first deals with how the different components of educational processes support each other; the second with how various decision-making processes within the university support the educational processes; and the third focuses on organisational learning, i.e. how experiences made within the organisation are used for further development. The overall aim is to support the long-term enhancement of education, student learning and personal development.

This text reports on a specific project conducted within the framework of EQ11. Its purpose has been to explore a limited number of strong educational contexts, micro-

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1 Lund University is one of the oldest in Scandinavia, founded in 1666. It is research-intensive, and in recent years ranked among the top 100 universities of the world. The university has eight faculties, 46000 students and 6000 employees. See more at www.lunduniversity.lu.se.

2 EQ11 means 'Education Quality 2011'. For details about the initiative: http://www5.lu.se/o.o.i.s/4311

cultures (hereafter called MCs) and to explore how these contexts construct educational quality.

The text firstly sketches a background of quality work in higher education, particularly in Sweden, and then offers a theoretical framework for the study based on key concepts such as organisational culture, communities of practice, personal mastery, and leadership. It then reports on the five MCs studied with a case-study approach, and concludes with results and a discussion of the findings and some future possible directions for further research.

Background

Attempts to influence the quality of Swedish higher education have a long history. For example, the quality of teaching at the Swedish Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) was discussed in Parliament as early as 1909 (Berner, 1996) and the first pedagogical course for academic teachers in Sweden was launched in 1957 (Åkesson & Falk Nilsson, 2010). Over the following decades formal organisations – centres for teaching and learning – were gradually founded. In the beginning mainly in the big universities, but later also suggested for all institutions by a governmental official report (SoU 2001:1). Furthermore funding for the renewal of teaching was made available (as descibed in Degerblad, Haikola et al., 2005), and a discourse on quality issues grew stronger, primarily driven by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV)(Franke & Nitzler, 2008).

The purpose of the EQ11 initiative is to enhance the quality of the education provided by Lund University. Quality enhancement of education should here be understood in its widest form: everything that the university does or stands for which influences the students' learning and personal development in becoming professionals and good citizens. This means many things, but whether or not it is done excellently, fairly, or badly depends to a large extent on the people whose task it is to support the students. Student learning is, consequently, the concern of many groups of professionals; in the project reported here the main focus is on the teachers as individual academics within collegial social contexts.

Since teaching is about interaction based on trust (trust in the teacher's competence and trust in the student's willingness and ability to learn), the professional role of a teacher has a "moral dimension that comprises a set of beliefs about professional attitudes, values and dispositions" (Shulman, 2007 cited in Mourshed, 2010:27). In this report we are going to describe five strong contexts in which a limited number of teachers teach, interact and live their professional lives.

From a structural and managerial perspective one can observe that over the last few decades many things have been initiated in order to influence the quality of university teaching. Investments in time, energy, and financial resources have been huge. The results vary tremendously: in some contexts change and development of teaching and learning seem to go on constantly while in other contexts nothing seems to happen in terms of enhanced quality of teaching. We argue that the total outcomes of these bottom-up and top-down strategies do not match the invested resources (Fig. 1). We suggest that the reason for this is that resources have been applied without sufficient knowledge about the elements that stabilise academic teaching. In this study we therefore strive to take a step back and uncover some of these cultural elements that are assumed to bolster the effects of various initiatives. In particular and as a first step we look at good examples where the quality of teaching – as perceived from the outside - is treated seriously and where the quality of teaching has been high for a considerable time. The overall hypothesis underpinning this specific project is that there are cultural traits within academia that reduce or support the effects of the described attempts to influence teaching quality. It is assumed that through an enhanced understanding of these traits future attempts to govern the university towards improved educational quality may become more successful.
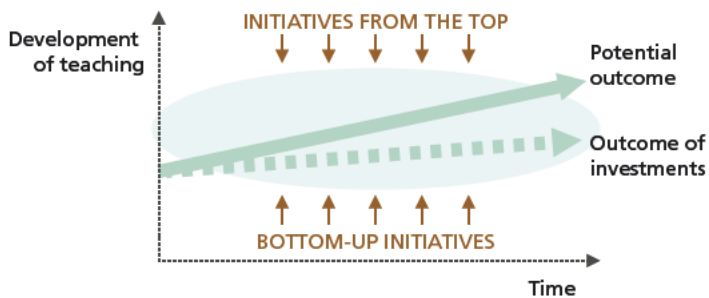
Fig 1. Initiatives from the top and the support of individual bottom-up initiatives have been the main strategies to create progress in university teaching. These attempts are likely to have influenced the quality of teaching, but potentially this outcome could have been greater with a more developed understanding of the teaching culture (illustrated by the shaded area) constructed and maintained by the university teachers.

Following from the above, the key questions in this project are:
What characterises strong academic MCs and how do they function?

The study focuses on the local level, on cultures formed and maintained by small groups of teachers (MCs). In earlier studies we have reported on teachers' significant networks (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). These networks consist of a few trusted and significant others, both colleagues and others. We have argued that teacher-beliefs about teaching are constructed and maintained during interaction in these networks. Many

earlier attempts to influence the quality of teaching have taken an individual approach by providing funding for individuals (Degerblad, Haikola et al., 2005) or a systematic approach by developing formal structures and university policies (Bauer et al, 1999; Newton, 2002,2003). In this report we offer an additional aspect by putting forward a cultural approach, with a specific emphasis on the local level.

Culture is of course a vague term. It is related to habitual ways of talking, interacting, and doing things (Alvesson, 2002; Ancona, Kochan et al. 2009; Geertz, 1973/1993); ways that support the individuals, but also create boundaries to other culturally formed groups. In relation to academia, Paul Trowler (2009) discussed the relevance of culture based on research during organisational merger of universities and faculties. Further, Jawitz (2009) examined how new academics learn how to assess students and found that this skill was acquired in different ways depending on differences in departmental and disciplinary cultures; Walsh (2010) explained the variation in the experience of international doctoral students in the UK with differences in the "climate" within various research groups; and Roxå and Renc-Roe (2010) described how teaching in English within a Swedish-speaking faculty at Lund University takes many forms within different subcultures with almost no dissemination of experiences from one part of the faculty to other parts.

These few examples all focus on the local level as critical while understanding teaching quality. Hence, the approach we have taken is part of a long tradition. McKinsey & Company use it in the report *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better* (Mourshed, Chijoke et al., 2010). Ramsden (1979) too used a local approach while showing that students' approaches to learning vary in relation to their perception of the department where they study. Gibbs and colleagues (2008) studied 21 departments, excellent in both research and teaching, with a specific focus on leadership, and found a huge variation in almost every aspect. Successful departments obviously come in many shapes and forms.

Even further, Lizzio and colleagues (2002) found – after having surveyed 5000 students – that the students' perception of the learning environment was the most important predictor of both learning approaches and outcomes. Trowler (2005, 2008) showed that variations in different academic contexts are not only related to disciplinary epistemology, but also to what he labels 'teaching and learning regimes'. In Sweden, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV) awarded centres of excellence in higher education between 2007-2009 based on nominations from the Swedish institutions. The quality criteria used regarded, among other things, organisational structure, educational setting, leadership, teacher commitment, teaching and examination methods, student learning and student results. An analysis of some of the awarded environments at Umeå University (Bergenheim, unpublished) put forward critical aspects such as a positive departmental climate, a good sense of a collegial

"we", continuous and deliberate discussions about educational issues, strong research achievements and active collaboration with other parts of the university and with the society.

The references above reveal an immense variation in how teaching in local contexts occurs, how it is led and maintained. Overall, these studies and many others underline the importance of the local learning context. It is convincingly argued that the local level is where teaching materialises; this is the level where teachers affect student learning and where teachers decide how to do this. Students as well as academic teachers are clearly influenced by the local teaching milieu in which they work.

Consequently, this is the main focus of our project: We investigate the local level, a few MCs, and by doing so hopefully contribute to an overall understanding of how teaching is governed on the "factory floor". We hope to uncover some cultural traits important to consider for leaders of higher education wishing to improve their ability to enhance the quality of teaching and student learning within their institution.

Theoretical perspectives

Organisational culture

The approach taken in this project implies a choice of perspective on the organisation at hand. It favours a focus on norms, habits, and symbols as organisational members continuously construct them (Ancona, 2009; Alvesson, 2002; Geertz, 1973/1993; Trowler, 2009). Culture, in this tradition, is constructed and maintained by members as they interact during their daily lives. Culture hereby takes on a structural property as it influences individuals to behave in ways considered normal. The individuals are, however, not entrapped totally in this cultural web. They can always, as knowledgeable agents, choose not to comply with what is expected (Giddens, 2004). Nevertheless, since diverging from what is normal means a cost and potentially a risk for the individual, people mostly act according to the expected pattern and thereby both construct and are influenced by the culture as they perform their professional duties. Goffman (1959, 2000), using a theatre metaphor, offers an important distinction in relation to individuals acting under the influence of normality, as he observes that individuals behave more according to the norm while observed by individuals whose reactions they cannot foresee (*front stage*, acting publicly), than when they act if surrounded only by people whom they trust (*back stage*, acting privately). Hereby, also in the context we study, individuals may comply with the normality front stage but counteract expectations while acting back stage.

By focusing on culture and normality in relation to change efforts, we follow several recent studies emphasising culture as the most important factor in processes of change and development in higher education (Bauer, Askling et al., 1999; Edvardsson-Stiwne, 2009; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Kezar, 2007; Kuh, 1993; Merton, Froyd et al. 2009).The significance of culture is further accentuated by Stensaker (2006) summarising a study where he surveys a decade of change in Norwegian higher education: "Hence, in this organisation [higher education] authority concerning the quality of teaching and learning would not follow the hierarchical but rather the informal structure, and through mechanisms such as socialisation and training." (p. 47).

Organisational culture, as described by Schein (2004) can be analysed through observations in three layers: *artefacts*, *espoused beliefs and values*, and *underlying assumptions*. In short, artefacts are overt behaviour, speech, or things that are constructed continuously by cultural members and observable. Espoused beliefs and values become visible as explanations given by members when asked about the reasons for why they do and say things. Underlying assumptions, as a contrast, are almost never talked about, members might not even be aware of them. Nevertheless, these assumptions are what stabilises the culture, they are what binds people together, like gravitation, over considerable time-spans. Further, these assumptions and values almost never change. If they do, Schein claims, the process is always related to deep organisational crises from which the organisation might survive and develop or, if the process fails, possibly dissolve. According to Schein, underlying assumptions may only be revealed through analysis.

Argyris (1977) and Schön (1983) offer an important distinction when they discuss *espoused theories* in contrast to *theories in use*. The observation they make is that organisational members often explain their behaviour by referring to espoused theories while they in practice may use other perspectives, i.e. do something else. The authors suggest that the study of mismatches or alignment between espoused theories and theories in use might reveal important information about organisations.

Schein's view on organisational culture is related to several other socio-cultural perspectives. Wenger (1999) describes the dynamics of *communities of practice*: groups of people joined together by a shared interest, an *enterprise*; a joint practice developed over time. A shared experience of the pursuit of an enterprise is what forms the members' identities and influences their future meaning making. The process is fuelled by the on-going, sometimes tough, negotiation about what to do next in the pursuit of the enterprise. Further, the shared experience spawns a notion of *us*, in relation to *the others*, those who do not share the same experiences, something that in turn creates borders and distance to other communities.

The idea about communities of practice – especially the notion of enterprise – introduces the dynamics of time to the cultural perspective; it has the power to explain

what binds the members together, what influences their identities, and how the notions of *Us* and *The Others* emerge as important features within an organisation. The enterprise is a projection by the mind into the future, a direction to pursue. A related concept, offered by Clark (1998), is the organisational *saga*, which relates to the members' memories of previous events within the organisation. A saga describes the organisational history as the members remember it, often in the form of narratives about the founders of the organisation or events considered significant for the organisations existents and uniqueness[3] – its raison d'être. Both the saga and the enterprise are related to the underlying assumptions and therefore have a tremendously stabilising effect over time on the culture at hand.

Through these perspectives organisational culture emerges as related to professional identities, to the distance between subcultures in the organisation, to the future in the form of an enterprise, and the past in the form of the saga. It sheds light on the passion, and the commitment shown by members during their pursuit of enterprises. It also touches upon emotions and their significance in daily life (Bloch, 2008; Ehn & Löfgren, 2007). Further, they can reveal aspects of the culture by focusing on the cultural artefacts and on the explanations and descriptions offered by the members about how and why things are done in certain ways.

Innovation and development

Our approach is in a similar way related to innovation through the concept of *absorptive capacity* (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), a concept used in relation to an organisation's innovative and adaptive capacity.. The more developed the sense of direction is; the more efficient the internal communication is; and the more developed the awareness of the context is, the better the organisation's ability to innovate and to use external changes as opportunities rather than threats. Absorptive capacity has been useful for researchers when studying knowledge-intensive organisations with a high degree of specialisation. It has been used to explain why some innovative organisations develop further in a changing context, while others whither away and disappear (ibid.). For two decades this research has focused upon profit making organisation, and only recently as an intellectual tool for analysing non-profit organisation, such as universities (Harvey, Skelcher et al., 2010). In the current project we are interested in the internal communication within the MCs, in the shared sense of direction (enterprise in relation to underlying assumptions and the saga), and the awareness of the context in

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3 Martin et al. (1983) analysed a number of narratives told by organisational members with the purpose to underline the uniqueness of these organisations. The authors were able to show that these stories display a remarkable resemblance with each other. The paradox is that they, the narratives, despite the resemblance can function as signs of uniqueness.

which the MC is operating. We expect the well functioning MCs in our study to show a high degree of absorptive capacity.
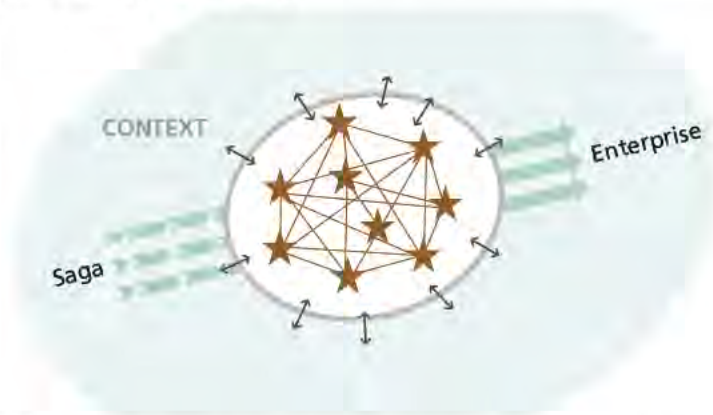

Fig. 2: A schematic illustration of a MC imbedded in a context and the three main areas of investigation in this study: 1. Internal relations and leadership (indicated by the interrelated stars); 2. Absorptive capacity/external relations (arrows crossing the borders of the MC indicating interactions with others, external to the MC); and 3. Enterprise/saga (green arrows indicating the relationship between the group's experienced past and the envisioned future)

Leadership and management

A core interest in this project is the area of leadership and management. These are terms often used as synonymous (Senge 2006). Sandahl et al (2010) talk about them as aiming for influencing a group, either by being accepted as an authority or with the use of some kind of power. It goes without saying that these things in reality are hard to distinguish but also that experiences of the two differ to a large extent.

Robin Middlehurst, professor of higher education and director of strategy and research at the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the UK has pointed out this "inevitable tension between leadership aligned with creativity, and management aligned with constrained resources and accountability requirements" (Middlehurst, 2008:336). She suggests no solution to this tension, rather highlights that it calls for a never-ending balancing act. But she points towards the fact that both leaders and managers depend on trust, which might be the capital much needed to "persuade 'free' followers to cede their own legitimate power in favour of desirable goals and collective benefits" (ibid:336).

As shown by Allan and colleagues (Allan, Gordon et al., 2006), much literature about leaders in higher education focus on the strong (male) leader who does great things in service of the many, often under dramatic circumstances. In this study, however, we focus on the small contexts and on everyday activities, meaning that the leadership or management will lack much of the drama appearing in the literature. The urgent need

for such a focus, closer to the every-day practices of higher education, is argued for by Anderson and colleagues (Anderson, Scott et al., 2008) as they report from a survey of a large number of Australian middle managers in higher education. It is also exemplified by Trevelyan (2001) who studied leadership and autonomy in a number of research groups in the UK, specifically responses to different leadership styles. The key in this small but growing body of research, whether we talk about leadership or management, appears to be trust, as pointed out by Middlehurst (above).

In this project leadership and management will be studied through the *competing values framework* (Quinn et al, 1996/2011). It acknowledges the almost overwhelming complexity and contradictions described by many middle managers in academia (Anderson et al, 2008). It therefore has the potential to mirror both management and leadership as it is realized in the everyday practices within the MCs we study.

In short the framework emphasises four sometimes-contradictory functions displayed in management and suggests that these, in a well functioning organisation, have to be balanced and in operation simultaneously (Fig 3). The four functions are characterised by: 1) documentation and control; 2) commitment, openness, and the welfare of co-workers; 3) goals achievement and productivity; and 4) innovation, growth and resource acquisition. In terms of focus, 1 and 2 have an internal focus, 2 and 3 a focus on control, 3 and 4 a focus on external signals, and 2 and 4 a focus on flexibility. The four functions are related to historically dominant models for management (Quinn et al, 2011).
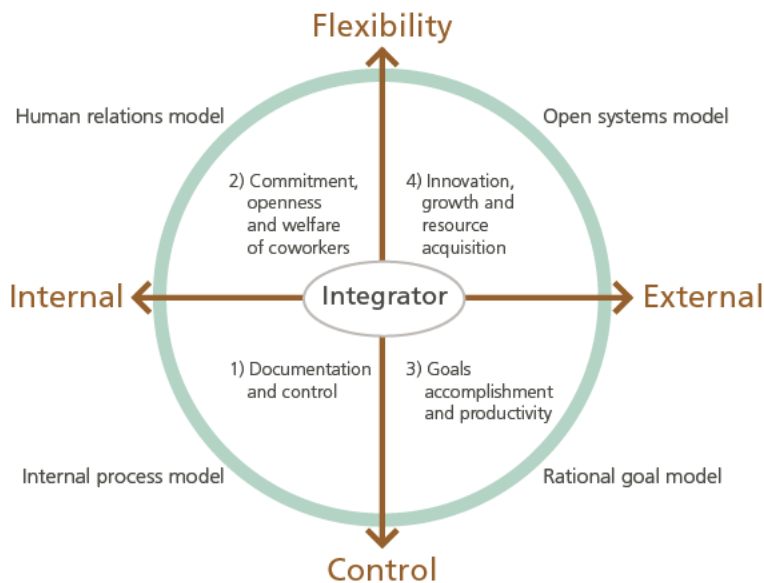

Fig. 3: A simplified illustration of the competing values framework. Vilkinas & Carten (2001)

According to the authors, good management is signified by an ability to use all four functions depending on the situation. When analysed through the framework good managers display a larger profile, meaning that the repertoire of the individual manager includes all four functions and an ability to use them appropriately. In a further developed version of the framework Vilkinas and Carten (2001) include a fifth function called the *integrator* and places it in the middle of the model (figure 3). The idea is that if the various functions are to interact and support each other, then there is a need for a function where information can be balanced, synthesised, and stored for later use. This is the decision-function and the learning-function. Without a coordinator, both synchronisations between the other functions as well as organisational learning would be hard to explain and perhaps even to achieve. Our analysis will use the framework in order to see how leadership and management in the MCs take shape.

Peter Senge (2006) discusses the spirit of the individuals within a learning organisation. The crucial feature, according to him, is whether they manage to maintain a constructive tension between what they want to achieve and the actual outcome. He argues that there will always be a difference between what ambitious people aspires and what they actually accomplish. It is this tension that makes them try harder. Less ambitious people release the tension through lowering their aspirations. High achievers never reach their goals, because they strive for a moving target; instead they strive constantly to improve. Senge labels this characteristic personal mastery. People with a high degree of *personal mastery* "have a special sense of purpose that lies behind their visions and goals. *For such a person, a vision is a calling rather than simply a good idea.* They see current reality as an ally, not an enemy." (ibid:132, italics in original).
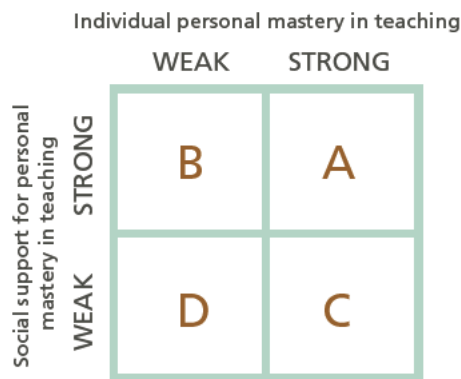
Fig. 4. Illustration of the individual personal mastery in teaching viewed in relation to social support for such personal mastery.

For our purposes it is interesting to observe whether the social climate supports personal mastery in relation to the entire professional identity, but also whether personal mastery in relation to teaching is rewarded or penalised within a MC. As illustrated in figure 4 (above) an individual might be strongly motivated to personal mastery indi-

vidually and work within an environment that supports, or does not support such personal mastery.

We hypothesise that position A illustrates a sustainable personal mastery socially supported within the working context. D illustrates a lack of personal mastery and a lack of social support for the development of such mastery. Both A and D are likely to illustrate a sustainable relation to personal mastery in teaching. B and C, in contrast, illustrate unsustainable situations, since individuals in situation B and C will deviate from the social contextual norms. It is likely that an individual in C has to rely heavily on individual ambition in teaching without social support. This would imply that much personal energy and ambition is invested but without recognition or reward. The individual in B would most likely be perceived as a problem for the social context since the individual ambition does not match what is expected. In our investigation we look for signs of personal mastery in relation to teaching, and particularly whether the cultural context supports this part of the professional identity, since it would be a critical feature for both the individual's wellbeing and for the motivation to excel in his or her professional practice (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Method

A case-study approach

We use a case study approach, following recommendations by Yin (2009) and Eisenhardt (1989). Yin (2009:18) suggests a case study approach when investigating "a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". Eisenhardt (1989), like Yin, stresses the potential in using case studies for theory development purposes. Thick descriptions allow empirical material to interact with existing theory. Furthermore, Eisenhardt advices the researchers to use imagination in order to reach deeper structures; the analysis should neither be just a recount of material nor an overemphasis on theory deconstruction, but rather an intense dialogue mediated through the mind of the researcher in search for improved or developed theory. It is the search for cross-case patterns, similarities and differences, with a stress on conflict, contradiction and unresolved patterns in relation to preconceptions that have the potential to unfreeze previous understandings. Thus, through a case study approach we might deepen the understanding of how strong academic contexts function and organise their practices.

Selection of microcultures

Being a small-scale pilot-project within the EQ11-initiative, the number of MCs to study was limited to five. Allowing for an analysis in relation to the organisational context, the MCs were chosen from only three different faculties within Lund University. Due to time-constraints the project focused on faculties where we (authors) have substantial experience. The three faculties represent a wide range of academic sub-cultural characteristics: from vocational/professional to non-vocational; from programme oriented to modular; from research-intensive to teaching-intensive and from strong in finance to comparably weak.

Since the overall purpose is to study strong MCs in relation to education within a research intensive university, the criteria for selection were the following: The chosen MCs should, besides from being possible to distinguish from their organisational background, display

- a strength in both research[4] and teaching,

- a wide array of teaching, from beginners level to doctorate level,

- a fairly large size of teaching mission, i.e. numbers of students per year, and

- a reputation as being good (as opposed to not good).

Notably, and deliberately we did not include any criteria about particular teaching methods, since we believe that good teaching can appear in many forms, even if they may initially appear "traditional". This view is supported by Hattie (2009), who from a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement, concludes that there is no such thing as a one best teaching method. On the contrary, teaching methods inevitably display a huge variation in learning results.

In order to identify MCs matching the above criteria, 11 interviews were conducted with leaders at faculty and/or department level as well as with student unions. The question was: "Where do you think we should go and look for good educational environments?". It was explicitly stated that we were interested in groups, MCs, and not necessarily departments or programmes.

With material from these different sources – quality assessments, interviews with leaders and student unions, as well as our own local knowledge – five MCs were selected for study, here called P, K, R, F and S. We have for ethical reasons chosen to treat the

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4 The quality of the research was indicated by a university-wide research assessment
    exercise including all disciplines at Lund University, RQ08 (The final report "RQ08.
    Research quality assurance for the future. A quality review of research at Lund
    University 2007/08" is available at http://www.lu.se/upload/LUPDF/Forskning/
    RQ08_helarapporten.pdf).

MCs anonymously in this text, but their main characteristics are exposed in the matrix below (table 1), and they are further described in the Case-section (p. 17-19).

	P	K	R	F	S
Group size	Small	Small	Big	Big	Medium
Organisational structure	Part of department	Part of department	Department	Department	Part of department
Homogenous or complex Homogenous	Homogenous	Homogenous	Complex	Complex	Complex
Research quality	Excellent	Good	Outstanding	Outstanding	Very good
Educational context	Professional education	Modular	Professional education	Modular	Professional programme

Table 1. An overview of the five selected MCs. A small size group is roughly 10 people; a medium sized group is about 30; and the big groups have about 60 members. When classified as complex, this means several disciplinary subgroups are detectable within the MC.

Selection of respondents within the microcultures

After selection, the five MCs were approached through a telephone call or e-mail, usually to a person with a formal leadership-role, such as the Head of Department or the director of studies. In this initial contact the aim of the project was explained, and they were asked if they would agree to be studied and interviewed. All five contact-persons from the different MCs immediately reacted positively, a bit surprised that they were chosen but yet proud.

Interviews

Over a period of five months (October 2010 – February 2011) interviews were completed within each MC with formal leaders such as Head of Department and/or the director of studies, with experienced as well as new teachers, and at a later stage in the process also with students. The order of this process was deliberately chosen, since the description from within the MC was in focus and the results from these interviews could then be compared to the results from the student-interviews.

All interviews with the academic staff were done individually, in the interviewee´s office. The interviews were between 45-75 minutes long, semi structured, and recorded. With a few exceptions, both project leaders (the authors) together performed the interviews. After each interview, the project leaders made immediate notes about the first/strongest impressions. All interviews were later transcribed completely. The interviews with students were conducted as focus groups with between 4-7 students usually representing different levels of education within each MC. A total number of 22 interviews

were conducted, 4-5 in each MC, with altogether 45 persons being interviewed in this phase of the project: 17 academics, 9 men and 8 women (9 of the 17 also having a formal leadership-position) and 28 students, 12 men and 16 women (see table 2 for an overview).

Interviewees	P	K	R	F	S
Academics	2 m / 1 w	2 m / 2 w	2 m / 1 w	3 m / 1 w	3 w
Students	1 m / 3 w	6 w	5 m / 2 w	4 m / 2 w	2 m / 3 w

Table 2. An overview of number of interviewed academics and students in each micro-culture (m = men; w = women)

Both immediate notes as well as interview-transcriptions and relevant documentation from the five MCs have formed the basis for the analysis and the results in this report.

Cases – a brief presentation

P is a young MC, initiated by a now retired professor who in the middle of the 1990s started a new research-area. Three doctoral students from this initial phase do now form the core of the seniors within the MC. They all refer to the professor and her way of creating the discipline, and to the group-culture as very pro-active, dynamic, and outreaching. Nothing seems impossible to this group. The three senior academics share an office that was once used by the professor. Decisions are made collaboratively through close and daily interactions. The teaching in P is described by students as different from other ways of teaching within the faculty – a lot of project-work and collaboration with industry is used, even at undergraduate level. The group is part of a department, and they are actively engaged in the department´s overall engagement in teaching matters.

The group members are proud about their discipline and claim it to have unique features. They display an urge to have an impact on both students, as future members of the overall profession, as well as the industrial sector with which they collaborate. They have recently entered an international collaboration with three other groups in Western Europe, a project initiated partly based on an audit instigated by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV).

K is a traditional academic discipline, taught in modules from undergraduate to postgraduate level. They have recently launched an international Master´s program, which has been externally evaluated and claimed to be unique in the Nordic context. The teachers display a profound commitment to the discipline, and to the teaching of it, and they describe the students as equally interested in the subject. K has a senior leader who is deeply engaged in teaching and development, an engagement dating back to the 1968-era. The other teachers acknowledge her as a good and im-

portant leader within the MC. She initiates development and supports initiatives from the group members. She is currently dissatisfied with a recent organisational change, in which the group became part of a department. This group has extensive collaborations with other disciplines, but they want to build collaborations based on their own interests, with a following resistance towards some collaborations suggested by the departmental management level.

The orientation educational-wise shifted in this group during the Bologna process. Interviewees describe this process as a turning point, which was followed by a systematic restructuring of the curriculum. While doing so the MC made extensive use of support offered by the university.

R is a department with a strong reputation in relation both to research and to teaching, particularly teaching at postgraduate level. They refer to themselves as being the best in their field and with an intention to continue to be so. The group still relates many of its activities back to a senior professor having a strong impact as early as during the 1960s, members are aware of his importance. He is still employed part time as a senior professor. A distinct feature of this environment is that everybody joins for coffee in the morning and in the afternoon although being around 60 people with offices on three different levels in the building. Another feature is that since a decade teaching planning is systematically and well structured, so that members of staff know well in advance what their workload looks like. Each year the department organises a retreat where, among other things, teaching is discussed. Suggestions are, as a result of junior teachers' initiatives, documented in a web-based protocol with timelines and responsibilities. Suggestions for improvements are realised to a higher degree now than compared to before the suggestions were documented.

Teaching is taken as seriously as research, as expressed by the teachers. An example of this is when a new research-profile was developed, the department immediately looked for ways to offer a related course within the faculty. A saying is that "you cannot teach an area unless you do related research and you cannot do research unless you have related teaching". Important decision-making takes place at a round table in the office of the Head of Department, where all senior teachers meet once a week. This MC has remained a department of its own despite a process of mergers around it. The role of being the head of this department is seen as fulfilment of a tradition that will continue into future.

F is perhaps the most complex environment in our study and least clearly one joint MC. It is a department that consists of three units/sub-disciplines. On an overall level they are glued together by the building in which they are located, which is important and symbolic to both teachers and students. This environment can be described as elitist and individualistic. Nothing but being the best seems to be on the agenda.

"We want them to explore the borders of their intellectual capacity" one interviewee explained. When it comes to internal relations there are a few highly regarded and skilful teachers who are deeply admired by both colleagues and students. Within courses offered by sub-units collaborations and conversations between teachers take place but not apparently much so between the sub-units. Some teachers here express that the faculty leaders want this department to merge with others, in order to increase collaboration. Our interviewees are not very keen on this; rather they highlight the fact that they do collaborate a lot outside their own discipline but with collaborators of their own choice. This environment has a lot of international networks and contacts, and has also actively worked to attract international post-docs to the local context. Leadership in this environment seems almost invisible, very indirect and soft-spoken, patient and much appreciated. When asked about the history of this environment the answers appear to get lost, it obviously is hard to summarise.

S is responsible for a vocational program. The program has three main disciplinary fields, and the academics in S have a specialisation in any of the three. S is located in a corridor of its own, in a building where it is organisationally part of a large department. The culture in this environment is described as "fun" or "like a big family", both by teachers and students. The culture originates from a time when a group of teachers were employed simultaneously, almost twenty years ago. They have worked actively and collaboratively to shape a creative and stimulating environment. The coffee room is mentioned as a very important place, the heart of the culture. Meetings, discussions, celebrations, and day-to-day sharing takes place here. One of the leaders has a habit of knocking on people´s doors and asking them to join. The educational leader in this environment has an enormous commitment to students, and to teaching. She is highly appreciated by both colleagues and students, as an outstanding leader and teacher. She has initiated a collaborative strategic development process with a focus on internal collegial critique about teaching issues, in order to enhance the program as a whole. This environment has a profound and intense collaboration with representatives from the profession, and they are very keen to have constructive relations both ways. The formal organisation – the faculty – has no visible presence in the day-to-day work.

Results

Leaders lack of shared value system

One of the first striking results in this project came out of the initial interviews in the selection phase, where leaders and students were interviewed in order to find out which MCs to study. A common feature in these interviews, and what we consider an interesting result in itself, was that the leaders or students' representatives did not

immediately know where successful MCs could be found. A common initial reaction was: "It would have been easier for me to name places were it does not work well". When trying anyway to point out interesting groups to investigate, leaders as well as students used very different kinds of information and varying ways of reasoning. It appeared as they used whatever information they personally happened to have accessible or favoured. Different things were mentioned and focused upon by different interviewees, such as keeping the budget, having lots of research/development funding, attracting lots of students or having one well-known driving spirit in the group. This can be interpreted as a lack of a functioning value system for leadership or management of education. Individuals in these positions act independently from each other and possibly also from their predecessors and successors. Another interpretation is that leaders and possibly also student unions are forced to focus more on troublesome teaching environments than on functioning ones. The latter are left to keep up the good business. A third possible interpretation is that since universities more and more are organised in large departments and faculties, MCs of the kind that are studied here become more or less invisible to organisational leaders. Still, we find this result striking and intriguing.

The rest of the text in this section will highlight some of the central themes that were identified during the interviews and observations within the five studied MCs. It should be kept in mind that this investigation – being a pilot – does not reveal the full picture.. Nevertheless, there are clear themes emerging as important pathways to follow in future investigations with a wider scope. These themes are:

- Teaching

- Underlying assumptions – the enterprise

- Internal climate

- Leadership

- External relations

- Espoused theories – theories in use

- Personal mastery

Since teaching and learning and educational quality was the main focus for this study to start with, we will address teaching as one theme initially, but it will also be a detectable part of the other themes.

Teaching

In all MCs teaching is seen as an inseparable part of what it means to be an academic. One senior teacher could not separate percentages of time used for teaching or re-

search. When asked he clutches his hands together and says, "Teaching and research go together, like this", and he continues: ""When you are interested in a subject, you simply have to teach it".

Teaching methods vary tremendously between the MCs from a constant flow of innovations to what could be labelled as very traditional forms of teaching. At P, many of the students work with applied projects in close interaction with the industry; at S, cases and problem based learning support students for their future profession. At K and F the teaching is mainly lecture-based mixed with sessions where students can practice and discuss what is presented in the lectures. At R teaching is lecture based but it is the laboratory work that is emphasised by both teachers and students.

A striking similarity, on the other hand, is the alertness to the students and their working situation. Much effort is invested into administrative tasks of teaching, a fact strongly acknowledged and asserted by the students. They also affirm that the teachers appear to have agreed upon how and what to teach and what to expect from students. "They have a certain spirit here. That you can tell immediately" (student). The same goes for the students' contact with the research, which the MCs are involved in. Junior students appear almost unaware of the fact that teachers are also researchers. Senior students are more conscious. All MCs support participation in pedagogical courses and presentations at campus conferences on teaching. Where such systems exist they also show pride in university or faculty based reward systems for teaching.

As for progression, the students again confirm a gradual maturation. In the focus group interview with students from S, new students complained about ambiguities in information about how to deal with certain professional situations. Older students then reassured the younger students that the ambiguity was not related to teaching but a normal phenomenon within the profession. "Once you've been to your workplace training you realise this!" (student to student). It is of course hard to say whether this is because of a conscious strategy within the MC or if the students only describe the trajectory any participation in an established community would follow.

In all MCs teaching is taken seriously. The seriousness with which teaching is handled was for instance illustrated when we observed how a senior teacher informed the students about the importance of student evaluations (at P). She spared no effort in convincing them that their opinions mattered. In the interviews students from other MCs confirmed the same ambition. The study director or programme director often works closely with the student representatives, listening to them, going to their meetings, reading and summarising student evaluations. Problems mentioned by students are taken seriously (as reported by students in all MCs) – often corrected, and sometimes only explained. "They are open and serious and explicit even if they do not change things" (student). It appears that even collegiality sometimes is set aside. Individu-

al teachers can be offered special support, be admonished, or even be removed from teaching for a period, if their teaching does not match the standards expected within the MC (examples from P, R, F, S).

Interviews reveal that new teachers are often trained in an apprentice fashion. Typically, they learn to construct and grade exams in collaboration with more senior teachers. Again this emphasises how the MC is constantly reconstructed through socialisation in contrast to by formal training. Junior teachers describe how preparation and ambition with teaching comes as a natural part of becoming a full member of the MC, it becomes built into their professional identity as something self-evident; as illustrated by a junior teacher while describing the reasons for his personal ambitions in teaching:

> "They were almost without exception very good lecturers, so… there is a kind of… there is absolutely no expectation about … or, like you have to be as good as… uh, because it is difficult, but … uh, they are putting up … like a standard for how it should be …" (junior teacher).

The students are definitely aware of this ambition in teaching and they appreciate it. They also choose courses depending of what they have heard from others or experienced themselves about the quality in teaching (K, P, S). They sometimes choose teacher. "I discussed with a classmate. We are going to write a thesis and tried to decide on which one of the supervisors we should choose. And we can't choose. It's like a smorgasbord" (student). All MCs are aware of and protect their good reputation. None of MCs reported having problems in attracting students and all had nothing but good to say about the students.

In all, striving for quality in teaching appears to be embedded in the professional identity of being a teacher. Bad teaching as indicated by students or revealed by results in exams leads to changes, in some cases it even leads to interventions with colleagues (all MCs). It also – more as a precaution - results in the mentoring of new teachers as a way of inducing them and supporting them to high quality teaching.

Underlying assumptions – the enterprise

All MCs display a strong enterprise. Three orient themselves towards a profession with a mission of both preparing students for the profession, but also to influence the profession. The best way to do this is to teach students to become valued members of the profession. "Almost no one out there reads our research papers. Graduates, however, will carry the message into the profession" (senior). The other two MCs orient themselves towards the society in broader terms, but with a similar vision of having an impact. It becomes clear in all interviews that the mission referred to here is not a written statement; it is rather related to underlying assumptions (Schein, 2004), forming the ideological base of the MC. It is also clear that the enterprise does not only include the

MC itself, but stretches beyond its borders, both within the academic society and the society as a whole; it is related to the far future with an implicit mission of having an impact.

The enterprises display a remarkable stability, which is consistent with findings by e.g. Gibbs et al. (2008). It might appear natural that the youngest MC, with a history only back to the mid 90s, has maintained one single enterprise. However, only two MCs (K and S) have ever renegotiated their enterprise. K did so a few years ago as a result of an idea formulated during the student movements in 1968, and with an experienced window of opportunity offered during the Bologna-process in Swedish higher education. S did so as a result of a major restructuring of the professional programme in early 90s. F and R have, as far as any of our interviewees can remember, never changed their orientation. None of the MCs foresee major changes of the enterprise in the future.

A striking aspect, as this project relates to EQ11, is that teaching and research are treated as nearly inseparable in the MCs. They clearly are viewed as two ways of fulfilling the enterprise and are considered as interrelated and totally dependent on each other. This does not mean they are given the same priority; structures beyond control intervene, successes in research add to the MCs resources in ways that are incomparable to what follows from improvements in teaching, meaning that research de facto becomes more important than teaching. Teaching simply must be good or even excellent, or "the best", as formulated by one interviewee (senior). But it is considered an advantage if time and energy can be released from teaching to research, as long as it does not jeopardise the anticipated quality of teaching.

In this ambition to maintain the link between teaching and research our interviewees echo Kreber's (2000) informants, senior academics who have been rewarded for both teaching and research. They too blend the two professional identities almost totally, a phenomenon argued by Åkerlind (2011) as most desirable; since such a conception of the professional identity is linked to learning centred teaching.

It becomes apparent during the interviews that the underlying assumptions as materialised in the enterprise (future) and the saga (past) function as a compass. When asked about why they collaborate with some but not with others, the answer is almost unanimous: "Because it is interesting". Our interpretation is that some collaborations add or link up to the enterprise; those are perceived as interesting. In all MCs the interviews reveal on-going discussions about how to carry the enterprise further. These discussions concern: what competences do we need in the future? With whom should we collaborate? How do we bring in resources? (By the way, none of the MCs complain about shortage in resources, although there are huge differences between them in terms of allocated monetary resources). Several interviewees voice experiences where the faculty or the university has forced them into collaboration in ways they themselves ex-

perience as detached from the enterprise. The testimonies are that these occasions, at best, are time and energy consuming.

The enterprise is evidently incorporated into the professional identity during socialisation, often already during undergraduate studies, with a continuation during doctoral studies and as junior teachers. In one MC, the seniors leading the MC are currently about to retire; they were once supervised by the founder of the MC, and their doctoral students, in turn, are now assimilated into the group of seniors.

The orientation towards the far future is expressed in rather vague terms, something contrasting the strength of the enterprise; a fact making it unfair to describe the MCs as objective or goals oriented. Rather they are value driven where the teachers experience themselves as sharing a responsibility and a fate, with strong implications for professional identity. Values derived from the enterprise – rather than from objectives – guide them during collective decision-making.

In the literature organisations similar to the MCs in this study are sometimes described as having a strong ethos, a distinct and perceivable feature signifying the institution, college, school, or department at hand. Ethos "is a belief system widely shared by faculty, students, administrators and others" (Kuh, 1993:22). "Ethos, the fundamental character or spirit of a culture, connects individuals to a group; it expresses a particular group's values and ideology in a way that creates an emotional connection" (Kezar, 2007:13).

A positive and strong ethos influences the students towards engagement both in their studies but also in relation to identity (Kuh, 1993 and Kezar, 2007). In terms of a community of practice the ethos attracts students, invites them to become peripheral participants (Wenger, 1999) with subsequently dramatic effects on their engagement in their studies, which over time becomes a transformational process. "We want them to explore the borders of their intellectual capacity" (senior). The students gravitate towards the centre of the MC attracted by what they perceive as the ethos, impersonated by the teachers. The focus groups conducted with the students confirm this. In all five MCs the students emphasise the coherent character of the MC, they describe how this attracts them and energises their study behaviour and ambitions. They even, during the interviews, express this in ways that mirror the seniors of the MC (e.g. pace in conversation and patterns of social interaction). The students who were interviewed were clearly affected by the ethos of the MC. They are apparently peripheral participants of the MC.

However, a strong ethos is not always a positive feature. Edvardsson-Stiwne (2009), after having interviewed and closely observed teachers and students in a Swedish engineering programme, points out that it may secure and stabilise a high quality but that it can also impede development. Further, any single ethos cannot be attractive to

all kinds of students; some may feel alienated and even dismissed by the MC. When asked, the students in this project confirmed that these negative effects were a risk and in a few cases had caused students to choose other options. "You take it or leave it" (student). This is something we will return to below while discussing the internal climate of the MCs.

Internal climate

The most prominent feature of the climate within the MCs we have investigated is trust – trust in each other, in the group's ability to handle things constructively and with high quality, and trust in the direction things are moving. If the enterprise is the compass with which they navigate then trust is what glues them together. All MCs report on actions taken in order to secure a trustful working environment. They all report on problems in relation to trust and how they have gone a long way in order to restore trust among colleagues: a senior teacher's teaching does not match the quality expected in this MC; one academic does not approve of the direction the MC is heading; one individual develops research into a new area and the concern, shared by all seniors, how they can connect this research to teaching; one formal leader describes the efforts to restore trust in one subgroup of teachers; et cetera. It is not the absence of problems that illustrates the importance assigned to trust by these MCs; rather it is the degree of concern and the actions taken constantly to secure trust.

All have routines and strategies to scaffold trust among the members. R is a large MC and is spread out on three floors in one large building. All members are expected to have a break in the coffee-room twice a day. The routine is built into the everyday behaviour. One interviewee says: "Everybody goes. That´s just the way it is. People don´t miss it unless they have a deadline for a research grant proposal" (junior). F has organised seminars about teaching and put much effort into restoring the premises they inhabit. S has initiated an on-going project supporting inquiring conversations about teaching. K uses co-teaching and has for a long time sent teachers to pedagogical courses in groups.

It is noteworthy that these efforts to maintain and restore trust do not imply similar patterns for internal communication. Instead, the internal flow of information is organised in different ways.

Ekvall (1997) discusses the importance of the internal working climate as a key to a group´s innovative and creative potential. An innovative climate is characterised by a number of features: People are emotionally engaged, they feel free to make new contacts, they listen to each other and encourage new ideas; they experience trust and emotional safety, interactions are dynamic, the climate is playful and humoristic; debates are frequent, conflicts are task oriented, risk-taking is encouraged, and there is

time for the development of new ideas. Similar ideas are put forward by Argyris (1977, 1993) emphasising how fear and insecurity inhibit the flow of quality information necessary for qualified decision-making. He labels a climate characterised by openness and task orientation as Model II for an organisation, leading to effectiveness, openness, and double loop learning, i.e. learning aimed at further developing perspectives in use. Model I, on the other hand, is characterised by competition, mistrust, and single loop learning, i.e. learning which confirms the perspectives in use. The key according to Argyris is that in Model I, the flow of information is distorted. In case of mistrust, all members will censor information about their own performance. In the end managers, during decision-making, will only have distorted information available and therefore their decisions will be misguided and ineffective, leading to an even further increase of mistrust and dysfunctionality.

According to Luhmann (2005) trust is experience-based anticipation about the future. Through trust a person releases cognitive capacity by believing that the outcome of the interaction will be a positive one. If we mistrust a person we from the start expect a negative outcome. Therefore, according to Luhmann, both trust and mistrust are cognitively serving the same purpose: to release cognitive energy. But, during collaboration they of course generate very different outcomes in terms of productivity, innovation and persistence. Further, trust is related to risk – risk of failure to accomplish an aspiration or risk of losing something. Unless something is at stake, Luhmann continues, risk cannot be tested and grow or vanish.

A function of the trust as displayed within the MCs is that it releases cognitive energy for purposes beyond facilitating internal collaboration. It opens up for negotiation, much in the way described by Wenger (1999), that is, since one member trusts the others to be loyal to the basic assumptions he or she can challenge ideas without risking position or status as a member of the group. It secures a constant flow of information, which in turn is crucial for the pursuit of the enterprise. It allows for individuals specialised in different fields to function as a collective and it thereby maximises the advancement of the enterprise. The result is a growth of trust in the members of the MC, including the students, with a subsequent process of a developed experience of shared belonging. This is the process where the notion of Us and The Others, described by Wenger (1999), becomes relevant

It might be relevant to return to the risk of excluding students, as touched upon above. It might be that the MCs are effected by *social homophily,* a natural tendency causing people with the same race, gender, education, income et cetera to end up interacting preferably with each other (McPherson et. al., 2001). During one focus group the students spontaneously observed similarities among themselves and confirmed the risk that some students might be pushed away.

On the other hand, we have also heard about rigorous recruitment processes taking place as results of a perceived need for new competences within the MC. One interviewee was newly recruited because he had research experiences from a new field. He was told, though, that his competence, however new to the MC it was, was interesting in relation to the overall direction within the MC. Another MC explicitly claims that they search for members of the MC who have differences in background, in knowledge, in personality etc; and they consider that to be an important characteristic of the group. Interestingly, when interviewing students in this environment who are doing their Master´s theses, they claim the same – that the differences between the students are an important and inspiring source for their learning. Interviews also reveal a great number of collaborations with other contexts.

We therefore come to the conclusion that the strong enterprise within the MCs might balance the risk of social homophily. Thanks to this, recruitments and collaborations are coloured by what is needed in order to advance the practice, rather than only by the purpose of maintaining the community. The possible negative effect is further balanced by the active interaction with the surrounding context and the organisation in which the MC is imbedded. Without a strong enterprise and an active participation in the context, we hypothesise a greater risk the MCs to fall prey to uniformity, with a potential negative effect on innovation, creativity, and efficiency.

Despite the fact that the MCs display many features of well functioning groups of academics, they appear not to be democratic in the sense that every member has an equal voice during decision-making. On the contrary – and also congruent with Wenger's description of communities of practice – individuals appear to be positioned differently within the MCs, thereby forming a hierarchy. Experienced senior academics that significantly influence the negotiations related to the enterprise and consequent decisions are positioned in the centre of this hierarchy. This phenomenon is even more visible in the larger MCs, which appear to be composed of even smaller MCs, each working independently but with a representative securing direct interaction with the central group formed out of seniority. All members are not equal; their contributions are not assigned the same value, not only because of the significance of the contribution but also because of their different positions in the hierarchy. It is not clear to us how these hierarchies function, how power is exerted or how junior members of the MC signal subordination. However, research presented by Åkerlind and Kayrooz (2003) implies that academic freedom is often understood by academics as containing a strong component of loyalty. It is possible that the junior academics within the MCs accept the hierarchy because of this component.

Trust also permeates the relationship to students. The interviewed academics talk about the students as ambitious and well prepared; an attitude confirmed by the students. Students seem to be treated with high expectations and the students respond

positively to these expectations. None of the MCs are engaged in active student re-cruitment, they all treat student numbers with the same confidence when asked about the future. In the end, teaching and student numbers appear to be part of the same en-terprise. Teaching is a crucial part of pursuing the enterprise, and since the profession-al identity is strongly connected to the enterprise, so is the belief that students will find their ways to the discipline.

Leadership and management

In K, S, R, and F all interviewees refer to one specific and important leader of teaching within the MC. In P the leadership is more collectively shared among three seniors. However, in the larger MCs (R and F) the individual leaders referred to have little di-rect control over teaching. They are part of the group of seniors being central with-in the MC, and within this group they represent teaching and inform the others. In R the group of seniors discuss everything important in weekly meetings, teaching be-ing only one of many things discussed. Junior teachers acknowledge the prominence of this group. It is similar in F, even though the leading group does not meet with the same regularity. In S and K it is much more clear who is leading teaching, even though both colleagues and students refer to the entire group of teachers as a "family" or a "bird´s nest".

In terms of leadership the MCs use different models. When it comes to leadership functions we can see that a range of purposes is covered. At R the logistics of teach-ing stretches into the teachers domains. They know well in advance what to do and when. This derives from a routine developed almost a decade ago. All MCs allow great freedom for individual teachers, as long as there are no problems reported. "We need teachers who believe in what they do" (senior). Much of the leadership approach can be described as lots of freedom for the individual academic teacher, but without being left alone in what you do. Mechanisms for follow up secure that falling standards are reported. All MCs have their economy in order, and are proud about this. They mon-itor their quality in education in various ways: through interviews with alumni, con-tacts with similar units nationally and internationally, through student evaluations, and analyses of exam answers. The interviews display a great number of different ways to monitor quality. All MCs regularly send teachers to pedagogical courses, it is con-sidered a natural part of the professional development process; two MCs (P & K) at-tend courses in groups.

In relation to the earlier presented competing values framework of leadership (p. 17-18), three out of four quadrants are clearly covered in all MCs: internal processes, hu-man relations, and rational goals. According to the framework these functions secure the MCs ability to formulate and maintain teaching routines, to feed and maintain personal commitment, and to maintain a clear direction leading to productive out-

comes. The fourth quadrant – open systems, dealing with growth and innovation – differ between the MCs in terms of how renewal and innovation are encouraged and fed into the MC. Below we comment on the different MCs strategies to secure innovation in teaching. We are specifically focusing on how the MCs support individuals to innovate and how the internal information-flow affects the spread of innovations.

R relies on the study director, but has, as it appears a persistent renewal process organisationally, and an intense flow of information. Further, they have an annual internal conference where ideas about improvements in teaching are discussed and documented in an internet-based protocol, stating timetables and responsibilities. R also has an elaborated routine for teaching logistics, planning and follow-up, much appreciated but also slow with sometimes a long time-span from idea to practice. F relies on the study director to influence colleagues towards innovation in teaching. Due to a lower flow of information internally and – compared to R – a somewhat weaker position for the study director, innovation in teaching relies to a great extent on individuals and informal networks rather than management strategies. Our observations confirm that innovation stems from individual teachers rather than being initiated or driven by the organisation. F & R are both large MCs in comparison to the others.

K & S both have study directors that are explicitly acknowledged by colleagues as leaders of teaching. They both display clear ideas abut how to proceed in the development of content and formats of teaching. They collect ideas from colleagues, generate ideas themselves and secure an intense flow of information among the teachers, including peer review of teaching. K & S are both medium sized MCs in our sample. P has a collective leadership with unclear boundaries for who is responsible for what. But P is also a small MC, lead by three of the seniors during intense communication. Compared to the others, P is both small and young; features most likely important for its flexible style of organisation.

In relation to the competing values framework we can also see clearly the *integrator* function (Vilkinas & Carten, 2001). It operates differently in different MCs, but its function while stabilising negotiation between MC-members and in storing insights made for future use is clear. It appears likely that the integrator function is crucial if innovation in teaching is to be supported organisationally within the MCs.

Further, the degree of internal trust displayed by all the MCs forms the background to any observations about leadership. A former leader for one of the MCs emphasised that "you have to know the people you lead. You have to know their aspirations. Their dreams. And you must remember that someday you are not the leader anymore. Someone else is." He explained that if you have violated anyone's trust with your leadership it might come back and haunt you once you have stepped down. It is not clear to us how this particular risk relates to the widespread trust we have encountered.

External relations

All MCs are engaged in many collaborative projects and programs. When asked about how they choose partners the answer is unanimously: because it is interesting. One interviewee told the story about how she went to a university wide conference on teaching and learning. She attended a session by a colleague from another field who was previously unknown to her. "I could sense that he needed collaboration" (senior). During the interview she told that she had approached him immediately and together they had now started a project, which also includes a colleague from Copenhagen. All investigated MCs report a number of recently started and on-going collaborations. One observation is that collaboration happens with people that share values and therefore has "a similar perspective on the material", as expressed by a junior teacher. This is congruent with findings by Newell & Swan (2000) studying a multidisciplinary research project. They make the distinction between companion trust, competence trust, and commitment trust. The two latter are about trust in the collaborator's ability and determination to do what has been agreed upon. Companion trust is a more stable form of trust that grows out of a long period of interaction. "Over time, as confidence that the other person shares one's values is established, this trust will be converted into unconditional trust" (ibid: 1294). The authors conclude that companion trust is necessary, although not enough, for a successful collaboration.

Collaborations are, no matter how frequent, always very selective. One interview revealed how a colleague with a different perspective had approached the teacher we talked to. "So, I listen. She was very nice. But I don't share that perspective. It wouldn't work" (senior). It comes down to the basic underlying assumptions. If they do not resonate it is not interesting. As one respondent said: "We collaborate if it is interesting, not because someone tells us to" (senior).

We find these MCs to be very alert to ways of advancing what they believe in. Consequently they have numerous contacts, which they use to orient themselves in the constantly changing environment they operate within: The profession for which they train their students, the industry they support and influence, and/or the disciplinary competitors within and beyond national borders.

But, the MCs also function within the context of a faculty and the university (here called the formal organisation). Their relationships to the formal organisation, on the surface, vary tremendously. One MC engages fully in the department in which it is embedded. One MC preserves its independence in a context where all other groups of similar size have been merged into larger units. One MC strongly resists its organisational placing. The formal organisation can be used, can be resisted, can be supported, et cetera.

One interviewee told a story about how one board of education, within the faculty, had made – from the MCs perspective – a wrong decision. As we were told, the result was that "we told them that they had misunderstood things and that they had to change the decision. And so they did" (senior). The astonishing aspect of the story was the confidence with which it was told. An interview with a senior from another MC touched upon the Bologna process and how it started as an intellectual process but changed when the formal organisation set directives and deadlines. "We started to use this idea about learning outcomes, because it appeared to be interesting. We had a couple of really stimulating meetings. But then came a series of directives from the faculty administration. Purely bureaucratic. So, we lost interest" (senior). But in another part of the same MC the Bologna process sparkled a revision of the curriculum. Yet another example also concerned the Bologna process and the writing of learning outcomes. The MC was approached with the question whether they could act as a pilot, being the first in the faculty to rewrite the syllabi. The answer, after internal negotiation between the seniors, was: "We are not sure that we want to become known as good at this." In one MC, the acknowledged leader did not mention the formal organisation at all while describing important counterparts to interact with. In contrast, within another MC a senior is acting as deputy head of department. According to this MC it is the best way to support the development, to take active part in the management of the formal organisation.

This somewhat incoherent picture of the relationship between the MCs and the formal organisation is also displayed in quality assurance activities such as students evaluations, reporting of administrative data, self-evaluations and audits initiated by HSV, and reactions to policies of various kinds. Sometimes these things are treated as important, sometimes not. Evaluating the impact of these organisational activities, aimed at influencing practices within the MCs, therefore clearly becomes unpredictable and almost incomprehensible.

We suggest that this on the surface chaotic impression originates from a perspective where the formal organisation directs the MCs by asking them to do and report things. Through the lens of cultural analysis used in this project (Schein, 2004), most of these things may be interpreted as artefacts – things the MCs produce, do, or report, sometimes with engagement but often in an almost absentminded way. The result is a number of visible activities; e.g. the production of plans and reports, mostly as asked for by the formal organisation. But the link between these artefacts and the underlying assumptions vary. Some artefacts demanded by the formal organisation are found by the MC to be related to the enterprise with a resulting engagement in line with the formal organisation's intentions or in the form of opposition; other artefacts are perceived as unrelated to the enterprise and therefore the engagement takes a form similar to a surface approach, they comply without engagement.

On a deeper level and as displayed in our interviews, the MCs show an agentic[5] relationship towards the formal organisation, meaning that it is the MC itself that decides when and how to interact with engagement with the formal organisation. If the formal organisation, through the use of policies or other means, calls on the MC, the seniors negotiate how the policy relates to the enterprise. The outcome of this process directs whether the engagement is mere compliance and a surface approach, or if it leads to a deeper engagement. Thus, the decision whether the formal organisation through management activities will have an impact on the MC or not, is to a large extent in the hands of the MC itself.

Espoused theories and theories in use

There is always a reason to be critical towards cultural claims based on a limited number of interviews. Positive images presented by the interviewees might not be consistent with the day-to-day-practices. In short, there may be mismatches between what individuals say and describe – espoused theories, and what they actually do – theories in use (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

However, in all MCs we firstly interviewed leaders and academics; and then groups of students. Except in one MC the students represented several courses and/or levels of education. In all cases there was an almost complete consistency between what the academics (seniors and juniors) described and what the students told us, e.g. about the teachers´ ambitions, about teaching practices, internal relations etc. In other words, there was a strong alignment between espoused theories from the members of the MC and their theories in use, as experienced by the students.

On the other hand, a mismatch appears to exist concerning organisational learning in relation to teaching. In short, individuals from the MCs participate frequently in activities related to scholarship of teaching and learning (Boyer, 1990; Kreber, 2002; Mårtensson et al, 2011; Roxå et al, 2008). These activities are things like pedagogical courses, campus conferences on teaching and learning, and reward systems based on the scholarship of teaching and learning. But, interviewees did not refer to experiences from these activities of engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning, not even when discussing what in their view characterizes a good teacher. The latter was instead often related to content knowledge, and to the engagement for teaching and supporting student learning. One might say that during interviews about teaching and student learning, the interviewees did not make use of perspectives and theories they use elsewhere in arenas for scholarly activities organised by the university. We see here a possible mismatch between espoused theories and theories in use, or a sign of a po-

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5 Agentic stems from Giddens' (2004) concept of agency.

tential failure by pedagogical courses and similar activities to reach the inner circles of the MCs[6].

Personal mastery and loyalty

A specific component of the cultural ethos is related to what Senge (2006) calls personal mastery. Personal mastery is an identity driven urge to constantly improve the result of what one is doing. All interviewees display this, both when talking about the group as well as when talking about themselves as individuals. "One simply wants to be the best" (senior), "To not be prepared for teaching is just unthinkable" (junior). This personal mastery component of the ethos is likely to influence the teachers as well as the students.

In this project we have taken a socio cultural perspective by focusing on MCs. The idea has been to reveal cultural features that foster individuals who take part in the MCs to do good things. But, as pointed out by Giddens (2004), although individuals are both guided and influenced by structures within the social context, they are also knowledgeable agents with an opportunity to do as they like, despite structures and cultural norms. Therefore, it becomes somewhat mysterious why individuals with a clearly strong personal mastery submit themselves to the strong norms formed by the MCs we have investigated. Remember, we have not only been able to describe some of the features of these MCs, we have also told stories about how trust operates within them. People who do not match the cultural ambition in teaching, who teach with low quality, become problematic for the others, who then often interfere. Students report on how measures have been taken when things do not work well. But despite this the individuals do not abandon the trust they have placed in the problematic colleague, they do not lay him or her off, instead they sometimes go to great lengths to prove to him or her that he or she is still part of the community and will be supported for further development.

Thus, it becomes mysterious how individual academics – often determined, persistent, and even stubborn individuals with a high degree of personal mastery – can work together and create good MCs as the ones we report on here. Senge himself warns against simply empowering strong individuals without a strong value system directing their mastery: "*To empower people in an unaligned organization can be counterproductive.* If people do not share a common vision, and do not share common mental models about the business reality within which they operate, empowering people will only increase organizational stress and the burden of management to maintain coherence and direction" (Senge, 2006:136). It is the shared vision that, according to Senge, can

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6 We have discussed the challenge for pedagogical courses to have an impact on the
   level of MC in detail elsewhere (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2013)

bind a group of strong individuals together. The investigated MCs in this project appear to be examples of such groups, in an academic context

Åkerlind and Kayrooz (2003) show in their investigation of conceptions about academic freedom that this is a phenomenon that includes a strong component of loyalty – loyalty towards the society, the profession, the discipline, the institutions, and towards colleagues. We therefore claim that the MCs at hand are held together by a *vision*, using Senge's words, by the *underlying assumptions*, using Schein's words, and by *trust*. Vision, underlying assumptions, and trust in colleagues are all different parts of what individuals are loyal to. Visions relate to the enterprise, the sense of direction, and trust in colleagues forms the social glue bringing the members together.

Within the discourse of leadership in higher education metaphors like "herding cats" or "conducting soloists" are often used to verbalise personal experiences of leading academics. The academics within the MCs studied here are clearly strong individuals, but they do not behave as cats or soloists. These metaphors simply appear to be irrelevant in relations to the findings of this project. Instead the individuals display great loyalty towards the context they belong to. They choose to submit themselves to the enterprise pursued collectively, and this choice appears undoubtedly to be aligned with academic freedom. The result is MCs that are successful over considerable time periods.

While the individuals in all MCs behave consistently in terms of loyalty, the MCs function different internally with subsequent effects on the professional identities, especially regarding personal mastery in relation to teaching. The professional identity includes both research and teaching in all MCs. However, the balance between the two are different and most importantly, the internal communication within the MCs supports development of the teacher identity differently. In F the discussions about teaching appear to happen mainly in back stage conversations within sub-disciplines, even though attempts have been made now and then to organise seminars on teaching issues. In R, the discussions happen when the quality is threatened and during specially organised occasions like the annual departmental conference. Here ideas emerge and are negotiated, but until lately those ideas have had a tendency not to be put into action. This has, as we are told, changed since the introduction of a web based protocol. Another aspect of the front stage discussion at R is the routines for organising the logistics of teaching. The routines are greatly beneficial for teaching staff since it makes their personal planning easier, but it might also conserve teaching practices. At S and K teaching is discussed continuously as part of front stage attempts to influence teaching introduced and managed by acknowledged leaders. At P, teaching appears to be constantly negotiated as part of the flow of information among the leading group of senior staff.

As far as we can see, the professional identity includes a strong aspect of personal mastery in relation to teaching, but since the internal communication patterns within the MCs differ, the further development of teaching take different forms. The MCs as described above obviously differ in terms of how the front stage communication supports the ambitions to do well in teaching. Therefore, an important aspect is that even if all cultures support personal mastery in teaching, the individuals' possibility to maintain and develop this personal mastery varies, depending on internal communications patterns within the MC.

In relation to the model described in the theory section of this report (Fig. 4, p. 18), all interviewees display personal mastery in teaching as an important part of their professional identity. Furthermore all MCs support personal mastery in teaching, placing the entire sample in the A-position. However, some interviews reveal situations where individuals within the MC do not meet the standards, a potential example of a B-position. We conclude that the model is not specific enough to describe the variation within this sample. In order to do that the model should also include support related to the intensity of internal flow of information, and to whether the support is offered mainly as part of front stage or back stage processes.

Discussion

The first and maybe most important result from this project is that academic contexts can be studied as microcultures through a socio cultural approach. In our study five MCs emerge among others as distinctively recognisable from an organisational background within a large research based university. We can see that the MCs are oriented towards the future in the form of an enterprise and towards the past trough an organisational saga. The enterprise fulfils a series of functions for its members. Naturally, decision-making is guided by the enterprise, but also by loyalty, monitoring of quality in teaching, and decisions concerning whom to collaborate with. We have seen how the enterprise is connected to underlying assumptions within the culture and it is assumable that the enterprise forms the core of the professional identities developed by all members. It is also long lasting. In three out of five MCs we could not find any trace of a renegotiation of the enterprise, it has been stable since the creation of the MC, or as long as anyone can remember.

These findings are consistent with the view on organisational culture formulated by Schein (2004). The underlying assumptions form the baseline of the organisation, and visible artefacts form the outer layer. In between are the espoused ideas, the explanations and arguments for why things are done in certain ways.

We believe the distance between the artefacts and the underlying assumptions have the potential to explain why quality enhancement processes show contradictory results (Franke & Nitzler, 2008; Osseo-Asare, 2005). From a cultural point of view quality enhancement, as it has developed over the last decades, mostly deals with things that are measurable or at least possible to discuss, placing them on the artefact-level. If so, different MCs respond differently to the artefacts required and suggested in the quality discourse. Some MCs find the artefacts related to or closely linked to their underlying assumptions and thus their enterprise; they therefore engage with potentially more positive results in the process. Other MCs find the artefacts offered through the quality discourse to be without meaning for their enterprise; they therefore do not engage. But, since the organisation is hierarchical and managers often possess considerable power, the MCs deliver data and communicate what is expected; just as students do while using a surface approach in their studies. The result is no effect on teaching quality and distorted information for managers to act upon.

Thus, the explanation suggested here is related to the degree of relevance for the enterprise; something negotiated by each MC. The problem with a quality discourse therefore can be perceived as either a lack of relevance for MCs within the organisation, or an overemphasis on explicit and measurable routines and practices, which does not reach beyond the surface level of artefacts. The first issue can be resolved by a greater understanding of the enterprises operating in an organisation and constructed by the MCs. The second issue could be resolved by, if possible, a greater effort on linking quality enhancement routines and practices to these enterprises. We would call such an approach a scholarly approach to quality issues in higher education.

It is hard from a limited investigation like this to elaborate further on the enterprises. This is definitely a task for future research: what are the natures of different enterprises owned by different MCs? However, from the material we have collected it is possible to say that the enterprise is about making a difference, making a difference in relation to a profession, to a field of practice, to the society, to the academic society, et cetera. It is clear that all the MCs investigated find what they have to offer – in their various ways – valuable and with a potential to influence others.

If the relation to the quality discourse is governed by the enterprise, so is the relationship towards the formal organisation surrounding the MCs. We have found evidence showing that the MCs have an agentic relationship towards the formal organisation. By this we mean that it is the MCs that decide if, when, and how to engage when the formal organisation calls on them. In several of our interviews the respondents have described how they negotiate whether to engage or not, whether to just comply, or even when to ignore calls from the formal organisation. In reverse, the MCs may call on the formal organisation if they find that to be of importance in relation to their enterprise.

A question that we have not asked in this project – but with great potential for senior managers in universities – is how a system of MCs would function? What we can visualise is a system of many interacting MCs forming an entire university. Even though we cannot answer this at this stage related research in other fields could potentially offer seed for thoughts. Ostrom (1990) has investigated a number of social systems, which she calls limited resource pools. These are groups of people caring for a resource which they have to take responsibility for, otherwise the resource can potentially be damaged or even destroyed. Based on our observations we suggest that MCs in higher education act in similar ways. We further suggest that the limited resource that the MCs in our sample cultivate so carefully is their reputation, a reputation in relation to the counterparts who are important for them. A strong reputation means greater possibilities to pursue the enterprise; a weak reputation means diminishing possibilities. We can see a great potential for future investigations of academic MCs to be inspired by Ostrom's research.

Other important aspects that have emerged throughout our inquiry are trust, processes for regeneration, ethos, and absorptive capacity. Trust is the most prominent feature controlling social interaction within the MCs in this project. It is clear that the individuals, from the students to the senior academics guiding the culture, trust each other and trust the value of the enterprise they are pursuing even though different categories may have different personal interpretation of what this enterprise consists of. Trust, as has been discussed earlier in this text, grows out of personal experiences during times of risk; risk of losing something or risk in trying to achieve something. Therefore, the degree of trust within the MCs at hand most likely is a result of the long pursuit of the enterprise. These MCs are always moving, at different pace, but never stagnant. It is the aspiration and the risk of not continuously accomplishing new things that feeds the experiences resulting in trust. If the MCs would stop this process, trust would most likely deteriorate. Again, with a reference to Ostrom's (1990) research on social systems taking responsibility for limited resources, the balance is delicate between the external pressure and the potential threat it poses in relation to whether the individuals involved will take on the responsibility it means to maintain a resource pool. No external pressure or too much external pressure both threaten to destroy the constructive processes resulting in increased trust among the individuals involved. A conclusion to be drawn is that no single strategy for management will work; different constellations of MCs will need different management and quality strategies.

The strong link to a shared enterprise affects the teaching within each MC. The students confirm over and over again that the teachers within these MCs appear to have agreed upon not only how to teach and what to teach, but also on how to treat students constructively with high expectations and full support in terms of provision of information and supportive social climate. The junior academics we have interviewed

describe how the consistency in the situation they find themselves as newcomers, but also the kinds of master-apprentice relationships they are offered by seniors, socialise them into this shared understanding. There is clearly a risk for social homophily (McPherson et. al., 2001) in these processes but that risk is, within the MCs studied here, balanced by a strong external engagement and a strong pursuit of the enterprise. We have seen how MCs carefully search for collaboration-partners and new members to recruit because it strengthens the enterprise. Clearly, the MCs regenerate themselves because their constant and rigorous maintenance of the enterprise. The pace of this regeneration is governed by the MCs themselves and might appear slow from the outside. It is an open question and not obvious from our findings how managers and other external stakeholder can influence this pace.

The shared understanding mentioned above display strong similarities to what has been described as an educational ethos (Edwardsson–Stiwne, 2009; Kuh, 1993; Kezar, 2004). The students are engaged because of the strong ethos, which in turn is linked to the enterprise. "We want students with a burning engagement. And so we have" (senior). This burning engagement is a result of the social interplay between the teachers and the students. Johan Asplund (1987), a Swedish social psychologist has coined the term social responsoria in order to describe what happens when individuals engage in a mutually constructive and productive dialogue where they metaphorically gain access to each other's thinking. In many ways, the students we have talked to, describe how the teaching is experienced in ways similar to what Asplund describes. It is an open-ended process where the individuals involved, students and teachers, invest their understanding of things in order to support intellectual growth. These are strong forces that we suggest are further investigated in relation to teaching and learning in higher education.

In the theoretical section of this report we introduced absorptive capacity as a term used in research on profit making organisation and their capacity to innovate and regenerate in a changing environment. This project has demonstrated the potential for this concept to be applied also on non-profit making organisations like universities. It has the potential to include social processes but also the strong engagement in the underlying assumptions taking form as an enterprise. We foresee that absorptive capacity in the future will regenerate the discussion about quality in higher education.

There are definitely other kinds of MCs, different from the strong MCs investigated in this project. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) categorise four ideal-type groups in relation on the one hand to what extent the groups are internally integrated in terms of values

and norms, and on the other hand to how the groups experience external rules and pressure (table 3).

Degree of group-control: Intensity of external-rules:	Strong	Weak
Strong	Responsive	Reactive
Weak	Regenerative	Reproductive

Table 3. From Harvey and Stensaker (2008): four ideal types of groups in relation to intensity of group control over individuals, and intensity of experienced external pressure.

In this model four ideal-type groups function differently in terms of group learning, quality work, and innovation. For example, the regenerative group is described as not only having a dynamic improvement agenda but also as being engaged in "an on-going reconceptualization of what it knows, where it is going and even the language in which it frames its future direction" (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008:437).

The present project has most definitely investigated MCs similar to the regenerative ideal-type. But, the university no doubt hosts many groups similar to the other ideal-types. Future research could investigate other forms of MCs and maybe even initiate a discussion about how MCs change from one position to another and how they interact and function in a system. Not much research with focus on academia is so far presented on these issues.

A university, most likely, consists of all sorts of MCs where different categories function in different ways. This variation calls for different approaches from a university management while pushing quality agendas in education. It seems clear, even from a limited study like the present one, that one-size does not fit all. Different categories of MCs can be described differently in relation to enterprise/saga, to internal communication, to their external engagement, to their relation to the formal organisation and to how they manage themselves viewed through the competing values framework.

Despite this huge variation in terms of MCs and despite the limitations of this study it is clear that the MCs we have investigated, though few in numbers, do not experience any consistent and shared value system for assessing quality in education. Nor did the leaders or student unions we interviewed early in the project in order to identify strong cultures. It is clear to us that there is no shared idea about what constitutes quality in education. In comparison, the research culture, which despite an immense variation in content and directions, clearly display specific norms for how to distinguish between different levels of quality. This value system directing research cultures almost globally can be viewed as a social system guiding practices. Such a value system does not exist in education. On the contrary, in education, one might argue, everyone is free to formulate their own quality criteria, and even free to being engaged in education without any conception of quality at all. Furthermore and as a result, it is hard to initiate a cu-

mulative process where innovations in education can feed into further development. Instead innovations have a tendency to start from scratch over and over again.

It is a challenge for leaders in higher education to drive processes towards a shared value system. The contribution to such a process from this project is that such a value system has to be linked into the underlying assumptions guiding the individuals and MCs engaged in education. It is not enough to focus on easily measurable artefacts; rather – based on the results in this study – what is needed is something that touches upon the enterprises, which together drive and direct the practices within the university.

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In the study reported here, five strong academic organisational contexts were studied with semi ethnographic methods. The purpose was to explore and describe high quality in a traditional research-intensive university, especially focusing high quality in education. The results revealed the life of five independent but organizationally sensitive microcultures. The five microcultures belonged to different university faculties and varied in size from 10 up to 60 employees. They all displayed similarities in terms of high levels of internal trust, the importance of future orientation, historical perspective, strong links between teaching and research, internal communication strategies, and attitudes towards the students. Arguably the socio-cultural perspective applied here has a potential to further deepen the understanding of genuine academic quality.

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