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# ***AGREEING ON WHAT? CREATING JOINT ACCOUNTS OF STRATEGIC CHANGE***

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## ***Abstract***

This paper addresses a fundamental conundrum at the heart of meaning-making: how are multiple meanings accommodated within a joint account, given the plurivocal nature of organizations? While a new strategic initiative introduces new meanings that must coexist within multiple prevailing meanings; studies on meaning-making processes place different emphases on the accommodation of such multiplicity within a joint account. Based on the findings from a longitudinal case study conducted in a university setting, we develop a framework that demonstrates two patterns of meaning-making on the basis of distinct micro processes of expanding, combining and reframing that are involved in the accomplishment of a joint account. Our study offers counter-intuitive insights into the way vested interests enable or constrain the construction of a joint account of meaning. In doing so, we contribute to knowledge about resistance, ambiguity and the role of agreement, or lack of agreement in constructing joint accounts within a plurivocal context.

## INTRODUCTION

Organizations are comprised of multiple constituents, pursuing diverse and often competing interests grounded in their different meaning systems about the organization and its purposes (Barry & Elmes 1997; Buchanon & Dawson 2007). Such fragmentation creates challenges when the organization is faced with a new strategy or proposal for change, because the new strategy must be incorporated into these multiple different prevailing meanings (Balogun & Johnson 2004; Brown 1998; Sillince, Jarzabkowski & Shaw 2011; Thomas, Sargent & Hardy 2011). Prevailing meanings refer to those “interpretive codes” (Tsoukas & Chia 2002), “understandings” (Brown & Humphreys 2003) or “frames” (Bartunek 1984; Kaplan 2008) that guide the current actions of organizational members. Existing studies have examined this problem of meaning-making in the face of a proposal for change in two main ways that differ in their understanding of the extent to which shared meaning is an important precursor to the change. One strand of the literature shows that agreement requires shared meaning across diverse organizational members. In these studies, the predominant challenge for meaning-making in the face of a new strategy is managing the transition from an existing dominant meaning to accepting a new one (e.g. Bartunek 1984; Corley & Gioia 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991). The problem is thus one of moving from one largely shared meaning system to another, during which process multiple meanings about the change may abound, but will eventually be reconciled in a common interpretation of the change. In contrast, another strand demonstrates that diverse constituents’ may agree to change but for different reasons without assuming shared meaning (e.g. Brown 1998; Brown & Humphreys 2003; Donnellon, Gray & Bougon 1986; Sillince et al. 2011). This latter strand takes seriously the fundamental proposition that organizations are plurivocal places in which multiple meanings abound. Hence a singular or dominant meaning is neither an aim, nor particularly feasible, but rather the question is how to generate some agreement about the proposal to change amidst the multiple, coexisting interpretations of what the change means?

These different approaches to meaning-making are grounded in different assumptions about coexisting meanings within organizations, and their implications for generating meaning around a proposed change. Whilst one approach treats coexisting meanings as a temporary state needed to transition from one dominant meaning system to the next; the other recognizes the tensions around coordinating multiple meanings that continue to coexist simultaneously. These differences stem from differing concepts of organizations as largely uniform meaning systems (Bartunek 1986; Gioia et al. 1996)

or as a plurivocality of interests (Brown 1998; Denis et al. 2007) and narratives (Barry & Elmes 1997; Boje 1991). Studies adopting the former approach suggest coexisting meanings fade away or are amended as individuals accept new meanings. Their adoption of new meanings reduces their commitment to prevailing meanings and so reduces the resistance to the change (Balogun & Johnson 2004; Corley & Gioia 2004; Gioia et al. 1996). The focus of the latter approach emphasises the need for diverse groups to guard their interests, as a critical component of their willingness to accept a proposal for change (Brown 1998; Brown & Humphreys 2003; Donnellon et al. 1984; Sillince et al. 2011). Despite such fundamental differences, studies from both strands concur that multiple coexisting meanings are challenging for managers looking to foster agreement about a proposal to change.

We propose the concept of a joint account to address the puzzle in the literature about how agreement to change is achieved amidst multiple, coexisting meanings. A joint account provides a higher-order concept that helps to explain how diverse individuals/groups come to agree on an abstract label that accommodates their diverse interests, whilst leaving enough specificity for each group or actor to act (Donnellon et al. 1986; Eisenberg 1984; Sillince et al. 2011). A joint account does not imply shared meaning, but rather that the different actors, with their multiple coexisting meanings, have been able to accomplish some connections between these different meanings in their account of the proposed change. By focusing on the process involved in developing this joint account we are able to go beyond concepts of managers imposing their meanings systems on others, who either resist or adopt the common meaning (Bartunek 1984; Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991), or managers exploiting the ambiguity of a proposed change to co-opt others under the impression it meets their interests (Brown 1997; Sillince et al. 2012). Our notion of a joint account does not assume suppression of some meanings in order to gain ascendancy of others, or the reduction of multiplicity in coexisting meanings, but rather enables us to explore the active and joint accomplishment of meaning across diverse constituents, which may or may not involve such issues of resistance, ambiguity and dominance. It brings the acts of negotiating meaning to the foreground (Samra-Fredricks 2003; Thomas et al. 2011) as a range of organizational members construct, jointly, their own meanings about proposed changes and align them to their particular different meaning systems, enabling these meanings and the new proposal to co-exist simultaneously. Yet, as Balogun, Bartunek and Bo (2015) point out, the existing focus on actors as either givers or receivers of

meaning, and the achievement of agreement through coercion or compliance (Hardy & Philips 1998) has obscured the study of such processes of jointly accomplishing meaning.

We conducted an ethnographic study of meaning-making, gaining in-depth access to a British university as a new strategy to establish a future direction was proposed and developed. Universities are considered pluralistic organizations, similar to hospitals and arts organizations. Pluralistic contexts are salient for exploring the tensions in creating a joint account because constituents have diverse professional interests that need to be acknowledged (Brown 1995; Denis, Lamothe & Langley 2001; Denis, Langley & Cazale 1996). In our fieldwork, we encountered extensive efforts with recurring tensions as actors attempted to establish a joint account of the new strategy that accommodated their multiple meanings. For instance, the proposed strategy shifted the emphasis of the university's research strategy to pursuing relevant research, whilst downplaying those research activities previously accepted as important within Unico's prevailing constellation of meanings. Our empirical findings reveal two patterns of meaning-making, one of which leads to the accomplishment of a joint account in which there is agreement to the new strategic initiative, whilst in the other a joint account is not accomplished. We develop these findings into a conceptual framework that is the basis for a series of contributions that further existing understandings about meaning-making, particularly within pluralistic contexts. In particular, we identify those micro processes enabling prevailing and new meanings to coexist, and also explain those conditions under which coexistence may be constrained.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMING**

The literature on processes of meaning-making may be delineated into two strands with differing assumptions about the need for shared meaning and the recognition of coexisting meanings. Despite such fundamental differences, the literature points to similar mechanisms and challenges – ambiguity and resistance – that shape meaning-making processes, albeit leading to different explanations about how to generate agreement about a proposal to change.

One strand of literature assumes that organizational members collectively share meanings. A proposal to change introduces new meanings that challenge such shared meanings imbued in dominant “meaning systems” (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, Corley & Gioia 2004) or “frames” (Bartunek 1984, Kaplan 2008). To facilitate change, efforts are devised to shift members from their prevailing shared meanings towards accepting the new organizational meanings (Bartunek 1984; Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia et

al. 1996; Fiss & Zajac 2006). This process has been portrayed as a transition from one dominant meaning system to another (Lewin 1951). As part of the transition, multiple coexisting meanings surface temporarily (Corley & Gioia 2004) but are phased out as the new meaning is institutionalized (Gioia et al. 1996). The change process is influenced by the extent to which the existing meanings are strongly or weakly institutionalized (e.g. Jarzabkowski 2008). Weakly institutionalized meanings are more malleable and susceptible to the adoption of new meanings (Barley & Tolbert 1997, Corley & Gioia 2004), while strongly institutionalized meanings are more prone to generate resistance (Balogun, Jarzabkowski, & Vaara 2011; Jarzabkowski 2008; Wooldridge & Floyd 1989). Research has focused on the mechanisms that explain the adoption of new meanings or the difficulties associated with their acceptance amongst organizational members, typically middle managers (Balogun & Johnson 2004) or employees (Sonenshein 2010). Shared meanings are established as senior managers influence other constituents' meanings by providing a "preferred redefinition of an organizational reality" (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, 442) that they could adopt "as their own" (ibid., p. 443). For example, in their study, the CEO undertook an extensive, organization-wide exercise in explaining a new strategy to organizational members and convince them to adopt his interpretations of the organization's future (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991).

In this vein of research, the preservation of prevailing meanings has been treated as failure to change (Maitlis & Lawrence 2003), or evidence of resistance (Wooldridge & Floyd 1989). The focus on change in meaning thus downplays the coexistence of prevailing and new meanings. Yet actors need to remain connected with their prior understandings, even as they transition to a new meaning, in order to act (Corley & Gioia 2004; Weick et al. 2005). Recent studies therefore challenge assumptions about alternative meanings as resistance (Ford et al. 2008; Thomas et al. 2011). Rather, actors may broaden the constellation of coexisting meanings about their organization. For instance, Sonenshein (2010) revealed surprising findings about a retailer's change initiative as employees both preserved prevailing meanings through stability narratives and also combined these with new meanings through progressive narratives. Such findings challenge long-standing assumptions about the adoption of new meaning on the basis of transitioning from one dominant meaning to another. Instead, they emphasize the need for research into those processes through which actors establish connections between new and prevailing meanings.

In contrast, another body of research explores meaning-making on the assumption that organizations are plurivocal (Barry & Elmes 1997; Boje 1991; Brown 1995; Buchanon & Dawson 2007)

instead of comprising a largely dominant and shared meaning system. Plurivocality recognizes that multiple communities of actors may hold different, often competing understandings of the purpose and motivation for a change initiative (e.g. Brown & Humphreys 2003; Kaplan 2008; Sillince et al. 2012). Rather than treating coexisting meanings as a temporary state during the period of transition (e.g. Lewin 1951), these studies demonstrate that multiple meanings, grounded in different identities (e.g. Corley & Gioia 2004; Gioia et al. 2013), and narratives (e.g. Boje 1991; 1995; Brown, Stacey & Nandhakumar 2007) persist during change processes. Yet, such multiplicity creates challenges for motivating and fostering agreement to change across diverse constituents who assert various, often conflicting meanings to the change (Donnellon et al. 1986; Sonenshein 2010). In particular, actors or groups protect their different self-interests; for instance retaining their professional autonomy and self-esteem (e.g. Brown 1998), which may lead to resistance (Hardy & Thomas 2014; Thomas & Davies 2005). These studies point to tensions that arise as actors attempt to preserve their diverse prevailing meanings. Such tensions are particularly prominent in pluralistic settings, which are characterized by distributed decision-making and power that resides in professional expertise and autonomy (Cohen & March 1974; Denis et al. 1996).

Several studies point to the critical role of ambiguity in facilitating agreement to change (Brown 1995; Donnellon et al. 1986; Gioia, Nag & Corley 2012; Sillince et al. 2012). Ambiguity provides a mechanism for multiple meanings to coexist in relation to a strategic initiative. It enables diverse actors to construct different meanings for the same initiative, thereby satisfying their various interests and fostering agreement to participate in action, albeit for different reasons (Eisenberg 1984, Eisenberg & Goodall 1997; Donnellon et al. 1986). For example, Brown (1995) illustrated how a project team used ambiguity to tailor the rationale for an IT implementation in order to satisfy multiple constituents' demands and vested interests, which facilitated the acceptance of change. Controlling the flow and content of the IT system's benefits that was fed to different constituents resulted in purposefully withholding key information that may have lead to opposing views of the proposed IT system (Brown 1995). Ambiguity also may be exploited by employees, for instance to gain access to previously unattainable resources (Sonenshein 2009). While ambiguous terminology may foster agreement to change, by allowing all actors to ascribe their own meanings to a strategic initiative; it also can result in deviations from the proposed course of action (e.g., Abdallah & Langley 2014, Sonenshein 2010), since actors will interpret the initiative in different ways (Sillince et al. 2012). Ambiguity is thus a double-edged sword for organizations: a strategic

initiative hinges on creating objectives that are framed in terms sufficiently ambiguous to be meaningful to different actors, yet not too ambiguous to act upon (e.g., Denis, Dompierre, Langley & Rouleau 2011; Gioia et al. 1994). Furthermore, while existing literature has investigated the triggers and consequences of ambiguity in facilitating or constraining attitudes to change, there is little evidence of how diverse organizational members come to agree on a change proposal whilst ensuring that their various existing meanings and interests are retained.

Whilst the above literature recognizes the need to foster agreement across diverse constituents to facilitate change, it thus offers competing explanations about the way coexisting meanings are accounted for in the meaning-making process due to fundamentally different assumptions about an organization's singular or plural meaning system(s). We therefore introduce the concept of a joint account as a means of fostering agreement about a change initiative. A joint account provides a higher-order concept to explain how diverse individuals/groups come to agree on an abstract label that accommodates their diverse interests, whilst leaving enough specificity for each group or actor to act (Donnellon et al. 1986; Eisenberg 1984). Specifically, it brings to the fore the actual, real-time meaning negotiations of multiple actors since it is these negotiations that enable or constrain the accomplishment of a joint account (Fenton & Langley 2011; Robichaud et al. 2004). A joint account does not assume that shared meaning will arise. Rather, in those activities where diverse actors negotiate the meaning of a new initiative, they are able to jointly accomplish an account of what that initiative means to each of them.

However, to examine meaning-making as it is jointly accomplished we need to go beyond the binary division between top and middle managers or employees which characterizes much of the literature on meaning-making. For example, most of the above studies either examine top managers efforts to change other organizational members' meaning systems (e.g. Gioia & Chittipedi 1991; Jarzabkowski, 2008), or manipulate their interests through the strategic use of ambiguity (e.g. Sillince et al. 2012), or, by contrast, examine how lower level managers resist change (Balogun et al, 2011) and assert their own interests (Maitlis & Lawrence 2003; Sillince & Mueller 2007). Only recently studies have begun refuting the division between change agent and change recipient, for instance demonstrating a divisional senior management team's dual role as they simultaneously made sense of change imposed on them as well as responding to the change (e.g. Balogun et al. 2015). We thus need to study the accomplishment of

a joint account by studying those episodes in which these actors come together to negotiate the meaning of a new initiative (Ford et al. 2008, Thomas et al. 2011). That is the focus of this study.

In doing so, we build on a few studies that have investigated those communicative and turn-taking practice that enable actors to construct a shared sense of a strategic direction (e.g., Samra-Fredricks 2003) or to agree on issues such as administering drugs to patients (Tsoukas 2009) without assuming shared meaning across these actors. For instance, Thomas et al.'s study (2011) shows how the meaning of a telecommunications company's strategic initiative shifted from a "customer focus" to a "commercial focus," (ibid: 29) as senior and middle managers built on each other's points during a workshop. The authors draw on Tsoukas (2009) framework of productive dialogue to explain whether social interactions lead to agreement or disagreement. Tsoukas suggests that participants assimilate the novelty of change through a dialogic process of *conceptual combination*, combining prevailing meanings and proposed meanings within their dialogue; *conceptual expansion*, semantically expanding the proposed meanings in which the change is expressed; concluding in *conceptual reframing* of prevailing and proposed meanings within a composite understanding. The meaning that emerges from this productive dialogue does not belong to any one individual but rather has been co-constructed to account for participants' multiple experiences. By contrast a degenerative dialogue, in which actors undermine each other's perspectives and reify existing disparate views, remains mired in disagreement, for instance about how to implement a strategic initiative (Thomas et al. 2011).

While such studies provide evidence of how agreement or disagreement is established, such insights are limited to a specific incident such as a particular strategy meeting (Samra-Fredricks 2003, 2010) or a single workshop (e.g., Thomas et al. 2011). Thus, we know little about the processual dynamics involved in fostering agreement across several episodes which include diverse constituents beyond the core group of executives typically involved in designing a proposed strategy. To gain a better understanding about how multiple, coexisting meanings surface and shape the meaning-making process as they are subsumed within, or excluded from a joint account, we therefore examine the accomplishment of a joint account across multiple episodes of meaning-making. Our research question is; *how is a joint account of a new strategic initiative accomplished amid the many meanings held by diverse actors in an organization?*

## METHODOLOGY

**Case Selection.** In keeping with other exploratory studies of meaning-making (e.g., Balogun et al. 2015; Thomas et al. 2011), we conducted a longitudinal, ethnographic study. We gained high-quality access to a British university, “Unico” at the start of developing some new strategic initiatives. These were introduced during a strategic planning process that unfolded over eleven months. The official release of Unico’s strategic plan at the end of this period presented a natural cut-off point for data collection.

Our longitudinal case provided a basis to explore episodes of meaning-making over a course of meetings and their role in generating a joint account of meaning. A university provides a salient pluralistic setting in which to examine the creation of a joint account, as multiple meanings arise due to diffuse power structures and conflicting interests amongst diverse constituencies; yet these constituents typically come together to participate in decision-making (Cohen & March 1974, Denis, Lamothe & Langley 2001, Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, Jarzabkowski & Sillince 2007).

**Data Collection.** We collected data from multiple sources, including nonparticipant observation of meetings dedicated to discussing the strategic initiatives; sequential interviews throughout the planning process; and documents such as minutes and the multiple, evolving versions of Unico’s strategic plan (see Table 1). In initial interviews with senior managers, we identified meetings that addressed the formulation of Unico’s strategic initiative. Similar to other research on universities (e.g., Jarzabkowski & Seidl 2008), we focused on these meetings as communicative episodes in which strategic initiatives were discussed as part of developing a joint account of their meaning. The first author attended each meeting and also obtained the related agendas, minutes, and emails. In total, 25 meetings were attended (20 audio-recorded), comprising over 112 hours of observation. At all meetings, detailed field notes about unfolding discussions were taken and then typed up within 24 hours as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994). In addition, we noted the numbers and roles of participants, and collected meeting minutes and agenda items. We also noted whether specific conversational instances were particularly heated, or emphatic, or, indeed, non-contentious. In addition to studying the meeting transcripts, we listened repeatedly to the audio-recordings, in order to more deeply analyze these conversations (Silverman 2001).

### *INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE*

To explore participants’ views, and resultant alterations to Unico’s proposed strategy in the evolving strategic plan (see Langley 2009), we conducted sequential interviews throughout the process,

typically immediately after a meeting. In total, we held 76 interviews, including multiple interviews with key actors such as the Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, heads of academic and administrative departments. All but one interview were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Interviews were 45 to 60 minutes and provided rich insights about participants' understandings of the proposed strategy, and their specific reconstructions of the process. We also accessed the informal discussions around meetings by walking with participants to and from the meetings and "hanging around" before and after each meeting. Finally, we collected 10 versions of the strategic plan, which were important for tracing how points from the meetings were articulated within the proposed strategy. All data was imported into the qualitative software package NVIVO to support the analytic process of indexing and comparing units of coded data.

**Case Description.** Unico is a small to medium-sized British university with international research recognition in a few subject areas. It is run by an executive team comprising the Vice-Chancellor (VC), Deputy-VC (DVC), Finance Director (Vikas), the heads of Unico's four academic departments A (Thomas), B (Sam), C (Nigel), and D (Susi), and the Head of Administration (William). At the time of our study the VC, who had just joined Unico, initiated a strategic planning process incorporating new strategic initiatives that were intended to address the challenges of the funding environment.

These strategic initiatives introduced new directions for the Research, Teaching, and Community Engagement strategies, with the overarching aim of increasing university income from £80 million to £120 million in four years. Most of Unico's income was generated through teaching-related activities: "*Unico has research-intensive areas but . . . Most of our funding comes from teaching*" (VC, Interview 11). In order to attract students, methods for delivering quality teaching and an excellent student learning experience were revisited. The VC felt that Unico's research income was not very high, though the university had excellent research in specific areas as reflected in the 5\* and 4\* ratings awarded in the latest UK research assessment exercise (RAE 2008). To increase research income, the aim was to focus on those pockets of research where Unico had a track record of winning research bids, and also to generate more commercially exploitable research outputs. While research and teaching are the core business of any university (Hardy et al. 1983), the third strategy, "Community Engagement," was relatively new at Unico. The VC wanted to develop the strategy by exploiting Unico's geographical location in a large British city, in an effort to attract funding for local initiatives from the City Council.

The VC and the DVC devised an eleven-month planning process, aiming “*to have a pretty well clearly defined strategy by the early autumn*” (DVC, Interview 1). The process would culminate in a set of objectives, with specific goals and targets for each initiative, as a participant explained: “*A well-known planning sort of sequence of events is that you look at your vision, you look at the mission, you look at the plans, you look at the objectives, you implement those plans, you monitor them, and then you revisit the whole process*” (Ralph, Interview 25). Consistent with strategic planning in other university settings (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, Jarzabkowski 2005), the process passed through five specific stages over 11 months. The development of each strategic initiative, Teaching, Research, and Community Engagement, followed the same sequence of activities in meetings. We listed these activities and explored how participants made meaning about the strategic initiatives from early meetings where they discussed what Unico wanted to be and formed objectives, to the final meetings where they specified targets and measures for those objectives that they had identified.

While steered by the VC and DVC, the strategic initiatives were developed in dedicated meetings in order to increase department heads’ commitment. To further commitment, the process included Unico-wide consultation over a three-month period, during which senior and junior academic and administrative staff were invited to help develop objectives for the proposed strategic initiatives. Based on these meetings, the wording of some strategic initiatives was altered so that, in the VC’s words, Unico could “*have a reasonably common understanding of what we mean by some of the phrases*” (Interview 20).

**Coding & analysis.** The strategic planning process provide a series of conversational episodes where diverse actors come together to negotiate the meaning over the proposed strategy. The sequence of meetings is the meaning-making process in which the joint account is to be accomplished, in order to foster agreement to the proposed change. Coding went through several stages, as we explored the multiple meanings that arose and their incorporation (or not) within a joint account. Both authors met regularly, throughout and following the fieldwork, to develop a coding framework grounded in the data. Initially, the first author wrote a thick description of the development of the strategic initiatives. This description revolved around the ways that the strategic initiatives introduced particular objectives for the Research, Teaching, and Community Engagement strategies. We then noted the different meanings that participants attached to the terminology of Unico’s proposed strategy, which was sometimes modified following meetings. These varying interpretations of the terminology reflected the plurivocality of meanings, which we further explored in the sequential interview data to trace participant’s understandings

of the process. Throughout the analysis, we returned frequently to the meeting transcripts, examining who was speaking and what departmental interests and experiences they were expressing.

Our first layer of coding explored the multiple meanings that were attributed to the proposed strategies for Unico, which we explored in detail during interviews. The proposed strategies introduced shifts to current activities in order align Unico's strategy with changes in the United Kingdom's funding environment. We refer to these proposed strategies as introducing *new meanings*. The VC and DVC introduced these proposed strategies at the beginning of each meeting. We noted that participants typically related their current experiences and activities to the proposed strategy, and that these were often diverse reflecting their different departmental interests (Hardy et al. 1983; Jarzabkowski 2005). We refer to participants' various experiences and activities as *prevailing meanings*.

Next, we examined the sources of these prevailing meanings. First, we identified that these differences manifested in the way participants positioned themselves in the conversation (Robichaud et al. 2004). A participant might relate the meaning of the proposed strategy to what he or she was doing individually, which we termed *personal experience* or according to departmental activities and interests, such as publishing in top-tier journals, which we termed *collectively held experience*.

As these differences seemed grounded in the strengths of prevailing meaning about each strategy (Bartunek 1984), we then identified how deeply the current Research, Teaching, and Community Engagement strategies were institutionalized in practices and activities across Unico (Jarzabkowski 2008). Specifically, we analyzed Unico's previous strategic plans and returned to participants' interviews to show us what was new in the proposed strategies. The current Teaching and Research strategies were *strongly institutionalized*; they had resulted, for the former, in one of the highest scores for graduate employment in the UK and, for the latter, in national and international recognition for Unico's research output (RAE 2008). We noted in these contexts that participants' prevailing meanings were largely based on collectively held experiences, and that they articulated *strongly vested interests* based on these experiences, such as garnering international recognition for their research. However, Community Engagement was a relatively new and *weakly institutionalized strategy* with few clear activities attributed to it. Here, participants' prevailing meanings were largely based on personal experiences, with few common activities and *weakly vested interests* in their maintenance or development. We noted that these different degrees of institutionalization and vested interests generated different patterns in establishing a joint account for a proposed strategy. In

particular, it was clear from the heated debates in meetings that the most controversial changes were those to the Research and Community Engagement strategies. Hence, this paper examines the aim to develop a joint account for Unico's proposed Research and Community Engagement strategies.

In a further step, we closely investigated the specific elements involved in meaning-making and how these shaped the different patterns, which we identify as follows.

*Ambiguity.* For both the Research and Community Engagement strategies, ambiguous new terminology was used to describe the proposed strategies. Participants struggled to understand each term and identify how it affected their current activities. In response to ambiguity, participants attributed their prevailing meanings of that strategy, by drawing upon either their collectively held experiences, or their personal experiences.

*Inclusion/exclusion of prevailing meanings.* These prevailing meanings were not uniform but rather reflected the diverse departmental and personal experiences of the participants. We noted that, where they had strongly vested interests, participants insisted that their prevailing meanings be accommodated within the planning process, returning to these meanings continuously throughout the series of meetings until they were satisfied they had been incorporated in the proposed strategy.

Next, we looked at the micro dynamics of meaning-making *within* conversational episodes. In particular, we returned to the literature examining how meaning is co-constructed within social interactions (e.g., Thomas et al. 2011). After examining our codes closely in relation to the literature, we recognized links with the concepts of expanding, combining, and reframing (e.g., Tsoukas 2009, Thomas et al. 2011). These constructs refer to different ways joint meaning is co-constructed in social interactions with participants. *Expanding* occurs through semantically extending the use of a concept beyond its core use; for example, expanding the meaning of the proposed strategy to encompass some aspect of prevailing meaning. We also noted *combining*, when prevailing meanings were juxtaposed conversationally with the new meanings of the proposed strategy, bringing them together to examine whether they could coexist. In addition, we observed *reframing*, in which the specific terms for the proposed strategy were altered, in order to better capture multiple, coexisting meanings. Expanding, combining, and reframing contributed to the creation of a joint account, and were jointly accomplished amongst organizational participants across a series of conversational episodes, as illustrated in Tables 2 and 3. We found that these micro-dynamics varied within, and so helped to explain, our two patterns of meaning-making.

## FINDINGS

At the outset of proposing the new initiatives, the VC acknowledged “*one of our challenges is, we have got arts people, we’ve got different kinds of scientists and business people and we have got to try to find words that they can all interpret in their own context and some of their contexts are quite different, quite diverse*” (Interview 11). A process was therefore set-up for “*colleagues from across the university ... to contribute*” to the formulation of the proposed strategy (DVC in meeting). Conversational episodes from this series of strategic planning meetings are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Throughout, we adopt the following distinctions for participants’ roles: Head of Department (Head Dep’t), Academic and Administrator. We now present two patterns of attempting to establish a joint account when a new strategic initiative is proposed. The first pattern, addressing the strongly institutionalized Research strategy, culminated in the creation of a joint account whereas the second, addressing the weakly institutionalized Community Engagement strategy, did not.

### **Creating a joint account with a strongly institutionalized strategy**

At Unico, a strategy of research excellence, meaning top publications, peer recognition, winning research grants, and developing patents, is strongly institutionalized; “*The word-class university with the world-class research, research-intensive, you know all that sort of thing which has been very much part of the Unico message.*” (Susi, Interview 8). However, the new strategic initiative, labeled ‘Translational Research’, emphasized commercial research outputs, as evidenced by objectives such as “*listening to and working with business, industry and the professions*” and “*delivering outputs that deliver for the regional economy*” (Plan V1). The new direction, aimed at increasing research income by 400 to 500% over a five-year period, challenged prevailing meanings. Indeed, the first version of the plan had a dedicated slide titled “*What we are not: Research Intensive*”. “*There was a research strategy, which I felt was a bit unrealistic ... I have to say that Unico has research-intensive areas but it is **not** a research-intensive university across the board.*” (VC, Interview 11).

Participants felt that the proposed strategy marginalized their prevailing, strongly institutionalized meanings about Unico’s research excellence. While these meanings were not uniform, they provided a joint account of Unico as good at research, which academics felt strongly about safeguarding. Hence, the following alternative meanings, lone researcher, fundamental, blue skies research, and applied research were continuously brought up in relation to the proposed strategy, as we now explain.

***INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE***

***Expanding the proposed strategy to accommodate the lone researcher.*** The new strategy proposed to set-up “*interdisciplinary, collaborative research centers*” (Plan V1), and included a specific bullet point about centers enabling a move away from the model of the lone researcher. Participants demanded clarification about any potentially adverse effects arising from the new strategy; for instance access to internal funding schemes. The sense of exclusion was particularly prominent amongst social sciences faculty who tend to work without large grants or teams; “*some of my colleagues may be seen as lone scholars and therefore will be disadvantaged through this focus*” (Table 2, Susi/Head Dep’t D, 1.4). Participants insisted that the new strategy should be expanded to “*ensure that lone researchers still feel supported despite our focus on research being transferable to industry*” (Table 2, Thomas/Head Dep’t A, 1.5). These challenges were raised in a series of consultative meetings. For example, at Research committee the following changes were suggested for the second version of the plan; “***What Unico won’t do*** [original emphasis]: *Lose the expertise of the lone researchers. We will respect different research traditions and cultures*” (official notes).

Senior management realized they needed to expand the meanings of the new strategy, in order to avoid excluding prevailing meanings about the lone researcher, as shown in this email exchange:

“I have removed the bullet about not supporting lone researchers. I know what it was trying to convey, but also understand Susi’s concern about how we can word this, a difficult one, so just removed for now.” (email: VC to DVC)

“I’m far more comfortable now with the slide on focus of research activity and pleased that we have deleted the reference to the lone researcher not being supported.” (email response: DVC to VC)

By removing the statement, the meaning of the *new strategy expanded* to accommodate prevailing meanings about the lone researcher (post-plan v3); “*we respect different research traditions and cultures*” (Table 2, DVC, 3.8).

***Struggles to expand the proposed strategy to accommodate fundamental, blue skies research.*** The emphasis on commercial activities also challenged other meanings attributed to the strongly institutionalized research strategy; “*We were going from what we thought we were; a research-led institution ... to now being a not research-led institution with other activities to follow in keeping with the new [strategy] ... That is a big change.*” (Nigel, Head Dep’t C, Interview 3).

One key query was whether fundamental, blue skies research would be recognized in the new strategy; “*What is the balance between fundamental and translational research?*” (Table 2, Sam/Head Dep’t B, 1.3).

As strategy conversations unfolded, the VC and DVC recognized the “*huge resistance from research active groups. Like [Department A], for example, pushing for us finding some other descriptor that includes being a research-intensive university. Because they feel that’s [the proposed strategy] in some way degrading their activity and will be a disadvantage to them*” (VC, Interview 11). Hence the new strategy, while focused on ‘translational research’ expanded to include an objective on ‘rigorous research’ (Plan V2), which was intended as a proxy for fundamental, blue skies research.

Despite this inclusion of ‘rigorous research’, the proposed strategy’s emphasis on commercial outputs still remained separate, unable to coexist with participants’ prevailing meanings; “*how is blue skies research recognized within this direction?*” (Table 2, Adam/Academic Dep’t B, 4.1). Faculty felt their current activities were neglected; “*We often do research that hasn’t any commercial benefit. So, to make the assumption that all the research has to be commercial after a period of time is not going down very well with [Department C]*” (Academic Dep’t C, Interview 9). Following a research committee meeting, specific changes to the new strategy were submitted to the DVC.

“**Additional points to consider** [original]: Need to balance fundamental and translational research.

Often the fundamental blue skies research is the start of the pipeline that leads to translation. Should the mission recognize this in some way?”

“**What we won’t do** [original]: Be inflexible in our strategy and dictate what people can and can’t do. Research is a creative process and needs a nurturing environment to blossom”

Drawing on their respective research expertise, faculty in the different departments denigrated the meaning of ‘translational’, as, for example, in the feedback provided to the DVC;

“The notion of ‘**translational**’ research was poorly understood, leading to queries as to whether this was a slip in place of ‘**transnational**’, and also to surprise that the University had decided to attach such importance to our work in **translation** research [original emphasis]” (document from Unico-wide consultation, Stage 2).

Even non-academic departments, such as Unico’s Marketing team, suggested that “*whilst acknowledging the integral part translational research must play in increasing the University’s research income and third stream funding, staff felt that the importance of fundamental research should not be understated*” (written feedback to the DVC, Stage 2).

***Struggles to combine prevailing meanings with proposed strategy.*** These continuous queries demonstrated that a semantic expansion was insufficient to accommodate the prevailing meaning of fundamental, blue skies research within the proposed strategy. While the VC and DVC (e.g. Table 2, 3.4, 3.8, 4.4) advocated continued support for traditional research, this recognition was not apparent in the term, ‘Translational Research’. Even as the focus on commercial outcomes was reduced (e.g. start of meeting 11, Table 2, DVC 5.1), staff continued to feel that the meaning undermined their current activities. The pressure to recognize fundamental research mounted as participants drew out the negative implications for Unico of translational research. For instance, Department B representatives pointed out potentially harmful consequences of diminishing publishing, as “*top journals and the citations*” were essential for the UK research assessment exercise (Table 2, William/Head of Administration, 4.2).

Participants associated the proposed strategy with applied research; “*So I’m not sure what translational means. Is it something about relevance or applied research?*” (Table 2, David/ Academic Dep’t D, 3.1). Worried about the implications for Department D, Susi (Head Dep’t D) queried “*in the context of [Department D] there are people doing their research on historical analysis, which means it cannot be applied. How does the focus on translational research affect these individuals?*” (Interview 8). The proposed strategy’s association with applied research was counter to participants’ *vested interests* in fundamental, blue skies research. Opposition peaked at an away day with senior academic and administrative staff, as participants dissociated their prevailing meanings about research from the proposed strategy. For instance Jeff (Academic Dep’t B), a top grant-winning scientist, denigrated the new strategy as “*second-hand research; not rigorous. It’s not what Unico should be assimilated with*” (Table 2, 5.4). It became increasingly difficult to combine the concepts of fundamental, blue skies research with research that leads to commercially viable outputs. Another academic noted that the term may “*limit the understanding of external bodies in terms of what we actually do*”, proposing that the terminology should “*move away from a single research term*” (Table 2, Ian/ Academic Dep’t B, 5.3).

***Need for reframing to combine multiple, potentially conflicting meanings.*** In light of participants’ continuing insistence on including fundamental, blue skies research (see Table 2, DVC, 5.1) within the proposed strategy, it became clear that the term ‘Translational Research’ could not expand sufficiently to *combine* prevailing meanings with the push for commercial research output. In order to ensure the prevailing and new meanings could coexist, it would be necessary to *reframe* the proposed strategy within a term that could include both. Considering the discussions thus far, the DVC and VC

suggested using “relevant” - which captured some of the new meanings in the proposed term - and “rigor,” which resonated with participants’ prevailing meanings about the scientific quality of Unico’s research. Walking back to their offices, they discussed how to reframe the strategy: *“Sometimes we call that the double hurdle of having not just rigor and not just relevance but both. I think that’s what people were talking about, but we were using slightly different language”*, the DVC remarked. The VC added *“What we need now is to refine the language so that everybody recognizes that we’re saying the same thing.”* They concluded by deciding to reframe the new strategy; Unico should become *“A Center of Excellence in rigorous and relevant research”* (Plan V5).

**Creating a joint account.** The new terminology of “*rigorous and relevant research*” (Plan V5), was jointly accomplished between participants and had sufficient ambiguity to cover the multiple coexisting meanings. The agreed terminology accounted for commercial research outputs through the term “relevant,” whilst modifying it with the addition of “rigorous,” which resonated with multiple prevailing meanings, grounded in participants’ vested interests in the strongly institutionalized research strategy. The modification ensured support from academics, enabling a joint account of the new strategic initiative to be formed. Not only did this reframing ensure that prevailing meanings were retained, but doubts over the term did not emerge again during the planning process. Rather, at subsequent meetings the proposed strategy was introduced as *“research [that] does need to be world-leading and world-class research, but it’s also research which is relevant and it is research which finds application and can be used”* (e.g., Table 2, DVC, 6.1). Both senior management and faculty had accepted the joint account of meaning. For example, the DVC observed, *“There was, particularly at the start, concern about the use of the term ‘translational research’. But that concern hasn’t emerged since [the term was amended]”* (Interview 56), while Nigel noted *“We had some other terminology before which we took out, but I think we always meant relevant research; we just didn’t get the right terminology”* (Interview 69).

The later stages of the planning process thus were able to unfold, as participants devised measurable courses of action for the new strategy. The final version of the plan comprised eight high-level objectives with associated actions: two focused on commercial outputs; two focused on fundamental research; and four with a dual focus (Plan V10). The multiple, coexisting meanings had been brought together in a joint account of Unico’s new research strategy.

### **In search of a joint account with a weakly institutionalized strategy**

Our second pattern draws on the development of a new strategic initiative for Community Engagement. It was motivated by three precursors. First, the UK government introduced a new funding

scheme to foster the impact of universities on society. Second, stronger engagement with the local community was seen as critical to sustaining the university's student population; *"Forty percent of our students come from the local area,"* the VC explained, concluding that *"If we don't continue to be appealing to the **local** community and **local** students then that would be quite a problem for us"* (Interview 11). Third, a recent economic redevelopment being rolled out by the City Council *"is very much wanting the higher education institutions in the area to put more back into the city."* (VC, Interview 11), prompting the VC to capitalize on Unico's geographical proximity to the City.

This strategy was quite recent, *"it is the [element of strategy] that is the least developed"* (DVC, Interview 1). The VC considered Unico's current Community Engagement activities, which only a few staff undertook, as *"disjointed pieces"* (Interview 11), indicating its weakly institutionalized status. The proposed strategy aimed to channel these efforts into stronger collective engagement with the community. Three out of four objectives stressed local activities such as *"research, training, advice and support to local business and industry to drive economic growth"* (Plan V1). The final objective emphasized regional activities.

***Accommodating prevailing meanings.*** While there were some prevailing meanings, these were not institutionalized across Unico, but rather reflected individual's personal experiences. For example, despite operating a hub for Community Engagement, Unico lacked a central repository of current activities. John, who was in charge of this hub, had only sketchy information about what *"wider community stuff"* already happened, such as continuous professional development (CPD) workshops and student placements. There was thus no corpus of activities that might be characterized as Community Engagement. For instance, Thomas (Head Dep't A) sent the following email to his staff: *"We need to gather evidence about the basis for interaction with the community and the region. How are we seeing, what are we currently doing, what does the region and the community want from us?"* (email to Department A, Stage 2)

The proposed strategy, having little institutionalized basis from which to draw meanings, was particularly ambiguous; *"What does Community Engagement actually mean?"* (Table 3, Daniel/non executive Council member, 3.1). Indeed, many participants expressed confusion about Community Engagement; *"I mean I don't know. So I'm sorry I'm vague on that, I just don't know enough about the details. Community engagement; well it depends what you mean by community engagement really."* (Academic, Dep't B, Interview 41).

Without an established understanding about Community Engagement, meanings were fragmented, even amongst those few staff who already engaged with particular communities, which they typically saw

as connected to their specific academic expertise. This raised an additional challenge as participants suggested that the proposed Community Engagement strategy “*overlap[s] with research and teaching quite extensively*” VC, Interview 11). Even John, Director of Unico’s hub for Community Engagement, flagged that “*when the strategy is agreed, if it is agreed ... there are three Centers of excellence in Research, Teaching and Learning and Community Engagement, then we’ve got to have the debate about what we precisely mean by community engagement and what falls under my portfolio and what falls under others’ portfolio*” (Interview 44). Unsurprisingly, therefore, participants drew on their personal experience as educators and researchers to identify the potential implications of the proposed strategy for their current activities. Over the course of the various strategic planning meetings several meanings surfaced, which we summarized as: engagement with firms; local and/or regional; national profile; and international profile.

### ***INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE***

***Expanding to accommodate engaging with local/regional firms.*** The push for closer engagement with local and regional firms focused on building momentum around a few nascent Unico-wide activities such as the “*innovation voucher project for small and medium-sized enterprises*” (John, Director for Community Engagement, Interview 44). Otherwise, most activities occurred within departments. For instance in Department B “*we have been involved in things like foundation degrees which are very industry related*” (Interview 23). Others such as department C and D, however, had few such activities.

“We don’t have a lot of community engagement ... as far as I know, and I guess we might do, but I can’t think of any examples off the top of my head. ... That’s not ... that’s not important in my mind, everything I’m doing, I’m not thinking business. I’m thinking science; in fact I’m thinking [specific research area]”. (Academic Dep’t C, Interview 33)

“There’s virtually no opportunity for Department D in the things that we do, virtually none. That might change but I can’t see it changing dramatically. (John, Interview 44)

In the absence of departmental activities, participants drew on their teaching and/or research experiences to relate to the proposed strategy. For instance, Jack (Academic Dep’t B) tried to clarify whether short courses and, as he called it, “*low-level stuff*” fit within the remit of Community Engagement: “*that seems to be a way in which our research activities naturally lead into local from what we’re doing in our department*” (Table 3, 2.4). Thus participants suggested that the proposed strategy expand to include these meanings based on their personal experiences. The VC confirmed that these activities were accommodated within

the proposed strategy, thereby reinforcing the meaning of engagement with the local community: “*it’s a good area for strengthening our local engagement, yes*” (Table 3, 2.5).

In addition, several participants demanded further clarity on the nature of engagement with firms. For example, in Department B faculty wondered about which companies might fall within the new strategy’s remit, as a participant in their recent meeting reflected;

“People started to say ... well if we engage with the local community, what kind of companies we primarily engage with around here? And then people said that’s kind of changed now, so with what sort of companies are we engaged now? What exactly are we here for in [U.K. City]? What would be the nature of the engagement with local companies? And I cannot remember what companies were mentioned then, if any. But we did start talk about the theme of re-generation. Yes, re-generation agencies were mentioned and local organizations that are engaged in re-generation.” (Interview 23)

As participants drew on their various personal experiences, meanings became more fragmented and ambiguous. For instance, at the meeting with Council (Meeting 13) Simon, a non-executive Council member, drew upon his experience as an entrepreneur to suggest that the new meaning expand to clarify “*what Unico can offer to local businesses*” (Table 3, 3.3), prompting Lynne (non-executive Council member) to wonder what types of businesses they could engage with and how “*the University ... can demonstrate what it’s good at*” (Table 3, 3.4). Despite some minor expansion in meaning, the proposed strategy thus retained a strong, albeit ambiguous, emphasis on local engagement.

***Expanding to accommodate a national and international profile.*** Based on their current research and teaching activities, staff felt that Unico operated in a national and international community. For instance, Thomas wondered whether the activities of Department A colleagues with roles on national committees were accommodated within the proposed strategy (Table 3, 1.6). Similarly, when the DVC visited department C (Meeting 12), Gina (Academic Dep’t C) pointed out that a strictly local meaning could potentially undermine a national teaching profile for Unico. She then linked the proposed strategy to her research experience, noting that local or regional research should not be at the expense of their international research standing (Table 3, 2.2). To incorporate these prevailing meanings, the proposed strategy was *expanded*, adding an objective on becoming “*recognized internationally as an exemplar of best practice in community engagement*” (Plan V3). Despite this expansion, participants struggled to relate their teaching and research experiences to the emphasis on local engagement. Indeed, participants continued to worry

about the term local, and suggest that an international dimension should be added to the new strategy: “Possible tension between world-leading research and a local regeneration focus. Ensure our contribution locally is world class.” (Unico-wide research committee feedback, Stage 2); “The local market for UG students in particular is volatile and susceptible to regional events and market changes” (Marketing team, Stage 2)

***Struggles to combine the local with Unico’s national and international profile.*** As the strategy process unfolded, participants continuously struggled to *combine* the push for local engagement with prevailing meanings about Unico’s national and international profile. At the meeting for Unico’s governing body, Council, to comment on the new strategy, these struggles intensified, as Daniel (non executive Council member) worried that local Community Engagement might be antithetical to their existing status as an international university (Table 3, 3.1). The VC acknowledged these coexisting meanings by saying, “there is agreement that it is not an either/or but an AND between regional and international” (Table 3, 3.2). However, the challenge of how to *combine* these meanings remained. Despite agreement that it did not capture Unico’s international profile, ambiguity remained, and efforts to combine various meanings within a joint account were deferred to yet another meeting.

The “local – global tension” (Table 3, DVC, 2.1) was ongoing. While the VC acknowledged the need to combine a local dimension with Unico’s national/international profile (see exchange in meeting 3, 3.1. & 3.2) and recognized that it was “also a challenge to achieve” (Table 3, VC, 3.2), participants struggled to imbue the new strategy with meaning. The VC recognized that the new Community Engagement strategy attempted to capture “a very complicated jam jar if you know what I mean, full of ... you know, full of things” (Interview 37). Yet the absence of strongly vested interests in the alternatives proposed, meant there was little pressure to combine any particular meaning within the new strategy. For example, conversational episodes skipped between the perceived negative implications of a local focus (e.g. Table 3, Gina, Academic Dep’t C, 2.2), and queries about whether Unico needed “to improve our regional engagement” (Table 3, DVC, 2.3). Indeed, only the VC articulated a vested interest, stating that it “is not about engaging internationally” (Table 3, VC, 4.5), albeit without providing a strong alternative for what the term did mean.

***The search for a joint account continues.*** The local meaning emphasized within the proposed strategy remained disconnected from participants’ prevailing meanings. While participants saw the emphasis on engagement locally as inconsistent with Unico’s international teaching and research profiles; the VC and DVC tried framing the local and national/international dimension as complementary.

“The tension between being internationally recognized, recruiting students internationally, faculty internationally, and having a strong local presence. I don’t think there is a problem in reconciling the two. If you actually look at many of the leading universities in the UK they do have a strong influence on their region as well as being internationally regarded.” (DVC, Interview 26)

“There’s been some misunderstanding and some concern about what does this sort of ... what does this community engagement ... with you know, with [UK City] and the region, doesn’t that make us a less international university? And how do we balance our international profile with our kind of local profile? ... I think some people have not been able to ... not been comfortable with how do we balance a local agenda with an international agenda.” (VC, Interview 58)

Despite efforts to expand or combine meanings (see Table 3, Thomas/Head Dep’t A, 4.1; Hans/Academic Dep’t A, 5.1; Sam/Head Dep’t B, 5.3; Michael/Non-executive Council member, 7.1) participants continuously struggled to relate their multiple, fragmented meanings to the proposed strategy.

***Consequences as the search continues.*** Lack of agreement about what the proposed strategy meant constrained discussions about what activities Unico should undertake. As they moved to that stage in the planning process, actors struggled to establish priorities and goals. For example, at a meeting to finalize strategic objectives (Table 3, episode 4), Thomas (Head Dep’t A) struggled to identify actions that his department could undertake as Community Engagement (Table 3, 4.1). Further, lack of clarity about Community Engagement inhibited attempts to set targets and measures for proposed actions at a Stage 4 awayday. Rather, participants returned discussing the meaning of “community.” As they focused on the “*regional community*”, debate arose over “*how do we engage?*” (Table 3, Susi/Head Dep’t D, 5.4). John (Head Comm Eng) attempted to establish an all-encompassing description that would enable participants to coordinate activities (Table 3, 5.5). However, his effort to remind them of the meeting’s purpose – to develop potential actions for the objective – was undermined, as participants could not relate their experiences to the proposed meaning of Community Engagement. Indeed, Sam (Head Dep’t B) asked, “*Why are we engaging with **these** partners?*” [emphasis reflects intonation] (Table 3, 5.6). Moreover Nigel (Head Dep’t C) noted that the local and regional meanings excluded the firms with national and international scope that he works with (Table 3, 5.7).

At Meeting 24, the executive team met to finalize the change objectives before seeking approval from Council (see Table 3, episode 7). While objectives and targets had been set for the Research and

Teaching strategies, hardly any had been assigned to Community Engagement. The various fragmented meanings, arising from different participants' experiences, could not be accommodated within the proposed strategy. Again attempts at generating a joint account stalled as participants continued to propose alternative meanings, none of which gained any traction. As Thomas (Head Dep't A) pointed out

"I don't feel that we're clear enough yet, as a university or as a school, on what that means. ... It still seems to me to mean lots of different things to lots of different people and it still seems to me that there are not clear targets yet in that area" (Interview 56, Stage 4)

***Finalizing the strategy with a lack of agreement about meanings.*** The continuous struggles for meaning resulted in a lack of agreement on what actions were encompassed within the proposed strategy. Despite the remaining lack of agreement about the term, or an understanding of "*how we balance a local agenda with an international agenda*" (Table 3, Thomas/Head Dep't A, 6.2), participants conceded "*I don't know if there is more we can do*" (Table 3, 6.2). Eventually, reflecting the temporal process of planning, the opportunity to develop a joint account had passed. By Meeting 24 and 25 (Table 3, episodes 6 and 7), participants agreed to sign off the strategy, despite lack of agreement about the Community Engagement strategy and, hence, no specific objectives or targets. It remained in the plan as a high level mission only.

Even at the final meeting with Council, scheduled to approve the new strategy, participants yet again noted that an all-encompassing meaning for Community Engagement had not been established. Michael wished that the term had been expanded so as "*to have the word regional in here*" (Table 3, 7.1), while the VC called the potential combination of local and global profiles "*still contradictory*" (Table 3, 7.6). Nonetheless, Senate approved Unico's strategies after the top team and Council meetings (see Meetings 24 and 25, Table 3 [6], [7]). There was collective acknowledgment that there was no agreement about the meanings that were encompassed within the proposed strategy. After the meeting, John (Director of Community Engagement) reflected upon the terms' ongoing ambiguity:

"Community engagement was a phrase that perhaps people didn't fully appreciate what it meant. And we've got to be absolutely clear when we talk about third stream, community engagement, business participation, commercialization, whatever and we've got to get that more clearly articulated inside the university, in terms of a set of strategic objectives going forward that tells people exactly what we're going to be doing and how we're going to be doing it." (Interview 60)

Even several months after Unico's strategy was officially rolled out, the search for a joint account continued. In comparison to the Research and Teaching strategy, the deputy secretary pointed out that the area of "*Community engagement [is] a lot more woolly, a lot more broad I think is the word*" (Interview 71). An ongoing lack of agreement constrained future actions, as Thomas (Head Dep't A) noted

"I still feel it's the area where we're not clear enough in terms of a strategy about what we want to do and how we want to do it. There's lots of good ideas there about being on committees and influencing business and so on, but I don't ... I'm not really clear that I see an action plan for how to get there." (Interview 70)

## DISCUSSION

Existing research, despite competing assumptions about the need for shared meaning or the ongoing coexistence of meanings, emphasizes the challenge of getting diverse organizational constituents to agree about a proposal for change that signals a shift in an organization's meaning system (Bartunek 1984; Corley & Gioia 2004; Sonenshein 2010). Reaching such agreement is particularly challenging in pluralistic settings where diverse constituents have conflicting vested interests and multiple prevailing meanings (Brown 1995; Denis et al. 2001). Our findings contribute to knowledge about meaning-making in pluralistic contexts by showing how such diverse actors can arrive at a joint account that bridges their multiple *prevailing meanings* and the *new meanings* conveyed in the proposed strategy (see A, Figure 1). When a new strategy is introduced, it initiates micro processes of meaning-making by the different parties involved in the proposed change (see B, Figure 1). These micro processes of expanding, combining and reframing meaning play out in different ways, that either enable the development of a joint account and fosters agreement to the proposed strategy (see C, Pattern 1, Figure 1) or constrains the development of a joint account so stalling agreement (see C, Pattern 2, Figure 1).

### ***INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE***

These two different patterns of meaning-making have conceptual implications for enabling – or stalling – the development of a joint account and, hence, agreement to a proposed new strategy. In order to develop a joint account it is necessary to accommodate coexisting meanings of a proposed change, which will comprise multiple prevailing meanings and new meanings. The micro processes involved in attempts to accommodate coexisting meanings vary according to whether the multiple prevailing meanings are grounded in a strongly or weakly institutionalized strategy. When new meanings are

proposed in the context of a strongly institutionalized strategy (Pattern 1, Figure 1), participants hold strongly vested, albeit different, interests that are grounded in their diverse community roles and identities, and which they require to be recognized and retained in the new strategy. Successive iterations of expanding and combining over many conversational episodes thus take place, which might even appear as a form of resistance. These iterations reinforce the need for the new meaning to coexist with, rather than replace, the prevailing meanings. The ensuing dynamics may prompt a change in the existing terminology if it is unable to expand to cover, or combine these meanings. Acceptance of a new strategic initiative thus involves reframing the strategy in a way that enables both the new and the multiple prevailing meanings to coexist within a joint account of the proposed strategy (see C, Figure 1). This joint account, which accommodates multiple, competing meanings and maintains a link to existing activities and interests helps to foster agreement to the new strategy.

By contrast, the micro processes of meaning-making vary in the context of a weakly institutionalized strategy (Pattern 2, Figure 1). In this context, participants' prevailing meanings are grounded in their individual experiences rather than in known community roles and identities. Hence few vested interests arise that demand the acknowledgement of such roles and identities. Rather, successive iterations of expanding and combining fragment the possible meanings about a new strategy and dilute insistence on any particular meaning or counter meaning. Without strong claims from prevailing meanings, or insistence that they coexist with the new meanings, multiple meanings abound but are difficult to bring together in a joint account. The meaning-making process may fail to reach agreement (which is not disagreement!) about which diverse meanings are encompassed within a proposed strategy, thus the search of a joint account continues.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

Our study makes three important contributions to theorizing about the processes of meaning-making. First, we advance understanding about the *coexistence* of new and prevailing meanings in the context of change (Corley & Gioia 2004; Sonenshein 2010; Tsoukas & Chia 2002). Predominantly, studies have considered coexisting meanings as part of a transition phase during organizational change suggesting that prevailing meanings are replaced with new meanings (Corley & Gioia 2004; Gioia et al. 2013; Fiss & Zajac 2006), albeit recognizing some modifications (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004; 2005). Such studies suggest that agreement to change requires the development of shared meaning (Bartunek 1984; Gioia &

Chittipeddi 1991; Lewin 1951). Instead of this transition to a new shared meaning, our study demonstrates that the meaning-making process is characterized by continuous efforts to accommodate multiple, coexisting meanings, which may not be shared. We thus develop the concept of a joint account. By focusing on the establishment (or not) of a joint account scholars can study the process by which multiple meanings may be accommodated and able to coexist, rather than assuming the transition from one shared meaning to another. The need to accommodate, instead of replace, multiple prevailing meanings is critical in a joint account as it allows participants to preserve their diverse identities and roles. Such insights extend Sonenshein's (2010) identification of simultaneous change and stability narratives as employees made sense of and embraced a retailer's change implementation. Specifically, we identify those micro processes – expanding, combining and reframing – through which a joint account may be established that enables the coexistence of multiple prevailing meanings alongside the new meanings about a proposed change (e.g. Pattern 1). We also show those conditions under which such coexistence may be constrained, which in turn inhibits the development of a joint account (e.g. Pattern 2).

Second, our concept of meaning-making as attempting to develop a joint account advances understanding about the role of vested interests in generating agreement to change in plurivocal contexts (Barry & Elmes 1997; Buchaon & Dawson 2007; Denis et al. 1996, 2001). In such contexts, prevailing meanings comprise more than a single 'dominant' meaning system, so raising queries about how an agreement to change may be fostered across multiple constituents (e.g. Brown 1998; Donnellon et al. 1986; Sonenshein 2010). Our study elaborates on existing research by demonstrating the influence of vested interests on how actors from diverse communities coalesce around agreement or resistance to a proposal to change. To date vested interests have largely been considered as the province of one or another set of actors, such as top managers who use them to exert influence over others' meanings (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991; Kaplan, 2008), or organizational members who use them to resist proposed changes (e.g. Brown 1998; Thomas & Davies 2005). Such studies tend to assume the promotion of one set of interests by suppressing, resisting or converting the interests of others (see Lukes 1974). Our study goes beyond the use of vested interests by one or more groups of actors, to showing the dynamics through which they play out in the institutionalized meaning systems of an organization (Hardy & Thomas 2014). While strongly institutionalized meaning systems have been deemed resistant to change (Jarzabkowski 2008), we show that they can be productive in enabling actors to articulate their prevailing

meanings. These prevailing meanings are not simply a basis for resistance or influence by a particular group of actors (e.g. Brown 1998; Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991), but rather, form the basis for developing a joint account that encompasses these actors' varied meanings. While such meanings may not be shared, the meaning-making process fosters agreement to the proposed change; all participants can see themselves within the joint account of that change. We therefore suggest that establishing a joint account is an important precursor to agreement to change, and that this is actually facilitated by strongly institutionalized meaning systems. By contrast, weakly institutionalized strategies may have a constraining effect, because participants lack strongly embedded prevailing meanings or collectively held vested interests from which to attribute meaning to a proposed strategy.

Our findings on vested interests also contribute to debates about the role of ambiguity in facilitating or constraining meaning-making (Abdallah & Langley 2014; Denis et al. 1996; Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991; Corley & Gioia 2004; Sillince et al. 2012; Sonenshein 2010). Previous studies suggest that ambiguity either constitutes a strategic tool, which can be manipulated to co-opt participation in a new strategy (Eisenberg 1984, Sillince et al. 2012), or frustrates efforts at meaning-making (e.g., Sonenshein 2010). Our study shows that ambiguous terminology may be neither the servant of top managers, who use it to persuade others to pursue a common goal (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991), nor a means of satisfying multiple constituents' goals (e.g., Sillince et al. 2012). Rather ambiguity constitutes a fluid, unfolding accomplishment, as ambiguous terminology is discussed and modified in order to accommodate participants' multiple meanings. Hence, in contrast to the concept of ambiguity as a tool to manipulate meaning (e.g. Brown 1995; Eisenberg, 1984; Sillince et al. 2012), our study offers a more nuanced understanding about the iterative association between ambiguity and meaning-making. In our study, ambiguous framing of a proposed strategy *enabled* the development of a joint account as the ambiguous terminology could be modified to accommodate both strongly embedded prevailing meanings and new meanings. By contrast, ambiguity *constrained* the construction of a joint account in light of weakly institutionalized prevailing meanings, where participants continuously debated the paucity of meaning within the ambiguously framed strategy. Our study of a pluralistic context, which is particularly prone to ambiguity (Denis et al, 1996; Sillince et al. 2012), thus provides grounds for further research into the potential boundary conditions under which ambiguity may be considered productive for meaning-making.

Further, our findings on the resistance implicit in articulating vested interests offers grounds for revisiting notions of degenerative dialogue which is considered to obscure action (e.g., Thomas et al. 2011, Tsoukas 2009). In particular, our study poses an important conceptual expansion to notions of degenerative dialogue and disagreement. We show that lack of agreement may arise from ongoing efforts to establish meaning about a strategy that is couched in ambiguous terms. This lack of agreement is not necessarily disagreement, since it is not characterized by turf wars and resistance. Rather participants' are unable to generate a productive dialogue because they lack collectively held prevailing meanings for a relatively ambiguous term. Indeed, actors may acknowledge that the term remains ambiguous as they complete the formal meaning-making process. Thus we distinguish lack of agreement from disagreement, since lack of agreement may arise from dialogue that is not degenerative but merely unproductive. We therefore raise grounds for further research on the nature of disagreement. While lack of agreement is not conducive to action, as shown in our case, where participants could not progress with the various planning tasks, disagreement, by contrast, may be integral to meaning-making, as actors posit alternative meanings and push for their incorporation in the joint account. Thus our study offers new insights for debates on disagreement as degenerative (e.g., Tsoukas 2009; Thomas et al. 2011) versus theories that posit resistance as critical for establishing a common framework of understanding (e.g., Balogun et al. 2011; Ford et al. 2008). In counterpoint to both sides of this debate, our findings show that, while resistance arising from strongly vested interests can be productive in gaining acceptance of an initiative, lack of agreement, even apart from degenerative dialogue, may fail to generate sufficient momentum for acceptance of a strategic initiative.

Third, our study introduces a joint account as a novel concept that explains how meaning is negotiated across diverse organizational actors, that enables them to agree to a proposed change without necessarily assuming they hold shared meanings. Our focus upon those situations within which a joint account is negotiated across a diverse range of organizational members thus goes beyond the largely binary approach taken in much research on meaning-making. By examining those situations in which diverse actors come together, we depart from the separation of participants by their role, hierarchical level or function (e.g. Floyd & Lane, 2000; Mantere & Vaara 2008; Wooldridge & Floyd 1989), which often characterizes actors as either change initiators, who give meaning, and change recipients (Farjoun 2010; Sonnenshein & Dholakia 2012) who are portrayed as adopting (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991), resisting

(e.g. Maitlis & Lawrence 2003; Sillince & Mueller 2007), or modifying (e.g. Balogun & Johnson 2004; 2005) the received meanings. This largely binary focus on meanings given and/or received has constrained the study of meaning-making; neglecting those situations where actors come together to accomplish a joint account that encompasses the meanings negotiated between them. Our study, by introducing the concept of joint account, thus extends recent work and furthers calls to examine meaning-making processes that involve interactions between top *and* middle managers/employees (Balogun et al. 2015; Sonenshein & Dholakia 2012; Thomas et al. 2011).

**Boundary conditions.** As our study is based on a typical pluralistic setting, we expect our conceptual framework to apply to other pluralistic contexts, such as other universities, hospitals, arts organizations, or governmental agencies that face multiple vested interests amongst relatively powerful professional constituents (e.g., Denis et al. 1996, 2001; Maitlis & Lawrence 2003; Oakes et al. 1998). Further, a pluralistic setting may amplify particular aspects of our findings. First, pluralistic organizations are prone to ostensibly democratic decision-making in order to allow multiple constituents' demands and interests to be voiced, which increases the need for joint meaning-making processes (Brown 1995; Cohen & March 1973; Denis et al. 2001). In pluralistic contexts, the analytic separation of participants, for instance differentiating the meaning-making processes of top or middle managers, is less valid, since one group does not impart meaning to others who need to make sense of it (Denis et al. 2001; Sillince et al. 2012). Our context is thus particularly appropriate for addressing calls to consider how participants enact multiple roles in making meaning about strategic change (Balogun et al. 2015). Second, findings from our study point to a tension and compromise that is particularly salient when introducing and managing strategic change in pluralistic organizations. The preservation of prevailing meanings to satisfy vested interests may modify the proposed strategy to the extent that it constrains radical strategic change. Speculating from our findings, we suggest that while coexisting meanings may reduce resistance to change, preserving and accommodating these prevailing meanings may dilute the scope of change, which is particularly detrimental in situations requiring a radical departure from the status quo.

## CONCLUSION

Our study provides a relatively rare glimpse into the formulation phase of a strategic initiative (see also Aggerholm, Asmuß & Thomsen 2013, Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991). It thus complements and extends those studies that have largely focused on meaning-making during the execution of imposed changes (e.g.,

Balogun & Johnson 2004, Sonenshein 2010). Our study lays the groundwork for future research that might span the processes involved in both formulating and executing a strategic initiative. Such research could examine whether a joint account of meaning established during strategy formulation translates into particular courses of action over time. Furthermore, in eliciting the way that stages of a formal process shape the construction of a joint account, we raise the opportunity for other scholars to examine the temporal nature of meaning-making as it is entwined with the tasks and activities that are specified within formal and time-bounded processes, such as strategic planning, or policy consultation processes.

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**Table 1: Data sources**

| <b>Data Sources</b>        | <b>Month 1</b> | <b>Month 2-6</b> | <b>Month 7-8</b> | <b>Month 9</b> | <b>Month 10-11</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|----------------------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------|
| Meetings                   | 2              | 17               | 2                | 1              | 3                  | 25           |
| Versions of strategic plan | 1              | 5                | 2                | 1              | 1                  | 10           |
| Interviews                 | 1              | 32               | 15               | 5              | 23                 | 76           |

**Table 2: Conversational episodes – Research strategy**

| Conversational episodes across multiple meetings (Extracts 1 to 6) <sup>1</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Micro processes                                                                                                                                                                                            | Creating a joint account                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>1. <i>Stage 1 - Meeting 1, Month 1, Plan V1. Launching Unico's strategic initiative at the top team meeting, the focus is on developing Unico's strategic directions based on a set of bullet points put together by the VC and DVC and previously circulated as V1 of the Plan. In this extract the team is discussing the research objectives. The team has agreed that one key focus is to increase research income because Unico is still too dependent on its teaching income. They are now discussing what is implied by the research objective on 'translational research'.</i></p> <p>1.1. <u>Sam/Head Dep't B</u>: Strategies to increase income are important but, looking at this [he points to the paper], we need to think what translational research implies.</p> <p>1.2. <u>VC</u>: We should create research centers pooling researchers across disciplines and departments in order to increase research income. This will ensure that our research is commercially valuable to businesses and industry partners.</p> <p>1.3. <u>Sam</u>: Well, we still need to balance fundamental and translational research. Often the fundamental blue skies research has the rigor that is the start of the pipeline that leads to translation. Should the strategic direction recognize this in some way?</p> <p>1.4. <u>Susi/Head Dep't D</u>: I think that some of my colleagues may be seen as lone scholars and therefore will be disadvantaged through this focus.</p> <p>1.5. <u>Thomas/Head Dep't A</u>: I agree. We should ensure that lone researchers still feel supported despite our focus on research being transferable to industry. I understand Susi's concern about how we can word this; it's a difficult one.</p> <p>1.6. <u>Susi</u>: I'm far more comfortable now with the focus of our research activity.</p> <p>1.7. <u>DVC</u>: It is important that other colleagues from across the university have a chance to contribute, but it is looking very good.</p> | <p><u>Possibilities:</u><br/>Initiate <i>expanding</i> to accommodate 'fundamental research' (Sam, 1.3).<br/>Initiate <i>expanding</i> to recognize 'lone researcher' within (Susi, 1.4; Thomas, 1.5).</p> | <p>Proposed strategy <i>dismisses</i> and <i>marginalizes</i> prevailing meanings, particularly fundamental, blue skies research and the lone researcher.</p> |
| <p>2. <i>Stage 2 - Meeting 5, Month 2, Plan V2. The top team discusses phrasing of the proposed strategy (Plan V2) with a view to then disseminate more widely for comment in the University. Earlier in the meeting, they came up with the phrase Centers of Excellence for all the key directions and have been phrasing the document accordingly. After this meeting Plan V3 is developed and the term 'Center of Excellence in Translational Research' is incorporated.</i></p> <p>2.1. <u>DVC</u>: So we are going to make this one 'Center of Excellence in Translational Research'.</p> <p>2.2. <u>Nigel/Head Dep't C</u>: Yes, we want to encourage excellence but I'm not sure if this one is clear ...</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <p><u>Possibilities:</u><br/>Initiate <i>expanding</i> to accommodate 'accessible research' (2.4, Susi)<br/>Possible <i>expansion</i> to accommodate "our</p>                                              | <p>The proposed strategy <i>expands</i> to encompass accessible research which reinforced the goal to "make more income"</p>                                  |

<sup>1</sup> Extracts in Table 2 illustrate conversational episodes across meetings

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2.3. <u>Thomas/Head Dep't A</u> : [interrupting] But we are calling them all excellence, so this one has too ... but yes, I see, how does it fit with our other research aims; what is it?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | other research aims” (Thomas, 2.3).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | (DVC, 2.6). Yet, a joint account remains <i>absent</i> as it neglects prevailing meanings (Thomas, 2.3).                                                                                                                             |
| 2.4. <u>Susi/Head Dep't D</u> : Well is it about getting our research out there, making sure it can be used by people, I think; is it accessible research?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 2.5. <u>VC</u> : And so people across disciplines can see that research needs to be more accessible.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 2.6. <u>DVC</u> : I don't know ... it's linked to our aim to make more income; we certainly want excellence in that [chuckles]!<br><i>ALL LAUGH and move on to phrasing the next objective as a Center of Excellence</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 3. <i>Stage 2 - Meeting 6, Month 2, Plan V3. The DVC consults with Department D to gather feedback on the trajectory within the proposed strategy. Participants have had the Plan for 3 weeks. The DVC presents the proposed directions at the start of the meeting and situates Unico as a 'research-intensive' University that needs to generate more research funding if it wants to maintain that reputation. Therefore, the DVC emphasizes, 'We need to dramatically increase our research income'. The conversational episode is unfolding over discussion of 'A Center of Excellence in Translational Research'.</i> | <u>Possibilities:</u><br>Initiate <i>expanding</i> to applied research (David, 3.1; Pierre, 3.3).<br>-> rejected to protect proposed meaning (DVC, 3.4)<br>Initiate <i>expanding</i> to accommodate blue skies research (Jorge, 3.5) and the lone researcher (Jorge, 3.5; Susi, 3.7). | While recognizing the constraints of the proposed strategy to accommodate prevailing meanings (DVC, 3.4, 3.6), a joint account remains absent as it <i>discards</i> the lone researcher as well as fundamental, blue skies research. |
| 3.1. <u>David/Academic</u> : I actually wondered if this was a slip, instead of transnational, because I was surprised that my department's research into translation was the focus of the strategic direction. So I'm not sure what translational means. Is it something about relevance or applied research?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 3.2. <u>DVC</u> : Research will be translational, meaning that it makes a difference. It can be translated to make a difference.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 3.3. <u>Pierre/Academic</u> : I also wondered how the implications of this term differ from the traditional and more familiar emphasis on 'applied' research?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 3.4. <u>DVC</u> : Yeah, I can see that "Translational" may not be the right word for research that is commercially viable.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 3.5. <u>Jorge/Academic</u> : Well, I strongly feel about safeguarding blues skies research and also the individual research project of the scholar in the humanities.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 3.6. <u>DVC</u> : Yeah. It's difficult to explain how it differs from the University's traditional scientific research or our other emphasis on relevant research ...                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 3.7. <u>Susi/Head Dep't D</u> : ... (breaking in) or to recognize the expertise of the lone researchers.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 3.8. <u>DVC</u> : We ... yes, okay, yes ... we respect different research traditions and cultures.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 4. <i>Stage 2 - Meeting 9, Month 3, Plan V3. The DVC, invites Department B to gather feedback on the trajectory within the proposed strategy. See description of meeting 6, conversational episode 3.</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <u>Possibilities:</u><br>Initiate <i>expanding</i> to accommodate blue skies research (Adam, 4.1; Omar, 4.3).<br><i>Rejecting</i> a pure focus on commercially viable                                                                                                                 | Despite recognizing the exclusion of prevailing meanings e.g. DVC, 4.4), the proposed strategy                                                                                                                                       |
| 4.1. <u>Adam/Academic</u> : What is the balance between fundamental and translational research? How is blue skies research recognized within the direction?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 4.2. <u>William/Academic</u> : May I add to that, fundamental research is more publishable; you need scientific rigor for leading academic journals. If we reduce fundamental research we could have a drop in the number of articles                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

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| <p>published in top journals and our citations. That would be bad for our position in the RAE [UK research assessment exercise]. We need to keep a balance between fundamental and translational research.</p> <p>4.3. <u>Omar/Academic</u>: It's not just about relevance or income. We need to be careful ... not to damage publishing</p> <p>4.4. <u>DVC</u>: Indeed! It's important at all times to recognize the impact and importance of measurable research quality on overall and subject-based league tables and rankings, especially in attracting international students. If our Translational Research does not get a "high score" in rankings etc it may not work in our favor in relation to our national and regional competitors and to increase our international research profile.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <p>research (Omar, 4.3)</p> <p>Demanding to <i>combine</i> fundamental research and translational research to continue striving for excellence.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <p>remains unchanged. The need to encompass fundamental, blue skies research intensifies strengthening the <i>absence</i> of a joint account.</p>                                                                           |
| <p>5. <i>Stage 2 -Meeting 11, Month 4, Plan V4. The top team and key departmental representatives from across Unico discuss the proposed strategy (Plan V4), which participants have had for 3 weeks. All these participants have been involved in prior meetings. At the start the VC situates the meeting as finalizing the strategic directions; 'What differentiates us'? and 'Is there anything on here [pointing to the plan] that we should not be doing? If so, what and why not?'. This conversational episode is about the objective 'A Center of Excellence in Translational Research'.</i></p> <p>5.1. <u>DVC</u>: The current view that we've been developing is that a lot of our research is what we would call translational in nature. Now that doesn't mean to say that it's applied, it doesn't mean to say that it's just consultancy work, that we're not interested in research which is of a high quality internationally, including blue skies research, but most of the research that's done here will have application eventually. And so it's of a high international quality and rigor but it also has a high degree of relevance and to the extent that some of it will eventually be commercialized and will turn into products and services that will be of value to society either tomorrow or in ten or even fifteen years' time. So is that right? Is that what really differentiates the research at Unico or is there something else that differentiates it.</p> <p>5.2. <u>William/Head of Administration</u>: What differentiates us positively is applied research and relevant research activity, but ironically in that context low research income, and to our shame to some extent. It's almost a contradiction because if we're doing relevant and applied research we ought to be able to be bringing in the funding and the money for it. Though, there is concern about the term translational research. I feel this need defining. ...</p> <p>5.3. <u>Ian/Academic Dep't B</u>: The understanding of translational varies quite significantly, whether it be translating from German to English or ... relevance, you know, taking something from the bench to the bedside. I think we have to move away from that term. Because if we have to translate the term to everybody, then it's not going to be easily graspable in terms of what is our research expertise. It may limit the understanding of external bodies in terms of</p> | <p><u>Possibilities</u>:</p> <p>Rejecting the association with applied research, which is seen as "second-hand research" (Jeff, 5.4). Initiate <i>expanding</i> to accommodate prevailing meanings (William, 5.2; Ian, 5.3; Jeff, 5.4). The term 'translational' constrains <i>combining</i> multiple meanings within the proposed meaning.</p> <p><i>Reframing</i> occurs through a proposition to combine a commercial focus of research outputs with scientific, rigorous blue skies research.</p> | <p>To create a joint account, the proposed strategy was modified to encompass multiple prevailing meanings, while at the same including the new meaning aimed at increasing income by commercializing research outputs.</p> |

what we actually do, and it may not engage even for the departments. So, move away from a single research term and perhaps just aim for excellence.

- 5.4. Jeff/Academic Dep't B: The translational bit seems to imply taking someone else's research, bodying it together and making something else. It's second-hand research; not rigorous. It's not what Unico should be assimilated with.
- 5.5. DVC: But it's research that then gets translated or applied to creating better social conditions for people, developing new interventions in healthcare, developing new interventions in terms of organizational effectiveness and so on. So I would term it as rigorous but relevant ...

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| <p>6. <i>Stage 2 - Meeting 12, Month 4, Plan V5. To commence the meeting with representatives from departments across Unico, the DVC instantiates the previous discussions as he introduces the new wording of the proposed strategy. The proposed strategy now represents the emphasis on rigor and relevance that arose in the previous meetings, which now reads "A Centre of Excellence in Rigorous, Relevant Research".</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <p>6.1. <u>DVC</u>: We've been having some problems getting the right adjective here, we started off talking about translational research and that created in many peoples' minds an image that we were just interested in research which was purely applied and wasn't going to be pushing back the frontiers of knowledge, wasn't going to be world-class and world-leading research. That's not actually what we intended by it, so we've been playing around with some other adjectives and I'm not sure we've completely got this right yet, so any suggestions would be very welcome. But what we're trying to convey in the research strategy is that the research does need to be world-leading and world-class research, but it's also research which is relevant and it is research which finds application and can be used. ... it is that it is rigorous, it is world-leading research but it is relevant. So it's rigor and relevance ...</p> | <p><i>Reframing</i> combines the rationale of the proposed meaning 'relevant' with the prevailing meanings of Unico's strongly institutionalized strategy.</p> | <p>A joint account was created that encompassed previously competing meanings around fundamental, blue skies research <i>and</i> commercializable research.</p> |
| <p>There is some nodding about this wording but no response and the meeting moves to the next statement</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                 |

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**Table 3: Conversational episodes – Community Engagement strategy**

| Conversational instances across multiple meetings (Extract 1 to 7)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Micro processes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Creating a joint account                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
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| <p>1. <i>Stage 1 - Meeting 1, Month 1 Plan V1. Kicking-off the strategic initiative at the top team meeting. The focus is on developing Unico's proposed strategy put together by the VC and DVC. In this extract the team is discussing what 'Community Engagement' covers.</i></p> <p>1.1. <u>VC</u>: It's really important to reengage with the community; right from the schools ... and I also think it's hugely motivating for the staff and the students who get involved with that kind of thing. ... we should, we are right in the middle of the city. So we've got to start being more visible in the community and there's a whole range of things we could do and there's a big regeneration agenda for [UK city] and the [UK region] which is a big local agenda, it's also a big national agenda, and I think we will benefit hugely from being part of it but also from being seen to be part of it. Because I do actually think projecting with the work we do, projecting that and making more of it. So these are some of the sorts of things'.</p> <p>1.2. <u>DVC</u>: We do a lot of this already; we've got the Science Park next door, and staff are doing work with the Regional Skills initiative. You know I think we have a presence in the region.</p> <p>1.3. <u>Thomas/Head Dep't A</u>: One of the issues is do we focus on our regional capability or do we look at ourselves as an international operator? HSBC seem to have a problem like that, they style themselves as an international bank locally, and I think that there is a trade-off there. We've got to get the message right on that particular point otherwise we'll fall between the two.</p> <p>1.4. <u>Sam/Head Dep't B</u>: Mmm. It's what stage we want to figure on ... but I think it's both. I think we need to ensure that our contribution locally is world class.</p> <p>1.5. <u>VC</u>: I think we should start with reconsidering the committees that colleagues are currently members of. What are the key bodies we need to be represented on to become part of regenerating [UK city] and [UK region]?</p> <p>1.6. <u>Thomas</u>: Well, yes, that would include, say, the Chamber of Commerce or the City Council ... but people are also on national things, like the Institute for Asian Business.</p> <p>1.7. <u>Sam</u>: How about we summarize this in a bullet point along the lines of "Engaging strongly with local and regional communities'. We would need to think about that ... identify how it works with specific communities</p> <p>1.8. <u>DVC</u>: Is anyone taking notes of this, I will copy that [laughing, <i>as he notes down the discussion and they move on to the next bullet point; strategic objective</i>].</p> | <p><u>Possibilities:</u><br/>Initiate <i>expanding</i> to include an international dimension to Community Engagement (Thomas, 1.3).<br/>Raise the need to <i>combine</i> the local/regional meaning with an international dimension (Sam, 1.4).<br/>Initiate <i>expanding</i> to accommodate engagement at a national level (Thomas, 1.6).</p> | <p><i>Absence</i> of an existing joint account due to new emphasis of activities. Proposed strategy neglects multiple prevailing meanings that pertain to activities at a national or international level. The proposed strategy <i>expands</i> to accommodate activities at the regional level (cf., Sam, 1.4). The DVC and VC reinforced local meaning <i>discarding</i> a national or international dimension within the proposed strategy.</p> |
| <p>2. <i>Stage 2 - Meeting 12, Month 4, Plan V5. This is a strategy day with representatives from departments across Unico. The following</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <p><u>Possibilities:</u><br/>Initiate <i>expanding</i> to</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <p>Recognition of the "tension" between a</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

discussion occurs about Community Engagement which is, following meeting 5 in Month 2, expressed like other objectives as “A Center of Excellence in Community Engagement”. The DVC asks participants to think about ‘things that we could do more effectively to improve on the regional engagement’.

- 2.1. DVC: People have mentioned that there is a local global, like HSBC approach, tension in a way. I think, actually there’s also an opportunity as community engagement doesn’t have to be just local, it can indeed be something for which we could be internationally known.
- 2.2. Gina/Academic Dep’t C: For Unico to grow and succeed, a national profile in recruiting students, undergraduate and postgraduate, is essential. Being seen as a “local” University has negative connotations both for the local and national/international markets. We should also focus our research efforts towards “local” businesses, developing local partnerships and collaborative working ... all pulling toward the goal of regenerating the [UK region]. Yet, we’ve got to be careful about a tension between on the one hand a commitment to research regionally and support and international research.
- 2.3. DVC: Okay and we need to improve our regional engagement?
- 2.4. Jack/Academic Dep’t B: Engagement with local companies and communities comes up a lot with [our] environmental research [the research done in his Department] so we’ve had projects where we kind of look at carbon footprinting of local communities and villages and more general questions about environmental impact. So that seems to be a way in which our research activities naturally lead into local from what we’re doing in our department ... we give a lot of continuous professional development short courses for the Asian caterers and other caterers in the community and that’s tremendously ... but it’s not high-level stuff, it’s fairly low-level stuff, would you consider this as engaging with the community?
- 2.5. VC: Yeah, well I think it’s a good area for strengthening our local engagement, yes.

3. *Stage 2 – Meeting 13, Month 5, Plan V5. Strategy day for members of Council, who are the Board that will ultimately sign off the change objectives. The following discussion is about the statement ‘A Center of Excellence in Community Engagement’. To establish the remit of the discussion, the VC asks delegates to help tackle ‘how do we improve our engagement with business and industry partners?’.*

- 3.1. Daniel/non-executive Council member: What does this community engagement actually mean? Engagement with you know, with [UK City] and the region, doesn’t that make us a less international university? And how do we balance our international profile with our kind of local profile?
- 3.2. VC: Well, other universities managed to deal with it successfully, like at [Competitor University] and [Competitor University] there is agreement that it is not an either or but an AND between regional and international, but it is also a challenge to achieve.
- 3.3. Simon/non-executive Council member: I feel that we’ve got to identify what it is we could offer to businesses. I

accommodate a national and international profile to community engagement. Initiate *expanding* to accommodate *personal* research and teaching *experiences* (e.g., Jack, 2.4).

local and international focus *constraining* a joint account (e.g. DVC, 2.1). Proposed strategy *expands* to accommodate situated research and teaching experiences. *Calculated engagement* reinforced the local (VC, 2.5) and regional (DVC, 2.3) meaning but continues to *discard* a national or international dimension.

Possibilities:

Initiate *expanding* to include medium-sized companies (Lynne, 3.4).  
Initiate *expanding* to create clarity around the nature of engagement (Simon, Lynne).  
Initiate *expanding* to accommodate Unico’s

While recognizing the *tension* around prevailing meanings (Unico’s national and international profile) and the new emphasis and focus on local/regional “it is not an either or but an AND” (VC, 3.2), a joint account remains *absent* as participants struggle to

mean, the fact that my small company, has now linked up with [University in different region]. I have because they came to my door and offered me free an innovation challenge program of fantastic quality, and I'm in the middle of experiencing it and it really is something. And I think what we need here is ... it's not just about getting the profile of Unico being a great university and a great place to be in business, it's to go further and say this is what Unico can offer you business people, for example we can offer you placements, we can offer you consultancy. What else could we offer to local businesses? Because if you can be clear about what Unico is and what its offer is, then you can really maximize your impact.

- 3.4. Lynne/non-executive Council member: Well, I think that raises another question ... if it's big business, larger companies are reasonably adept at working out where best to go for their ... where they want to collaborate around things ... The more difficult area continually is how you engage the sort of medium end ... it's that vast bulk of medium sized companies, how do you get them and sell the message to them? I come back to clarity of strategy, and these people can get an early assessment of what the University believes itself to be good at and can demonstrate what it's good at.
- 3.5. VC: It's the middle range companies that are the most under-supported in many ways, and how to get those kind of things going forward. So, should we be more selective in our targeting? Should we be saying, you know, it's the middle size companies in particular sectors that we think our skills particularly match? Let's really be very proactive in going for them rather than maybe spreading ourselves a bit more thinly?
- 3.6. DVC: Good points raised that we will need to be discussing further. But I'm going to have to move us on otherwise you won't get any tea later on.

international profile, which creates difficulty to *combine* with a local and regional dimension of community engagement (Daniel, 3.1).

accommodate their multiple meanings within the proposed strategy. Closing down the surfacing of multiple meanings [*calculated engagement*] stalls any further discussion that may remove ambiguity around who and how to engage (DVC, 3.6).

4. *Stage 3 - Meeting 20, Month 7, Plan V7. A top team meeting to finalize the terminology of the plan, in preparation for focused discussions that are to take place with wider University constituents. The DVC initiates discussion with; 'Let's move on with Community Engagement ... are there any issues?' as he indicates the statement 'A Center of Excellence in Community Engagement'.*

- 4.1. Thomas/Head Dep't A: Just a comment about the strategy, this is the area that I find most amorphous always and that I have most difficulty translating into; 'well what would we do in our department?' I mean of course we're doing things, but I have difficulty translating this into what we need to be doing.
- 4.2. DVC: I think this is an area where we would value some brainstorming as to how do we actively become more engaged in the community and what do we mean by the community, is it restricted to local or is it national, international?
- 4.3. VC: Well this definitely means the sort of city, the regional community, this is about engaging with where we are.
- 4.4. DVC: That's where we start from, yeah.
- 4.5. VC: This is not about engaging internationally, although there may well be an engaging internationally element in

#### Possibilities:

Initiation to *expand* in order to accommodate an international dimension to community engagement is *rejected*. Difficulty to suggest alternatives on how to *expand* the proposed strategy due to the absence

Agreement around a lack of *combination* between a local/regional focus and Unico's international profile undermines the creation of a joint account. Delegating any further discussion to create clarity on the definition (DVC, 4.2), maintained the *exclusion* of an

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| comparing what's happening in the city region here with what's happening in Sweden and things. But if this gets extended to being international engagement it's not the subject that we meant it to be.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | of a joint account (e.g. Thomas, 4.1).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | international dimension to the proposed strategy (VC, 4.5).                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <p>5. <i>Stage 4 - Meeting 22, Month 9, Plan V9. Strategy day for wider constituents with key roles, who participated in previous meetings. This meeting is to work out how to measure the objectives that have been agreed. The following extract is about 'A Center of Excellence in Community Engagement' where John, a top team member responsible for the development of Community Engagement across Unico, started a discussion on 'how we're going to engage with the community?'.</i></p> <p>5.1. <u>Hans/Academic Dep't A</u>: So what are your priorities, would you say, for engaging with the community? Where would you say we should be spending ... you know, in this sort of remit, what are the ...?</p> <p>5.2. <u>Nigel/Head Dep't C</u>: That's it. What you ask is engagement with the community. But what this is ... there is already an objective for regional engagement, which is bigger than just the community. Well, it depends how you define community.</p> <p>5.3. <u>Sam/Head Dep't B</u>: Yeah, but let's say region. You know, that'll be one part of the community; within the region.</p> <p>5.4. <u>Susi/Head Dep't D</u>: There are big issues around why do we ... and if we're going to do it how do we do it ... if we are engaging selected industry partners and regional governmental agencies, how do we engage with them?</p> <p>5.5. <u>John/Director for Community Engagement</u>: We need to start coordinating activities across departments to build and communicate our strength. So we should not be duplicating efforts and so that we don't have four people reporting to the [medium-sized firm] about four different initiatives of which the firm says 'Why are you coming to me four different times on three different days?'</p> <p>5.6. <u>Sam</u>: The question is not just how but why are we engaging with <i>these</i> partners, even if it's regional, it's not clear ...</p> <p>5.7. <u>Nigel</u>: And some of these firms are bigger than the region; national and international in their scope.</p> | <p><u>Possibilities:</u><br/> <i>Difficulty to expand</i> the proposed strategy around priorities and goals due to the remaining ambiguity around community (Hans, 5.1; Sam, 5.3), engagement (Hans, 5.1; Susi, 5.4), and its geographical scope (Sam, 5.3, 5.6; Nigel, 5.7).<br/>         Initiate <i>expanding</i> to accommodate activities that are of national and international scope (e.g. Nigel, 5.7)</p> | <p>Remaining ambiguity about the inclusion of prevailing meanings within the proposed strategy highlights the <i>lack</i> of a joint account and <i>constrained</i> progressing with the tasks of meeting's remit.</p>                                         |
| <p>6. <i>Stage 5 - Meeting 24, Month 10, Plan V10. This is a top team meeting where the VC has set the context as 'only specific questions please' because the aim is to finalize the plan and 'get it ready for the Council to approve it' (DVC). Participants are working quite quickly through each section of the plan, with little discussion, as each has been thoroughly discussed in prior meetings. The following discussion occurs when they get to the section on Community Engagement:</i></p> <p>6.1. <u>DVC</u>: In terms of engagement we're not; we haven't set any targets or any specific objectives.</p> <p>6.2. <u>Thomas/Head Dep't A</u>: People have not been able to ... not been comfortable with how do we balance a local agenda with an international agenda. ... So I think we had a lot of discussion about that. I don't know if there is more we can do.</p> <p>6.3. <u>VC</u>: I agree. We've discussed it at every meeting. I think we should just leave it as "A Centre of Excellence in Community Engagement".</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <p>Agreement around the failed effort to <i>combine</i> a local focus with prevailing meanings of Unico's international profile.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <p>Recognition about the <i>lack</i> of a joint account as previous attempts failed to accommodate prevailing meanings (Thomas, 6.2; VC, 6.3), which <i>constrained</i> the progression of the planning processes, e.g. to establish targets and measures.</p> |

7. *Stage 5 - Meeting 25, Month 11, Plan V10. The strategic plan was sent to every Council member for review prior to endorsing it at today's meeting. Before 'sign off', the Chairman invites final comments on the strategic directions. 'A Center of Excellence in Community Engagement' is one of the few statements that raise queries, as shown in the following discussion.*
- 7.1. Michael/non-executive Council member: What is the definition of 'community' in community engagement? I would prefer to have the word regional in there.
- 7.2. VC: Community starts from engaging with primary schools to colleges and everything in between.
- 7.3. Michael: Is community geographical?
- 7.4. VC: Yes, the City and around.
- 7.5. Michael: Could you add City region?
- 7.6. VC: It's still slightly contradictory; we want the local and global sort of ... reputation, community, I think.
- The few other points of clarification in the plan are discussed briefly, whereupon the strategic plan is endorsed in its entirety.*
- 
- Possibilities:**
- Initiate *expanding* to accommodate *personal preference* and to remove ambiguity (Michael, 7.1).
- Accepting that the proposed strategy revolves around "slightly contradictory" meanings (VC, 7.6) reinforces the status quo around a lack of a joint account.

Figure 1: a conceptual model around the creation of a joint account of meanings

