A sociological inquiry into university responses to global imperatives
ORGANIZING INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

A sociological inquiry into university responses to global imperatives

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PhD dissertation
Ghent University, Department of Sociology
Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent
Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Sociology

Academic year: 2017-2018

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The author discloses receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this dissertation: The author acknowledges financial support received from the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO), grant number G.OC42.13 N.
Снежани и Драгиши
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Chapter 3 Under review:


An earlier version presented at the 33rd EGOS Colloquium, sub-theme 65: The Organizational Origins and Consequences of Competition, Copenhagen, 5-8 July 2017.

Chapter 4 Published as:

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0169-2

Chapter 5 Forthcoming as:


Chapter 6 Published as:

Chapter 7

Published as:


https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699317739951
Preface

The university is one of the few institutions still in existence whose origins and some of the defining features are distinctly medieval. It is commonly characterized by its long legacy, professional authority, deeply institutionalized norms and values, as well as by a strong sense of identity and role in society. Throughout its centuries-long history, the university has shown great resilience to different kinds of external pressures and a remarkable ability to remain relevant. Somewhat paradoxically, the university remains the only medieval institution which has ever since the early modern period been associated with progress and discovery.

Yet, contemporary universities appear to believe they are facing unprecedented challenges. The sentiment is a commonplace not only among academics, university leaders and policy makers, but also among scholars researching universities. Universities are nowadays frequently thought of as living in turbulent times, constantly under pressure, having to conform to various standards, and not least demonstrate efficiency and responsibility, while dealing with numerous and often conflicting demands coming from an ever longer list of stakeholders. Almost as if it were a myth of sorts, “the
university is in crisis – let’s panic” narrative is challenged by almost no one and used by many for legitimating anything from renovating campus restrooms to merging whole universities.

Indeed, the world has changed. Our planet has never been as populous as it is today, yet our world never seemed as small. Today’s youth is better informed, more educated and better connected than any generation before. The information, knowledge and technology we have at our disposal are unprecedented. We communicate and travel with great ease. We have more opportunities before us and more choice (or more of the illusion thereof). We even take our opportunities and choices for granted. We have more rights and freedoms than our parents did and more than our grandparents imagined possible. Yet we strive for more. We want better options, better education and better services. We expect more from our teachers, our doctors, restaurants we visit, bank tellers, cars we drive, our mobile phones, our toasters, but also from our governments and our universities. We evaluate, rate and rank them as we go about our daily lives. We expect them – and we think rightfully so – to always perform better. What our toasters and our governments have in common are exactly these expectations we have of them: if either underperforms, we are entitled to discard it and get ourselves a better one. If we were given the choice, we would choose a Harvard over any other university, just like we would choose an Audi over a Lada. Unless, of course, we are for some reason personally attached to the latter which, while we are at it, we are not supposed to be. Our choices should be nothing but rational.

What does any of this have to do with universities? I would say – everything. Economic and bureaucratic rationality, faith in progress, justice and the empowerment of individuals are often highlighted, if not celebrated, as hallmarks of the post-Enlightenment period. As values unto themselves, they are virtually inextricable from the ontological backbone of modernity. With its roots firmly in the Western world, it is precisely this ontology that paved the way for the expansion of education and later higher education, the global institutionalization of science and professional authority and not least the ever-expanding list of individual rights and freedoms. The university has, as
it turns out, greatly contributed to the said global processes, perhaps even more than any other social institution.

However, we – higher education researchers in the first place – do not seem to be particularly concerned with how the university – either as *an institution* or as *an organization* – has shaped and continues to shape the world as we know it. Instead, we are more interested in understanding how this ever more “complex” environment affects universities. In more normative accounts, universities are frequently depicted as mere victims of things like marketization, privatization, commodification, neoliberal doctrines, rankings, competition, and so on. In other accounts, universities are seen as strategic actors – organizations “smart enough” to navigate this complexity to their advantage. And in contrast to these stand those who argue that universities simply cannot be such strategic actors because that would go against the very essence of the institution they represent.

Four years ago I embarked on my PhD journey without even being aware of these questions, let alone the tensions between them. I have spent a great deal of time since then trying to understand what they meant. Finally, today, as I type these lines, I am not sure if I could offer a satisfactory answer. However, if there is one thing I think I have learned over the past years, it is that asking the right questions is often far more valuable than all the answers in the world to the wrong ones. This dissertation is, therefore, not so much intended to give answers, as it is to challenge some of the widely-held assumptions about universities and the world which surrounds them and hopefully point to some overlooked yet pertinent questions.

J. B.

Bielefeld, November 2017
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible had there not been for the generous support, help and advice of a number of people to whom I will forever remain indebted. I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity by the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent at Ghent University (CHEGG) to dedicate myself to the exploration of the fascinating world of universities. I was even luckier to spend three years in Ghent working together with some truly amazing and unique people whom I now hold among my dearest friends.

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Jeroen, my promotor and supervisor, for the opportunity, guidance and freedom. I am grateful for what turned out to be a unique and fruitful mixture of scepticism and trust. If you thought at moments I did not know what I was doing, you were not far from the truth. Thank you for believing in and supporting my work and especially for keeping your door always open, metaphorically and literally. Marco, thank you for challenging me at every opportunity. Your insight, your meticulousness and your patience are incomparable. I know all too well how difficult and stubborn I can be. Do know one thing though –
my work and my thinking have benefitted a great deal from our discussions and your guidance as a co-promotor and colleague.

Martina, to you I am indebted for reading too many versions of most of things I’ve written, since 2009. I am especially grateful for the friendship, support and for always being there for me. Julie, my cheerleader, thank you for the unreserved encouragement to fight for what I believed in. Jelle, for the many mind-twisting discussions on ontologies and theories and all that stuff. It’s been a pleasure and a privilege.

Lisa, thank you for being the friend one can only wish for. Your generosity, patience and care are unparalleled. Meta, lisica, thank you for the contagious amounts of enthusiasm, humour and candour. Melissa, for brightening our office with graciousness and for the support both in good and not so good times. Last, but certainly not least, Freek, I am already missing your wits and our little chats during breaks. My PhD journey would have not been a fraction of what it was had it not been for all of you. The “cage” spirit is one of the kind and make sure you enjoy it while you are still there. You will miss it big time once you are out, I promise you that.

To my whole CHEGG family: thank you for the friendship, comradeship, joy, laughter and beyond. You are absolutely and always will be irreplaceable.

To my new academic family at Bielefeld University – Tobias, Leopold and Simon – thank you for welcoming me to your team. For patiently introducing me to Germany and especially to the curious world of German sociology. To you I am especially thankful for all the discussions and support in the final stages of my PhD project.

My very profound gratitude goes to the members of the Doctoral Examination Committee, Gili Drori, Simon Marginson, Henk Roose, Raf Vanderstraeten and Bart Van de Putte, as well as to Georg Krücken, of the Doctoral Advisory Committee. Thank you all for having taken the time to read, comment and discuss my doctoral dissertation. It has been a true privilege and honour.

This work would have not been what it is without a number of other friends and colleagues who have offered their thoughts, advice and criticism on one
or several parts of this dissertation (in alphabetical order): Dominik Antonowicz, Jana Baćević, Sofija Dukić, Gary Barron, Bojana Ćulum, Marija Filipović-Ožegović, David Frank, Simon Hecke, Hokyu Hwang, Markus Höllerer, Renze Kolster, Daniel Malter, Frank Meier, John Meyer, Daniel Semper, Ivana Živadinović and the anonymous reviewers assigned by journals and edited volumes to which I have submitted my papers over the past years. Your role in helping me find the all too elusive path between thoughts and words has been invaluable.

My thanks also go to the many colleagues and friends from the Department of Sociology at Ghent University, for having made my time there all the richer and more enjoyable. I am especially thankful to Astrid, Carine, Deborah and Virginie, for being there whenever I needed help in navigating the complex yet indispensable world of administration. Your professionalism, efficiency and kindness have been very much appreciated.

These acknowledgements would not be complete without thanking those who are closest to my heart.

Manuel, amore, thank you for showing me life in a light I would have never imagined possible. For all the love, inspiration, fulfilment and little daily joys. For the unconditional support and care in the most difficult moment of my life. For reminding me that, after all, life is an adventure and that adventure is a way forward. Ti amo.

Никола, Биљана и Петре, увек сте били уз мене, навијали за мене и овај успех има већу тежину јер сте ви део њега. Хвала до неба.

Мама и тата, од вас сам научила да је живот борба и да, без обзира на све, никад не одустанем. Овај докторат посвећујем вама.

Хвала.

Thank you.
Part I. Introduction
Aim

Scholars have time and again asserted that universities are, on the one hand, notorious for being resilient when externally pressured and, on the other, remarkably adaptive organizations with an inherent propensity to reinvent themselves (Becher & Kogan, 1992; Clark, 1983; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Elton, 1981; Gumport, 2000). These accounts, even though they seem to present us with some sort of a paradox, share three important assumptions: (a) there is a thing called university; (b) the university is surrounded by some kind of (external) environment; and (c) the university can respond to events in the environment.

These assumptions – as trivial as they may appear to us – are important to consider as they permeate much scholarly work on organizations in general, including that on universities. More importantly, they commonly materialize as specific imaginaries, some of which have earned a taken-for-granted status in dominant scholarly accounts. For example, depending on the strand of scholarship, in their responding to their (institutional) environment(s), organizations are assumed to be something between “cultural dopes” (or mere enactors of broader social structure) and “strategic actors”, whereby it is commonly believed that (a) the two conceptions are incompatible, but that (b) neither alone fully grasps the reality (Battilana & D’Aunno, 2009; Fligstein, 2001; Hwang & Colyvas, 2011; Weik, 2011). The said environment is in turn frequently portrayed as increasingly more “pluralistic”, “complex” or “multiplex” (Frølich, Huisman, Slipersæter, Stensaker, & Bótas, 2013; Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Raynard, 2016), whereby “pluralism” and “complexity” are conceived of in terms of tensions, conflicts and problems they bring upon organizations, effectively pressuring them to respond (Meier & Meyer, 2016).
In this dissertation I will, on the one hand, try to unpack the notion of *institutional environment* and, on the other, zoom in on how universities – as *organizations* – engage with it. I frame my contribution to the debate by relying on sociological neo-institutionalism and its world society theory in which the environment is conceived of as a site of accelerated cultural rationalization. I will argue that environmental rationalization – in which the university as *an institution* has played a vital role throughout history as a home of science and higher learning – does not lead only to universities becoming more *organized* or *rationalized* internally, as in acquiring properties of “real” organizations, as suggested by Krücken and Meier (2006); rather, paying attention to how universities relate with one another and other entities and to what end may allow us to conceive of them as *organizers* of their institutional environments. Therefore, phenomena like complexity, rankings, competition, categories, standards or national policies do not necessarily just happen to universities; instead, universities may as well be seen as actively engaged in the construction and institutionalization of these phenomena which make up the environments in which they are embedded.

**Structure**

This dissertation has three parts. The first part positions the work in the broader literature and outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework. The second part consists of five stand-alone studies, theoretical and empirical, addressing different elements of the overall research framework. The last part concludes the dissertation.

In more detailed terms, in Chapter 1 I introduce the two main analytical elements of the study – *institutional environment* and *organization*. This is followed by a description of the theoretical approach – *sociological neo-institutionalism* and *world society theory* – which comes with a specific conceptual framework. This chapter also features a review of literature evidencing various ways in which universities and governments respond to
global-cultural trends which are conceived as part of the broader processes of rationalization and organizational expansion. As my interest primarily lies in how universities respond to these processes and in doing so shape the environment, I use the concept of organizational field, and specifically forms of interaction taking place in fields, and argue why this concept is useful for studying the said responses.

In Chapter 2 I outline the central part of the dissertation – the five stand-alone papers, each addressing the above-outlined theme in a different way. I introduce each of the papers and explain how they are linked with the theme of the dissertation and broader literature. The literature which these papers engage with spans a number of scholarly traditions, ranging from sociology, organization studies, higher education studies, to political science.

Part II of the dissertation comprises the five studies (Chapters 3-7). They are arranged to follow a certain logic, starting with macro-social phenomena and more general lines of theorizing and proceeding towards specific cases and richer empirical accounts. The studies in turn ask the following questions:

   Study 1. How do global rankings produce status competition between universities?
   Study 2. How do universities respond to organizational status competition?
   Study 3. How do university associations affect boundaries in universities’ institutional environment?
   Study 4. How do universities influence national policy process?
   Study 5. How does local context empower universities as actors in national field governance?

Finally, Part III summarizes the main conclusions drawn thus far and discusses them in the context of the main theme and broader literature. The dissertation closes with a short discussion, a reflection on conclusions, limitations, delimitations and suggestions for research.
1. Theory, concepts and evidence

Across the broad spectrum of social sciences, there is a tendency to think of organizations and their environments as real and distinct phenomena. There are, however, (at least) two things we should not lose from our sight when adopting this imaginary. First, both the organization and its environment are – together with many of their ascribed attributes – social constructions. The social constructivist approach is deliberately emphasized because, as obvious as this may be, we seem to often forget that “the objectivity of the institutional world, however massive it may appear to the individual, is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 78). The social reality is objective because it exists independently of our volition, yet this reality would not exist in the first place without human interaction. The constructed nature of objectivity also implies that social phenomena and their meanings are in a constant state of revision (Bryman, 2015). As a result, phenomena such as organization, globalization, competition, standards and categories – as taken for granted as they may be – have many definitions, interpretations and explanations, all of which are,
in fact, indeterminate. The scholarly work accounting for these five alone could make up an impressive home library.

Second, both the organization and the environment are conceptual heuristics. This means that they are simplifications of what in reality is a more complex matter. Therefore, important questions to consider when it comes to heuristics are (a) whether heuristics do justice to reality and (b) whether they are at all useful. The collocation of these two in particular – organization and environment, as Czarniawska notes, emerged in the 1960s as “a kind of a middle ground between mechanistic Taylorism and idealist administration theory”, effectively imitating Darwin’s earlier intention to “mechanize biology” by introducing concepts such as “organism”, “environment” and “adaptation” (2013, pp. 4–5). Since the 1960s, the organization/environment dichotomy – although it came to be increasingly problematized and even contested over time – has not left organization theory. I believe this is the case due to a certain appeal in the dichotomy as such which speaks to our proclivity as (social) scientists (or, simply, humans) to habitually strive for simplicity and for identifying “fundamental ingredients” in explaining the (social) phenomena we observe. As Davis famously put it, for a social theory to become a classic – which means widely used and therefore considered useful – it is not enough “to be merely true; it must also be seductive” (1986, p. 298). This is, in my view, an important part of the dichotomy’s appeal, although probably not everything about it. Is the dichotomy, then, true to reality? As it goes with any heuristic anywhere: partly. Is it useful? If we are to judge by how often it is still resorted to among social scientists of all stripes, I would say, very much so.

My approach to understanding the nature of institutional environment, the university and their relationship is fundamentally informed by sociological neo-institutionalism which adopts the heuristic but considers it phenomenologically. Therefore, unlike some other institutional theories of organization (which tend to slide into something we could term “methodological organizationalism”2), the sociological one adopts a firm social constructivist approach: it treats organizations, much like individuals and other social actors and their activities, as cultural constructions, that is, products of a cultural system (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Simply put,
organizations (but also individuals and nation-states) would not be possible in the first place without a culture prescribing organization as an available and legitimate cultural form.

When it comes to their behaviour, neo-institutionalism sees organizations as primarily guided by cultural norms, rather than rational choice; by a role- or identity-based logic of appropriateness, rather than a preference-based logic of consequence (March & Olsen, 2013). It should be stressed, however, that neo-institutionalism does not deny self-interest, rational calculation or strategic behaviour or treats them as incompatible with the theory’s premises (W. R. Scott, 1983). Rather, it sees the theories based on such premises as ontologically problematic and limited in their potential in explaining broader cultural processes (see e.g. Meyer, 2008; or Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987 for a detailed discussion).

An advantage of using sociological neo-institutionalism is that it comes with an empirically-informed and theoretically sound “toolbox” for studying macro-social processes, rather than being limited to the study of organizational fields and organizational behaviour (as it is the case with much of the theoretical work in organizational studies). The theoretical tradition has offered its own account of modernity and the global cultural processes which have emerged from it known as the world society/polity theory³ developed by John W. Meyer and colleagues (Boyle & Meyer, 1998; Jepperson, 2002; Meyer et al., 1987; Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997). The theory brings a genuinely sociological approach to the study of globalization and argues that the global sphere is characterized by a set of distinct cultural norms which affect social reality. Its central concept – rationalization – originates in Weber’s work and refers to the idea that the world society follows a cultural and institutional dynamic characterized by, to use Jepperson’s words, (a) “continuing efforts to systematize social life around cultural schemes that explicitly differentiate and then seek to link social means and social ends” and (b) “efforts to reconstruct all social organization – including eventually the national society itself, constructed as an actor – as means for the pursuit of collective purposes, these purposes themselves subject to increasing simplification and systematization” (Jepperson, 2002, p. 63). The global educational expansion, the
institutionalization of science and the professions as cultural authorities and the empowerment of individuals are here all conceived of as parts of the broader processes of cultural and natural rationalization (Baker, 2014; Drori, 2003; Perkin, 1996; Schofer & Meyer, 2005; Suárez, 2007; Tsutsui & Wotipka, 2004).

The origin of the world society theory can be traced back to the 1970s and to the efforts of John W. Meyer and colleagues to explain similarities across different contexts which could not have been explained by then dominant functionalist approaches. In a recent interview, Meyer recalls this in the following way:

“Education was expanding everywhere, not where it was supposed to, in terms of the economy. Political change was going on everywhere and not where it was supposed to. And it looked like isomorphism. By 1978 or ’79, or ’77, or ’78 we started to do papers on this. One of the first was on childhood -- national conventions, and what did they say about childhood. And it has nothing to do with national development. It has everything to do with time period. And the new countries that came copy the currently fashionable. Child labor, child protection, education, compulsory education, you know, basic stuff. And the paper showed that.” (Meyer, 2016)

With “basic stuff” Mayer refers to the phenomena which have become institutionalized and therefore taken-for-granted parts of social reality or – in the language of this theoretical tradition – rationalized myths, such as compulsory education or child protection, whose global diffusion and resultant isomorphism across different contexts were being empirically evidenced at the time. The world society is, in fact, made up of such cultural scripts, while social entities, such as individuals, organizations and states, are seen as constructs embedded in them. The embeddedness implies an imperative of appropriateness which, to use Meyer’s example of child protection, means that the world society provides a model or a template of what child protection entails as well as how child protection is “to be done right”. Logically, science and the professions emerge as cultural authorities tasked with elaborating and legitimating these models, while international organizations and national governments are their main carriers – into and across – national and organizational contexts. The reality is, of course, often different than the “alternative world orders” that is the world society
(Krücken & Drori, 2009, p. 3) and it is not uncommon that countries, organizations and individuals – for whatever reason – do otherwise than what is considered appropriate. An organization, say, a school, may formally abide to a law which is to secure appropriate child protection, while in practice ignore or violate it or simply do other than it is expected to. This is called decoupling. Globalization, in the sense of this theory, is therefore not an end product, but a process which captures this cultural and institutional dynamic.

One of the papers Meyer refers to in the above interview excerpt is the seminal 1977 article “Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony”, published in the American Journal of Sociology, which he penned together with Brian Rowan. This paper, alongside DiMaggio’s and Powell’s 1983 “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields” (American Sociological Review), has been widely influential across social sciences. Together they laid a foundation of a long a fruitful tradition of scholarly inquiry into the institutional theory of organizations. Importantly, both papers have greatly informed and continue to inform organization scholarship as well as higher education studies.

Much of recent higher education scholarship has been preoccupied with how the “myths” and the “iron cage” in which universities operate have changed over the last decades and how these changes have shaped those same universities and national systems. Here, much attention has been paid to how universities respond to environmental and institutional pressures, complexity, ambiguity, demands, etc., to which globalization, competition, standards, categories and boundaries are integral, often taking these as givens of social reality. Comparatively, far less attention has been paid to understanding the role universities played in the shaping and institutionalization of some of the said “myths”. It remains a puzzle of sorts that the questions of how, when and why of the institutions vital to the modern world polity – and here I primarily mean scientization, professionalization, democratization and the expansion of individual rights and freedoms (Drori, 2003; D. J. Frank & Meyer, 2002; Meyer, Ramirez, Frank, & Schofer, 2008; Schofer & Meyer, 2005) – rarely catch attention of
scholars studying higher education, given higher education’s vital role in the promotion and diffusion of the said institutions. The puzzle on the side, as it goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, the gap remains.

A bird’s eye view: a world culture and its diffusion into higher education

The world society theory argues that much of the change universities around the world have undergone in the past several decades can be best explained by the emergence and institutionalization of a global culture which features a set of taken-for-granted rules about what constitutes a proper university (Buckner, 2016; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Ramirez, 2006, 2010). These rules arrive as a set of prescriptions promoted by international institutions and organizations, as well as a growing number of national governments, and they typically incorporate doctrines such as efficiency, accountability, transparency, goal-orientedness, managerialism and standardization. These cultural doctrines are by no means specific to higher education. Rather, they are applied to society as a whole – and its public sphere in particular – and higher education is here merely another brick in the wall.

Higher education scholarship has amassed a wealth of evidence on how this process has played out in reality. Studies on new public management (NPM), governance and funding reforms, quality standards, Bologna Process and most recently on rankings, have been especially prominent in higher education research in the past two decades, in Europe in particular (Brockerhoff, Huisman, & Laufer, 2015; Broucker & De Wit, 2016; Teixeira, 2013). Journal articles, edited volumes, monographs and not least the reports commissioned by governments and international organizations such as the European Commission, OECD, World Bank, European University Association, and many others, have all contributed to the current state of knowledge on what is happening with universities today.
Thanks to this research, we now know that, since the 1970s, governments around the world – those in the West being the pioneers – have been increasingly preoccupied with systemically changing their higher education and science systems, of which universities make a vital part. The aim has been, by and large, to make universities more aligned with the country’s needs and therefore better for society, in a manner of speaking, somewhat assuming that the said alignment is not optimal. These preoccupations have typically materialized as reform initiatives, often targeting the entire sector. Accompanied by model “solutions”, they would then “travel” from one country to the next, sometimes “carried” by intergovernmental or international organizations or institutions. (E.g. Chalam, 2011; Eggins, 2003; Ferreyra, Avitabile, Botero Álvarez, Haimovich Paz, & Urzúa, 2017; Gornitzka, Kogan, & Amaral, 2006; Kwiek & Maassen, 2012; Ryan, 2011; Zgaga et al., 2013.)

Among the first reforms in this vein reaching a global scale were the so-called NPM reforms. Extensively researched by the scholars in the field (e.g. Amaral, Meek, & Larsen, 2003; Broucker & De Wit, 2016; Enders, de Boer, & Leisyte, 2009; Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2008), these reforms have been seen as a part of a broader trend of public sector reforms, much as they were described by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) and Hood (1986, 1995). In general, an NPM reform package would include (a) a change in the way state funding is allocated, typically featuring a shift from input-based to output- or performance-based funding; (b) mechanisms pushing universities (through hard law or some kind of incentive system) away from the state, encouraging them to “build a diversified funding base” (Clark, 1998, p. 140) by generating revenue from a broad range of so-called stakeholders (such as the industry or students and as a result depend less on the government as a source of funding) and in doing so demonstrate their relevance for the labour market and economic needs of the country; and (c) mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency such as obligatory and (international) standards-based accreditation and introduction of indicators of performance (Alexander, 2000; Amaral & Magalhães, 2002; Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2001; Meek, 2003; Orr, Jaeger, & Schwarzenberger, 2007; Pofi & Reale, 2007; Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2007). In return, the universities are granted more autonomy to organize themselves internally as they would see
This change in the relationship between higher education and government has been aptly captured by Neave’s (1988, 1998) famous phrase “Rise of the Evaluative State”.

The second line of scholarly work on the changes in the institutional conditions in which universities operate could be linked with the emergence of distinctly international policy initiatives. Here I primarily refer to the Bologna Process, as well as the increasing importance of the European Union and its institutions, in the context of Europe, but also Bologna-like initiatives in other regions, such as Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Africa, notably supported by their respective inter-governmental organizations (Huisman, Adelman, Hsieh, Shams, & Wilkins, 2012; Schriewer, 2009). These initiatives typically aimed at “harmonization”, that is, the standardization of policies and practices across countries of the region, most notably in the domains of (international) student and staff mobility, recognition of formal qualifications and quality (Curaj, Scott, Vlasceanu, & Wilson, 2012; Elken & Stensaker, 2011; Karseth & Solbrekke, 2010; Teichler, 2012; Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007; Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011). Scholars have been here mostly interested in the effects of these initiatives on national policies and on universities (Amaral, Neave, Musselin, & Maassen, 2009; de Boer, Huisman, et al., 2017; Elken, 2015; Gornitzka et al., 2006; Huisman & Westerheijden, 2010), as well as in the (changing) role national governments and the intergovernmental/international entities such as the European Commission, OECD, UNESCO, etc. play in delivering (or hindering) the intended effects (Amaral & Neave, 2009; Keeling, 2006; Maassen, 2003; Rodríguez-Gómez & Alcántara, 2001; Vukasovic, 2014b).

The third and here the last kind of change in the institutional environment I wish to highlight refers to the rise of the competition discourse. Today universities, especially in the global context, are imagined as entities which, willingly or not, engage in some kind of competition. National higher education systems and universities are nowadays thought of in terms of being more or less “competitive” or having competitive “advantage” or “edge”, often as if it were a virtue of sorts (e.g. Abramo & D’Angelo, 2014;
Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Horta, 2009; Lynch & Baines, 2004). The taken-for-granted status and world-wide diffusion of phrases such as “competitive university”, “competitive workforce”, and “competitive (national) economy” imply that being “competitive” is a desirable property, bestowing legitimacy on those organizations which possess it. Neave has described this phenomenon as “an attempt to insert a particular form of externally defined ‘Competitive ethic’ as the prime driving force for institutional, and thus system, development inside higher education” (Neave, 1988, p. 7–8, italics mine). Interestingly enough, we seem to be little reflective on the difference between competition as yet another cultural pressure prescribing proper organizational behaviour, which is best understood as a rationalized myth, and competition as a social form, in the way Simmel (1950), for example, conceived of it. Notably, higher education scholars have also studied competition within different types of higher education markets (Cremonini & Antonowicz, 2009; Dill, 1997; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Jungblut & Vukasovic, 2017; Marginson, 2006; Teixeira, Jongbloed, Dill, & Amaral, 2004).6

The competition discourse (itself not unrelated to the NPM discourse) is typically promoted by national governments and the aforementioned supra-governmental structures, but also by a growing number of intermediaries, of which the best-known and the most-studied ones are – rankers. Research on rankings has been proliferating since the emergence of the first global university ranking – the so-called Shanghai Ranking – in 2003. By and large, this research has been concerned with (a) the effect rankings have on universities, governments, students, etc. and (b) the ranking organizations and especially ranking methodologies, often assuming a somewhat critical stance to rankings’ ability to adequately capture quality of performance (Clarke, 2007; Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2016; Lim, 2017; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013; Rijcke, Wallenburg, Wouters, & Bal, 2016; Saisana, d'Hombres, & Saltelli, 2011; Shin, Toutkoushian, & Teichler, 2011; van Raan, 2005; Wedlin, 2006). Among various intermediaries which have emerged as producers of rankings, such as scientific institutes, media and other companies, it has been evidenced that also some governments have started producing their own rankings for various national agendas
On the other hand, the role of national governments in promoting competitive behaviour has been particularly highlighted in relation to the growing popularity of the so-called performance-based funding schemes, as a measure to boost university performance (Hamann, 2016; Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2001; Orr et al., 2007; Reale & Seeber, 2013).

Sometimes with a critical stance to these trends, at others less so, higher education scholars are more or less in agreement on several things. First, regardless of the nature and the degree of effect, if we look at it historically, universities today are operating in some rather novel circumstances. Second, these circumstances, which are often seen as pressures of sorts, have some important commonalities to be found across – often disparate – national contexts. What is more, it seems as if national governments cannot shield – if shielding is what they would want to do – their universities from these pressures (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Mörth, 2006). Referring to the public sector reforms in general, Brunsson and Sahlin-Anderson (2000) reported that many of them have met with little resistance from governments, regardless of their political alignment. This is in part linked with the third point and that is that both institutional changes have been marked by the growing prominence of the role of international, inter-governmental, or otherwise internationally-active organizations and institutions, which have played an important part in structuring and legitimating the discourse, as well as in promulgating solutions in its spirit at the national or organizational levels. Fourth and I think most important here, NPM, supra-national policy initiatives and competition, with their organizational carriers, all contribute to the diffusion and increasing acceptance of the idea that universities, wherever they are:

- a) Need to demonstrate value (for money); i.e. they need to be accountable for their performance;
- b) Need to conform to supra-nationally determined and globally-institutionalized standards of quality of performance (often quantified);
- c) Are compared and evaluated against all other universities around the globe based on their performance.
This idea, itself firmly embedded in the rational ontology of the contemporary world culture, appears to be an inextricable part of the institutional environment of today’s universities, that is, of a shared understanding among policy makers, and often universities themselves, that they are logical, necessary, good, and – perhaps most importantly – that they do not have an alternative.

The argument of the world society theory is that the actual changes in this spirit are exogenously driven by the said institutionalized global culture, rather than by their instrumental utility or power structures (D. J. Frank & Meyer, 2007; Meyer et al., 1987, 1997; Ramirez, 2006). In other words, NPM, Bologna, standards and competition have not become part of the global institutionalized order because they proved to be useful or because of the hegemonic ambitions of powerful Western nations. Rather, they became institutionalized because, in the grand scheme of things, they made sense. Therefore, the empirical evidence hitherto mentioned effectively points to the existence of “alternative world orders” which – as imagined or hypothetical as they may be – brings some unique and useful insights on why the things change the way they do in the “real” world (Krücken & Drori, 2009, p. 3).

Universities as rationalized organizations

An important part of thus prescribed template for the formal structure of contemporary universities is that of the organization – a highly legitimate and standardized social structure around which much of institutional life nowadays revolves (Bromley & Meyer, 2015). Today, state agencies, hospitals, churches, but also family firms, school districts, political parties or professional associations, are being reimagined and consequently restructured as formal organizations. This is not to say that they were not organized in the past, but rather that they are now being increasingly permeated by formal and gradually more elaborate rules and role specifications, and a designated purpose in society (Bromley & Meyer,
2015; Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2006b). Crucially, they are ascribed *actorhood* – legitimacy and capacity to act as autonomous, responsible and empowered agents (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).

For contemporary universities, this global organizational expansion means that they are now more than before expected to acquire properties of formal organizations and reinvent themselves as *organizational actors*, much as Krücken and Meier describe this in their 2006 paper. The basic characteristics of the university thus imagined are easily identified with merely a surface look at documents produced by governments and international organization, and not least those found on university websites. By way of example, a 2013 document titled “Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe’s Higher Education Institutions”, produced by a “High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education”, is a telling example. Here, a proper contemporary higher education institution in Europe is, *inter alia*, efficiently managed, has capable leadership, is autonomous but transparent, cares for quality and reputation, and is accountable to a variety of now also empowered stakeholders, such as students, staff and the community to which it belongs. A proper modern university is also competitive, entrepreneurial, innovative, diverse, multi-cultural, flexible and accessible. Its teachers are effective and the knowledge it produces and transmits is socially relevant. It is a national institution while simultaneously being a global and/or regional or a local one. It has a mission, a strategy and a clear vision of where it is heading. These elements – regardless of the extent to which universities incorporate them – represent important legitimating principles which link actual situations and actual structures to collective social purposes. Critically, their successful implementation is considered *de facto* a measure of progress.

The evidence with regards to how universities have changed their formal structure, practices and available roles to resonate with these globally diffused principles is also abundant and could be summarized as follows. First, regarding the formal organizational structure, universities have, by and large, become more elaborate over the years and not only in the traditional way universities expand (by opening new faculties or research institutes), but...
also in a way as to better incorporate elements of the above-described templates and in doing so maintain their legitimacy. Some of the often studied organizational extensions is the proliferation of the technology-transfer units whose role is to help universities better transfer scientific knowledge to the industry (Anderson, Daim, & Lavoie, 2007; Debackere & Veugelers, 2005; Dill, 1995; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Siegel, Waldman, & Link, 2003). Another example would be the units tasked with ensuring that universities fulfil quality standards, typically dictated by national accreditation agencies and in line with international developments such as the Bologna Process (Billing, 2004; Papadimitriou & Westerheijden, 2010; Proitz, Stensaker, & Harvey, 2004; Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2007; Williams, Rassenfosse, Jensen, & Marginson, 2013). A third example would be the units and activities dedicated to communication, public relations, marketing or branding, given that these tasks are also being increasingly recognized by universities as appropriate and purposeful (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2016; Delmestri, Oberg, & Drori, 2015; Mampaey & Huisman, 2016; Mampaey, Huisman, & Seeber, 2015; Sands & Smith, 2000; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008). Offices for internationalization are another example (Bolsmann & Miller, 2008; Hudzik, 2014). The list does not stop here. Human relations departments, student guidance centres, alumni offices, to name but a few, are all Western-born products of the post-World War II period, institutionalized for the faith in their potential to help universities perform better and thus have been widely diffused.

Second, higher education researchers have looked into the way internal university governance has been affected by the changing institutional environment, in particular the NPM-inspired national policies, notably pressuring universities to move away from the traditional collegial model of decision making and towards a top-down hierarchical one, assuming such change would make universities more efficient and responsive (Christensen, 2011; de Boer, Enders, & Leisyte, 2007; Ferlie et al., 2008; Frost, Hattke, & Reihlen, 2016; Musselin, 2007; Paradeise, Reale, Bleiklie, & Ferlie, 2009). Evidence has shown that the extent to which universities have actually changed their governance in response to these institutional pressures varies across contexts, often due to national or institutional “counter-forces” (Beerkens, 2008; Bleiklie, Enders, & Lepori, 2017; Musselin, 2007; Seeber
et al., 2015). Therefore, much like with the elaboration of formal structure, the landscape with regards to the change in organizational governance and decision making is unsurprisingly mixed. One thing that appears to have been a leitmotif across contexts has been the increased attention paid to a variety of (internal or external) stakeholders, such as the government, business sector, trade unions, international organizations, students, etc. (Amaral & Magalhães, 2002). To accurately describe contemporary universities as organizations, while having in mind how their governance has been affected by the multiple relationships formed with such parties, Bleiklie, Enders and Lepori (2015) have coined the term “penetrated hierarchies”, suggesting that these new relationships are effectively disrupting the traditional organizational structure of the university.

An important implication of thus described organizational rationalization is that, in the process, universities end up internalizing various environmental elements which traditionally did not share the organizational roof with academics, such as professionals or consultants of various (non-academic) kinds as well as roles and practices often associated with the corporate world (Drori, 2016; Serrano-Velarde & Krücken, 2012). Bromley and Meyer (2015) suggest that this leads to new internal tensions due to growing inconsistencies (in professional values and norms, for example), to even more complexity in organizational structures (as a way to “solve” inconsistencies) and, finally, to more decoupling. This too has been evidenced as taking place in universities (Kondakci & Broeck, 2009; Nyhagen & Baschung, 2013; Sapir & Oliver, 2017). Moreover, Maassen (2017) has recently observed that universities’ efforts to increase efficiency by becoming more tightly coupled and having stronger leadership control may, in fact, lead to less efficiency in performing their core institutional tasks: teaching and research. That organizational conformity to the institutional environment reduces efficiency is not a new idea in neo-institutional thinking (Meyer & Bromley, 2013; Meyer & Scott, 1983) although, as Zucker (1987) pointed out, less efficiency does not necessarily mean less success. However, Maassen argues that reduced efficiency in teaching and research negatively affects university’s prestige – its “single most important institutional objective” (Maassen, 2017, p. 8). This argument points to a tension between different measures of success in the universities’
institutional environment, which has already been flagged by scholars (e.g. Gumpor, 2000).

It should be added that new forms of rationalizing and decoupling or degrees thereof (materialized as changes in formal organizational structure or otherwise) can also arrive as a result of competition for status, especially in response to (global) rankings (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Higher education literature has so far paid little attention to how these processes – competition for status and ranking, on the one hand, and rationalizing and decoupling, on the other – are related. Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation will touch upon this problem, although empirical evidence exposing the nature of this relationship is still needed.

The discussion up to this point, and especially the empirical works mentioned, has it clearly that higher education – its governance, policy, organizations and practices – has not been immune to the environmental rationalization. The tendencies have, with more or less resistance, diffused across disparate contexts and pervaded many aspects of university life. Certainly one of the most important effects of such rationalization is the way it has shaped the globally shared understanding of what constitutes a proper university. Therefore, the institutionalized rationalized organization is a powerful construct which can explain a wide range of phenomena we are witnessing in universities nowadays, some of which indeed disrupt the “business as usual” of universities’ core processes – teaching and research. However, once we conceive of universities as organizations interacting with other entities and redirect our attention away from what is happening to universities to how what universities do beyond their organizational boundaries, we may encounter some new developments bearing resemblance with processes taking place within the organization.

Organizational fields as loci of organizing

In elaborating on different levels at which causal explanations operate, Jepperson and Meyer (2011) distinguish between the individual, social-
organizational and macro-sociological (institutional), whereby the latter two are considered essentially structural. The distinction is based on complexity, ranging from very simple causal processes (individual level) to fairly complex ones (institutional level). The processes discussed thus far refer to the effects of macro-sociological processes on universities. In order to look into how universities as organizational entities engage with their environment, we shift the focus from the macro to the social-organizational level.

Social-organizational processes, as defined by Jepperson and Meyer (2011), refer to causal influences attributed to social structures less complex than institutions which often feature some kind of relationship or interaction between entities. To provide a fuller picture of what is meant by social-organizational, it is worthwhile providing the entire description by the authors:

“Social-organizational processes refer to the causal influences attributed to (for example) hierarchic, network, market, and ecological formations. In each case, specific structural features are the properties of interest: for instance, Simmel’s idea that triadic structures generate distinctive dynamics wherever found. Contemporary exemplars are Granovetter (1973) on effects of weak versus strong network ties, Burt (1982) on effects of ‘structural holes,’ White (1970, 1992) on dynamics of ‘vacancy chains,’ and ecological ideas emphasizing the effects of properties of competitive niches upon organizational survival (Hannan and Freeman 1989). Sociologists also invoke a number of ‘emergent’ and more collective social-organizational properties that have a cultural character: group values, typified social positions (roles), prestige patterns, emotional dynamics, interaction rituals, organizational cultures.” (Jepperson & Meyer, 2011, pp. 62–63).

In other words, the causal inferences attributed to the social-organizational level are generated by relatively stable social-organizational structures, such as groups, networks, role enactments, ecologies, etc. – all shaped by the macro-sociological ones.

The social-organizational structure I find important for studying how universities – as organizations – may shape their immediate environment is the one of (organizational) field. The concept of field is variously defined and variously used. It goes back to Bourdieu's, whose understanding of field
inspires much sociological analysis and can be applied to individuals but also to other social entities. In simplified terms, the Bourdieusian notion of field – and those drawing from it (Buchholz, 2016; Fliedstein & McAdam, 2012) – would refer to major areas of practice, such as music, sports, arts, sciences, politics, etc. in which social position, struggle and power play a central role. In part inspired by Bourdieu, scholars of organizations, among which neo-institutionalists in particular, have offered somewhat less “dynamic” understandings of fields, often portrayed in the literature as a source of stability, rather than as a dynamic site of interaction and struggle. Here, two works figure as the most influential ones in setting the tenets of what is meant by an organizational field. The one is the seminal article by DiMaggio and Powell from 1983, which defines a field as “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). The other is the 1994 definition by Richard W. Scott which says that a field is “a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with other actors outside the field” (W. R. Scott, 1994). Differences on the side, both works highlight the importance of a meaning system shared by a community of organizations characterized by some form of interaction.

The idea of a field as a social-organizational sphere allows us to conceive of (a) the institutional environment as more specialized or “local” than the macro-sociological world society would have it, while not being disembedded from it; and of (b) a group of universities as more than a collectivity or a constellation of organizations. This seems particularly important for studying how organizations – as real entities – respond to their, arguably, multi-layered institutional environment. Along this line of reasoning, Hüther and Krücken (2016) draw from the work of Fligstein and McAdam (2012), who conceive of fields as “nested”, to speak of “multiple-field embeddedness” of European universities, whereby the distinction is made between the global, European and several national, state and regional fields. Therefore, a university can simultaneously be a member of a regional, a national, the European and the global field (of course, the same logic can
be easily applied to other parts of the world). In addition to being thus nested, fields can be also conceived of as overlapping and otherwise interrelated (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008).

Typically, in higher education studies, universities, as well as other organizations and actors who together “partake of a common meaning system” within the jurisdiction of a nation state, make up a national higher education field. Analogously, national fields in a region, such as Europe or Latin America, make up a regional – European or Latin American – field. These fields – much like those of any other sector or industry – feature structural characteristics which may predate NPM, Bologna, rankings and other trends typically associated with recent decades, but which have been subject to the broader project of rationalization and expansion, in particular in the decades following World War II (Ramirez, 2006).

One structural feature of national fields which has been continuously subject to policies aiming at “improving” higher education and science by rationalizing it is the institutionalized differentiation between different kinds of higher education institutions based on their broader societal purpose, that is, their categorization. Many national fields in Europe, for example, would comprise organizations such as universities and so-called non-university higher education institutions (such national arrangements are commonly referred to as binary systems9). A categorization may as well be done according to different ownership structure whereby we would typically have public and private institutions (Altbach & Levy, 2005). Other, formal or informal, categorizations are possible. According to Burton Clark (1983), a common categorization of higher education institutions within a national field can be horizontal, i.e. comprising organizations pertaining to different higher education sub-sectors, such as the aforementioned public, private, university, college, polytechnic, etc.; or vertical, whereby fields are hierarchically stratified, either according to the level of their task (hierarchy of sequence) or according to prestige (hierarchy of status). These categorizations suggest that, depending on the structures that make up the system, different higher education institutions likely occupy different positions within one organizational field. Thus, in terms of status ranks available, higher education fields can vary “from sharply peaked to relatively
flat structures” (Clark, 1983, p. 64). Empirically, however, horizontal and vertical differentiation are not independent of each other (Bleiklie, 2003; Clark, 1983). In Chapter 4, I elaborate on this aspect of organizational fields.

The changes in terms of institutionalized categories we have seen in this respect have been the introduction of binary systems in some countries (e.g. Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany), their dismantling in others (UK and Australia), the establishment of the formal university associations (e.g. Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, UK), the expansion of private higher education sectors (e.g. Central and Eastern Europe, South America), the emergence of liberal arts colleges in various European countries (van der Wende, 2011), and establishment of international branch campuses (Knight, 2011). These changes, as well as other distinctive features of these fields, would variously interact with globally diffused cultural scripts, resulting in different national (or regional) realities. One such reality implied in the change in institutionalized categories would be the consequent change with respect to within-field boundaries, which may effectively confine different categories of organizations to different institutional realities (Brankovic, 2014). Therefore, apart from affecting the organizational landscape of the respective fields, changes in the available organizational categories and identities may affect the institutional conditions in which higher education institutions operate.

The field perspective implies that the macro-societal trends of which these changes have been part would, once they reach the field level, acquire distinctly national (or regional) form (Pope & Meyer, 2016). This study of interaction between the global and the local in the process of diffusion, and the resultant institutionalized realities, has given birth to concepts such as translation and editing (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), glocalization (Drori, Höllerer, & Walgenbach, 2014), glonacal agency (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002) and domestication (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2013b). This literature has greatly enriched our understanding of how the world culture plays out across different and disparate localities. The situation is not much different in higher education. It is hard to imagine a country which would blindly copy a new model of university governance or funding from manuals prepared by international organizations into its own legislation and then implement it
exactly as originally devised – to everyone’s satisfaction and without some form of decoupling between the “talk” and the “walk” (Cerych & Sabatier, 1986). There will always be some local “flavour” to it, for one reason or another, maybe even accompanied by some side-effects and possibly conflict.

An important implication of the global expansion of organization and organizing – as in, systematizing and introducing “order” and “logic” into a sphere of social activity – is that organizational fields (national or any other) also become more rationalized and organized (Bromley & Meyer, 2015). As we have seen on the case of NPM, Bologna, and rankings, governments and international or internationally-active organizations are the ones who act as the chief organizers. However, universities – normally the targets of such “top-down” pressures to rationalize and become better organized – may also seek to introduce order into their environment (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Of course, the way they would go about this would, we expect, differ from that of the government for the simple reason of formal authority if not any other. Put simply, it is highly unlikely that a university, or even majority of them by joining forces, unilaterally changes a national law, criteria for allocating public funding, or what global rankings measure, let alone what is globally considered a “world-class” university. A university can conform or rebel. However, both rebellion and total conformity are rare and isolated, if at all possible. What, in fact, most of them end up doing is some combination of responses lying in between the two “extremes”, typically involving some form of decoupling (Hasse & Krücken, 2015; Oliver, 1991).

What do, then, universities do outside their organizational “walls”? First and foremost, they interact with other universities or third parties. We can conceive of this interaction in a number of ways, ranging from merely taking each other into account when deciding on their mission and role in society, to cooperating to achieve common educational or scientific goals, helping each other, competing for status or funding, forging alliances, to joining forces against a common adversary, or some other way. None of these are alien to universities (or any other kind of organization, for that matter). Interaction is of special interest here because, first, it is one of the defining features of an organizational field, and second, it keeps the institutions, of
the field or macro order, close to reality. As Hallet and Vantresca aptly put it: “interactions are the beating heart of institutions” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006, p. 215). Institutions are not, as the authors remind us, “inert containers of meaning”; rather, they are “‘inhabited’ by people and their doings” (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006, p. 215). This reasoning I apply to organizations: institutions are inhabited by organizations and their doings.

Second, by interacting with others, universities engage with the social-organizational structures which make up the field of interest, such as formal rules, categories and boundaries thereof, status hierarchies, available roles and identities, or some other field-structural condition. In the spirit of Hallett and Ventresca’s (2006) argument, the interaction around these structural elements is what puts “life” into DiMaggio’s and Powell’s notion of field as “a recognized area of institutional life”. Critically, looking at how different forms of interaction engage with the social-organizational of the field allows us to see the field as a locus of organizing – beyond the organization itself.

In the remainder of this dissertation I will try to extend this line of reasoning to illustrate three forms of interaction in which universities engage: competition for status, meta-organization and open political contestation. Status competition is conceived of as a triadic form of interaction, featuring at least two universities competing for the favour of a third party. Meta-organization is a more permanent kind of cooperation by formal association established by two or more universities. It can also be established for them by a third party such as the government. Lastly, open political contestation refers to a process in which one or more universities enter a contestation with a third party, typically the government, in which they openly challenge its policy or some other decision. All three forms of interaction are hereby conceived of as (a) channels in which universities may enact and shape their organizational identities; and (b) opportunities for them to shape other elements of their respective fields, such as categories and their boundaries, hierarchies, rules, and other possible field-level institutions they – as organizations – inhabit.
2. Five stories on the way universities engage with the changing institutional environment

In this section I will introduce the five studies which make up my contribution to the understanding of the institutional environment in which universities operate and the way they – as organizations – engage with it. With these studies I wish to draw attention to status competition (Chapters 3 and 4), meta-organization (Chapter 5), and open political contestation (Chapters 6 and 7) as forms of interaction taking place between universities and between universities and other entities in their respective organizational fields. It should be noted that the studies do not approach the subject in a theoretically and sometimes even conceptually uniform way. Rather, they – taken together and placed against the introductory chapter – represent both an illustration and an extension of the arguments put forward thus far. In terms of structure, each of the following sub-sections includes (a) the main question of the study; (b) a summary of the main idea, and (c) how the study
theoretically and/or empirically speaks to the overall framework of the dissertation.

Study 1: How do global rankings produce status competition between universities?

The study with which I wish to set the stage focuses on universities’ institutional environment and specifically on status competition produced by global university rankings and their role in shaping the global university field. That said, the study asks: How do global rankings produce competition between universities?

Global university rankings have received considerable scholarly attention (e.g. Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Espeland & Sauder, 2007, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2016; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013; Rijcke et al., 2016; Saisana et al., 2011; Wedlin, 2006). They have provided important insights, useful frameworks and a wealth of empirical evidence. However, these studies are largely concerned with the effects of rankings on universities or policy makers, often stressing the adverse effects they have on universities and academic work and culture. Some of the literature on rankings even takes a normative stance, defending or criticizing rankings rather than developing a distanced view on the phenomenon. This is particularly the case with the works analysing rankings methodology, metrics and other aspects of rankers’ effort to capture the quality of performance. We argue that too much focus on the effect of rankings and too little on their production obscures a highly relevant topic of research: the question of how exactly rankings produce and institutionalize competition.

In light of the subject of this dissertation, the study takes a closer look at how global rankings draw on contemporary rationalized myths such as “excellence”, “top university” and “world-class university” to organize the global field environment in which universities operate, inevitably triggering “reactivity” from universities, to borrow the term from Espeland and Sauder.
With this study we specifically try to elucidate the mechanism built in the global university rankings which distinguishes them from their earlier (national) counterparts. This, we argue, helps us understand better why contemporary university rankings have an effect that previous ones – since their first appearance at the beginning of 20th century – did not have.

Study 2: How do universities respond to status competition?

The second study moves on to the organization and zooms in on how universities respond to status competition. As competition appears as intense as ever – especially now following the emergence of the global university rankings – universities’ efforts to maintain or advance their imagined hierarchical position vis-à-vis each other are becoming more salient, both in national contexts and internationally. However, the story of university status is both older than rankings and effectively goes beyond rankings. The paper thus asks what the concept of organizational status entails in the case of universities and how universities of different status rank respond to what appears to be an increasingly more competitive environment.

I draw on the works of Podolny (2010) and Washington and Zajac (2005) to define organizational status as a socially constructed and accepted ordering or ranking in a social system. However, this definition does not tell us how these orderings and hierarchies are constructed, nor whether and how they vary. In order to offer a fuller picture, I reviewed a rich body of literature and identify three mechanisms of organizational status construction: categories, intermediaries and affiliations. This, I argue, is crucial if we are to understand how universities, but also organizations more generally, respond to competition in their respective fields.

The contribution of this study to the dissertation theme is twofold. First, by unpacking the notion of organizational status and elucidating possible mechanisms of its construction, the study indirectly addresses the question of
what it is about organizational fields that shapes universities’ perceptions of other universities in the same field in terms of some universalized notion of “worthiness” in the given context. Such approach allows us to anticipate possible “moves” universities could make in trying to be or appear to be more worthy than others, which is then translated into a set of propositions the study offers. Second, the study also argues that universities can shape the said universalized notions of “worthiness” when making these “moves”. This, as it will be argued, seems especially to be the case when high-status universities create formal linkages with each other, such as associations, effectively excluding those they deem of lower status and drawing boundaries around myths such as “world-class” or “research-intensive” whose legitimate agents they claim to be.

Study 3: How do university associations affect boundaries in universities’ institutional environment?

In the third study I go deeper into the notion of boundaries within an organizational field which may emerge or be otherwise affected when universities create formal associations or so-called umbrella organizations. I draw on the work of Ahrne and Brunsson (2008, 2011) on meta-organizations, that is, a type of partial organization characterized by having other organizations as its members, and ask: How do organizational associations affect extra-organizational boundaries?

The study addresses this question by looking into the long-established practice among universities to form associations and argues that meta-organizations represent, and in some cases even epitomize, organizational efforts to create, maintain or disrupt boundaries in the institutional environment (Hannan, 2010; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Negro, Koçak, & Hsu, 2010). The study also draws on the earlier mentioned work on universities’ multiple-field embeddedness by Hüther & Krücken (2016) to conceive of organizational associations as links between different fields, whereby the creation of such linkages could, on the one hand, weaken
boundaries between fields at different levels, from national to the global, and, on the other, strengthen boundaries constructed around organizational categories and the identities of their members.

While studies 1 and 2 in principle conceive of universities as organizations which interact by observing each other, this study focuses on a more “tangible” form of interaction – formal association between universities. Keeping its focus on (extra-organizational) boundaries in organizational fields, the study argues that university associations may create, maintain or disrupt boundaries in universities’ field environment. Based on an analysis of 185 university associations, the study offers a typology thereof and an account of the changing institutional conditions giving rise to different types of associations throughout history.

Study 4: How do universities influence policy process?

Johan Olsen called the university “a fiduciary system” because “[t]hose belonging to the University are supposed to be the guardians of its constitutive purposes, principles, rules, and processes. They are supposed to defend its institutional identity and integrity whether the threat comes from outside or inside.” (Olsen, 2007, p. 27). The remaining two studies are good illustrations of how this “fiduciarity” works when reified by organizations acting as guardians of various institutionalized beliefs and values in their respective national fields.

The first study takes us to Croatia. It is a story of the government’s persisting policy since the mid-1990s to have a binary higher education system, with the university and polytechnic sectors, clearly demarcated along different functions and purposes. The policy was originally a part of the country’s broader efforts to ensure a balanced development among the regions, but also to improve quality, efficiency and accessibility to higher education. Since 2001, it was further embedded in broader higher education reform efforts, especially the implementation of the Bologna Process. The policy was, however, continuously challenged by universities which were, as the
study finds, never in favour of a strong non-university sector. Despite continuous efforts of one government after another, the reform effectively failed to align the distinction between the two categories of higher education institutions and types of study programmes, rendering the boundary between the two sectors and categories of organizations, at best, blurred.

The study was conceived as an analysis of policy implementation and it is for this reason – in its conceptual framework and vocabulary – the least of all five informed by the earlier introduced concepts. Its contribution, however, lies in the empirical part, which, I would argue, tells a compelling story of how universities effectively “sabotaged” the government’s policy to institutionalize boundaries between two sub-sectors of higher education and two categories of organizations, and effectively acted as guardians of the institutional status quo in the national field.

**Study 5: How does local context empower universities as actors in national higher education governance?**

Finally, universities may enter open political contestation with the state in their efforts to change the local institutional order of their national fields. In the final study, we cross the Croatian eastern border and go to Serbia where we witness what I argue to be a historical empowerment of Serbian universities as an actor in the national higher education governance. At the turn of the millennium, after more than a decade of political and economic turmoil, Serbia emerged as a country firmly on its path to politically re-join Europe and the world. Europe has, meanwhile, changed and is now deeply engaged in the discussions on the European Higher Education Area (the originally intended end-product of the Bologna Process), quality assurance, student mobility, national qualifications frameworks, internationalization, and other novelties which were supposed to harmonize European higher education and help it perform better. The new government embraced this discourse and direction and was eager to embark on bringing them to Serbia. However, much due to the somewhat uneasy relationship with the state over
the previous decade, Serbian universities did not share the enthusiasm. What ensued was a period of intense political contestation and a change in how the national field was governed. The question I here ask is: How does local context affect actor empowerment in local change processes which are embedded in global scripts?

The empowerment of Serbian universities – the outcome of this contestation – is particularly striking given that, historically (and much like in other countries of Eastern and Central Europe), they had played a rather limited role in national field governance. In this historical empowerment, Serbian universities successfully challenged the decades-long state domination in higher education, but also some of the global trends promoted by the state at the time, such as the spread of independent accountability mechanisms.

Here as well, like in the case of Croatia in the previous study, the main contribution of the article is in the case presented. Theoretically, on the other hand, this study explicitly focuses on one of the central concepts of the world society theory – actorhood – and tries to illuminate the genuinely local sources of actor empowerment, alongside those originating in the expanding world culture. Interaction between universities and the state – taking a form of a dialectical political contestation – is here particularly highlighted as a decisive factor in shaping actor identities and making way for a new role for Serbian universities in their national field governance.

Notes

1 The term “university” is here used to broadly refer to higher education institutions which conduct teaching and research. The term, as I use it, may as well loosely apply to non-research higher education institutions, such as polytechnics or community colleges. When it plays a role in the line of argument, the difference is specified.

2 The term is analogous to “methodological nationalism” in social sciences, which occurs when scholars treat nation-states as natural units of the social world.

3 For an elaboration on the difference between world polity and world society theory, I recommend a blog post by Evan Schofer at
Throughout this dissertation I use the following definitions of “institutions” and “institutionalization”, put forward by Meyer, Boli and Thomas in their seminal chapter from 1987: “We see institutions as cultural rules giving collective meaning and value to particular entities and activities, integrating them into the larger schemes. We see both patterns of activity and the units involved in them (individual and other social entities) as constructed by such wider rules. Institutionalization, in this usage, is the process by which a given set of units and a pattern of activities come to be normatively and cognitively held in place, and practically taken for granted as lawful (whether as a matter of formal law, custom, or knowledge).” (1987, p. 13)

With higher education research/scholarship, I primarily refer to a relatively young area of study, its vibrant research community and dedicated professional associations (e.g. Consortium of Higher Education Researchers – CHER, Association for the Study of Higher Education – ASHE, etc.), specialized journals (e.g. Higher Education, Studies in Higher Education, Higher Education Policy, etc.), book series, conferences, but also research groups and study programmes dedicated to the study of higher education and research, universities, respective national systems, global trends and other related topics.

I have been under the impression that it is somewhat assumed in the literature that competition and markets always go together. This, in fact, would be little surprising and not exclusive to higher education scholarship. Competition is typically studied by economists and not particularly popular among sociologists, which is then also reflected in higher education research. However, I believe that a debate which would address these different understandings of competition (in the first place, competition within markets and competition outside markets) is much needed.


Czarniawska (2013) suggests the term may go even further back and that Bourdieu probably borrowed it from the psychologist Kurt Lewin.

A widely-used typology of national higher education systems was introduced by Peter Scott (1995) and further developed by Kyvik (2004). The typology is based on the identified categories of higher education institutions and their roles present in the context of a country. The distinction is made between university-dominated, dual, binary and stratified systems.
There is a very interesting paper by Tim Hallett (2010) on what happens to organizations when they actually try to live by a rationalized cultural ideal such as “accountability” and when conformity is no longer symbolic but real. The paper is based on a two-year ethnography of an urban elementary school and it provides a good example of how successful implementation of a rationalized myth can lead to uncertainty and conflict inside the organization.
Part II. Studies
3. How global rankings produce competition between universities: A sociological view

Based on:


An earlier version presented at the 33rd EGOS Colloquium, sub-theme 65: The Organizational Origins and Consequences of Competition, Copenhagen, 5-8 July 2017.
Abstract

Using the example of global university rankings, we offer an explanation of how rankings construct competition. Drawing from a sociological understanding of competition, we propose a concept of rankings as a social operation that combines four elements: comparison of performances, quantification, visualization and publication. We then use this concept to explain how global university rankings take part in the social construction of competition between universities, highlighting the following three effects thereof: (a) globalization of a specific discourse on university excellence; (b) “sarcification” of reputation for the said excellence; and (c) regular publication of findings, effectively transforming a stable status order into a dynamic competitive field. In this process, competition for status is being converted from something that is implicit and inherently local into something that is explicit and globally acknowledged. We conclude by discussing general conceptual implications of this analysis for the study of rankings, decoupling and global fields.
Introduction

It is often argued that, today more than ever, universities engage in competitive behaviour on a global scale (Marginson, 2006; Shin & Kehm, 2012). In many ways, universities appear to be not any longer nationally or locally rooted institutions, tightly connected to specific traditions and histories, but rather empowered organizational actors in a globalized academic world (Krücken & Meier, 2006). This development is often attributed to globalization processes, the rise of neoliberalism and new public management, reduced financial support from the state, heightened demands by stakeholders such as (prospective) students, alumni and parents – but also to the proliferation of rankings, first developed in national contexts (Myers & Robe, 2009) and, since the early 2000s, on a global level (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013).

Global university rankings have received considerable scholarly attention (e.g. Espeland & Sauder, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2016; Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013; Rijcke et al., 2016). However, these studies are largely concerned with the effects of rankings on universities or policy makers, while presupposing that rankings produce or intensify competition. This obscures a highly relevant topic of research: the question of how exactly rankings produce and institutionalize competition. We argue that an adequate understanding of the effects of rankings can only be developed after studying the social processes that connect rankings and competition.

Our paper therefore asks: How is the oft-assumed “increasing global competition” socially constructed? We use the example of university rankings for three reasons. First, there is a rich and growing body of literature on university rankings, which tends to take for granted that rankings produce competition, rather than paying attention to the distinct social processes underlying the production of competition. Second, university rankings are widely popular but also intensely contested. Much of the literature therefore takes a normative stance, defending or criticizing rankings rather than developing a distanced conceptual view to guide empirical studies. This calls for a genuinely sociological perspective on rankings that clarifies the relationship between rankings and competition.
before taking a closer look at their effects. And third, while rankings in other fields are often limited locally or nationally, a variety of university rankings have been institutionalized globally, offering the chance of studying the production of competition through rankings on a global scale. Global university rankings, therefore, epitomize some of the characteristics and potential effects of rankings as a social operation in an ideal-typical way.

Against this background, the paper develops a new conceptual view of the interplay between rankings and competition, empirically informed by a closer look at the global university rankings currently in operation. We specifically look into how these rankings set and shape the institutional framing of status competition between universities and, in doing so, help shape the global university field. We argue that global university rankings affect this field in three ways: (a) by establishing a universal framework of comparison, global rankings urge universities to see themselves as actors in a global, rather than just regional or national, field; (b) by evaluating performances comparatively and quantitatively, they “scarify” reputation; and (c) by regular publication, they transform stable status orders into dynamic competitive fields. Empirically, we primarily draw from the three major global university rankings – Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU, a.k.a. Shanghai Rankings\textsuperscript{1}, Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings\textsuperscript{2} and QS World University Rankings\textsuperscript{3}, given their prominence and dominance among global rankers. We develop our argument in three steps. In the first section, we present our understanding of rankings as a social operation. For this purpose, we introduce a sociological concept of a particular type of competition – competition for the favour of an audience – to which rankings contribute. We distinguish between four elements of rankings that set the production of status competition off: comparison of performances, quantification, visualization and publication. In the second section, we develop our argument about the production of status competition through global university rankings in more detail. Finally, we point to some general conceptual implications of our analysis, discussing how it might inform comparative studies on rankings, how it draws attention to a particular kind of decoupling, and how it might help develop our understanding of global fields.
Producing public competition: rankings as a social operation

Rankings are ubiquitous in modern society. Be it athletes, hospitals, countries, restaurants, cities, or universities, there is almost no limit as to what kind of social entity can be made subject of a league table. From a sociological point of view, rankings are interesting because they play an important part in the social construction of competition for symbolic goods such as attention or reputation. Conceptualizing their role in the social construction of competition, however, requires a specific approach to the analysis of competition.

Rankings and the social construction of competition

In everyday language and much of the social science literature, competition is usually seen as a constellation where two or more actors struggle for the same scarce good. Competition here is the result of overlapping intentions of (at least) two competitors. In terms of formal sociology, this is a dyadic understanding of competition that requires only two participants. This understanding captures important phenomena, such as the case of two countries claiming the same territory. However, the kind of competition as constructed by rankings is closer to a definition suggested by the classical sociologist Georg Simmel (1903, 1955). Simmel’s aim was to develop a clear distinction between competition and other forms of struggle. For that purpose, he conceived of what he called the “pure” form of competition as the case where (at least) two competitors struggle for the scarce favour of (at least) a third party. A simple example would be two rivals-for-love trying to win the favour of the loved-one. In formal terms, this is a triadic constellation, as it requires the participation of, and interaction between, at least three parties. Most notably, it requires a third party observing and evaluating the competitors’ offers in order to distribute its favour among them. It thus highlights that third parties can affect the formation and effects of certain types of struggle and is therefore considered “pure” competition.
Simmel’s view is unique in the social sciences in that it sees modern competition not just as a procedure to discipline and motivate the competitors (as liberal political economy since Adam Smith has it) but also as a procedure to sensitize them to the needs and interests of third parties, particularly a common audience. In Simmel’s own words: “Antagonistic tension with his competitor sharpens the businessman’s sensitivity to the tendencies of the public, even to the point of clairvoyance, in respect to future changes in the public’s taste, fashions, interests – not only the businessman’s, but also the journalist’s, artist’s, bookseller’s, parliamentarian’s. Modern competition is described as the fight of all against all, but at the same time it is the fight of all for all” (Simmel, 1955, p. 62).

This triadic concept of competition is particularly helpful for the analysis of rankings, as it allows us to analyze them as tools used by third parties to construct competition. For this purpose, however, Simmel’s insight needs to be specified further by looking at the means of production of a particular variant of triadic competition: competition for the favour of an audience. In these cases, the competition is produced by third parties – from governments to political journalists to market analysts to art critics – by publicly comparing and evaluating performances while addressing and imagining an audience supposedly interested in these performances. This definition draws attention to neglected aspects of the social production of competition: to the constitutive role of third parties; to relationships between these third parties and their audiences; and to the temporality of the competitive process as produced by these third parties and their imagined audiences (Werron, 2014, 2015).

Competition in these terms is not just an outcome of intentions directed at the same goods. Rather, it is the product of public attributions of performances. Take the example of the Human Development Index, which yearly compares the development of countries based on sophisticated quantitative indicators: although development per se is hardly a scarce good (countries may, after all, develop and grow together), the ranking, by attributing progress of development comparatively in quantitative terms, suggests that the reputation of “more developed” countries comes at the expense of “less developed” ones, urging governments to compete for this
reputation. Likewise, university rankings construct reputation as a scarce good by publicly evaluating and attributing performances: while all universities may improve their research output or teaching simultaneously, rankings suggest that the reputation of the top universities comes at the expense of those at the bottom, urging universities to believe that they are, in effect, competing with one another for the favour of a common audience.

The social construction of this kind of competition, then, is primarily a matter of public discourse comparing and evaluating performances, thus producing and distributing reputation. The production of competition thus does not depend on the point of view of the competitors but on the – publicly communicated – point of view of third parties. Regarding this particular kind of competition, studying the production of competition therefore has to be distinguished rather clearly from the question of how successful rankings actually are in urging governments, universities and others to see themselves as actors striving for the same goods – a question that can only be studied adequately after studying the production of competition in more detail.

Rankings as a social operation

We see rankings as an ideal-typical means of production of this kind of competition. They achieve this by combining four operations (Werron & Ringel, 2017): zero-sum comparison of performances, quantification, visualization and (repeated, periodic) publication.

(1) The first operation is the comparison of performances. This features (a) comparability of entities pertaining to the same category and (b) differentiation between the entities of the said category according to certain criteria of performance (Heintz, 2010; Heintz & Bühler, 2017). This step is crucial in that it helps the observer to systematically denaturalize basic assumptions deeply engrained in the practices of everyday life. For instance, it is not natural – in the true sense of the word – to conceive apples and oranges as being part of the same category of “fruits.” Rather, the category “fruits” is a social product enacted and thus created in the act of comparing two objects by using the tertia comparationis “fruits.” Applied to our empirical case, different social entities are first defined to be organizations,
then being declared comparable because they belong to the category “university,” and finally evaluated according to the same criteria of performance which are applied to all members of the category (such as “quality of research” or “excellence in teaching”).\(^5\)

Moreover, rankings are not merely comparisons; they are zero-sum comparisons. “Zero-sum” denotes a specific kind of comparison that assumes that a quality ascribed to some compared entity by implication cannot simultaneously be ascribed to another compared entity. In these cases, the “sum” of possibilities created by the assumption of comparability is transformed into a dependent relationship between the compared entities. In the case of university rankings: only one university can be at the top of the ranking – at the expense of all others universities.

(2) Zero-sum comparisons are not necessarily of a quantitative kind. Arguing that Oxford is the best university in the world is indeed a matter of a zero-sum comparison in that it implies that all other universities – for whatever reason – are not the best. This argument can be made in exclusively narrative, or qualitative terms. However, there are certain limitations to such zero-sum comparisons, especially when it involves the comparison of a large number of entities. Someone arguing that e.g. Yale is better than Oxford would have to elaborate how s/he came to such conclusion – tradition, the quality of a specific department, the debate culture, etc. The proponent of Oxford might have just as many good reasons as does the champion of Yale. In the case of a multi-university comparison, both would have to follow elaborate lines of argumentation to not only to convince the other person that Oxford/Yale is the best university but also that all the others are not. As a result, narrative zero-sum comparisons can quickly lead to contentious debates.

Against this backdrop, the distinct appeal of numbers as a rhetorical means of comparison becomes clear: by attaching numbers to qualities, rankers can validate their zero-sum statements in unambiguous terms. After all, Oxford is not just “more international” than, for example, the California Institute of Technology, but it has a student body that is exactly 35% international, while the latter’s is only 27% international. Seen in this light and given that an international student body is something to be desired, Oxford is “of
course” ranked higher than the California Institute of Technology. Sociologically speaking, it is important at this juncture to take notice of the communicative quality that quantification adds to zero-sum statements: while the literature on rankings often criticizes quantification as simplification, we argue that it is precisely this “reductive” aspect that makes rankings such a successful means of public comparison.

The two operations hitherto discussed concern what we call the informative dimension of rankings: zero-sum comparisons and quantification draw attention to the arguments rankings introduce to justify differences in performance. In addition, there is what we call the performative dimension of rankings, which addresses how rankings communicate their arguments to their audiences. This dimension explains the close relationship between rankings and the production of competition for the favour of an audience. Here, we suggest distinguishing between two aspects: visualization and publication.

(3) Visualizing quantified zero-sum performances allows rankers to present a range of comparable entities and the differences between these comparable entities in one and the same operation. It matches the clarity and simplicity of quantified comparisons with a similarly clear and simple visual order. Rankings thus usually establish what Latour (1987) calls “centres of calculation” which collect and interpret all available information and present it to an audience. Visualization does not merely encode information, but fundamentally transforms it (Hansen & Flyverbom, 2015), implying that visualizations should be taken seriously as social phenomena in their own right and should not merely be observed with regard to how “accurately” they represent information.

The most common device used for this purpose is a table. A table produces a clear overview of comparable entities which are arranged hierarchically according to differences in performance. The three major global university rankings – ARWU, THE and QS rankings – use some kind of table to present their findings to the public. In addition to the one table with the overall ranking of universities, they also rank universities according to some specific criteria, all of which always feature a single table listing universities according to their rank. Sometimes, they include their respective score in the
given year, their ranking relative to other universities ranked from the same country, ratings, and so on. Moreover, the tables published on their websites have evolved over time to allow more interactivity and customized service. Thus, visitors can choose among several criteria and arrive at several different rankings. U-Multirank\(^6\), whose creators argue that there is no such thing as a single global university ranking, is, for example, entirely based on this approach. Yet this ranking too uses a table as its main visualization device.

(4) While comparison, quantification and visualization are necessary to establish rankings as a distinct social operation, they do not suffice to produce the kind of competition for the favour of an audience described above. Rankings are transformed into a mechanism of competition only in the act of *publication*. By being published on a permanent basis, rankings create a situation in which the ranked entities are being constantly observed *for* an audience, whose appreciation is imagined as a scarce good that can be competed for. An audience, or public, in these terms is not a sum of concrete people but a social construct created in the process of publication; vice versa, public discourse – as a series of specific speech acts – is only possible by addressing and imagining a public (Warner, 2002). As Warner suggests, the discursive constitution of publics only takes place when it is regularly re-enacted by recursive reference of public communication: “It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and a responding discourse be postulated, can a text address a public” (2002, p. 62).

The temporal aspects of repeated publication is essential in this regard: historically speaking, early experiments with this form of evaluation often involved the publication of one, maybe two ranking tables. James Cattell’s early university rankings from the early 20\(^{th}\) century are a good example for this. Rather than comparing universities repeatedly, he sought to document a stable state by, for instance, using the place of study of the so-called “great men” as a token for the quality of a university (Myers & Robe, 2009). In contrast, contemporary university rankings are published regularly, predominantly use updated information (newest surveys, newest
publications, etc.) and in doing so help create a continually “shifting” environment for universities. In other words, the ongoing publication of the same ranking (each year, every two years etc.) keeps the conversation going and thus the public in existence.

To sum up: the regular publication of visualized and quantified zero-sum comparisons in different fields of society produces suggestions of competition between the ranked entities (Table 1). By including the performative dimension into our analytical framework and particularly by highlighting the “publicness” of rankings, we add to the debate by emphasizing that we see rankings as a genuinely social and not just as a cognitive operation. This understanding of rankings sets stage for the analysis of the *interplay between these four elements* in the production of status competition.

**Table 1. How rankings produce competition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four ranking operations</th>
<th>Informative dimension</th>
<th>Performative dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comparison of performances</td>
<td>Quantification</td>
<td>Visualization Publication</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**From local institutions to global actors: global competition for status**

Since the 1980s, at the national level, and the 2000s, at the global level, university rankings have proliferated and generated considerable attention, effectively becoming a “hot topic” in higher education and research. Based on our concepts of competition and rankings, we argue that global rankings are crucial in producing and intensifying competition for status by combining the above-outlined interrelated processes, which together turn
rankings into a powerful social operation that transforms the global university field. The effect thereof, we argue, arrives as a set of analytically distinct but empirically intertwined “impacts.”

First impact: globalizing the discourse on university excellence

Historically, academic performance, if any had been in place, would have been primarily considered within a national context or through a disciplinary lens, rather than across countries or disciplines. In either of the cases this would still be rarely done by “outsiders” or third parties of any sort. In contrast, today these discussions are regularly taken beyond the organizational, disciplinary, or national context, to the point at which academic quality is treated as a universal matter of global concern, with excellence being “the new yardstick” used for its measurement (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2016, pp. 1–3). Excellence – understood as the highest standard of quality of performance – is what nowadays a growing number of universities around the world, at least nominally, subscribe to (Ramirez & Tiplic, 2013). The idea that excellence is something that can be universally defined, objectively captured and ascribed to academic organizations of all stripes, and further measured, compared and communicated to an audience, is integral to global university rankings. In the remainder of this section we present the four sub-operations which together globalize the discourse on university excellence.

Defining the comparable category; establishing a universal framework of comparison; and identifying the dominant model within the category. The world-wide institutionalization of the rationalized university as an organizational ideal gears a growing number of universities and countries around the world towards a common set of standards about what constitutes a proper university. This isomorphic process is further promoted by the emergence of the American university as a “globally favoured model,” typically incorporating features such as research intensity, diversified funding, global collaboration, increasing complexity etc. (Mohrman, Ma, & Baker, 2008; Ramirez & Tiplic, 2013, p. 440).
For the three most prominent global university rankings, the dominant model is certainly the research-intensive university. Raw research power is particularly rewarded by the ARWU which allocates 80% of the total score to research-related indicators, followed by the THE Rankings with 65% dedicated to research and innovation related indicators. QS Rankings, on the other hand, allocate 20% to research indicators (precisely, citations per faculty), while 40% of the total score goes to academic reputation. The fact that global rankings are comparatively less concerned with teaching quality is, to say the least, paradoxical, given that these global rankings, as we shall see below, particularly address prospective students as their main audience.

**Transforming qualities into quantities.** The establishment of a universal framework of excellence is supported by the practice of quantifying comparisons. For example, in evaluating performance, ARWU quantifies quality of faculty, quality of education, research output and per capita performance\(^7\), each measured based on criteria that are applicable to all universities in the world, irrespective of location and/or sociocultural context. Research output is measured by the number of papers published in the journals *Nature* and *Science* and it makes up 20% of the total score of the institution, while quality of education is measured as the number of alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, weighting 10% of the overall score. Applying such universalized criteria, the latest ARWU (2017) has ranked Harvard University as the number 1, giving it a total score of 100.0, while the University of Chicago, number 10, has a total score of 53.9. The numbers seemingly speak for themselves: Harvard “evidently” shows more excellence than Chicago. An important implication of such practices (notwithstanding a methodological bias\(^8\)) is that they take research and teaching even further away from their disciplinary and national contexts, which may have historically favoured different aspects of performance from those promoted by a global ranking.

**Creating an open-ended table that renders universities comparable on a universal scale of excellence.** The idea of global, quantified zero-sum comparisons of a specific type of entity (university) is matched in the performative dimension by visualizing them in an open-ended list suggesting that all those included in the ranking – and beyond – are (a) part of the same
population and (b) evaluated according to the same universal criteria. The open-endedness of the list is crucial because it suggests that potentially any university can be part of this world-community on the grounds of merit. Rendering the global university field on a world map, as some rankers do, further reinforces the “inclusiveness” of rankings. In result, the fact that most universities in the world are not ranked by the major rankings does not mean that the universalized criteria do not, in principle, apply to them. Quite on the contrary, every university not included in, for example, the “Top 500” (which applies to most universities in the world), is automatically considered inferior and is de facto far from a “world-class” institution. But – and this is crucial – they may become part of the “Top 500,” no matter what their name, how old they are and where they are located. Exclusion from the Top 500-list effectively means occupying the bottom of a global hierarchy of excellence. Since the first global rankings were published in 2003, a growing number of non-ranked universities is developing strategies to become included in one of the league tables (Hazelkorn, 2015), which is an implication of precisely the open-ended nature of the ranking tables. Tables and similar visualization devices play an underestimated role in making this logic work.

**Imagining a global audience.** Global rankings address a public, or multiple publics, that are imagined to be interested in the comparison of universities’ performances. Students, given their growing international mobility, seem to be a matter of particular interest to the rankers. This is further supported by growing cultural appeal of international mobility, rendering studying abroad a desirable “move” for students and scholars alike (Teichler, Ferencz, & Wächter, 2011). THE and QS Rankings acknowledge this by using the ratio of international to domestic staff and that of international to domestic students as measurements of diversity or “internationalization.”

Students are herewith imagined as cosmopolitans, detached from any local or national culture, who want to make the best decision and are willing to move from Berlin to Boston, from Shanghai to London to achieve their goal of optimizing their educational experience. The following passage from the homepage of the QS Rankings is revealing of this:
“As more countries around the world develop world-class universities, there have never been so many attractive possibilities for international students. Find your own ideal study abroad destination with our student-focused country guides, covering university admissions, fees, scholarships, visas, local life and more.”

The quotation is telling of two important features of contemporary higher education: first, the field is thought of as having undergone important change, because “there have never been so many attractive possibilities” (in other words: universities are getting better and better), and second, students are imagined as individuals who pursue their “ideal study abroad,” presuming they are expected to be willing (and able) to leave their home country (far-away universities appear as closer). QS Rankings, but also THE Rankings and U-Multirank specifically single out students by dedicating sections of their homepages to what they deem to be students’ interests and needs. This shows how in the act of publication ranking organizations not only communicate ideal images of the ranked entities (“world-class,” “diverse,” “research-intensive” etc.) but also attach properties to the targeted audience: as a modern student and a member of the cosmopolitan elite, you are supposed to take charge of your own education and compare all universities in the world in order to get the best education possible. Excellence on the level of performance is thus matched, at least in the publicly displayed imagination of the ranking organizations, by a desire for excellence on the part of a global audience of students.

In addition to students, rankers frequently address other publics, such as (political or administrative) decision makers or, in the case of THE, their readership. In a recent study, Lim (2017) shows how THE consults and gathers feedback from its readership and wider audience in order to legitimize its position in the face of criticism and opposition. To the same end, THE Rankings also organizes events in different locations around the world, inviting university leaders, administrators and statesmen. The audience imagined by the THE Rankings is, therefore, one of diverse tastes and preferences, which may partly explain the increasing complexity of its ranking methodology over time, compared to other global rankers. Most importantly, however, what unites all audiences imagined by global rankers is that they are not of a national kind.
Second impact: transforming reputation for excellence into a scarce resource

While early experiments with university evaluations in the first half of the 20th century sometimes resulted in the publication of tables that resemble today’s rankings (Myers & Robe, 2009), their counterparts in the present day and age, by means of periodic yearly publication, construct the reputation for excellence as a scarce resource which universities are expected to compete for. In other words: by evaluating performances comparatively, quantitatively, publicly, and regularly, global university rankings “scarify” reputation for excellence. This is far from being the natural state of higher education (or, for that matter, any other social field). As mentioned earlier, reputation for excellence unto itself is not a scarce resource, as we could easily imagine the world of higher education as one where all universities work and improve together, enjoying a common reputation for helping to further the interest of mankind. This, however, is not the world as imagined by the rankings. Rankings rather help establish the idea that any improvement of one university leads to reputation gains at the expense of other universities.

Evaluating performances relative to each other. In terms of comparisons, this implies a perspective that takes into account how scores of one university can be related to the scores of any other university in the world. Thus, rankings imply the claim to measure “the degree of excellence” universities have relative to each other and to offer a score of performances based on comparisons with all other universities. By producing relative measures of excellence on a global scale, rankings achieve two things than can be easily overlooked but are essential to the way in which they partake in the production of competition: First, they tie evaluation to comparison within a global field, so that the evaluation of each performance per se is essentially the outcome of a global comparison. According to this logic, you cannot evaluate a university without comparing it to all other universities. Secondly, comparative evaluation creates a specific kind of “geography of performance”: performance-based proximities, according to which universities from Freiburg, Hong Kong and Toronto can be neighbours on the ranking while two universities from Boston can be worlds apart. This
helps suggest that the progress of one university, relatively speaking, and irrespective of geographical or sociocultural characteristics, leads to the devaluation of its immediate neighbours in the ranking.

**Making small differences relevant and legitimate.** Quantifying comparisons with highly sophisticated indicators helps making small (and sometimes arguably insignificant) differences matter. In some cases, minimal differences might even cause a university to lose hold of its rank. Given the stakes, the producers of global university rankings need to carefully communicate their trustworthiness and the objectivity of their data, not least because universities themselves are a legitimate authority in matters of academic quality. To illustrate, in the 2017 edition of ARWU, the total score difference between the University of Cambridge (number 3) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (number 4) was 0.5 in numbers. Although such small differences may easily be disregarded, the methodology of the ranking, which ARWU describes as “scientifically sound, stable and transparent,”\textsuperscript{12} infuses the difference in score, as small as it may be, with meaning and legitimacy. In addition to the objectivity implied in the methodology used, rankers may seek legitimacy by appealing to legitimated parties in the higher education field, such as students and policy makers, or out-of-the-field third party experts, such as audit companies. The following passage shows how the *THE* World University Rankings addresses this issue:

“The top universities rankings use 13 carefully calibrated performance indicators to provide the most comprehensive and balanced comparisons available, which are trusted by students, academics, university leaders, industry and governments. The calculation of the rankings for 2016-2017 has been subject to independent audit by professional services firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC).”\textsuperscript{13}

The application of measures to secure legitimacy should not surprise given the regular criticism rankers have to deal with in the field of science. It has been argued that such measures are fundamental to rankers’ claim to expertise, and thus legitimacy, as well as to their revenue (Lim, 2017), both of which are particularly pertinent to the non-academic rankers, such as *THE* Rankings. Similarly, Barron (2017) indicates that the creation of the Berlin
Principles on Ranking Higher Education Institutions is a result of an attempt to standardize and legitimize ranking practices by aligning them with academic values, thus reducing the “reputational risk” (Power, Scheytt, Soin, & Sahlin, 2009) of ranking organizations. These efforts reflect the significance that is ascribed to quantification of performances as the basis of status competition between universities.

Using a hierarchical table as a visualization tool. When a table is employed as a means of communication, rather than an information storage tool (Wainer, 1992), ranked entities are arranged in such a way as to effectively convey the most important message. In global academic quality rankings, this message is: “this university is the best in the world,” followed by the second best, third, and so on. Therefore, rankings use a table in which universities are arranged hierarchically according to “how much excellence” they have. In doing so, global university rankings suggest that the vertical slots allocated merely reflect “the objective reality” when it comes to performance: (a) not all universities can be equally good and (b) the better a university is, the higher its slot is.

With these characteristics, tables serve as a perfect complement to the “politics of small differences” described above: they help transform the often minimal quantitative differences between universities into a visually unambiguous hierarchical order, signalling that any improvement by one university comes at the expense of other universities, leading as it does to their relegation on the table. Visualization of performances particularly helps in establishing proximity (or distance) between universities based on performance rather than territorial, historical or cultural criteria. This also amounts to the often-criticized simplicity of rankings. However, as pointed out earlier, this is precisely what makes them such an effective tool of communication, as it allows the user to easily “spot” differences in performance where he or she might otherwise be overwhelmed by a wealth of statistical and qualitative information. The rhetorical power of visual simplicity is reflected in the failure of rankings that pass up on this possibility. The U-Multirank, for instance, has been criticized for its rather complicated user surface that ultimately undermines the discursive force of ranking (Jongbloed, Kaiser, & van Vught, 2013).
Suggesting competition between universities – anywhere in the world. In combination, quantification and visualization underline the “sarcification” of status as reflected in the rankings. By publicizing these quantified visualizations of zero-sum comparisons, in which even small differences matter, universities are constructed as competitors for various goods (students, resources or reputation) on a global scale. Furthermore, rankings nowadays even allow visitors of their homepages to create their own rankings (e.g. compare only universities from one country), which amplifies this effect.

The competition between universities is also embedded in the broader discourse on competition between countries. Since the outset, global university rankings have promoted – albeit implicitly – relative standings of countries. National media closely follow global rankings and sometimes report on them by focusing on where “their” universities stand vis-à-vis others. When certain countries appear to take over, those who lose ground are alarmed. The following excerpt demonstrates this:

“There were 12 UK universities in the global top 100 in 2011 when the tables were published for the first time. Now there are nine. […] Some UK institutions are losing stature by comparison and it is partly because of an acknowledgement by some East Asian governments that spending on universities is vital to their economies.”

It is also not uncommon for Asian universities to be portrayed as a “threat” to the Western universities’ rank:

“With the University of Tokyo and National University of Singapore in the top 30 global universities and Seoul National University moving into the top 50 it is clear, universities in Asia are increasingly challenging the West’s role in leading the global market in terms of research, innovation and education excellence.”

As these examples demonstrate, media reports on rankings are particularly geared towards presenting countries and their respective universities as competitors, which, by making it a matter of constant debate, helps the “sarcification” of reputation for excellence materialize in the (national) public discourse and triggers regulatory efforts of governments.
Third impact: transforming a stable status order into a dynamic field

It is often said that *U.S. News* undergraduate reputational rankings revolutionized academic quality rankings (Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Hazelkorn, 2015; Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999; Myers & Robe, 2009). Until they appeared, “academic quality rankings were the province of professors and higher education administrators” (2009, p. 16). *U.S. News* were novel in two important ways. First, being a highly-circulated news magazine, it addressed a large audience, whereas earlier reputational rankings were usually published in academic journals and primarily addressed expert audiences, with some notable exceptions such as the Carter Report which was released in 1966 and sold approximately 26,000 copies (Myers & Robe, 2009). Second, it was the first one to *regularly* publish rankings, framed by the continuous (annual or biannual) publication of rankings, rendering the prospect of status change a purposeful event, instead of something that would change in an uncontrolled evolutionary process and at much slower pace. Thus, only when rankings introduce the possibility of *change* in the status order can we speak of the emergence of a field that features competition between its members.

**Regularly revising the universal framework of comparison.** Global university rankings vary in terms of how often they revise their framework of comparison. ARWU stands out as the most conservative one in this sense, as it has not changed its framework of comparison since its inception. QS Rankings and especially *THE* Rankings have a tendency to continuously seek to be better at capturing “excellence.” An important implication of the regular revision of the universal framework is that it keeps the conversation on what constitutes university excellence going, or, in the absence of regular revision, it reinforces the existing criteria. However, regular revisions suggest that “excellence” is not something that is once-and-for-all fixed but in a constant flux and thus needs to be revisited in regular intervals.

In addition to the overall rankings, rankers offer additional frameworks of university comparison. For example, *THE* Rankings and QS Rankings also publish specialized rankings, such as those for universities under 50 years old (both *THE* and QS have these), for universities within particular regions
(e.g. Latin America, Asia, BRICS & Emerging Economies Rankings), or focusing on a particular dimension, such as reputation, graduate employability or subject area. ARWU, on the other hand, features additional rankings by subject, as well as two national rankings. Much like the overall rankings, the specialized ones also have their yearly cycles, and their publication dates are distributed across the year. However, the overall rankings attract the most attention by far, while their annual publication is considered a critical event in the yearly cycle of the global “excellence race.”

All of this indicates an ongoing expansion process of global university rankings, enabled by the easiness of reusing readymade quantitative data.

Sensitivity of quantitative indicators and the regular revision of methodologies. University rankings temporalize comparisons, as quantitative indicators are designed to capture every change in performance and reflect minimal differences. This quantitative sensitivity produces the possibility of constant movement: the No. 1 today might be No. 7 next year, a score of 45.7 might turn into a score of 43.2 or 52.6. Even more important, quantitative sensitivity makes change normal and expectable and thus institutionalizes a constant flux in the field. Different indicators have different built-in sensitivity for change. For instance, the number of alumni with Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, which ARWU uses as an indicator of quality of education, is more stable over time than, say, the number of papers indexed in Science Citation Index-expanded and Social Science Citation Index. Both indicators display less sensitivity than those used by THE Rankings which are mostly composite, whereby, for example, the score for “Research” is the aggregate value of the individual scores for research reputation, research income, papers per research and academic staff, and the ratio between public research income and total research income. Such choice of methodology is more likely to capture small changes, which then results in greater variation in the rankings ranks from one year to the next.

Visualizing change over time. Visually, global university rankings (especially their homepages) are similar to other kinds of rankings in that they often not only show this year’s score, but also feature information on the last year’s score and/or last year’s position. In so doing, they provide information on how a university has lost or gained ground, thereby
emphasizing (the possibility of) movement. Thus, visualization allows combining this year’s and last year’s score and by doing so displays present status and change in time simultaneously. Although major global rankings differ in the way in which they make information about past performances available to users, this information is fairly easy to retrieve. The homepages of the QS Rankings and ARWU, for instance, allow their visitors to compare the universities’ ranks across time.

Regular publication and addressing the global audience. Global university rankings have been periodically published from the outset. When the first ranking, ARWU, came out in 2003, it generated considerable worldwide attention. It was soon followed by other global rankings. Together with QS and THE, ARWU is today considered to be one of the most influential global ranking of universities. All three, as well as most other global rankings, are published regularly. Publication makes change visible to a global audience and thereby a potential matter of public debate.

To make the suggested competition matter, global university rankings imagine their audience to be interested in these yearly movements. As mentioned above, they single out students in particular, but also other possible observers, from parents to policymakers, and each new publication is an act of communicating “new” information to these observers. This, in turn, has a priming effect on the targeted audiences. For example, many universities have public relations departments that are aware of when the results are published. They follow closely the events around the publications and promote their position via homepages, newsletters and social media (Hazelkorn, Loukkola, & Zhang, 2014; Rijcke et al., 2016).

It is worth noting that rankers differ in the role they play in the dynamics created by rankings. For example, on the occasion of publishing its annual table, THE organizes the “World Academic Summit,” as well as a series of other events linked to specialized rankings, such as Research Excellence Summit, Innovation & Impact Summit, Asia Universities Summit, and so forth. With these events, THE Rankings aim to, inter alia, bring together “pre-eminent global thought leaders across higher education, research, industry and government to share best practice and innovation in the development and leadership of world-class universities and research” (‘THE
World Summits’, n.d.). Indeed, being a news company, THE is clearly in the business of “making news,” yet it is also active in its efforts to be relevant, reach out to various audiences, in being responsive to their readership, but also to the concerns of students and the aforementioned “global thought leaders” (Lim, 2017). Global rankers such as THE thus play a significant role in the global debate on academic quality and excellence and particularly in keeping the public focus on rankings.

**Table 2. How global rankings produce competition between universities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four ranking operations</th>
<th>Performative dimension</th>
<th>Informative dimension</th>
<th>Three impacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Global) comparison of performances</td>
<td>Quantification</td>
<td>Visualization</td>
<td>Publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining the comparable category, establishing a universal framework of comparison and identifying the dominant model within the category</td>
<td>Transforming qualities into quantities</td>
<td>Creating an open-ended table that renders universities comparable on a universal scale of excellence</td>
<td>Imagining a global audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating performances relative to each other</td>
<td>Making small differences relevant and legitimate</td>
<td>Using a hierarchical table as a visualization tool</td>
<td>Suggesting competition between universities – anywhere in the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly revising the universal framework of comparison</td>
<td>Sensitivity of quantitative indicators and the regular revision of methodologies</td>
<td>Visualizing change over time</td>
<td>Regularly addressing the global audience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 summarizes the hitherto described four rankings operations and the three impacts they have on the global university field, with each impact
consecutively adding a new dimension to the dynamics of the global university field. Delivered in such a way, these four operations effectively transform a stable status order into a dynamic competitive field.

Conclusion and outlook: towards a sociology of rankings

In this article we have tried to explain the ways in which rankings, defined as quantified, visualized and regularly published zero-sum comparisons of performances, construct status competition. Using the example of global university rankings, we highlighted three impacts rankings have in the university field. In their first impact, rankings help globalize a specific discourse on excellence that can be universally applied. Second, by producing, visualizing and publicizing minimal differences in performance, rankings “scarcify” reputation. And third, by regular publication, they turn a stable status order into a dynamic competitive field. Combining these effects, rankings transform the status of universities from something that is implicit and fragmented into something that is explicit and globally acknowledged, effectively institutionalizing competition between universities as a global “fact,” that is, a matter of (assumed) shared knowledge within a global field.

In the conclusion, we wish to discuss some conceptual implications of our analysis for future research. We assume that our analysis of the ways in which rankings contribute to the production of status competition could be applied not only to universities but to other organizations and fields as well. It could be applied as a guide for future studies and help arrive at a more general sociology of the rise and impact of rankings in modernity. We highlight three particularly interesting and promising implications. First, our analysis provides a general vocabulary for studying the ways in which rankings participate in the production of status competition. It thus could be used to guide comparative studies of the impact of rankings across different societal fields. Second, our interest in rankings has drawn our attention to
particular type of competition: competition for the favour of an audience. The social construction of this type of competition is based not on the intentions of competitors but on the repeated comparisons and evaluation of their performances by third parties, which draws attention to a particular kind of *decoupling* between the production of competition and the actual motives of competitors. And third, our perspective on rankings and competition suggests reconsidering the concept of *fields*, as it encourages a discussion about the prerequisites of competition as a defining element of such social orders.

**Studying the production of competition through rankings across different societal fields**

Our account of global university rankings was based on a general vocabulary for the analysis of rankings that can be extended to other empirical settings. Building on the three propositions developed above, it can be assumed that rankings play a major role in *globalizing* the discourse on excellence of performance in various domains, ranging from human development of nation-states, to product qualities and prices, to quality of hotels or restaurants, to achievements of athletes and artists. In the process, they seem to turn the reputation for quality into a scarce resource and, finally, transform a stable status order into a dynamic competitive field.

These propositions could be tested by comparative studies that focus on the impact of rankings in different fields and on similarities as well as differences of the ways in which rankings contribute to the production of competition: What are the criteria of comparability introduced by the ranking? How are performances evaluated and quantified? What kinds of visualizations, such as tables, maps, etc., are used? Where and how regularly is the ranking published? How are the relevant audiences, or publics, imagined and addressed? How do rankings affect the perception of status? Which third parties – from government and political publicists to market analysts to art critics and sports journalist – use rankings to establish universal criteria of comparison and construct status competition? How prominent and legitimate are rankings in different fields? How intensely are they contested?
Decoupling between production and internalization of competition

Studying these phenomena comparatively and historically will also help to approach another research question that has largely been neglected in the social science literature: the possibility of decoupling between the production and the actual effects of competition. Based on Simmel’s classical concept of competition, we started our analysis by describing the specific characteristics of a particular type of competition: competition for the favour of an audience. This type of competition is different from other types in that it is not a direct outcome of the competitors’ intentions but is constructed in public discourse by third parties, which compare performances while addressing and thereby imagining an audience. Thus, studying the role of rankings in the production of status competition draws attention to the possibility that the successful production and institutionalization of competition — on the level of discursive production — is not necessarily reflected in increasing competitive awareness and behaviour on part of the competitors. In other words, the rise of rankings, although indeed leading to the increasing production of competition, might not necessarily also lead to intensified competition.

This analysis undermines the commonplace that rankings, in a sort of knee-jerk reaction, lead to intensified competition. Instead, it urges us to consider the degree of coupling between publicly suggested templates of competition — through rankings and similar mechanisms such as ratings and awards — on the one hand and the actors’ perceptions and motivations on the other hand as an open empirical research question. Actors, in other words, can be more or less aligned with the frames of reference suggested by rankings. Global university rankings, for instance, not only globalize certain templates for organizing, but might also induce what new institutionalism refers to as decoupling between formal structure and actual activities, grounded in the difference between the global templates that are diffused by instruments such as rankings and the realities of national and local contexts (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Sauder & Espeland, 2009). In other words, it is precisely their universality and their detachment from the national/local culture that is likely to trigger decoupling processes. This might also be true for the ways in which rankings induce competition. However, the degree to which the
global competition produced by rankings actually shapes competitive motives and competitive behaviour in different fields has largely been taken for granted and thus still awaits investigation.

**Opening up the discussion about characteristics of global fields**

Finally, this more complex picture of the ways in which competition is constructed, but also possibly resisted and decoupled, may also advance the discussion about the defining characteristics of global fields. So far, the discussion about global fields is largely confined to scholars interested in advancing Bourdieu’s field theory (for an interesting collection of papers see Go & Krause, 2016). For instance, based on Bourdieu and an in-depth analysis of the global arts field, Larissa Buchholz argues that a global field “can be delineated along three basic characteristics: (1) as a sphere of specialized practice; (2) with a relatively autonomous logic of competition, and (3) on a multi-continental scale of geographic expansion” (2016, p. 40).

This understanding of global fields is close to the concerns discussed here in that it draws attention to competition as a characteristic of global fields. However, as usual in Bourdieusian field theory (as well as in other versions of field theory; cf. Fligstein & McAdam, 2012), this conceives of competition as a given characteristic of fields and thus tends to naturalize the actors’ willingness to compete as a quasi-anthropological trait. By contrast, our analysis of rankings started with a closer look at the ways in which competition for an audience is socially constructed. It thus suggests treating the question of whether and to what degree such competition constitutes a field as an empirical question that requires studying the social construction of – but also possible decoupling from – competition within fields. In other words, it requires seeing competition not as a given characteristic but as an empirical variable that may shape different fields to different degrees. Using these insights for comparative studies of fields may help open the discussion about what constitutes a field beyond the confines of Bourdieusian field theory and establish a more pluralistic discussion about characteristics of global fields.
Notes


4 Note that in our concept, “audience” does not refer to a real group of people (which, of course, does not mean that rankings are not consumed by real people) but to a communicative construct of public discourse (Warner, 2002).

5 This aspect of rankings bears resemblance to Espeland and Stevens’ (1998) concept of commensuration. However, we wish to distinguish between making entities comparable and quantifying them and thus suggest distinguishing between commensuration and quantification.


8 By largely relying on methods of performance measurement such as citation counts or international publications, which vary across disciplines and countries, rankings downplay the disciplinary and also cultural differences and, as a result, privilege certain universities and countries over others (Lawrence, 2007, in Hazelkorn, 2015).

9 Potential inclusion in the list is an important feature of modern rankings because it suggests: “anybody can do it.” In contrast, the first known rankings in the 18th and early 19th century in the field of arts were of a much more exclusive nature. Spoerhase (2014) cites one of these early rankers, Christian Friedrich and Daniel Schubart, according to whom a rankings’ function is to merely show average artists that they are – and will always be – average, thereby implying the impossibility of ever becoming part of the illustrious circle of geniuses. In other words, these rankings were not meant to spur competitive behaviour between artists.


11 The discourse is furthered by a whole array of actors such as consultants, politicians, or university administrators, who regularly meet at conferences, publish
articles or online videos, and organize panel discussions. There are even organizations such as the IREG (International Ranking Expert Group) who observe, evaluate, and publicly comment rankings (Wedlin, 2014). When these actors criticize rankings, they usually take a reformist stance, thereby implying that, in principle, global zero-sum comparisons of “excellence” are a legitimate endeavor, provided the right methodology has been applied. Thus, their criticism does not aim at the abolishment of rankings but rather at triggering the intensification of ranking activities.


14 While Power et al. (2009) use the ranked organizations (universities) as their prime example, we want to emphasize that the producers of rankings themselves also develop strategies for managing reputational risk.


4. The status games they play: Unpacking the dynamics of organisational status competition in higher education

Published as:
Abstract

The article uses the concept of organisational status to explore how universities respond to intensifying competition. Although status is not a novel phenomenon in higher education, recent insights show that the concerns with vertical positioning, both nationally and internationally, are gaining prominence with a growing number of universities worldwide. As global competition becomes as fierce as ever, universities’ efforts to maintain or advance their position vis-à-vis each other are becoming more salient. The paper draws from extant literature to identify three mechanisms of organisational status construction – categories, intermediaries and affiliations – and offers a set of propositions as to how universities of different status rank are expected to act when seeking to maintain or advance their status. Such activities, it is argued, shape status hierarchies, which, in turn, affect the scope of organisational action. The article contributes to the discussions on competition in higher education literature and, more broadly, to the theory of organisational action in the tradition of sociological institutionalism.
Introduction

Over the past several decades, scholars have increasingly invoked the concept of status to explain both organisational behaviour and the dynamics of organisational fields (Jensen, Kim, & Kim, 2011; Piazza & Castellucci, 2014; Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012). A key insight from the sociological literature on status is that the importance organisations and their audiences assign to status positively correlates with the level of uncertainty with regards to the quality of organisations’ products or services (Podolny, 1994; Sauder et al., 2012). In other words, the more contested the quality is, the more attention audiences, but also organisations, pay to status signals.

Concerns about status have always been ubiquitous in higher education fields (Bleiklie, 2003; Clark, 1983). However, in recent years, organisational status has received an ever-increasing attention from universities, policy makers and general public. The proliferation of university rankings over the past decade, and not least the scholarly work addressing them, only attests to this phenomenon. Yet the position in rankings is not the only way to tell status of a university. Accreditations, ratings, alliances, awards, and even some processes specific to higher education such as “academic drift”, are inextricably linked with status dynamics. Not only do these trends cut across national boundaries and mobilise unprecedented levels of attention and resources, but they increasingly influence the way policy makers, students, media and even universities themselves talk and think of higher education.

As a phenomenon in organisational studies, status is usually researched in the context of competition and markets (Fligstein, 1996; Podolny, 1993; Washington & Zajac, 2005). And while market and competition are often addressed concepts in higher education journals and edited volumes (e.g. Geiger, 2004; Marginson, 2015; Teixeira et al., 2004), status – as a property of organisations and as a concept in its own right – is, save for few exceptions (e.g. Henderson & Kane, 1991; Marginson, 2006, 2013), rarely addressed in this literature. Although markets and competition in higher education are considered specific, thus not lending themselves easily to comparison with other empirical settings (Hasse & Krücken, 2013; Marginson, 2013; Musselin, 2010), I argue that such comparisons are much
needed, both for advancing theory on the phenomena of interest and for rendering the dynamics specific to higher education more transparent.

The aim here is to take the discussion on organisational status in higher education fields a step forward by offering a synthesised overview of status processes in general and their implications for universities’ responses to the said processes in particular. In doing so, I wish to bring closer together the insights on status dynamics offered by higher education scholars, on one hand, with the related discussions at a more general level of theorising, on the other. The article draws on sociological institutionalism which emphasises embeddedness of social actors in a broader cultural environment and argues that, rather than being primarily rational and goal-oriented entities, actors are, above all, carriers of social structure and enactors of global cultural scripts (Meyer, 2008; Meyer et al., 1987). This implies an ontology in which status, much like markets, competition and hierarchies, is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). I build on this by making use of insights from organisational sociology (Podolny, 2010; Sauder et al., 2012) and social psychology (Abrams, Hogg, & Marques, 2004) to propose a more nuanced understanding of how universities respond to status processes, themselves propelled by intensifying competition. Such understanding, as the article argues, should enable us to better capture the way contemporary universities respond to institutional pressures. I start by taking a closer look at the focal concept itself.

What is organisational status?

Status is hereby defined as a position in a hierarchical order, or more fully, “a socially constructed, intersubjectively agreed-upon and accepted ordering or ranking of individuals, groups, organizations, or activities in a social system” (Podolny, 2010; Washington & Zajac, 2005, p. 284). A status hierarchy, therefore, emerges around a shared understanding of what is considered more or less worthy, whereby the most worthy is located at its apex (Sauder et al., 2012). Status can, of course, be used in reference to
individuals and other entities, yet here the focus is on organisational status. Albeit sometimes used interchangeably with concepts like reputation, prestige, social esteem and even legitimacy, status is essentially a distinct construct (see e.g. Bitektine, 2011; or Washington & Zajac, 2005). It is also not the same as quality, although these tend to correlate, which is why status has also been defined as a signal of quality (Podolny, 1994). However, status is a meaningful construct only to the degree that the correlation between status and quality is not perfect: the fact that status may be a poor signal of “real” quality does not render it useless, on the contrary. It is precisely this imperfection which makes it a powerful construct in the face of great uncertainty about the said quality (Sauder et al., 2012; Washington & Zajac, 2005).

It is generally acknowledged that status benefits more those at the top. First, compared to lower-status organisations, higher-status ones enjoy more legitimacy and therefore higher resource stability. Second, higher-status organisations are more likely to influence and even set the rules of the game for themselves and others (Podolny, 2010). Third, higher-status organisations feel less pressure to conform to dominant norms and can thus afford more risk (Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001). This, argue Phillips and Zuckerman (2001), is because the identity of the higher-status ones is fixed in the eyes of their audiences and their actions alone are not likely to jeopardise it (unless they violate ethical or loyalty norms (Phillips, Turco, & Zuckerman, 2013)). Fourth, higher-status organisations directly benefit from the mechanisms of cumulative advantage, i.e. the “Matthew effect” (Merton, 1968). This means that they extract greater rewards than those of lower status for doing identical things and even for producing outputs of the same quality (Podolny, 1993; Rao, 1994).

Phillips and Zuckerman (2001) observed that, when compared to middle-status actors, the actors occupying opposite ends of the status scale are less likely to suffer consequences if they deviate from norms: those at the apex, as suggested, feel more confident about their identity and “role incumbency”, while those at the bottom are less scrutinised by audiences. Therefore, everything else remaining the same, a change in role prescriptions – that is, the field’s shared understanding of what it means to be a “worthy”
organisation – or an act of disloyalty or betrayal, may reshuffle the hierarchy. It is thus unsurprising that the highest-ranked organisations have the greatest interest in preserving the values and social order which grant them incumbency (Fligstein, 1996; Podolny, 2010).

Because not all status systems are the same, how much the elite or the top benefits is going to depend on the structure of the status system which ranges from the “winner-take-all” systems to more evenly distributed ones (R. H. Frank & Cook, 1995). Yet, once established, hierarchies tend to be self-sustaining (Chen, Peterson, Phillips, Podolny, & Ridgeway, 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Chen et al. (2011) list a number of ideological beliefs that contribute to this, such as the shared belief that hierarchies are sources of stability and order and that they are essentially meritocratic. These beliefs are not only held by those at the top, but they also tend to be internalised by those of lower status, which often show deference to those “above” them (Podolny, 2010). Yet this does not mean that they will do nothing about it, for hierarchies can also be seen as dynamic systems in which any of the occupants may always move up or down. Their mobility prospects will, however, be affected by how rigid and institutionalised the hierarchy is (Malter, 2014; Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001; Sauder, 2006).

That organisational action is both constrained and enabled by the institutional environment in which it is embedded is not a novel idea (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The pervasiveness of the global cultural system in which competition features as an ideological imperative shapes the institutional conditions for organisational behaviour (Bromley & Meyer, 2015). Competition for status, as well as other symbolic goods, such as prestige and reputation, is not a new concern among universities, yet now, with the advent of rankings and competitive funding schemes, it is gaining a new momentum. Such conditions urge universities around the world to perceive each other as competitors for the favour of third parties, such as funding agencies and rankings, and increasingly think of their social position as a slot on an imaginary vertical scale. Thus constructed hierarchies can vary in terms of how stable they are perceived to be, whereby, in ideal terms, the less stable they appear, the more competitive the environment is perceived to be. We could therefore expect that the scope
for organisational action directed towards maintaining or challenging the hierarchies in place would be contingent upon the degree of their settlement, but also, as it will be argued in the remainder of this article, on the positions those organisations occupy.

The status games they play: categories, intermediaries and affiliations

To take a closer look at how organisations in general, and universities in particular, respond to status dynamics, I start by asking: “How do we know the status of an organisation?” The literature hereby reviewed has led to three ways of telling status of an organisation in a hierarchy – categories, intermediaries and affiliations. Each of the three leads to a different image of the status order whereby the distinction is commonly made between the high-, middle- and low-status positions on the scale we imagine the hierarchy to be. However, such – or any other way of – segmenting the scale is often arbitrary and thus potentially problematic, for questions like “Where do we draw the line between high- and middle-status?” are ultimately empirical. In order to avoid this pitfall, I propose thinking of status of an organisation (or a group of organisations) as relative to the status of another organisation (or group) in the same field. A field can be a national, regional, or global community of universities in which its members think of each other as competitors for status, to loosely apply Scott’s often-cited definition of an organisational field (2001, p. 56). Yet much like the segmenting of a hierarchy, determining the boundaries of such a field is primarily also an empirical question.

Categories

Categories represent institutional classifications or socially legitimated groupings of perceived similar entities (Hannan, Pólos, & Carroll, 2007; Sharkey, 2014). They are heuristics used by audiences which shape
organisation’s identity, inform the organisation on the kind of action expected of it and helps it identify rivals and potential partners (Negro et al., 2010; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Therefore, categories matter to how audiences’ evaluate the organisation, its action and products, as well as to how the organisation sees itself in relation to others (Baum & Lant, 2003; Zuckerman, 1999).

Categories are an essential medium for creating and maintaining social boundaries and status distinctions (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Zhao & Zhou, 2010). Like organisations, categories can also have status, whereby status of the category affects status of its members (Jensen et al., 2011; Kovács & Hannan, 2010). For example, Sharkey (2014) notes that audiences’ evaluations of firm’s actions may also depend on the status of the category to which the firm belongs. In their study of American community colleges, Brint and Karabel (1991) show how the “status deprivation problem” of the two-year colleges was solved by transforming them from transfer-oriented institutions into vocationally-oriented ones offering access to direct employment.

Insights from social psychology may be valuable in highlighting the link between categorical boundaries and status (Abrams et al., 2004; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Tajfel, 1982a). This literature is consensual in arguing that individuals claim membership to social groups in order to differentiate from one another. Abrams, Hogg and Marques note that “the simple act of partitioning people into different social categories necessarily involves over inclusion and exclusion of members in terms of the assumed sharedness of their characteristics with others of the same category” (2004, p. 19). Thus, hierarchically arranged categories “may be constructed to associate power and legitimacy with social categories like “race”, caste, ethnicity, nationality, social class, religion, or any other group distinction that human interaction is capable of constructing” (Sidanius & Pratto, 2011, p. 419). Analogously, legitimacy and power may be associated with different categories and sub-categories of organisations, such as firms, non-profits, charities, or universities.

Because the boundaries between these (sub-)categories are not always clear, we can think of them as crisp or fuzzy sets (Hannan, 2010; Negro et al.,
2010). From this perspective, organisations are not always either in or out of a category, but they can have partial membership, i.e. their belonging in a category is seen in degrees. Thus, the status of an entity pertaining to a fuzzy category could be determined on the basis of the extent to which the entity possesses qualities considered to be essential or the most valuable for the said category. For instance, a woman may be considered “less of” a member of a male-dominated profession and thus more likely to occupy a lower-status position in the hierarchy of that profession (Epstein, 1970; Kellogg, 2011). Therefore, within each category, one may find a hierarchy based on the differences in organisational forms or activities, as defined by relevant audiences, and the degrees of appropriateness thereof (Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Negro et al., 2010).

Universities are also a category of higher education institutions/or organiations. While, on the one hand, there are other types of higher education institutions, on the other, different types of universities are often treated as distinct categories. And so we have colleges, polytechnics, universities of applied sciences, state, national, public, private (with for-profit and non-for-profit as sub-categories), flagship, regional, federal, faith-based, land-grant, and so on. This differentiation varies across contexts with some types being context-specific. For instance, in Japan, the distinction is made among state, national and private universities. Many countries have the so-called binary systems, comprising universities and polytechnics (Kyvik, 2004). In both cases, the distinction is a formal one, set by the authorities. On the other hand, some categories are not formal, yet there is a high level of intensional semantic consensus among the key audiences about their boundaries (Hannan et al., 2007). An example of such non-formal yet taken-for-granted categorisation would be the one of the sandstone universities in Australia.

Regardless of the level of formality, categories in higher education are often associated with a particular status. Generally speaking, universities, for example, have higher status than polytechnics (Clark, 1983), while in some contexts public may have higher status than private (Brankovic, 2014). The phenomenon commonly referred to as “academic drift” – a tendency of vocationally oriented academic institutions to emulate universities and thus
come closer to “true” or “proper” academic institutions (Morphew & Huisman, 2002; Pratt & Burgess, 1974) – speaks of the status dynamic driven by such difference. This can be very much consequential for organisation’s identity and its internal functioning. Henderson and Kane (1991) aptly illustrate this by showing how the attempts of US state-related comprehensive universities to emulate high-status research universities led to low faculty satisfaction and further loss of self-esteem in the former.

Such behaviour can also be thought of as an effort to vertically extend the status of the category (cf. Delmestri & Greenwood, 2016). A more recent phenomenon of a similar kind would be a growing number of universities around the world which are being identified as “world-class” or “global research universities” (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Ma, 2008; Mohrman et al., 2008; Robertson, 2012; Rodriguez-Pomeda & Casani, 2016). Many higher-status universities identify themselves as “leading research-intensive universities”, and even form associations with exclusive membership and advocacy agendas to promote mutual interests. While being “leading” and “research-intensive” may not seem as something categorically different from simply being a university, the fact that some universities establish exclusive clubs based on these shared characteristics may be interpreted as a concerted effort at forging and claiming a new higher-status (sub-)category or strengthening the boundaries of an existing one. That membership in a club can be taken as a prerequisite for membership in a category has been identified also in other settings: “Being a member of the Swedish House of Nobility was the only way for a family to be regarded as a member of Swedish nobility” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, p. 72). Membership, Ahrne and Brunsson argue, is what in this case defines nobility, and vice versa.

Therefore:

Proposition 1a: As the competition intensifies, members of a higher-status category are more likely to work towards reinforcing its boundaries, whereas non-members are more likely to seek membership in a higher-status category.

Proposition 1b: As the competition intensifies, members of a lower-status category are more likely to work towards vertically extending the status of their category.
Proposition 1c: As the competition within a category intensifies, higher-status members of the category are more likely to work towards creating a higher-status sub-category.

**Intermediaries**

Status can also be influenced by intermediaries, or arbiters, such as critics, funding agencies, rankings, ratings, awards, contests or credential authorities. Intermediaries are third parties that “mediate between the competitors and their audiences by observing the competitors and communicating their observations to an audience” (Werron, 2015, p. 199). More importantly, they posture as authorised agents of higher principles, such as “human rights” or “excellence”, often translated into standards and routinely deployed across different contexts as universal measures of appropriateness (Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

Today more than ever before, countries and organisations, as well as individuals, are being subjected to various forms of external and often publicised evaluations conducted by various intermediaries. We may distinguish among them by the type of evaluation they do, their authority and audience outreach. Ratings are not the same as rankings, for instance. Many restaurants can have three Michelin stars, yet only one can come at the top of the *World's 50 Best Restaurants* list, which makes the latter a more precise signal of relative standing. For a business school it may be a legal requirement to be accredited by national authorities, but having the “triple-crown accreditation” (Kaplan, 2014) is considered a matter of prestige. Winning the Best Director award at the *Evening Standard British Film Awards* may be an achievement, but counts less than winning an Oscar, both due to the authority of the party awarding it and due to the difference in the outreach. The bottom line is that winning a contest or topping a list is a matter of prestige, yet not all in the same way or to the same extent. We could, however, expect that organisations will pay more attention to those intermediaries which reach the widest audiences, have the highest authority with them (the audiences trust them the most) and offer the most precise information of relative standings. With regards to the last point, rankings represent an ideal-typical intermediary in this sense, given that they
effectively transform comparisons between organisations into zero-sum comparisons (Werron & Ringel, 2017).

Evidence that intermediaries have an effect on how organisations behave is abundant. For instance, Cotter and Snyder (1998) (Snyder & Cotter, 1998) looked into how French restaurants responded to being promoted by the Michelin Guide and noted that their increased Michelin rating was primarily reflected in their prices. Similarly, Colman (2008) and Hay (2010) reported on how wine-makers respond to critics. Hay specifically focuses on the American wine critic Robert Parker and concludes that Parker plays a key role in both price and status formation. Chatterji and Toffel (2010) examined how corporate environmental ratings, issued by a prominent independent social rating agency, influence firms’ subsequent performance. They show that firms which were initially rated as poor improved more their environmental performance than the firms which were rated as mixed or good. Analysing the American auto industry, Rao (1994) argues that certification contests are credential mechanisms which extend the life chances of winning organisations.

University rankings are a prime example of how responsive universities can be to third-party evaluations. Monks and Ehrenberg (1999), Meredith (2004), and Bowman and Bastedo (2009) offered evidence on the effects of change in rank in the US News ranking on universities’ and colleges’ admission and pricing policies. Martins (2005) found that business schools’ top managers were more likely to initiate organisational change when the rankings (Business Week) were not aligned with their own perceptions of their school’s relative standing. Sauder and Espeland (2009) convincingly show how rankings change the way education is perceived. The volume edited by Shin and colleagues (2011), as well as the works of Wedlin (2006) and Hazelkorn (2015) offer valuable insights on how universities around the globe respond to rankings. Most recently, Espeland and Sauder (2016) delve deeper into the mechanisms of how law school rankings permeate various aspects of legal education in the US, from admissions to graduate careers.

Intermediaries in higher education are many and their goals, focus and method of evaluation vary. Given that universities also vary in terms of mission, structure or disciplinary mix, it should not surprise that they have
preferences when it comes to which of their intermediaries to endorse and which to criticise. The refusal of the League of European Research Universities (LERU) to participate in the *U-Multirank* (Grove, 2013), a ranking scheme stressing horizontal, as opposed to vertical differentiation, or, more recently, some of England’s elite universities’ considerations to opt out of the *Teaching Excellence Framework* (Havergal, 2016), would serve as cases in point. Taking into account that variously positioned universities are differently affected by different intermediaries, we could expect that their responses would reflect these variances. At the same time, different intermediaries may assign different values to different activities and by, for instance, giving primacy to teaching over research, offer an opportunity to those who perform well in teaching to advance their position.

Proposition 2a: As the competition intensifies, both higher-status and lower-status universities are more likely to respond to those intermediaries who reach the widest audiences, which have the highest authority with the audiences and whose judgement gives more precise information of their relative position.

Proposition 2b: As the competition intensifies, higher-status universities are more likely to approve of those intermediaries whose judgement confirms their incumbency, whereas lower-status universities are more likely to approve of those intermediaries whose judgement may help them advance their status.

**Affiliations**

Apart from being assigned by means of category membership or third-party judgements, status is also known as a property of an organisation which leaks through exchange relations, whereby “status is a direct function of the average status of the actor’s affiliates” (Podolny & Phillips, 1996, p. 453). A higher-status organisation entering an exchange relation with a lower-status one is always running the risk of diluting its own status (Blau, 1964; R. H. Frank, 1986; Podolny, 2010). By extension, lower-status organisations would welcome higher-status partners for the benefit such exchange may
bring, while the latter would refrain from exchanges with those they deem to be of lower status.

That having the right connections can predict organisation’s survival prospects, sometimes even better than performance, has been supported with insights from different empirical settings. Studying child care service organisations in Canada, Baum and Oliver (1991) found that as the competition intensifies, so do the survival prospects of organisations with ties to government and community institutions in their environment. Stuart, Hoang and Hybels (1999) found that biotechnology firms with more prominent partners are more highly valued by third parties at initial public offerings. Evidence from the wine industry suggests that firm’s affiliates and status strongly influence the perception of the firm’s quality in the market (Benjamin & Podolny, 1999). Rao, Davis and Ward (2000) studied organisations which migrated from one group to another and found that when membership in one group is seen as threatening for their social identity, they defect to other groups.

Referring to product markets, Podolny (1993) identifies three types of ties which affect how a producer’s status is perceived: those with consumers, with third parties and between producers. These ties can be characterised by various forms, but also varying degree of commitment and of public visibility. For example, an ad-hoc exchange between two organisations and a strategic long-term alliance would, thus, have different implications for their respective status positions, simply because they signal different levels of commitment the organisation has to the said affiliate. An association would be an example of a more committed relationship, given that it can be ideologically driven, is often established as “strategic” and with the idea to last and, finally, may affect organisational identity (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Rao et al., 2000). Moreover, a tie between two organisations which is not disclosed to the public is not expected to do much for how that public perceives either of them. Conversely, the same agreement visibly displayed on the organisation’s website is more likely to affect the said perception. Thus, regardless of the “depth” of commitment an affiliation carries, we could expect that the higher the status of the affiliate, the more prominence will be given to the tie.
Although the idea of connectedness among scholars and their institutions is certainly not a new one, with the advent of internationalisation and globalisation, universities have become as networked as ever and not only through short-term exchanges. Memoranda of understanding or international research networks would be such examples, but also national and international university associations which have become an increasingly more common form of affiliation (Chan, 2004; Gunn & Mintrom, 2013; Teather, 2004). Some of these associations are explicitly status-driven, given that they are exclusive, are made up of high-status members and have an image of elite clubs (Abramo & D’Angelo, 2014; Boliver, 2015; Rodriguez-Pomeda & Casani, 2016). Examples of these are the Russell Group in the UK, Group of Eight in Australia, LERU and Japanese RU11, to name a few. They typically describe themselves as associations of “leading” or “top” universities in their respective countries or regions. Although their member universities are among the oldest institutions in their respective countries or, in the case of LERU, in Europe, the said associations are of relatively recent origin: the Russell Group was established in 1994, Group of Eight in 1999 and LERU in 2002.

Proposition 3a: As the competition intensifies, higher-status universities are more likely to affiliate with other higher-status organisations, whereas lower-status universities are more likely to pursue affiliations with higher-status organisations.

Proposition 3b: As the competition intensifies, universities are expected to give more visibility to those affiliations which positively affect their status, compared to the affiliations which dilute their status.

In taking this discussion forward, a number of caveats should be taken into consideration. First, the condition integral to each of the seven propositions – “as the competition intensifies” – is not necessarily independent of categories, intermediaries and affiliations in place. Competition and the intensity thereof may both affect and be affected by these mechanisms of status construction. To illustrate, one of the most important effect of rankings is that they transform comparative fields into competitive fields.
(Werron, 2015). Because here status of one university is presented as coming at the expense of another university’s status, relatively stable status orders defined by broad formal or informal categorisations (such as elite/non-elite, public/private, etc.) are effectively transformed into dynamic competitive fields, in which only one university can occupy the first place. We could therefore think of such categories as having a stabilising effect on hierarchies, thus restraining competition, while rankings – as ideal-typical zero-sum games – would have the opposite effect. A growing number of affiliations, on the other hand, as well as the aforementioned efforts of universities to forge new (sub-)categories themselves, may, as suggested by the propositions, come as responses to the said intensification of competition, but also as its drivers. Be that as it may, these processes seem to be interrelated, and further research could address these relationships in more depth.

Second, the distinction between categories, intermediaries and affiliations is primarily conceptual, while it is acknowledged that status positions inferred from category membership, intermediary judgement and affiliations may overlap empirically. For instance, in all likelihood, the highest ranked university is going to be a member of the highest-status category and will have the highest-status affiliates. Also, membership in categories and affiliations may overlap, as it is the case when universities form exclusive clubs. They may as well drive one another. A top position in rankings may attract the best students and scholars, but also deference and partnerships. By extension, playing the status game for a university may mean anything from joining an association, obtaining a highly valued accreditation, or emulating the higher-status ones, to all of these and beyond. Conceptual distinction on the side, if their dynamics were to be empirically investigated, then their inter-relatedness should be controlled for.

Third, like in the case of individuals, where wealth, education, occupation, looks or skills, can signal status (Fiske, 2010), our judgements on organisations could as well be based on their attributes such as structure, assets, age, activities, performance or any other characteristic, and independently of affiliations, intermediaries or the category they belong to. However, unlike affiliations, intermediaries and categories, attributes in
themselves do not necessarily presuppose a hierarchical macrostructure, which is essential to the definition of status hereby used.

Lastly, it should be stressed once again that, much like the rest of social reality, hierarchies are socially constructed. That said, we could easily imagine a higher education field featuring multiple or, hypothetically, even an infinite number of hierarchies, each constructed along a distinct set of ideas or value systems. In this sense, this article has tried to unveil how some hierarchies are constructed and transformed, but also the kind of real consequences they may have for organisations and their environments.

Conclusion

Referring to the trends in the global competitive sport of the twentieth century, Ahrne and Brunsson noted that “being world champion in cricket, baseball, or floorball does not have the same clout as being world champion in football”, for “the status of a world champion is greater, the greater the proportion of the world that plays that sport” (2008, p. 156). Analogously, as the attention given to the relative standing of universities around the world grows, so does the importance of being part of “the game”.

In this article, I have argued that status processes – in which universities have become increasingly engaged in recent decades – go beyond rankings and span organisational affiliations, various intermediaries and categories. Based on insights from diverse empirical settings, including higher education, I have put forward a number of propositions with regards to higher-status and lower-status universities’ respective responses to status dynamics, which are chiefly inspired by the status-based model of market competition in which the organisations’ room for manoeuvre is very much contingent upon their position in the hierarchy (Podolny, 1993).

This article makes two contributions. First, it adds to our understanding of organisational expansion in the tradition of sociological institutionalism which stresses the importance of the global culture of actorhood and
empowerment (Bromley & Meyer, 2015) and which has also been noted to be increasingly the case with universities (Krücken & Meier, 2006). The global cultural system dictates that “being competitive” is the way to go, creating expectations from universities to become more “complete” and “proper” organisational actors: rational, efficient and with coherent identities (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000; Krücken & Meier, 2006). And while we expect this to create an isomorphic effect on models of action, the status-based model suggests that this will eventually be mediated by organisational status. In other words, because higher-status and lower-status organisations face different constraints and opportunities, their responses to expectations of being “proper” organisational actors may entail different ways of rationalising and decoupling. While this article has been, for the most part, about universities, this conclusion may as well apply to organisations in general.

Second, by specifically focusing on the concept of status, the article contributes to the growing body of higher education literature which focuses on global competition (Horta, 2009; Marginson, 2006; Shin et al., 2011). While status is increasingly invoked, directly or indirectly, in the higher education literature, university responses to these processes have been neither addressed in a systematic fashion, nor compared to evidence from other empirical settings. A broader conceptual approach to understanding status dynamics in higher education fields would, arguably, allow us to identify what is it that higher education scholars could learn from other empirical settings to better explain the phenomena observed in higher education, but also to explore how insights from higher education could contribute to broader sociological theorising. In this sense, this article joins other scholars in the field (e.g. Musselin, 2014) in advocating for a more active dialogue between higher education as a field of study and broader disciplines. Finally and perhaps crucially, such an approach could help highlight aspects of the institutional dynamics specific to higher education fields and potentially reinforce the long-held argument that higher education institutions require special scholarly treatment and that – despite the pervasive pressures from broader cultural and political domains over the recent decades – they have retained their specificities.
5. How do meta-organizations affect extra-organizational boundaries? The case of university associations

To be published with minor changes as:

Abstract

How do organizational associations affect extra-organizational boundaries? This paper addresses this question by looking into the long-established practice among universities to form associations. In order to examine how associations delineate boundaries in universities’ institutional environment, the paper draws on the scholarly work on meta-organizations, categories and boundaries thereof. The article finds that category-based identities, but also other organizational characteristics, enacted to demarcate members from non-members, play a central role in this process. In following these lines of demarcation on a sample of 185 national and international university associations, a typology emerges, accompanied by a global diffusion pattern. Three sets of institutional conditions are then identified as being conducive to this process: (a) the 20th century university expansion and the consolidation of national higher education fields, (b) the intensification of cross-border interaction and the advent of international institutions and, finally, (c) the formation of a global field and the rise of competition as an ideological imperative.
Introduction

Throughout history universities have come together for various reasons: to cooperate, to exchange knowledge, but also to defend their right to autonomy and freedom of teaching and research, or to stand for the principles that go beyond concerns of purely academic nature, such as human rights or democracy. Sometimes these collective ventures would be of *ad hoc* nature, created to cease a one-off opportunity or head off a temporary threat. On other occasions, collective ventures take a more permanent form. The subject of this paper – university associations or, as also referred to here, university meta-organizations, are exactly such ventures.

That universities form or join associations is not a new thing. A European country would, as a rule almost, have at least one such association – often called rectors’ conference¹ – some of which with the roots in the 19th century. Typically, their purpose is to voice the interests of all universities in their country before third parties, especially the state, and to facilitate cooperation. Comparatively, cross-border associations are of more recent origin, with their number increasing dramatically only in the past several decades (Beerkens, 2004; Knight, 2008; Teather, 2004). Similar developments have also been noted in other sectors (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012). A common feature of all of these associations is that their boundaries are relatively crisp – organizations can be either in or out, or, in some cases, partly in, but in nonetheless (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). These boundaries are maintained by enforcing certain inclusion/exclusion criteria upon membership, thus demarcating organizations members from outsiders. However, we know little about (a) what institutional conditions invite such demarcations, as well as (b) how these demarcations affect the broader social structure and the dynamics of boundaries beyond organizations themselves.

This paper investigates this phenomenon in the university sector. To this end, it draws on, on the one hand, the literature on categories and boundaries thereof (e.g. Hannan, 2010; Negro et al., 2010) and, on the other, on the scholarly work on meta-organizations (e.g. Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Gulati...
It conceptualizes university associations as meta-organizations, that is, a type of partial organization characterized by having other organizations as its members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011) and argues that meta-organizations represent, and in some cases even epitomize, organizational efforts to create, maintain or disrupt boundaries in the institutional environment. Empirically, it analyses 185 national and international university associations established since the end of the 19th century. Based primarily on their membership criteria, the paper develops a typology of university associations, traces each of the types historically and discusses the way they affect within-field and cross-field categories and boundaries thereof. Their emergence and evolution are analysed along the following, partially overlapping, phases, each arriving with a distinct set of institutional conditions giving rise to a new way of associating: (a) the 20th century university expansion and the consolidation of national higher education fields; (b) the intensification of cross-border interaction and the advent of international institutions; and (c) the rise of competition as an ideological imperative. The paper closes with a discussion of the implications for the study of extra-organizational boundaries.

Meta-organizations as extra-organizational environment

All associations of organizations, or meta-organizations, are attempts to introduce order in society. Such attempts may come from organizations themselves, in their effort “to eliminate part of their environment” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, p. 62), but also from the authorities seeking to have a little more organization under their jurisdiction. Either way, both for focal organizations and third parties, once-established, associations are, on the one hand, expected to decrease uncertainty and complexity, and, on the other, increase control and predictability (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Gulati et al., 2012).
One important source of stability in the organizational environment would be formal and otherwise taken-for-granted categories of organizations that inhabit it. We can think of them as institutional classifications or socially legitimated groupings of perceived similar entities (Hannan et al., 2007; Sharkey, 2014). Often, these categories are sector-specific and can refer to groups of organizations classified as e.g. banks, retail companies, sports clubs, universities, civil society organizations, and so forth. It is not uncommon for a country to have associations comprising members of a designated industry, whereby boundaries of these associations are frequently aligned with boundaries of well-established categories (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). For example, the cooperative banking sector in Germany is represented through the National Association of German Cooperative Banks (BVR), which comprises all cooperative banks in the country. Such ventures can span national borders. The said BVR is also a member of the European Association of Co-operative Banks (EACB). Such spanning of national borders, while remaining within categorical boundaries, is, in fact, frequently found – and increasingly more so – in other sectors (Gulati, 1995). And so we have international associations of e.g. automobile manufacturers, national trade unions, chambers of commerce, business schools, national and regional professional associations, etc. These categories and their respective boundaries are often deeply institutionalized and for the organizations belonging to them it seems almost “natural” to (strive to) belong to the shared meta-organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, p. 71).

Joining or establishing a meta-organization can thus be seen as “a self-categorization process, whereby the organization’s membership in identity categories or groups are declared” (Whetten & Mackey, 2002, p. 398). Categories shape organization’s identity, inform it on what action is expected and appropriate and help it identify rivals and potential partners (Negro et al., 2010; Stryker & Burke, 2000). By extension, organizations may join or establish meta-organizations in order to claim or reinforce an identity. When meta-organizations are established by third parties (e.g. the state, international organizations or the law), the categorization and the identity of the meta-organization are also externally assigned and members are then expected to subscribe to it in order to secure or maintain legitimacy. In either of the scenarios, one role of linkages which are then established between the
meta-level and its respective member organizations would be to channel the identity between these two levels, in both directions, effectively shaping both.

Essentially, meta-organizations bring together organizations which share some characteristics that simultaneously separate them from other organizations. These characteristics may flow from a well-established cultural category, although not necessarily: organizations which are of the same status are more likely to form a tie (Podolny, 2010). In looking at hospitals, D’Aunno and Zuckerman suggested that those similar in e.g. the types of the services they offer are “likely to face similar patterns of resource dependence and, as a result, have similar problems to solve” and are therefore more likely to establish formal links (1987, p. 539). Category-related or not, these shared characteristics lay down the groundwork for the identity of the meta-organization. For members of an association of e.g. Christian colleges in Latin America, being Christian would be one of the central elements of the shared identity. But so may be the fact that they all share a Latin American cultural heritage or speak languages which place them in the same linguistic family. Or, that they claim to be of high status, rather than of low status; colleges and not universities. By extension, all those marked by the absence of some or all of these characteristics are in principle “disqualified”. Associations, therefore, play a role in bringing to the fore the multiple identities its member organizations carry, but they also create boundaries between these and non-members along those very same identity lines. The aforementioned BVR suggests an idea of an organizational field in which there is a clear boundary between cooperative banks, on the one hand, and other types of banks, on the other, whereby each member shares defining features of a cooperative bank and identifies itself as one.

Although organizational identity is confirmed or claimed by affiliating with similar others – effectively reinforcing boundaries towards dissimilar others – we should not think of the identity of an association as simply an aggregate of identities of its individual members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Rather, the essence of the shared identity carried by the association flows from one or a set of shared characteristics or purposes which bring the organizations
together in the first place (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; D’Aunno & Zuckerman, 1987; Podolny, 2010). Members of BVR may be very different organizations, but what brings them together is a set of shared characteristics constituted primarily – but not exclusively – in the category they claim to occupy. Identity of the meta-organization could be perhaps better described as the common denominator of organizational identities of all its members.

Ahrne and Brunsson (2008, 2011) argue that, unlike networks, meta-organizations have clear boundaries, given it is clear who is a member and who is not. However, as meta-organizations may have different types of membership, such as full membership, candidate or observer membership, we could think of those boundaries as permeable to a varying degree. Boundaries of a meta-organization which only allows full membership would then be less permeable than those of the meta-organization which also has partial membership, such as candidate or observer members. In this way, an organization which has some of the characteristics necessary to be a member, but not all of those required, may be given the status of a candidate (until it fulfils the requirements for a full membership) or of an observer. At the same time, partiality of membership and the related permeability of boundaries of associations may also be a function of the degree of fuzziness of the category boundaries which lends itself to the meta-organization as the main membership criterion and a source of shared identity of its members (Hannan, 2010). Unlike crisp boundaries, fuzzy ones allow partial membership, whereby membership in a category is seen in degrees. For example, compared to Oxford University, Ostwestfalen-Lippe University of Applied Sciences can be seen as a less typical member and therefore partial member of the category “university” (Hannan, 2010). Membership of such partial category members in a category-bound association may therefore be contested.

Scholars often assert that the institutional environment exerts pressure on organizations, creating expectations from them to conform to institutionalized norms, standards or taken-for-granted understandings of appropriate behaviour. Organizations, in turn, respond in various ways, whereby these responses are typically contingent upon a host of, often context-related, factors. Creating or joining meta-organizations is merely one
way of responding, although such response may feed directly into the institutional latticework which constitute the said environment, effectively “eliminating” parts of it, as Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) aptly put it. Even when meta-organizations are created by third parties, the outcome may be the same, although its origin would be different. For all the parties involved, and in this case for the organizations in question and the said third parties, such change is expected to decrease uncertainty and complexity, on the one hand, and increase control and predictability, on the other. We could as well imagine that such redrawing of boundaries may increase or decrease the room for manoeuvre for some organizations, with or without affecting that of other field members. In order to investigate further how this “elimination” of the environment looks like in the higher education sector, and particularly how it affects boundary “maps” in the organizations’ environment, I start with taking stock of its organizational associations.

### Researching meta-organizations in the university sector: sources and data

In order to investigate meta-organizations in the university sector, a database has been compiled from existing sources. This has been done using the manual nonprobability sampling technique, in the following steps. First, a definition of a university association was developed (given in the next paragraph). Second, existing databases, repositories and other sources containing some information on university associations were located. Two main sources were used here. The first was the homepage of the International Association of Universities (IAU)³, from which 77 national and international associations were identified as matching the definition. The second source was the Open Yearbook of the Union of International Associations (UIA)⁴, in which 54 such international associations were identified. In addition to these, another 54 national and international associations, from various sources, were included.
In deciding whether an association would be included in the sample, the following criteria have been applied. First, the association had to be primarily a meta-organization, that is, an organization of “multiple legally autonomous entities”, established without an expiration date (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; König, Schulte, & Enders, 2012, p. 1325). Associations which also allowed for individual membership along the organizational one were included as long as they were primarily organizations of organizations. Some of the associations in the sample are meta-meta-organizations, or both meta- and meta-meta-, which means that they have both universities and other university associations as members. Second, each association in the sample had to have universities (or non-university higher education institutions) as its members, not governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations or other types. Exceptionally, when an association would also allow these as members, while still primarily being an association of universities, it would be included in the sample. Third, the sample included only national level and cross-border associations, leaving out those which cover a specific region within a country.

The database was further expanded with the following information on the associations: (a) foundation year; (b) number of member universities; (c) whether it operates at a national, (cross-border) regional or global level; (d) if national, the country; (e) if regional, the geographical area covered; (f) whether it is intra- or cross-continental; (g) membership criteria; (h) institutional affiliation (e.g. UNESCO), if any; (i) descriptive data related to the associations’ goal and mission; and (j) the web page, when available, used to complete and cross-check the information.

A number of limitations of this approach should be highlighted. First, the conclusions drawn are within the limitation of the sampling method which implies that the size of the population is not known. Another weakness of this approach is that even though we can document the emergence of associations longitudinally, based on the year of foundation, we cannot tell anything about their membership composition over time, the historical change in their purposes and related. Thirdly, this data is largely self-reported, which comes with usual limitations. On the other hand, self-reported data is considered adequate when analysing how organizations
signal their identity, social role and appropriateness. Overall, although the external validity of such a strategy may be put to question, it is considered sufficiently reliable to address the research problem, and despite these limits, the data is considered a valuable resource given its uniqueness and the fact that it is tailored for the questions herewith addressed. The database has been cross-checked for reliability with another researcher.

University associations: the variety and a typology

A surface look at the data reveals that there is much variation among university associations with respect to their size, categories they subscribe to, when they were founded and by whom, membership criteria, rationale for their establishment, and not least to the level at which they operate. Some comprise universities from a single country, others are cross-border ventures and essentially operate in the international domain. Some are more than a century old, others are more recent. Some have large membership and comprise all universities in a geographically designated area, others are exclusive and restricted to universities of a particular kind, even regardless of geographical or political borders. Some are voluntary, yet membership in others is legally binding. And so on.

By looking at the geographic span of the associations samples, a distinction emerges between (a) the associations operating within the borders of a single country, (b) cross-border associations linked to a specific geographic region (such as Europe, Commonwealth, Arab countries, etc.) and, finally, (c) cross-border associations without a geographic reference, normally spanning two or more continents. These three types are treated as operating in distinct levels of organizational fields, i.e. national, cross-border (regional) and global respectively, whereby each is expected to represent a distinct institutional environment. Conceiving of institutional environment as a set of interrelated fields may bear some analytical leverage here (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). Hüther and Krücken (2016) argued that European universities display multiple-field embeddedness, whereby the distinction
can be made among the global, European and several national, state and regional fields.

**Figure 1. University associations by field-level and decade established (n=175)***

The number of associations at all three field levels has been on a steady increase, especially since the 1960s (Figure 1). The exponential growth roughly followed the general trend of organizational expansion (Bromley & Meyer, 2015), the expansion and “massification” of the higher education sector in the decades following the WWII (Schofer & Meyer, 2005; Trow, 1973), but also more intense cross-border interaction which was gaining momentum in the same period (Altbach, 2013; P. Scott, 1998).
## Table 1. Types of university associations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Generalist (University)</th>
<th>Specialist (University + attribute)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boundary</td>
<td>Sectoral</td>
<td>Intra-sectoral, horizontal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership criteria</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Specialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership inclusion/exclusion criteria</td>
<td>Category membership e.g. Universities Australia; European University Association; International Association of Universities</td>
<td>Category membership + presence of a pre-determined attribute e.g. Mexican Federation of Private Higher Education Institutions; Association of Christian Universities and Colleges in Asia; International Association of Maritime Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count and share in the sample</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>Regional (cross-border)</td>
<td>Global</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis of the membership criteria reveals two primary lines of inclusion/exclusion. The first group of associations draws its inclusion/exclusion criteria from (a) category membership, i.e. their boundary is aligned with that of the category “university”. These associations are hereby called *generalist*. Their membership criteria typically draw boundaries between universities and other types of organizations, such as trade unions or banks. Italian Rectors’ Conference, European University Association or Community of Mediterranean Universities would be examples of this type. The second group is reserved for those associations which draw boundaries around (b) sub-category membership and associate along similarities *within* the category of universities. They are further divided into two sub-groups. The first sub-group of associations draws its boundaries along some specialization or characteristic such as ownership,
religion, language, discipline and mission and they are called (b-1) *specialist-horizontal*. Typical examples of a specialist-horizontal association would be the Rectors’ Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, Asian Association of Agricultural Colleges and Universities or the International Association of Buddhist Universities. They come together not only as universities, but as a particular kind of universities, i.e. of applied sciences, agricultural, Buddhist, respectively. Finally, the second sub-group draws its membership criteria from status distinction and it is hereby called (b-2) *specialist-vertical* or simply *elite*. Examples of it would be the Australian Group of Eight or the League of the European Research Universities (LERU), both claiming to be primarily associations of “top” or “leading” universities in their respective fields, therefore excluding all those which are considered not to be top or leading. Table 1 provides an overview of the three types and their share in the sample.

**Figure 2. University associations by type and decade established** (n=175⁵)

Similarly to the distribution across field levels, the number of associations of different types has also been increasing over time (Figure 2). The smallest portion of the sample goes to the status-driven associations, or the elites, where out of the total 23 in the sample; more than a half has been established after 2000. This supports the often-made claim that status is becoming
increasingly important for universities, as well as that the environment is being more perceived as competitive (Brankovic, 2017; Marginson, 2006).

The 20th century university expansion and the consolidation of national higher education fields

That academic institutions from the same region or country come together in order to pursue a shared goal is not a new thing. According to some historical accounts, it was not uncommon for European universities in the Middle Ages to defend the collective interests of both students and professors before municipality, crown or church – all of which had their own expectations from and authority over the universities in their domain (Berman, 2009; Rüegg, 2003). Given that in those times it was rarely the case that there was more than one university on a territory ruled by one king, formal associating as an organizational form of the kind that existed in, for example, trading, simply was not a practice for universities. Universities back then were, after all, a different sort of establishments (Frijhoff, 2003).

In fact, medieval and early modern universities were actively striving to maintain monopoly over what they deemed was their territory by using resources to prevent potential rivals to emerge or become fully-fledged universities (Frijhoff, 2003; Rashdall, 2010; Rüegg, 2003). The expansion of the university, however, continued throughout the early modern period, although it was not until the 19th century and the rise of the nation state, and the subjugation of the university to its authority, that the universities under a single jurisdiction approached collective action more formally.

Among the group of the oldest ventures of the kind would be the present-day Universities UK (formerly the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom) – the umbrella association of all universities in the United Kingdom, formally established in 1918. According to its own account, the roots of the association “lie in the 19th century when informal meetings took place involving the vice-chancellors of a number of universities and principals of university
colleges”. Other associations established around the same time were the Swiss Rectors’ Conference (est. in 1901), Universities Canada (1911), the Association of American Colleges and Universities (1915), and the Association of Indian Universities (1925). Over the subsequent decades, the practice of forming such associations within national borders spread across the globe and today we can find them in all corners of the world. We could even safely assume that there is a somewhat universally shared understanding that university associations of this type are today an expected part of a university field environment. The fact that almost all countries of the former Eastern Bloc established their own university associations within several years after the collapse of the Soviet Union (or even some years before) attests to this.

Typically, the role of these associations is to represent interests of all universities in their respective countries, primarily before the state – which is the principal “rule-maker”, as well as a key provider of vital resources in most countries. They also commonly commit to a similar set of principles, such as defending the autonomy of academic enterprise and freedom of research and teaching, but also to upholding the role and defending the interests of university in society, both as an institution and as a category of organizations. They typically engage in internal, but also in public debates about the nature and purpose of higher education and science, as well as about their place in society and relationship with other sectors. In some countries, these associations are foreseen by the law and sometimes have a formal say – as the “voice” of all universities – in regulatory decision making (Stöber, 2013). In addition to pertaining to a single jurisdiction, universities in one country tend to share the national culture and identity, language and history, which together render their associations a mere “natural” phenomenon in the given context. Effectively, as a collectively of all (or most) universities on a designated territory, university associations of this type stand as guardians of categorical boundaries of university as an institution in the most universal sense.

Although these associations are to represent all universities, in some countries not all universities can actually be members. For example, (some) private universities in Poland and Portugal cannot join. Such cases testify to
the fuzziness of the category in those countries and membership in these associations is reserved for universities which fulfil certain criteria. These universities would then be “proper” or “real” category members due to some property, such as comprehensiveness, ownership structure, accreditation, etc. Such generalist yet exclusive associations are an example of efforts to maintain category integrity by not allowing “outsiders” in, which would carry the risk of “diluting” (the meaning of) the category.

The 20th century expansion of higher education and changing needs for skilled labour led to the upgrade of post-secondary schools to higher education institutions in many countries, typically into some form of polytechnics or, later, universities of applied sciences (Kyvik, 2004; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). In many countries traditionally dominated by public universities this was followed by the emergence and expansion of private higher education and institutions thereof (Altbach & Levy, 2005). These developments gave rise to the first national associations of these institutions, alongside the existing university ones. A country with a so-called binary higher education system, in which there is a clear boundary between two sub-categories of higher education institutions (i.e. university and university of applied sciences/polytechnic), would often have one association for each sub-category. This we find in, for example, Croatia, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal and Serbia. Some countries, on the other hand, have different dimensions of horizontal specialization and corresponding field boundaries, also reinforced by a formal categorization and (at least) one association for each category. For example, in Japan, there are four associations: one for national universities, one for public and two for private (Yonezawa, 2012). In Brazil, on the other hand, a distinction is made between federal universities, state or municipal universities and community universities, all of which have their own association (de Magalhães Castro, 2004). The mere existence and not least the active functioning of such associations implies, to some extent at least, that their respective categorical boundaries and corresponding identities are being maintained by their members or, when these are legally mandated, by the authorities.

Although the higher education expansion is commonly associated with the 20th century and especially the post-WWII period, in some cases these
university associations of the specialist-horizontal type date further back. For instance, the oldest such associations in the sample are the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (1887) and the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (1899), both in the US. Yet, much like in the case of the polytechnics and applied sciences decades later, or any other national field featuring any kind of specialist-horizontal associations, the US field in this case also had to undergo a prior expansion and organizational diversification, thus allowing for the (sub-)categorization implied in these associations to develop.

Beyond national borders: the intensification of cross-border interaction and the advent of international institutions

The first university association to span national borders was established in 1913 and named the Universities Bureau of the British Empire, today known as the Association of Commonwealth Universities. However, given the historical circumstances of the day, it is debatable to what extent this association was truly international at the point of its foundation. Perhaps a better vantage point for exploring the border-spanning associations in regional contexts are the Central American University Council, established in 1948, a year younger Association of the Universities of the Latin America and the Caribbean, the 1955 Association of European Universities (merged in 2001 with the Confederation of European Union Rectors’ Conferences to form what is now known as the European University Association (see Nyborg, 2014)), the Association of Arab Universities (1964) and the Association of African Universities (1967). These associations were mostly established in effort to strengthen formal cooperation between universities and reach out in a common voice to international organizations.

Some international associations, on the other hand, were initiated by international organizations, which in pursuing their own agendas, sought to
bring universities together. The International Association of Universities (IAU), founded in 1950 by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is one such example. Today it gathers more than 600 universities from about 120 countries which together aim at “reflection and action on common concerns” of all universities around the world. Similar to these, only at the sub-category level, would be the international associations of the universities of applied sciences, public or open universities, which exist in some regions or, like IAU, at the global level.

These associations characteristically emerged against the backdrop of political integration in their respective regions and are, if not established, then certainly endorsed by inter-governmental institutions. For instance, the Association of African Universities was founded following the recommendations made by UNESCO. The Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World works within the framework of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO). The Association of Arab Universities, on the other hand, works within the framework of the Arab League. Southern African Regional Universities Association brings together all public universities located in the fifteen countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Europe alone features a number of regions which emerge from its cross-border associations, such as the Alps Adriatic Region, Baltic Sea Region, Carpathian Region, Danube Region and Upper Rhine, each with its university association. Some of these, such as the European Confederation of Upper Rhine Universities, emerged from an international project consortium funded by the European Union. European University Association, for instance, is considered the voice of European universities and as such it is regularly consulted on policy matters by European institutions. To some extent, all the cross-border associations mentioned in this section thus far operate similarly as national ones of the same, generalist, type. Boundaries-wise, much like their national counterparts, their role is to maintain the integrity of the category and sub-category, only at another field level and spanning the boundaries of nation-states.
Apart from the associations which form around well-established categories or sub-categories, the ones spanning national borders are also often formed along some specific rationale, or specialization, such as a confession, mission, or cooperation for the sake of it. If not the largest, than certainly the oldest group here would be confessional associations, namely those gathering universities which identify as, as per sample, Buddhist, Catholic, Cristian, La Salle, Methodist, the Society of Jesus and St. Thomas Aquinas. In a way, this is not surprising given that a categorization of universities along confessions and particularly Christian denominations dates far back in history. The following excerpt speaks of this:

“With respect to the spread of university models imitated by newly founded universities, there is a marked trend in the early modern period towards what might be called confessional families of universities, Lutheran, Calvinist or Catholic, and within these, of national subfamilies. Sixteen-century universities usually copied an older model (such as Paris, Bologna or Oxford) but themselves became models (in a form suited to the conditions of the time) for new foundations of similar confessional allegiance in the same country.” (Frijhoff, 2003, p. 52)

Similar to other cross-border associations mentioned above, the confessional ones also maintain ties with instances of authority in their domain. For example, Latin American Organization of Catholic Universities is affiliated with the International Federation of Catholic Universities, itself created by a Papal Decree. This, in turn, strengthens the legitimacy of the association, and by extension that of its members, as members of the family, or even sub-category, of “Catholic universities”.

Sometimes, associations gather around a specific field or discipline, whereby they typically accentuate the importance of the contribution of those disciplines to society, in their respective regions or beyond. Examples here would be the Association for European Life Science Universities, Latin American Association of Universities of Public Relations Programmes, International Association of Maritime Universities or the International Association of Universities and Colleges of Art, Design and Media. These associations may render boundaries between members and non-members more visible by potentially implying that e.g. the life science universities located in Europe which are not members of the Association for European
Life Science Universities are not as legitimate or “life science enough” as the association’s members. That this association established an international agency for accrediting European life science universities clearly signals its efforts to establish and standardize “life science university” as a sub-category of university in its own right.

Another group of cross-border associations would be those which joined forces to address regional or global issues and challenges. Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture is an association of African universities set up to strengthen agricultural research and agricultural training in Africa, as part of a broader agenda to engage these universities with regional development. Consortium of Universities for Global Health, which sets its mission to “support the university as a transforming force in global health” would be another such association. It is difficult to say whether or to what extent such associations manage to create new categories, yet what they certainly do is broaden the scope of identity claims for their members. We could easily imagine King’s College London, a member of the Consortium of Universities for Global Health, seeing itself as a socially engaged university and even as a “transforming force in global health” due to its membership in the said association.

Finally, some associations are primarily cooperation networks, typically committed to improving quality of their work through exchange or simply to “internationalization”, itself considered something valuable to pursue. For example, the International Network of Universities stands for “higher education institutions that actively seek international partnerships and experiences, create innovative programming and delivery methods, and embrace the internationalization movement”. Their specific identity is not category-bound and we cannot say that these associations result in any new categories and boundaries thereof being established, nor that they necessarily affect the meanings of existing ones. This, however, might as well change, should the efforts of these associations, or third parties, lead to the institutionalization of a new category around their core – yet innovative – identity claims.
Going global: the rise of competition as an ideological imperative

In addition to the types of associations hitherto described, a third one merits a separate treatment. Unlike the associations which seek to reinforce their categorical or some other kind of specialist category membership and identity, these associations claim membership to the category of high-status universities and identify as such. They are, in other words, status-driven and characterised by high status of their members, claims to superiority in terms of their quality, and – typically – high exclusivity when it comes to membership, often based on some sort of performance criteria. In recent years, this particular type of university associations has been gaining in prominence, both in national contexts and internationally. With the exception of the Association of American Universities, which was established in 1900, and the 1985 Coimbra Group, the remaining 21 associations in the sample categorized as status-driven were established after 1991.

Three such national associations were established in the 1990s: U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities (originally the Group of Ten), Russell Group in the UK and the Group of Eight in Australia. The original goal of these associations was to represent the mutual interests of their members – seen as different than those of other universities – primarily to their national governments. During 2000s, two such national associations, Japanese RU11 and Chinese C9 League, were established by their national authorities in response to global competition. The Japanese RU11, for example, argues in its mission that “Japan must have pre-eminent research universities in the world to survive against international competition”. The most recent example of such national association in the sample would be Germany, which in 2012 established its own exclusive club of fifteen “internationally regarded” universities, “highly reputable for excellence in research”. In fact, U15 is not the only one such association in Germany. TU9, the association of “the nine most prestigious, oldest, and largest technical universities in Germany” and EAS7, “a strategic alliance of seven leading German Universities of Applied Sciences committed to excellence in teaching and
research” are two other, and even earlier, examples. Indeed, unlike U15, the other two would be sub-types of specialist-vertical, given that they are associations of high-status specialized universities (technical and applied sciences, respectively).

The 1990s also gave rise to several international status-driven associations: Europaeum, Association of East Asian Research Universities, Association of Pacific Rim Universities, and the first world-wide one Universitas 21. These were followed by the European LERU and the International Alliance of Research Universities, established in 2002 and 2006, respectively. Only in the past three years, five new ones were established: Young European Research Universities, the Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, African Research Universities Alliance, Asian Universities Alliance and Aurora. All of these associations stress the importance of “excellence”, in research in particular, and a “world-class” status, for which the position in global rankings is commonly taken as a proxy. Young European Research Universities, for example, states as its main membership criterion to “have been included at least for one year, in the QS ranking Top 50 under 50 or the THE ranking 100 under 50.”

The use of superlatives in reference to their members’ qualities or their performance is one of the features that sets status-driven university associations apart or, for that matter, what brings their members together (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015). Australia’s Group of Eight is “leading excellence, leading debate”, Coimbra Group strives to be “a reference of academic excellence in Europe”, the Chinese C9 league is “committed to world-class excellence”, African Research Universities Alliance are “region’s leading universities”, while UK’s Russell Group are “24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector”. Aurora speaks of its members as “leaders in academic research, within the top 250 in the world”, although, curiously enough, it does not want to be seen as a status-driven association:

“While other university networks come together to further their individual status, we are committed to working together to find solutions to globally
relevant problems, in areas such as sustainability, climate and energy, digital technology and human life and health.”

Concerns with broader social issues is sometimes found in their missions and self-descriptions, although these tend to be pursued indirectly through their primary activities – outstanding performance in teaching and especially in research. For example, the Association of East Asian Research Universities is committed to “cultural, economic and social progress in the East Asian region”. LERU “strongly believes that basic research plays an essential role in the innovation process and significantly contributes to the progress of society”.

Global Council of Research-Intensive Universities, which would be a “global umbrella” of some of these status-driven associations, is one of the latest additions to the club. In its form, the Council is strictly a meta-meta-organization and the only one of the kind in the sample. It meets annually since 2013 and on those occasions it issues statements in which it declares its position on various matters, such as the general state of scientific research, funding, and so on, globally. For example, in their Hefei Statement they “announce” what they claim to be “the ten characteristics of contemporary research universities”, the first being – somewhat unsurprisingly – “the pursuit of excellence across all its operations”. This is in accord with the evidence scholars have recently provided on the emergence of what appears to be a new sub-category of universities, commonly referred to as “world-class university”, “global research university”, “research-intensive university” (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Mohrman et al., 2008; Robertson, 2012). The efforts of status-driven associations to establish themselves as representatives of a distinct and superior sub-category are evidently directed at strengthening of the boundary between the “world-class” and everyone else. After all, categories, like organizations occupying them, may have a certain status which, then, affects the status of their members (Jensen et al., 2011; Kovács & Hannan, 2010).

The growing attention universities pay to status signals could be attributed to an increasingly more accepted notion that competition is intensifying, which is slowly gaining a status of a “global fact” and thus of an imperative requiring an organizational response. Certainly, global and other university
rankings play an important role in leading universities to believe that they are, in effect, competing with each other (Brankovic, Ringel, & Werron, 2017), but so do competitive funding schemes and not least government policies and those of international organizations which, today more than ever, champion the (global) competition narrative. If we take that status flows through exchange relations (Podolny, 1994, 2010), the expansion of status-driven affiliations of universities over the past decade, taking a form of meta-organization or otherwise, is little surprising.

Discussion and conclusion

Much like in other sectors, association as a form of high-grade organizing has been expanding among universities too, although, as a phenomenon, university associations have been around for at least a century. In a way, the expansion of such organizing went hand in hand with the global expansion of organization and that of higher education, but also with the 20th century intensification of cross-border exchange and finally with the consolidation of regional and global fields.

The diffusion of meta-organization as a form of organizing among universities has been, at best, uneven. A country could have one or several associations, depending on a host of contextual factors, such as the size of its higher education field, categories of higher education institutions, legal framework, cultural specificities, etc. National associations of universities of generalist type, for instance, are a common phenomenon in many countries. Other types, on the other hand, emerge only in certain contexts and under certain conditions. Governments, national policies and international organizations play a role in this, but so do broader trends and the narratives constituting them such as competition and internationalization. Even pressures on universities to differentiate from one another, while maintaining categorical allegiances, have been noted as a driving force in the process (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015).
Paradoxically though, while associations may be interpreted as efforts to reduce complexity, they may as well be adding to the complexity of the environment. Instead of “eliminating” the environment, to use Ahrene and Brunsson’s (2008) way of putting it, they may as well be adding to it. This we could especially argue for the increasingly dense network of international associations, but also of some national contexts, such as the UK one, in which the number of so-called “mission groups” (of universities) has been on the rise since the 1990s. Such an environment may appear to a university as a more complex one compared to the one in which there would be no meta-organizational formations of the kind.

We could think of organizational associations as links between different fields, nested or overlapping (Hüther & Krücken, 2016). A university – as many in fact are – can thus simultaneously be a member of a national generalist association, several European ones and a global one, and see itself as an actor in a national, European (or even some region within Europe) and a global field. A national university association can even be a member of an international one, like some are members of the International Association of Universities. In this way, for a German university, becoming a member of a European association could mean strengthening its European identity. In the same way as membership in the Consortium of Universities for Global Health could strengthen its identity as a global, but also a socially engaged university. Therefore, the creation of such inter-organizational linkages between different fields and levels thereof could, on the one hand, weaken boundaries between fields at different levels, from local to the global, and, on the other, strengthen boundaries constructed around categories and identities.

Boundaries around categories emerge, consolidate and expand. We could think of them as virtual lines of demarcation on a world map following categories and identities, and so transcending national, cultural, linguistic or any other borders. Or help maintain them. University associations certainly play a role in this. However, this is not to say that categorical boundaries do not exist or cannot be maintained without associations, but it is to say that once a category-bound association is in place, categorical boundaries may be more visible and perhaps more resilient. This arguably renders
organizational associations a source of stability in organizational fields, which may be another explanation as to why they are so often resorted to nowadays. At the same time, as the case of the elite associations of the Global Research Council shows, associations can also actively work towards the construction, institutionalization and diffusion of new categories or towards altering the meaning of existing ones.

Notes

1 Although called “rectors’ conferences”, they typically have universities as their members, rather than individuals (see Nyborg, 2014 for a historical explanation).

2 Following Ahrne and Brunsson (2011), I conceive of meta-organization as a type of partial organization. However, I refrain from using the term in order to avoid potential confusion with the notion of partial membership in categories, as defined by Hannan (2010). These two kinds of partiality are entirely unrelated.

3 International Association of Universities, Members. Last retrieved on 5 April 2017 from https://iau-aiu.net/Members.


5 For 10 associations the foundation year could not be determined.

6 The sample contains 33 cross-border associations operating within specific regions (Table 1).

7 Other meta-meta-organizations also have individual universities as members and they are in this sense both meta- and meta-meta-. The Global Research Council is only meta-meta-.
6. Partial horizontal differentiation in Croatian higher education: How ideas, institutions and interests shape the policy process

Published as:

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42237-4_3
Abstract

This chapter looks into the historical process of establishing and strengthening of the non-university sector in Croatia since the mid-1990s onwards and offers an account of its outcome. Initially, the process was part of the country’s broader efforts not only to ensure regionally balanced development, but also to improve quality, efficiency and accessibility to higher education. Since 2001, it was further embedded in broader higher education reform efforts, especially the implementation of the Bologna Process. This reform entailed, on the one hand, the establishment of non-university – professionally oriented – higher education institutions and, on the other hand, a gradual abolishment of professional study programmes in universities. The authors suggest that only a small part of the reform goals have been achieved, whereby some non-university institutions have been established and the number of students enrolled in professional programmes at universities has somewhat decreased. Effectively, the reform failed to align the distinction between types of higher education institutions and types of programmes, rendering the binary divide, at best, blurred. The authors argue that such outcome has been a result of, on the one hand, the governments’ reliance on formal regulation as the main policy instrument, which allowed for discretion in interpretation and enforcement of rules, and, on the other hand, the fact that the most dominant actor – universities – has continuously opposed the reforms.
Introduction

After the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Croatia embarked on a number of public sector reforms, higher education included. Since then, higher education legislation changed several times, introducing, amongst other, a new degree structure and a system of quality assurance and accreditation. The main structural reform in Croatia, today spanning more than two decades, aimed to increase horizontal differentiation among higher education institutions, which meant the re-introduction and strengthening of non-university higher education provision. Importantly, this reform has always been embedded in more general ones. During the 1990s, strengthening the non-university higher education was part of the broader agenda of achieving a balanced regional economic development in the newly independent Croatia, while in the 2000s it was part of implementing the Bologna Process action lines and the overall process of EU accession.

Increasing horizontal differentiation among higher education institutions in Croatia in practice implied two systemic changes. The first one concerned the establishment of non-university higher education institutions, in particular outside the cities such as Zagreb, Split and Rijeka - traditionally the seats of the largest universities in the country. The second change was the gradual abolishment of professional programmes at universities. And while the first change has to some extent been made, the abolishment of professional programmes at universities remains on the policy agenda to date, suggesting that the reform goals have been, at best, only partially achieved.

In this chapter we take a closer look at these developments and offer an account of how and why strengthening horizontal differentiation in Croatian higher education persists as a challenge for policy makers. We start with presenting the conceptual framework we use for analysing policy success and failure. The central part of the chapter consist of both analysis and discussion on the extent to which reform goals have been achieved, whether this constitutes policy failure and how specific characteristics of the reform, such as the policy content, institutional arrangements, on one hand, and politics of this reform, on the other, are related to such reform outcome. In
the concluding section, the main features of the reform design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation are summarized and implications for policy-making and policy analysis discussed.

Assessing and explaining policy outcomes: a conceptual framework

There is a general agreement among policy scholars that policy successes and policy failures are both political and normative and are therefore, at best, “contested constructs” (Bovens & ‘t Hart, 2016). Whether something is labelled a failure or a success is part of a discursive practice deployed by policy makers and practitioners, rather than related to inherent attributes of policy implementation in question (Bovens & ‘t Hart, 2016; Zittoun, 2015). As each public policy is normally accompanied both by its advocates and critics, it is these groups who are expected to be primarily engaged in such discursive practices (Bovens & ‘t Hart, 2016). Moreover, given that each policy is expected to benefit some more than others, different actors and interest groups involved would engage differently in such practices. The verdict, by extension, may be a result of a power game of sorts, rather than of an objective, evidence-informed analysis, provided such is even possible. This, however, does not mean that failures or successes do not exist per se, but that such judgements are both political and normative (Bovens & ‘t Hart, 2016). The political nature of such judgements means taking into account that they may have consequences both for future developments and for the actors involved. Being normative, on the other hand, means that an assessment of success or failure is often based on implicit criteria that tend to be ideological or that the criteria chosen by specific actors to proclaim success or failure may be subject to debate.

Given these challenges, one approach would be to judge the success of the reform in relation to the goals proclaimed by the creator of the reform which is – in this as in other similar reforms in higher education – the state. Here one needs to make a distinction between instrumental goals – what kind of
changes are planned for the higher education system, and strategic goals – what wider impact will these changes have on the overall functioning of the system and its relationship with other parts of the public sector. For example, in the case of the Croatian reforms, the instrumental goals were to introduce and strengthen the non-university provision and to abolish professional programmes in universities. The strategic goals included increasing quality and efficiency of higher education, boosting regional development and increasing the educational attainment of the population. Judged in this way, and taking into consideration the current state of affairs, the Croatian two-decade long effort to introduce and expand the non-university sector and to abolish professional programmes at universities seems to be closer to a case of failure than a success (see below for a detailed elaboration).

However, this assessment needs to be unpacked in two ways: (1) what is the nature of the reform outcome, i.e. what is it that actually failed and (2) why did such an outcome emerge?

Here, and based on our assessment of the case as “closer to failure than success”, we follow Peters (2015) who argues that there are different kinds of policy failures, depending on their characteristics, but also their sources. He therefore distinguishes among four types of failures: state failure, governance I and II failures, and policy failure. State failure refers to state’s incapacity of providing basic services, such as public order and the rule of law. This applies to the so-called “failed states”. A somewhat less dramatic type of failure is governance I failure which refers to “the incapacity to provide systematic direction to the society and economy” (Peters, 2015, p. 263). Governance II failures, on the other hand, are those in which governments fail to deliver policies addressing specific policy domains and their issues. Finally, policy failure, according to Peters, is primarily a failure to reach specific policy goals.

Importantly, while policy failure may occur independently of the other three types, it should not be treated in isolation. Contrary to what may be inferred from most of the literature on failures, Peters (2015) argues that the political or socio-economic environment within which policies are being made are more often the reason why a certain policy fails than the policy itself. Taking a closer look at the contextual factors related to the state structure or
governance arrangements may lead us to some important insights on conditions under which policies are more or less likely to succeed or fail. This approach is especially valuable in situations in which failure to achieve (fully) the stated policy goals may be due to both problems with the policy itself, as well as with the overall governance arrangements (i.e. governance II failure), which is what we claim was the situation in Croatia. Therefore, in addressing the “why” of specific reform outcomes, we analyse both the policy itself (its design and implementation), as well as the systemic conditions in relation to institutional arrangements and actor constellations and interests which may have impeded its implementation.

We argue that the conditions under which policies are developed and implemented are particularly important. In the case of Croatia this pertained to the outcomes being preceded by a “bumpy” implementation road. The importance of context in analysing and explaining policy outcomes has also been stressed by May (2015). He argues that the governing arrangements for addressing policy problems are undergirded by the interplay among (a) ideas (policy content), (b) institutional arrangements (structures of authority, attention, information, and organizational relationships) and (c) interests (constituencies that provide interest support and opposition). In addition to policy content, institutional arrangements and interests, May (2015) also stresses the importance of the temporal dimension inherent to any policy process. As Majone and Wildawsky (1979) claim, policies constantly evolve, much like the context in which they are embedded together with its defining aspects, such as governance arrangements, actors and their interests, and resource dependencies. We use this approach to elaborate our analytical framework and we take each of the three elements in turn.

**Ideas and policy content.** With respect to ideas, we see them as the very essence of policies, also referred to as the policy content (Gornitzka, 1999). Policy content can be seen to comprise a statement of policy problems and objectives identified, linkages of the policy under analysis with other policies that are relevant in the field and policy instruments (Gornitzka, 1999)¹. Concerning policy problems and objectives, some policies may be rather ambiguous in one or both of these aspects. Moreover, even in cases in which both problems and objectives are stated rather explicitly, the proposed
solutions may not be adequate to address the stated problems. This is in particular the case in situations of significant ambiguity and complexity, when it is not possible to identify and assess the different policy options (as suggested by Kingdon, 2003 in relation to the so-called multiple streams framework for policy analysis).

Policy linkages refer to the extent a reform is compatible with other policies relevant for the sector. These include horizontal linkages, i.e. policies concerning related policy issues or related policy sectors (e.g. secondary education or research), vertical linkages with policies promulgated by other governance levels (local authorities, federal governments etc.), as well as historical linkages, i.e. the extent to which the specific reform reflects institutionalized policy legacies. Given that change in higher education is slow and incremental (Musselin, 2005), strong policy linkages are linked to less problems in implementation. In the Croatian context, given that other governance levels do not have significant competences with regards to higher education policy, horizontal and historical policy linkages are particularly important.

Concerning policy instruments and their potential impact on the “why” of policy outcomes, it is necessary to first explore whether the developed policy instruments correspond to the proclaimed policy goals and whether different instruments are compatible with each other (e.g. are changes in regulation supported or undermined by the funding mechanism). Moreover, it is important to assess whether the developed policy instruments reflect the specific institutional arrangements and the interests of specific actors. In situations in which this is not the case – e.g. policy instruments developed implying that some of the main actors in the policy arena would effectively lose if the reform is fully implemented – it is likely that the implementation will not be without problems and that the reform goals may not be achieved.

**Institutional arrangements** concern the organization of the policy process in general and overarching governance characteristics. Analyses of institutional arrangements focus on the relationship between the state, the organizations in the sector (in this case higher education institutions) and the relevant stakeholders (e.g. students, trade unions, employers, etc.). Thus, a distinction can be made with regards to the extent to which different
stakeholders take part in design, implementation and evaluation of the policy process.

The state steering approach is an important element of the broader institutional arrangements (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; March & Olsen, 1998). There are cases in which the state is dominant and in which consultation with the actors is quite limited, leading to policies that predominantly reflect state interests and in which the state has significant control over the implementation and evaluation process (what Gornitzka and Maassen refer to as sovereign state model). There are also cases in which stakeholders play a significant role (corporate-pluralists steering), requiring bargaining and negotiation between stakeholders with diverse interests, potentially leading to ambiguous policy goals and incompatible policy instruments, which in turn means a less than smooth implementation process and contestation over the success of the reform (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000). The state can also grant significant autonomy to the institutions expecting them to compete in the market for students, staff, funding etc. (supermarket steering model), leading to light touch regulation and competitive funding mechanisms with very limited (if at all) public funding. Control over the implementation in this case is left in the hands of the institutions and the success of the reform is then linked to the success of institutions surviving in the market. Finally, the bulk of the control can also be in the hands of the academic profession (institutional steering model), meaning that change happens “through historical process and evolution rather than as a result of the reform” (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000, p. 271).

Steering in a particular higher education system is likely to be a mixture of the four steering models presented above, with historical legacies determining which approach is more dominant than others (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000). These historical legacies also concern the reliance on specific policy instruments and the use of information. In some systems, reforms may predominantly rely on regulation, while others may focus on funding incentives. In some systems, there may be a long tradition of using information about higher education systems performance to inform future policy decisions, thus leading to a more rationalist approach to decision-making (see de Boer, File, et al., 2017). In other cases, information may be
used opportunistically by different actors in the arena to justify their specific preferences or it may not be used at all, in both cases implying that the main determinant of specific policy decisions are pre-existing policy preferences of (most dominant) actors in the arena and not necessarily the characteristics and performance of the system as such.

**Actors and their interests.** Actors and their interests are what we refer to when we speak of politics of the policy process. While actors may vary with regards to their power and authority, as well as their role in policy implementation, Peters (2015) suggests that when we speak of failures to implement certain policy, we need to take into account that actors can also act as veto players and that a governance system may have multiple veto points. Referring to George Tsebelis, he suggests that “everyting else being equal, a governance system is more likely to fail the greater the number of independent veto points and veto players there are in that system” (Peters, 2015, p. 268). Stalemate or incapacity to make important decisions are, he argues, typical of governance failures due to veto players.

However, Tsebelis (2002) focuses primarily on actors who are veto players due to their formal position in the policy arena and policy-making process, e.g. those who have a formal and explicit power to veto a decision (e.g. a president can veto a law). However, given that this neglects the informal aspects of governance and the fact that policy actors can wield power even when not formally in the position to do so (Sørensen & Torfing, 2003), we focus also on actors who may be effectively veto players due to their influence over actors who are formally veto players. For example, if a buffer structure is formally a veto player but at the same time dominated by representatives of a profession, then effectively the said profession is a veto player as well. In other words, we go beyond the formal descriptions of actors and do not assume that all actors are independent from each other.

In sum, our analysis of the Croatian structural reform will focus on the following:

1) What is the policy outcome, i.e. can it be assessed as failure and, if so, what kind of failure?
2) Why did this policy outcome happen, i.e. what is the relationship between the policy content, institutional arrangements and actors’
interests on the one hand, and the specific policy outcome, on the other?

The following section will first provide a brief chronology of the structural reform in Croatia and will then address the “what” and the “why” questions.

Unpacking policy process: the “what” and “why” of Croatian partial horizontal differentiation

The chronology of the reform

Until the early 1990s, Croatia was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). The most important legacy from this time concerns the sweeping reform of the entire education system initiated in the 1970s, streamlining the secondary and higher education systems strongly to the needs of the labour market (Bacevic, 2014). One consequence of this was that although predecessors of non-university higher education institutions existed in Croatia since WWII, they were (a) not considered part of the higher education system, but rather as post-secondary education and (b) almost completely dissolved in the late 1980s, either by being amalgamated into universities (or rather their constituent faculties) or by disappearing altogether (Reichard, 1992). The other consequence was that the period immediately before the 1990s was marked by the growing dissatisfaction with effects of this reform and therefore the main aim with the first higher education legislation in independent Croatia, adopted in 1993, was to “do away” with this “legacy”. This law introduced the distinction between (a) universities and (b) non-university HEIs, as well as the distinction between (1) academic studies and (2) professional studies. Universities could provide both types of studies, while non-university institutions could provide only professional studies. The legislation also stipulated that the professional studies at universities should be abolished by the 1999/2000 academic year.

In 1995, the Croatian Parliament changed the legislation and prolonged the deadline for abolishment of professional programmes in universities to
2002/2003. Further attempts to abolish professional studies at universities were prevented by the 2000 Decision of the Croatian Constitutional Court (hereinafter: Court). Namely, upon an official complaint made by some of the universities that several provisions of the law were essentially violating the principle of autonomy guaranteed by the Croatian constitution, the Court decided that limiting universities to organizing only certain types of studies was unconstitutional, effectively eliminating the articles which required that universities abolish professional programmes.

When Croatia joined the Bologna Process in 2001, the new legislation, supporting a root-and-branch reform of the whole system, was adopted in 2003. Strengthening the horizontal differentiation was also on the agenda, with a clear instrumental goal to remove vocational content from university studies, in order to allow universities to focus more on research and to ensure that the non-university sector could develop. The legislation clearly stated that universities were expected to provide academic study programmes (three cycles) and non-university institutions vocational ones (two cycles). At that time possibilities for vertical mobility between the two types were asymmetrical; enrolling into the second professional cycle was possible with either a professional or an academic first cycle degree, while enrolling into the academic second cycle programme was possible only if the first degree was also from an academic study programme. The law stipulated that universities could organize professional study programmes only if they obtained a permit of the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) and that they are allowed to enrol students into such programmes only until 2010/2011. This plan to abolish professional studies in universities was once again disrupted by the Court, which in 2006, upon another complaint from the universities, ruled that such legislative provisions were unconstitutional (citing also the decision from 2000 as legitimation).

In 2009, a special law dealing only with quality assurance in higher education research was adopted. The key provision concerned the freedom of universities to develop their own study programmes and not be subjected to programme accreditation, as stipulated by the 2003 legislation, while non-university institutions were expected to undergo re-accreditation of their study programmes every five years.
Meanwhile, the government’s intention to achieve a clear binary divide and abolish the practice of universities organizing professional studies continued to be present in overarching strategic documents, linking this structural reform with the overall reform of higher education and relating its instrumental goals with strategic goals of developing Croatia as a knowledge-based society, improving the overall educational attainment of the working population, increasing efficiency and equity of higher education and ensuring a more balanced regional development.

In an attempt to improve quality and accessibility of higher education, as well as to ensure relevance of study programmes for both local and national strategic needs, the Parliament adopted the document “Network of higher education institutions and study programmes in Croatia” in 2011. The document was to guide decisions on programme accreditation and, by extension, on spending of public funding for higher education, given that student numbers in each accredited programme in a public institution were automatically taken into account in input-based funding allocations. When deciding whether universities should be given special permission for professional study programmes, the NCHE was to base its decisions on fifteen elaborate criteria concerning, e.g. existing offer of study programmes and specific regional needs.

Finally, in 2013, the Parliament adopted the legislation on the Croatian qualifications framework, clarifying its linkages with European Qualifications Framework and Qualification Framework for the European Higher Education Area. The legislation put academic and professional degrees from the same cycle on an equal level (e.g. both professional and academic second cycle degrees correspond to EQF level 7), but the asymmetry with regards to mobility between university and non-university programmes was maintained; transfer from the former to the latter was possible, but not the other way around.
The “what” of policy outcome: Have the reform goals been achieved?

The fact that there were almost no non-university higher education institutions in the 1990s and now there are 38 may be interpreted as achievement of at least one operational goal of the reform – the introduction of the non-university sector. Most of the currently operating non-university institutions were established in the second half of the 2000s, with the number doubling between 2005 and 2011. The number of students in professional programmes organized by universities has decreased in recent years. According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, the number of students in professional programmes at universities decreased from approximately 22,000 in 2004/2005 to just over 17,000 in 2013/2014. However, they still constitute only one-third of all students in professional programmes, suggesting that the operational goal to phase-out professional programmes in universities – by allowing them only as an exception given special permission by NCHE – has yet to be achieved. Effectively, this means that operational goals have only been partially achieved.

Concerning the strategic goals, while the bulk of the higher education provision is still concentrated in the capital city, each administrative region now has at least one institution, which was not the case in the early 2000s. Keeping in mind that the non-university sector actually caters to students of lower socio-economic background (Cvitan, Doolan, Farnell, & Matkovic, 2011), one would expect that expanded provision outside of the capital region could potentially improve access overall. However, the expansion of provision is in some cases rather narrow, including only one institution with a limited offer of study programmes (in 1-2 areas), primarily in social sciences (economics) and nursing. Moreover, the tuition fees in non-university institutions, particularly private institutions, are higher than in universities (Cvitan et al., 2011; Doolan, Dolenec, & Domazet, 2011), which means that under the current funding arrangements non-university programmes may actually be less accessible to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Similarly, although the educational attainment of the population seems to have improved – from 12% of the population with a higher education degree in 2001 to now about a quarter of the population
with at least first cycle degree – it is difficult to make a clear causal link with the structural reforms, given that the effects of demographic changes have not been systematically studied and that it is not clear how the introduction of the “Bologna” 3+2 degree structure affected the education attainment.

In sum, although there has been a clear increase in the number of non-university institutions and the professional study programmes they offer, in particular from 2005 onwards, continuous resistance to clarifying horizontal differentiation by allowing only non-university institutions to provide professional study programmes and an unclear situation with regards to strategic goal implies that the structural reform in Croatia has been overall partially successful at best.

The “why” of the policy outcome

Policy content

For the better part of the 1990s, the proposed solution, i.e. the instrumental goal of the reform to establish and strengthen the non-university sector in Croatia was not explicitly linked to specific policy problems, i.e. the reform’s strategic goals. This is to some extent caused by the fact that the structural reform was never a “stand-alone” reform but always a smaller element in much larger reform projects that concerned the main part of the higher education system – the universities. This embeddedness of the structural reform in the larger reform project may, at first glance, indicate that the horizontal linkages between the reform and other policies related to higher education were particularly strong. However, an analysis of policy documents, in particular from the mid-2000s onwards, suggests that the structural reform was actually of secondary importance, compared to the reform of universities. The ideas about and challenges for the non-university higher education were discussed to a much lesser extent, while the reform of universities, including their governance and degree structure of the programmes they offered took the lion share of attention. Moreover, the structural changes that the reforms were envisaging did not have strong historical linkages with the previous higher education policy. The reform was envisaging the establishment of a whole new sector and, perhaps most
importantly, the institutionalized practice that the universities also provide professional programmes was supposed to be abolished, indicating that the expected change was far from incremental.

Overall, insufficient attention was given to the development of policy instruments, given that (a) the bulk of the reform relied only on changes in legislation and (b) most of these changes actually concerned the overarching reform process and the functioning of the universities and less so the functioning of the non-university sector. The fact that the funding mechanisms were not changed meant that there was incompatibility between policy instruments. The number of students enrolled remained the key criterion for public funding which meant that professional programmes were actually an important source of income for the universities, thus undermining the regulation which foresaw that these programmes should be abolished. Therefore, it may not be at all surprising that the legislation was effectively re-designed during implementation, by the Parliament as well as by the Constitutional Court. This iterative characteristic of the policy process in which design and implementation overlap implies that it is necessary to consider the whole of the policy process and not assume that specific stages are clear-cut and isolated processes. Moreover, the back-and-forth of the reform is also a consequence of institutional arrangements and politics of the Croatian structural reform.

Institutional arrangements

Currently (and throughout the reform period), the steering model in place in Croatia can be categorized as predominantly institutional, with elements of the market model introduced over the past two decades\(^2\). This means that the bulk of the control in the sector is effectively in the hands of the academic profession and, by extension, the specific organizational actors that the academic profession dominates. These are first and foremost the universities but also the NCHE, given that the majority of its members is nominated by the universities.

Having such a steering approach has a number of implications. First, it means that the policies reflect the interest of the academic profession. The
first aspect refers to the structural reform process being a minor part of the larger reform that dealt with universities. Not only was this visible in the fact that less attention was given to the structural reforms in the strategic documents, but also in how regulation was developed. The key legislative provisions related to abolishing professional study programmes in universities were part of the so-called “concluding and transitional provisions” in the legislation which are usually not subject to significant consultations prior to Parliamentary adoption, but may be amended afterwards in case it becomes evident that their implementation will go against the interests of specific actors. This is precisely what took place in Croatia – these provisions were once amended by the Parliament (in the 1990s) and twice proclaimed unconstitutional by the Court (in the 2000s).

The dominance of the academic profession in the Croatian policy arena, as well as the historical legacies from the former Yugoslavia, together led to the situation in which policy development primarily relied on legislation and other forms of regulation, while not considering significant changes of the funding instruments, despite the fact that actors consider funding as the more important policy instrument (according to the interviews).

The information basis of the reform, both in the design phase, and in the monitoring and evaluation has not been particularly strong. Actually, the information basis in the 1990s has been particularly weak given that the analytical capacity of the NCHE and the ministry was rather limited (Orosz, 2008). The establishment of the Agency for Science and Higher Education in the early 2000s (ASHE), the increasing prominence of policy analysts within higher education institutions or within independent think tanks (Zgaga, 2013), and the existence of many externally (EU) funded projects focusing on analysis of higher education was expected to improve the situation. However, data collected through research projects, often funded by the EU, are used primarily for the identification of policy problems (if at all), and not explicitly as policy evaluation tools. Moreover, sometimes there are inconsistencies with regards to information. For example, data on student numbers reported by ASHE (citing the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports as the source) and data on student numbers reported by the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (CBS) do not match. Namely, the total number of
students (including postgraduate students) reported by the two sources for the 2013/2014 academic year differs by more than 12,000: 166,061 (CBS) compared to 178,676 (ASHE).

Finally, policy evaluation is, generally speaking, not a systematically organized activity in Croatia. Overall, the collective actors – NCHE, Rectors’ Conference, Council of Polytechnics and Schools of Professional HE, and ASHE do publish their annual reports, but these do not have a clear role in the policy design process. In addition, although ASHE does develop thematic reports on external evaluations of institutions and study programmes there does not seem to be an institutionalized way of using these reports. What the data collected by ASHE is used for is to indicate the persistence of problems which earlier reforms were expected to address – very high (and continuously increasing) number of study programmes and the provision of professional programmes by universities.

The politics of the process

Overall, given the dominance of the academic profession, the possibilities for weaker actors to take part and influence the process are rather limited. This brings forward the question of which actors actually take part and what interests they protect.

Although introducing the binary divide in Croatian higher education was never high on the state’s higher education agenda, the state was continuously involved in the implementation process through its branches. The most active branch was certainly the executive one – the ministry responsible for higher education and ASHE. These two bodies have always been the main ones to oversee the implementation of the policy. Taking into account that the policy itself implied changes in legislation, the state’s legislative branch – the Parliament was also involved, although not continuously. Finally, the state also acted through its judicial branch, namely, the Court, at two instances (in 2000 and 2006).

Given that the introduction of the binary divide would have affected universities and former post-secondary schools differently, these two types of higher education institutions positioned themselves differently with
regards to this policy. They acted both as individual organisations and through their respective councils, the Rectors’ Conference in the case of universities and the Council of Polytechnics and Professional Schools of Higher Education. In addition to these two bodies, the two types of higher education institutions are also represented in the NCHE, albeit this body has more university representatives than those representing non-university institutions.

Described this way, who the main actors are seems to be rather straightforward: the state, universities and non-university institutions. However, the reality is somewhat more complex, given that universities, even without a formal role in the legislative, executive or judicial governing branches, wield significant power over these structures and, therefore, over the policy process. We could, then, conceive of e.g. the Parliament and the Court as penetrated structures (Bleiklie et al., 2015) whose individual members are either themselves members of the academic community (i.e. university professors more often than non-university academic staff) or under the direct influence of academics. For instance, the Court judges are often either closely linked to the Faculty of Law of the University of Zagreb or academic staff members at some of the law faculties in the country, while the University of Zagreb itself, being the flagship university and the alma mater of the majority of Croatia’s political elite, is certainly the most influential higher education institution in the country. Another example is the work of the NCHE. According to the interviewed experts, even though NCHE is expected to allow universities to have professional programmes only under extraordinary circumstances (in line with the “Network of higher education institutions and study programmes in Croatia”), in practice all applications for such programmes coming from universities are accepted.

Finally, apart from these permanent structures, there are also temporary ones which are convened for specific purposes, such as the development of initial legislative proposals and strategic documents. University professors are particularly active in this phase, given that universities are considered both a major stakeholder, but also an authority on various issues. One example of this is the most recent Strategy for Education, Science and Technology adopted by the Parliament in 2014. The development of the strategy was
steered by the academic community, and the vast majority of individuals involved were university professors; no one from non-university HEIs was involved in the team focusing on higher education reforms in general, while the sub-team focusing on the binary characteristics of the higher education system consisted of three university and two non-university professors.

In addition to being active in the design phase of the policy process, universities are also active in the implementation phase. They do this by pushing for legislative amendments in the Croatian Parliament or, as already suggested, by submitting complaints to the Constitutional Court concerning specific legislative provisions.

On the other hand, non-university HEIs are relatively weaker as actors, although their influence over the policy process and their relative power has increased over time. Their position is certainly affected by their characteristics, relative to universities. They are comparably smaller, younger (most of them established in the second half of the 2000s) and less comprehensive. They are also more heterogeneous, which may mean that they have more diverse interests. If this is indeed the case, this would be another factor impeding stronger cohesion among them and reducing their capacity to act as one. At the same time, they are, as elsewhere, often considered to be of lower quality and tend to enjoy lower status (especially given that almost all private institutions are non-university institutions). All these factors affect their relative authority on higher education policy matters and, consequently, their legitimacy as a policy actor.

With regards to the actors’ respective interests, one thing that is clear is that throughout the period universities sought to maintain the advantageous position they enjoyed, for which purpose they used their influence across different structures and at all stages of the policy process. In specific, they were reluctant to give up their right to provide professional study programmes, given that this was seen as reducing state funding. They were also keen to protect the relative standing of their own study programmes, in terms of access to further education, which they saw as being threatened by competition from the polytechnics and professional schools. Non-university higher education institutions, on the other hand, were and still are, relatively weaker to push for a better position in the system.
At the same time, the ability of the state to secure a more successful policy implementation was hampered by at least three factors. First, this particular policy has never been high enough on its agenda to challenge the position of universities. Second, as already indicated, some of its structures have been penetrated and therefore under direct influence of universities, which would have probably diluted the influence of the state even if the policy had been on top of its agenda. Finally, as suggested earlier, the authority of the state in academic matters is lower when compared to that of universities. Thus, given that a functioning binary system does not enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of universities, it is hardly surprising that universities seek to obstruct its implementation by all legitimate means at their disposal.

When placed next to other actors, universities are, effectively, a veto player and a very powerful one. Presence of veto players is, as earlier suggested, yet another predictor of a policy failure, although as such it represents a failure of the governance structure, rather than the policy itself.

**Conclusion**

This chapter described and analysed the developments related to the non-university sector in Croatia since the mid-1990s. These developments included the establishment of a number of non-university higher education institutions which provide professional programmes, and attempts to gradually abolish provision of such programmes in universities with an aim to strengthen the non-university sector further. In strategic terms, these reforms aimed at increasing the quality, efficiency and accessibility of higher education, as well as ensuring the contribution of higher education to the regionally-balanced development of Croatia as a knowledge society. The reform comprised regulatory policy instruments (system level legislation and procedures and criteria for accreditation), with no reliance on arguably more effective policy instruments related to the allocation of resources (funding). The reform has achieved only a small portion of its goals, establishing some non-university institutions and somewhat decreasing the number of students.
enrolled in professional programmes at universities. However, the reform failed to align the distinction between types of institutions and types of programmes and the binary divide thus remains blurred.

Even though discussions on policy successes and failures are necessarily normative and political, this does not mean that the conclusions reached are to be dismissed on either of those grounds. However, whether Croatia has failed or succeeded in its efforts to establish a functional binary higher education system is not as central to our discussion here, as it is to demonstrate that a policy outcome, failure or not, is always a result of a number of factors which evolve and interact.

This structural reform has continuously been embedded in more general reform efforts. This, however, may have been a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it provided impetus for the structural reform. On the other hand, in these wider reform efforts, the structural reform was actually not the most politically salient one. The main focus was on the reform of the major part of the higher education sector – the universities. This made the structural reform less prominent, affecting both its design and its implementation. The situation in which the aims of the structural reforms are continuously reiterated and the most powerful actor in the system continuously manages to “dilute” these aims and keep its privileged position points to the necessity of bringing this most powerful actor more fully on board with the reform ideas. Since professional programmes are also a source of revenue for universities, the policy-makers may need to consider offering alternative financial incentives as “part of the deal”. Thus, in contexts characterized by high professional autonomy that allows for discretion in interpretation and enforcement of rules, such as higher education (for a more general argument see Mahoney & Thelen, 2009), reliance on one type of policy instruments – regulation – may not bring about the desired policy outcomes.

As we have argued in this chapter, for any effort that aims to create change in a policy domain or for policy analysis for that matter, higher education included, one needs to approach it contextually. In other words, doing justice to a public policy assessment means taking into account, on one hand, governance arrangements, as well as the way state apparatus operates. On the other hand, it also means appreciating that the policy, together with its
context, is always evolving. Ideas change or gain new dimensions while phases of the process overlap, rendering our efforts to tell policy design from policy implementation difficult, or perhaps even meaningless. Actors vary in their authority and capacity to act, sometimes resulting in a striking power asymmetry. In our case this proved crucial for the process and the outcome. Powerful actors penetrate structures and even “hijack” them for their goals when needed. Institutions may be more resilient, but these are neither static. Formal rules, such as laws, seemed to be easier to change than non-formal ones. The authority of the state, together with its legislative, executive and judicial branches, in a policy domain that is de facto public, can also be challenged, and even successfully so, by other actors, such as the academic profession and its organisations.

As a result of this “messiness”, the policy process is, as Lindblom suggested more than half a century ago, more of a “muddling through” (1959) than a rational and straightforward one. Therefore, we argue, policy analysis can only benefit from this appreciation. Assuming such approach in this chapter has, we contend, enabled us to offer a more comprehensive understanding of why Croatia has spent more than two decades struggling to strengthen the horizontal differentiation in its higher education. Focusing solely on policy itself would, arguably, have been a less fruitful exercise.

Notes

1 Gornitzka also states the “normative basis”, i.e. the underlying ideology, as an element of policy content. However, due to the fact that the analysed policy documents do not include explicit references to ideological principles, this aspect of the policy content of the Croatian structural reform will not be analysed in this chapter.

2 Prior to dissolution of Yugoslavia (1992), it was predominantly the state control model.

3 An example of this is a large scale project ACCESS (funded through the TEMPUS project), which focused on funding of higher education and socio-economic characteristics of the student population (the latter effectively being the national report for Croatia within the EUROSTUDENT project). Results of the project (Cvitan, Doolan, Farnell, & Matkovic, 2011; Doolan, Dolenec, & Domazet, 2011)
do highlight problems of reproduction of social inequality in higher education – students of lower socio-economic background are under-represented in universities and under-represented in higher education in general – but they provide a snapshot of the situation and not a longitudinal analysis potentially useful for evaluating the effects of reforms.
7. Between world culture and local context: The university as an empowered actor in national higher education governance

Published as:

Abstract

World society theory argues that actor empowerment in local contexts is driven primarily by the expanding world culture, rendering alternative explanations weaker in comparison. This article explores one such alternative explanation and offers an account of actor empowerment which highlights the role of identity constructed in local interaction. The article imports insights from identity theory to show how identities constructed in interaction may complement those derived from the world culture. To explore the phenomenon of theoretical interest, the case of a historical empowerment of Serbian universities in the post-2000 period, as an actor in the national higher education governance, is considered.
Introduction

Actor empowerment has been one of the central ideas of the neo-institutional world society theory (Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2006a; Meyer, 2010): it refers to the notion that since the beginning of modernity entities such as individuals, organizations and states have been increasingly seen as legitimate social actors (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). Mobilised by the expanding world society, these actors are granted authority, responsibility and capacity to act on behalf of various culturally legitimated principals (Drori, Meyer, et al., 2006b; Meyer, 2010). As a result, commercial businesses, hospitals, universities and governments are now reimagined as rational, purposeful and strategic organizational actors. Such “world culture” is, therefore, seen as the primary driver of actor empowerment in local contexts, rendering local, or “bottom-up” explanations weaker in comparison (Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Drori, Jang, & Meyer, 2006; D. J. Frank, Hironaka, & Schofer, 2000).

Although the world society theory is primarily interested in accounting for similarity across different and distant contexts, scholars have continuously offered new ways to explain variety, also with respect to different kinds of actors or forms of actorhood. For instance, to address the duality of similarity and variation, or that of universalism and particularism, scholars have used concepts such as “translation” and “editing” (Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón, 2005; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996), “glocalisation” (Drori et al., 2014) and “domestication” (Alasuutari & Qadir, 2013b), all highlighting the interplay between the global and the local, which may or may not lead to the “reshuffling” of power relationships in the local context. Protagonists of translation and editing actively ascribe new, locally inspired meanings to the “prototypes” they imitate (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). Glocalisation’s protagonists, or “glocalisers”, are “simultaneously charged with interpreting similarities, so to form the basis for the transfer of ideas, structures, and practices, while at the same time charged with establishing uniqueness, so as not to appear redundant” (Drori et al., 2014, p. 92). Domestication’s protagonists, in contrast, are actors in local political battles who vie for advantage by defending their own views of the country’s “best” interests.
(Alasuutari & Qadir, 2013a). These concepts are helpful in elucidating institutional processes and change in local contexts, and ultimately in explaining the variety that persists despite the isomorphic pressures exerted by the world culture. However, they are not as concerned with exposing genuinely local sources of actor legitimacy, identity and ultimately empowerment within the local context.

In this article I want to offer an extension to the neo-institutionalist concept of actor empowerment by highlighting the actor identity emerging from the local context and being enacted along the globally-scripted one(s). To this end I complement the sociological neo-institutionalism with insights from identity theory, which allows us to conceive of actors as enactors of not only identities scripted in the world culture, but also of role-based identities constructed in interaction (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1982b). I take the historical empowerment of the university as an actor in governing the higher education field in post-2000 Serbia as offering an apt illustration of how interaction and local dynamics can play a crucial role in this process. I argue that this case is a good fit for the theoretical problem, because it allows us to highlight aspects of actor empowerment which have not been much explored in sociological neo-institutionalism.

**Sociological neo-institutionalism and its empowered actors**

Sociological neo-institutionalism conceives of actors as socially constructed and thus firmly embedded in their environment, of which they are legitimate, responsible and empowered agents (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Meyer, 2010). These actors are occupants of institutionally constructed social roles and carriers of formal organizational models, various cultural practices or international norms and standards. This model of the actor is rooted in the phenomenological understanding that both identity and actorhood are scripted and it is “the cultural meanings that write and rewrite the scripts”, rather than the “hard-wired reality” (Meyer, 2010, pp. 4, 14).
These cultural meanings are universal and global in character. They penetrate local contexts and are adopted by local entities, while remaining firmly anchored in the global culture: “they are objectively true, and true everywhere” (Meyer, Drori, & Hwang, 2006, p. 26). Even when local actors are very much engaged in defending their local interests, these are legitimised by virtue of being “instances of more universal rules” pertaining to the world culture (Meyer et al., 1997, p. 170). The identity and authority of these actors flow from “roots that would once have been considered religious” (Meyer, 2010, p. 6), enabling them to act as an “other” to themselves, as with Mead’s “generalised other” (1934). Thus conceived modern actorhood has two essential cultural ingredients: one is a result of the rationalisation of the natural world and its laws, while the other of the devolution of the rationalised spiritual authority (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). The resulting actor’s authority, responsibility and capacity to act is, therefore, derived from “a single imagined natural-and-spiritual entity”, which is then its main source of identity and empowerment (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000, p. 106).

One of the arguments of the world society literature is that globalisation weakens the authority of the state, while empowering both supra-state entities, such as international organisations and institutions, and sub-state entities, such as governmental agencies, organisations and individuals (Drori, Meyer, et al., 2006b). Thus, while international organisations have the role of “legitimated theorists” or carriers of cultural frames of actorhood and empowerment, transferring them from one context to another (Strang & Meyer, 1993), national and local entities are seen as enactors of these globally diffused cultural frames – the process which leads to their empowerment (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).

This literature has offered ample evidence on the proliferation and empowerment of actors across national contexts. For instance, Hwang (2006) showed how the locus of planning has shifted downwards from the state – the main “organiser” of the post-WWII period – to sub-state actors, such as agencies, organisations and individuals. Across national contexts, not only modern individuals and their associations, but also corporations and other organisational forms, are increasingly seen as having capacity,
information and resources to plan and to contribute to collective development. The spread of “human resources” culture is another example of empowerment: employees around the world are increasingly perceived as empowered individuals, worthy of investment through training (Luo, 2006). Universities are yet another example. Globalisation is said to have propelled the transformation of universities into organisational actors, now more than ever expected to act strategically and position themselves with regard to their competitors, nationally and globally (Krücken & Meier, 2006). As a thus-empowered organisational actor, a “proper” modern university is goal-oriented, managed by professional managers, has elaborated formal structures and is accountable to a variety of also-empowered “stakeholders”, such as students and employers.

In addition to the empowerment through enactment of globally diffused scripts, sub-state actors may also draw on other, context-related sources of empowerment, a process which may also lead to the weakening of the state through downward shift. As it will be argued in the remainder of this article, role-based identities, emerging from the local, can act in parallel as sources of actor empowerment in a given context, much like globally driven ones.

Scholarly work on contentious politics and social movements offers evidence on how identity is constructed in interaction (e.g. Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000). In this literature, actors articulate their own beliefs and preferences by invoking cultural scripts inscribed in social categories with which they identify. Cultural categories such as “state”, “university”, “academic”, “student”, “African-American” or “woman” imbue their members not only with a sense of self but also with legitimacy, a sense of belonging and purpose and understanding of appropriate behaviour (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Although in principle the meanings of these categories are universal or trans-contextual, the meaning they carry in a local setting will be very much shaped by individuals’ experiences of themselves and of their roles, as well as of those others with whom they relate. In essence, this understanding does not run counter to that found in the literatures on translation, glocalisation and domestication.

When confronted with an issue, actors engage in a dialectical political contestation by espousing conflicting views (della Porta & Diani, 2006;
Hargrave & Ven, 2006). Identity theory argues that it is in this interaction with others that we learn how to assign meaning to and classify phenomena, including those others, and how to behave in relation to them (Stryker, 2002). These experiences, in turn, shape our perceptions and eventually mould our identities (Thoits & Virshup, 1997). As soon as we are confident enough about those identities, we “work to confirm them and strive to refute information that disconfirms them” (Pinel & Swann Jr., 2000, p. 133). Some scholars link this to one’s need for their identity to be verified by others – a need particularly acute when identity is under threat (Pinel & Swann Jr., 2000; Woehrle & Coy, 2000).

When interaction between two parties involves contention, both draw from available cultural resources to construct the other as a threat or even an enemy (Petonito, 2000). They may employ rhetorical tools to discredit the other and impose themselves and their views as superior, or claim themselves to be the victims and the others, offenders (Polkinghorn, 2000). Such contention is expected to amplify the social identity of the actor by strengthening boundaries of category membership and improving within-category cohesion. However, more importantly here, a shared appreciation of the situation among the parties involved may offer an actor a higher ground for claiming legitimacy, credibility and authority with regards to the issue at stake. Thus understood, local actor identity and empowerment can be viewed as context- and path-dependent, in addition to having their origins in the expanding world society.

This theoretical approach allows for an analytical distinction between two sources of actor identity, namely, world culture and interaction. The former is global in character and has its origins in the world-cultural categories whose authority and legitimacy are derived from imagined natural and spiritual authorities. The latter is localised and constructed in interaction with other (local) entities, whereby authority and legitimacy are derived from the local meaning systems rooted in the shared appreciation of the other and of the local context, which may as well be – albeit indirectly, through local interaction – informed by the world-cultural. Both, as it will be argued, can be sources of actor empowerment, and not in a mutually exclusive way.
Research design

A qualitative single case study is used here as an apt illustration of the phenomenon in question (Gluckman, 1961) and it employs ethnomethodology as a way to document the social reality construction (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). The study covers the period of the historical disempowerment of the state in governing the national higher education field in post-2000 Serbia, and the parallel empowerment of universities as an actor in governing the national field of higher education. As it will be shown, these developments resulted in, inter alia, a relative “deviance” of Serbian higher education governance from the dominant model being introduced across Europe at the time, despite its formal commitment to a European course (Vukasovic, 2014b). The idiosyncratic nature of the case, it is argued here, renders the object of the theoretical interest – local sources of actor empowerment – more transparently observable (Pettigrew, 1990).

The study relies on archival data and ten semi-structured interviews. The archival data were organised into following categories: meeting reports (agendas, minutes and briefings); regulation (laws and draft laws); policy positions (government and other instances of authority); media articles and reports produced by authorities; and miscellanea (speeches, correspondence, event descriptions, etc.). In total, approximately 1100 pages of archival data were collected.

The interviews were conducted with individuals who were directly involved in the events during the period under study, as officially mandated to represent the state (i.e. the ministry), universities and students. The interviewees were asked to reflect on the key events related to changes in higher education governance, the rationales for the positions they and their institutions assumed, as well as on other actors involved and their respective actions. The interviews were conducted in 2010, lasted on average one hour and were transcribed verbatim. Excerpts presented here were translated from Serbian by the author.

The data have been used with two aims in mind. The first aim was to reconstruct the chronology of events, especially those surrounding the
formal/legal changes in governance of higher education in Serbia, and to identify the processes behind these events and changes. The second aim was to gain insight into the identity claims of the participants involved, as representatives of their institutions/organisations in the events studied, and their appreciation of the developments. Altogether, this meant that pieces of the story needed to be put together meticulously, while simultaneously conducting data and methodological triangulation to ensure reliability and validity of findings (Denzin, 2006). The author’s interpretations were cross-checked with two individuals closely familiar with the Serbian higher education context.

Based on the theoretical distinction between the world-cultural and local-interactional sources of identity and empowerment, I put forward the following analysis of the case which takes into account both, while highlighting the latter.

Historical empowerment of Serbian universities as an actor in national higher education field governance

Historically, universities in Serbia were not involved in overseeing compliance with national higher education field rules. Governance was an affair of the state, and academic institutions were in principle little concerned with what was happening outside their faculties or institutes. This started to change with the economic crisis of the 1980s, when the government decided to subject universities to the economic imperative, effectively diminishing their autonomy. In parallel with the broader crisis which Yugoslavia faced, these developments brought universities closer together and increasingly challenging the state’s higher education policy. As a consequence, academics became more active in raising issues related to the overall functioning of higher education, thus questioning the authority of the state.
During the 1990s, Serbia underwent major political turbulences, starting with the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, the ensuing war, political and economic sanctions, economic downturn, civil unrest and other forms of internal political conflicts. Because of these developments, higher education was marked by relative isolation from international processes, as well as by internal political divisions, with the tension between the state and the university increasing. Throughout the decade, numerous university figures were active in opposing the regime in power, either through their academic work or through more active forms of dissent, such as street demonstrations (Vukasovic, 2014a). After a series of student protests in 1991, 1992, 1996 and 1997, in which many of the academic staff also participated, primarily from the country’s largest, capital-based University of Belgrade, the government decided to put an end to the recurrent unrests. In 1998 the parliament passed a law which, inter alia, enabled the government to suspend and dismiss university staff on political grounds, and to appoint university leadership of their liking. The law was, in effect, seen as a backlash against the university’s political dissent throughout the 1990s and it is remembered even today as the most extreme case of a state’s infringement on university autonomy. This added further to the distrust universities had towards the state.

**Europe and Bologna: a new recipe for a “modernised” Serbian university**

In 2001 the authoritarian regime was overthrown, making way for the first democratic government. With the state higher education policy also changed, the political tensions between the universities and the government seemed over. Much as in other post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe a decade earlier, major reforms were in preparation. The ministry responsible for higher education (hereinafter referred to as “the ministry”) sought to align national higher education with international developments, which meant steering the system in the direction of European trends, at the time revolving around the then news Bologna Process.¹ Notably, some of the leading positions in the ministry, including that of the minister and minister’s
assistant for higher education, were now occupied by university professors, themselves prominent figures in opposing the regime in the previous decade.

At the end of 2001 the ministry released a document titled “Higher Education Reform in Serbia”. The goal now, as the document said, was to establish “a modern higher education system in accordance with the Bologna Process”, and specifically to: (a) “Increase the efficiency of higher education in terms of the drop-out rate and the length of studies”; (b) “Introduce quality control mechanisms with regard to curricula and teaching delivery”; (c) “Establish the relevance of curricula with respect to the national needs and the market demand”; and (d) “Incorporate students as partners in the educational process”. It was expected that achieving these would contribute “…to the democratic development, economic recovery and European integration” of the country. The document further described the system, naming inter alia its strengths and threats, the challenges it faced and ways of taking it forward. The content of the document, much like the subsequent ones produced by the ministry, resonated with discussions on higher education in Europe at the time, and not least with the discourse of international organisations. Mentions of terms such as “accountability”, “quality control”, “efficiency”, (economic) “relevance”, “stakeholders”, “management”, “mission and goals” and “student participation” – rather new for Serbian universities – were abundant. Serbian universities were now expected to envision themselves in the light of these new internationally legitimised practices.

In addition to producing a number of documents of this kind, for various purposes and with a similar message, the ministry also took a more active part in international events such as conferences and round tables, and organised events at home. The latter typically brought together university leadership and other academic community members, student activists, civil society organisations, and international experts. In its efforts to “modernise” higher education in Serbia, the ministry had support, in expertise or funding, from a number of international organisations such as the Council of Europe, European Commission, UNESCO, OECD, World Bank, European University Association, as well as national higher education organisations and authorities abroad, such as the German Rectors’ Conference and the
Austrian Ministry of Education. At the time, these organisations were present in the country, promoting a new recipe for “proper” ways of “doing higher education” to the government and universities.

The ministry’s agenda appeared to be clear: to “modernise” and “Europeanise” Serbian higher education and to create conditions for its universities to become proper organisations: goal-oriented, rationalised, managed and accountable to various “stakeholders”. Backed by the international organisations and institutions, the Serbian government acted as a local carrier of the new script into the Serbian context, promoting it to the “outdated”, “inefficient” and “corrupt” Serbian universities as the sine qua non of modernised higher education. However, university leaderships, especially that of the University of Belgrade, were not particularly enthusiastic about such prospects, often accusing the ministry of being non-transparent in its policy work and of putting forward an unrealistic agenda which also violated university autonomy.

**Constructing a local-specific identity**

The activity which occupied the centre of the field’s attention between 2002 and 2005 was the work on the new legislative framework, which was intended to bring a radically new (legal) environment for Serbian higher education institutions. It was expected to facilitate the implementation of “Bologna”, to make universities not only more integrated, but also more autonomous and more international, but also more accountable and more transparent, as well as to set an institutional framework for student participation in decision making. In order to ensure a participatory and inclusive process, in early 2003 the ministry convened a working group for drafting the framework, bringing together government, representatives of higher education institutions and those of students. However, what was supposed to be a dialogue became an open contestation, virtually polarising the field. In the words of an interviewee:

“There were both sceptics and those who wanted reforms at all cost, that is, those who were extreme reformists and those who wanted to stick to the tradition and perhaps change at a slower pace.” (University representative A)
On the “pro-reforms” side stood the ministry, the University of Novi Sad and students, while the University of Belgrade was the leader of the “anti-reforms” side. Other universities would support one or the other side, depending on the issue, albeit reluctant to openly confront either. However, for both pro- or anti-reform camps, one issue was important enough to bring all universities together: university (and faculty) autonomy in general and their autonomy from the state in particular.

Given the still fresh memory of the previous decades, universities and the ministry both agreed that higher education needed to be shielded from the partisan politics of the state. Serbian universities were distrustful of the state and were seeking ways in which its role could now be changed and what the consequences would be for the university. For the universities, preserving autonomy was a prerogative. Here is how the problem was described by the ministry:

“University autonomy has always been, and rightly so, considered a shield from the political interfering of the state – the ruling party. It is for this reason that it will be very difficult to distinguish between the rights and responsibilities of the state in supervising the higher education system from the university autonomy, as a precondition of an efficient academic system in modern society. The problem becomes more complex with the need to introduce accountability mechanisms.” (Ministry policy document, 2003)

Explaining why the academic community saw the state as a threat to these values, a university leader remarked:

“The [working] group, consisting of people who remembered Milošević’s days very well, feared [these days could repeat], and regardless of the intentions of the government in place at the time, it was needed to set institutional guarantees that would prevent the state from interfering with academic autonomy.” (University Representative B)

In defending their interests, Serbian universities behaved as if they were acting purely on behalf of a moral law or, as Meyer and Jepperson (2000) described it, as “agents for principle”. The moral law invoked here was the one carried in the shared recollection of the local past, which was reinforced by the historical legacy of the university as an institution and the importance autonomy had in it. Together with the integrity of the academic profession,
university autonomy is a universally held principle, having the status of a constitutional right in many countries. In general, any perceived threat to such a principle is expected to be resisted by the academics and their institutions, because they commonly identify themselves as the institutions’ guardians:

“As if it were a birthright, they struggle for self-government, invoking powerful doctrines – academic freedom, community of scholars, freedom of research – which serve both as guild ideologies and as justification of unusual personal liberties” (Clark, 1987, p. 372).

It is therefore not surprising that the subject of autonomy was raised so often by the interviewees when reflecting on the relationship between the state and universities in the years leading to the legislative changes. Autonomy was understood as something highly valued by all parties involved, as well as something in need of protection, in particular in this context where, at the time, negative experiences dated only few years back and where standing up for the autonomy, even in the face of violence, was not alien to local actors. Thus, at the turn of the century Serbian universities had already constructed the identity of the guardians of university autonomy against the volatile nature of the state in the local context. With the state now being perceived by universities as “aggressive” and “reckless” (University Representative C) in its reform agenda, this identification was only amplified. The fact that the key “ministry people” were also “university people” did not seem to make the state look less threatening:

“No matter where they come from, when they are part of the ministry they represent a political option with an agenda in higher education.” (University Representative C)

Being “political” somehow seemed irreconcilable with being “academic”:

“There was a shared understanding that “Bologna” was a political move, not an academic one, and that it, in fact, was a threat to academic freedoms.” (Ministry representative A)

The cultural material from which universities constructed this local–specific identity came from the moral high ground of being the antithesis to a totalitarian state – one they had earned themselves in the past and carried into the present. The legitimacy of this identity was further strengthened by
the authority that the university has in society in the most universal sense. The actorhood thus constructed had its roots both in the high truths of the rationalised moral universe, in which the university stood as a cultural authority, and in the locally rooted construction of the state as a threat to those high truths.

**From identity to empowerment**

The negotiations on the legal framework continued until summer 2003, when the first version of the law was drafted by the ministry, incorporating the decisions reached by the working group. However, because the parliamentary elections were announced for the end of the year, the process was put on hold. Meanwhile, the University of Belgrade, itself not entirely satisfied with the content of the document, decided to form an internal group which would amend the draft as it thought fit and then, once the new government was in office, advocate its own solutions.

In the autumn of 2004 the new minister, having realised the importance of having a new law in advance of the next Bologna Process ministerial summit, took the matter forward. Notably, this minister had no academic background, nor did he seem particularly keen on interfering in higher education, let alone on confronting universities. Rather, he was perceived as “very considerate” (University Representative A) and “respectful of university professors” (Ministry Representative A). Contrary to the minister from the previous government, who was “pro-change” to the point of openly confronting the university, this new minister could be described as “pro-consensus” or, as a former student representative described the role – “a facilitator” (Student Representative A). His approach to the matter was to officially grant the mandate to the Rector of the University of Belgrade to proceed with the work on the draft law, while also involving other universities and student representatives.

Although there were some disagreements on different elements in the law, either between universities or between universities and students, the final version was drafted reasonably quickly. In the summer of 2005, four years
after it was first announced, the new, “reform law” was passed by the parliament.

Five years later, a ministry official from the first post-2000 government reflected on these events in the following way:

“We [the ministry] as a team, and me personally, lost that battle and the battle was won by the University of Belgrade. I was amazed at how passive other universities were, allowing Belgrade to ruin a relatively modern conception of the law. […] It is quite certain that the draft which we wrote could not have won the support of the majority of the academic community in Serbia. And if it had won it, that would have been a miracle because in no European country in which a similar law had been passed, this came with the support of the academic community. Because no academic community was happy with these [Bologna] reforms.” (Ministry Representative B)

The 2005 law was a compromise of sorts: it incorporated both some of the elements aiming at more transparency and accountability, originally put forward by the first ministry and largely endorsed by international organisations, and the need of universities to shield themselves from the volatile nature of the state. However, this need appeared to be so tenacious that the “shield” was, in effect, turned into a set of new governing structures colonised by university representatives having considerable competences in decision making with regard to Serbian higher education, and extending beyond purely academic affairs.

One such structure was the National Council for Higher Education, originally proposed by the first ministry. The original idea was for the body to be independent both from the state and from universities, whilst sharing policy-making competences of the highest level with the ministry. The first ministry initially conceived of it as an independent expert body on all matters concerning higher education, appointed by the government. As thus conceived, the National Council would act as both a “buffer” between higher education and the state, and as a body which would cater for the quality of higher education. However, such a proposal was not seen as a sufficient guarantee of autonomy and was considered by universities as being generally unfit for that purpose. As a ministry official responsible for the matter at the time put it some years later:
“When the idea of the National Council was proposed, the academic community was strongly resisting it because they seemed to have thought that no one but the professoriate could govern higher education.” (Ministry Representative B)

In fact, what universities sought was for the National Council to comprise prominent university figures chosen by the universities through their own decision-making procedures, by majority vote at least, rather than “independent” individuals, regardless of their expertise. Instead of having it formally approved by the government, they preferred to entrust this task to the parliament. In the end, the law required that 10 of the 16 members of the National Council would be university representatives, two would be from polytechnics, and the remaining four would be nominated by the government “from among prominent scientists or scholars, cultural figures, educators, artists or businessmen” (Article 10 of the 2005 law).

In line with European trends, the first ministry also planned to introduce accreditation of universities and their curricula – a practice which had not been in place in Serbia until then – to be conducted by an independent agency run by professionals. At that time, accreditation was spreading rapidly across Europe, as a new accountability and quality control practice for higher education, often under the “Bologna” flag. Accreditation thus seemed non-negotiable for Serbia although, to stress its non-state character, the body was officially called “commission”, rather than “agency”. All of its members were to be academics from the country, appointed by the university-dominated National Council, which ran contrary to the idea of it being an independent body. As explained by a ministry representative:

“There was a lack of willingness to form an independent accreditation body. Somehow people thought that all had to be controlled either by the university or by the state.” (Ministry Representative B)

Two more structures were introduced with this law: university and polytechnic conferences (associations of the respective types of institutions), which were to nominate the 12 members to the National Council and all 15 members of the accreditation body. The National Council was to consult these two conferences on issues related to quality standards, disciplinary areas, as well as on funding policy for higher education.
Finally, internal university bodies were organised according to the same rationale, thus ensuring at least a majority of academic staff in all structures. Even here, minimising the presence of the state seems to have been a goal: “He that has been bitten by a serpent, is afraid of a rope”, explained an interviewee (University Representative B). In all previous arrangements, the government would have appointed a share of the board members. Although their role was never completely clear, they were generally seen as catering for the interests of the state. With the exception of the 1998 law, according to which all members of the board were appointed by the government, throughout the 1990s the regulation prescribed that half of the board was to be appointed by the government. However, even such a solution was considered potentially problematic for universities. Eventually, the 2005 law stipulated only one-sixth of the board members to be appointed by the government, with another sixth appointed by the student parliament, and two-thirds to be members of the university’s academic staff and appointed by the university senate. With such arrangements the presence of any external voice in the internal university decision making, including that of the state, was brought to its historical minimum.

Meanwhile, the ministry retained the competence to propose policy to the government, only now this competence was shared with the universities-dominated National Council. The ministry’s other competences included planning of student enrolment for state universities and a number of responsibilities of an administrative or technical nature, including those for providing administrative support to the National Council and the Accreditation Commission. In effect, compared to the set of competences given to the newly introduced National Council, those of the ministry were more limited.

Interestingly enough, the law itself was more elaborate than previous ones. There were two key reasons for this. First, it also covered the non-university (polytechnic) sector, which was previously regulated separately. Second, there was at that time a widely shared idea that the law needed to provide the legal basis for implementing “Bologna” – understood as a comprehensive reform process. As a result, the law – especially if paired with internationally standardised and now mandatory accreditation procedures – ended up being
somewhat prescriptive in the areas of, among others, curriculum, quality, recognition of foreign degrees, student representative bodies and rights of students with disabilities. All of these had in the past been, to a lesser extent, if at all, subject to national regulation, yet now they stood triumphantly as beacons of higher education modernisation. Seen in this light, this law was no more than a springboard for the further diffusion of “a world of standards” into the Serbian context and a locally flavoured salute to ritualised isomorphism (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2002; Strang & Meyer, 1993). It may even be regarded as a paradox of sorts that universities – de facto authors of the law – fought so much for the autonomy, only to come up with a set of legal solutions which regulated and standardised their work to an ever greater degree.

Discussion and conclusion

The case presented demonstrates how Serbian universities expanded their role in the field of national higher education, leading to their empowerment as an actor in field-level governance. This expansion is particularly striking given the starting point: at least with regard to formal rules, Serbian universities historically had played a very limited role in national-level governing and policy making, and, at one point, even in the decision making taking place within their own “walls”. The expansion was a result of context-specific circumstances which propelled the university to embrace the identity of the ultimate guardian of the university institution in the national context and, when given the opportunity, to extend its governing competences beyond the issues of a purely academic nature and beyond the organisational level. By doing this, Serbian universities successfully challenged not only the decades-long state domination in higher education, but also some of the global trends promoted by the state at the time, such as the spread of independent accountability mechanisms. However, as it turned out, accountability mechanisms, as well as a number of other internationally-driven policy ideas, did find their way into the local context, largely as a result of their no longer being thought of as optional in the broader European
context, especially for a country aspiring to be seen as a part of that same Europe.

This conclusion suggests that resisting state-led reforms inspired by international trends does not necessarily lead to resisting those same trends. Tempting as it may be to accept the world society argument and say that resistance to such sweeping global processes is ultimately futile – especially for small non-Western countries which typically do not get to write the scripts of the world culture – this case encourages one to at least imagine alternatives. However, although it may be argued that Serbian universities could afford to reject some elements of the “modernisation package” offered to them, their empowered actorhood eventually had little to do with resisting global processes. It seems to be the case that when an actor is empowered in a dialectical process such as this, the diffusion seems to be resisted only to the extent that the actor deliberately defies the pressing cultural script. Rather, the actorhood of Serbian universities – even when they pose as a modern incarnation of one of the few medieval institutions still in existence – had much more to do with fighting the local “ghosts from the past”.

Looking at the state’s original and much-resisted agenda – to “modernise” and “Europeanise” Serbian higher education – we could conclude that the 2005 law marked some movement in that direction. Weakening of the state and the downward shift in the locus of planning also took place here, albeit in a somewhat different fashion to that in other countries. The state was weakened both by globalisation and by its own past actions, allowing its main challenger – the university – to construct itself as the state’s antithesis and claim authority over national higher education as its moral and natural right. The university’s identity in this specific context, therefore, was essentially constructed from the symbolic material derived from the locally shared understanding of a common past, its protagonists and the nature of their relationship. The global-cultural origin of the university as an institution did play a role, but this seems to have been only to the extent that it helped local universities legitimise themselves as rightful claimants to a greater say in national field governance. This, however, does not entail they did not act from a moral law; yet the moral law they enacted was much informed by the local “material”. Finally, the local opportunity structures –
particularly the 2001 regime change and the 2004 change in the ministry – were crucial in the empowerment process, given that it would be hard to imagine Serbian universities with such competences in field governance had the state maintained its historical role. Figure 1 sketches how these processes relate to each other.

The empowered actors, in the sense of this article, do not translate global-cultural phenomena by ascribing local meanings to them, as much as they act from their own meaning and role systems. They neither seek ways to be unique, as “glocalisers” do; and although, as “domesticators”, they engage in local political battles, their actorhood is concerned not so much with domesticating global scripts and identities thereof as it is with constructing and enacting local ones, alongside the global. By highlighting the interaction of roles and identities, the article speaks somewhat to Delmestri’s (2006) metaphor of “intersecting streams” of institutional influence, only here the focus is on organizations, rather than on individuals.

The world society literature highlights the strengthening of organisational actorhood as the main global process affecting the character of modern university (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Meyer et al., 2008). In this conception, the university is an “agent for its self” – an organisational actor whose purpose is to manage autonomously, rationally and responsibly, its legitimated interests (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000, p. 106). However, whether the organisational dimension of Serbian universities has been strengthened remains beyond the scope of this study. The empowerment of Serbian universities, as argued here, had little to do with universities’ intra-organisational properties, such as the elaboration of formal structures and the introduction of managerial practices, often taken as some of the main signs of a stronger organisational dimension (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Seeber et al., 2015). It had, in effect, much more to do with their empowerment in matters of governance and policy at the national field level, and particularly vis-à-vis the state. In this sense, the university empowerment could be interpreted not only as an extension of the university’s role in the national higher education field, but also as an extension of its organisational identity to incorporate new – perhaps less academic and more political – roles and responsibilities in the broader field environment. It is for this reason that the
actorhood in this case lies with the university – the institution and the organisation – rather than with the professoriate and their guilds.

In closing, this article does not claim that the local necessarily defies the global, nor does it offer a criticism of the world society theory in this sense. Rather, it builds on it by focusing in particular on one of its core concepts – actor empowerment – and offers a way to unpack the concept and to theoretically consider its various local manifestations. The findings
presented here are in accord with the general argument of the theory that globally available models inform the local construction of social arrangements, but they also highlight how, amidst all the global drama, a local context may inform a local construction.

Notes

1 A Europe-wide higher education reform process, launched in 1999.

2 Attributes in quotations were taken from the European University Association’s report on five universities in Serbia, Institutional Evaluations of Universities in Serbia 2001–2002: see EUA (2002).

3 University integration was by far the most contested issue in the process. For decades back, Serbian state universities had operated as loose associations of legally and financially independent faculties. The first post-2000 ministry strongly advocated for integration (also advised by international organisations), which was then strongly resisted by universities.

4 Letters of the alphabet are used to distinguish between interviewees in this article, to preserve their anonymity.

5 Curiously enough, when the first National Council was constituted in 2006, even those four government appointees were academics.

6 This was one of the main reasons why the Serbian Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance was not granted full membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education until 2013.
Part III. Discussion and conclusion
Organizational responses: beyond “strategic action”

Modern universities, around the world, are strikingly similar to their medieval and early-modern predecessors with their structure still very much organized around the core processes: teaching and research (Clark, 1983). However, as empirically evidenced, pressures to demonstrate value and relevance for a broader societal cause, conform to international standards and be compared on a global scale, all deeply affect contemporary universities. These changes, as it has been argued thus far, have resulted from accelerated rationalization, that is, continuous efforts to systematize life around increasingly elaborate and standardized rules and schemas (Jepperson, 2002). The expansive and stateless social order of the world society, made up of thus constructed rules and schemas, has had profound consequences for the real world. Much of the similarity we observe in the change in national policies and universities today can be explained by this broader trend.

As pointed out in the introduction of the dissertation, one implication of environmental rationalization is that universities increasingly internalize elements from the environment, such as norms, practices and cultures which pertain to other professions and which were traditionally not part of the university (we may think of, for instance, consultants, managers and policy advisors; but also strategic plans, missions, profiling, corporate identity, etc.). This, on the one hand, leads to more elaborate organizational structures, more internal complexity, new kinds of tensions and decoupling. On the other hand, it changes the perception universities have of their environment, as now they more often perceive it as increasingly complex, producing conflicting demands, as threatening even, and requiring strategic action to deal with.¹ A proper response to these challenges, if we follow the world society argument, requires that universities acquire properties of real organizations – rational, efficient and goal-oriented actors. One could even
argue that an implication of the institutionalization of formal organization, argued to be one of the most successful products of expanded cultural rationalization (Bromley & Meyer, 2015), is that it is gradually permeating university – the institution.

Quite certainly, the core tasks performed by universities – teaching and research – have not remained unaffected in this process. Examples such as ever more elaborate quality standards for teaching, the growing importance of metrics and the publication mania, the changing idea of students (reimagining them as consumers; see e.g. Cardoso, Carvalho, & Santiago, 2011), come to mind. Some argue that the effects of the “iron cage” of rationality are so deep that they are altering the core values integral to the idea of the university – those that make it unique as a social institution (e.g. Altbach, 2013; Gumport, 2000; Maassen & Olsen, 2007; Schimank, 2005; P. Scott, 2000).

An important dimension of the cage metaphor is that it evokes the idea of the institutional environment as made up of deterministic forces which effectively limit organizations’ room for “manoeuvre”: the range of choices that actors perceive as rational or wise – and, for that matter, the choice itself – are, in this vein, structurally determined (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Therefore, the imagery of contemporary university as an organizational, rational or strategic actor is, as suggested by Krücken and Meier (2006), best understood as a powerful myth – powerful because it is deeply seductive. Treating it as an actuality of the real world only strengthens the cage-like properties of the rationalized order in which this myth prevails.

This, however, does not mean that universities cannot make choices which are motivated by their desire to be better off – materially by acquiring more resources, symbolically by climbing rankings, or any other way. But this in itself does not make them any different than their medieval predecessors. In his book *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, Hastings Rashdall tells a story of what I find to be a good illustration of medieval universities engaging in thus conceived “rational action”:

“It is in all probability to the capture of Northampton by Henry III that we owe the fact – on the whole a regrettable one – that England possesses no more than two ancient universities. Another very determined effort to found a
new University at Stamford was made by the Northern scholars of Oxford, worsted in their battles with the Southerners, in the year 1334, or, as another account has it, by Masters beaten in an encounter with scholars. It required the most strenuous exertion of the Royal authority to disperse the seventeen Masters who persisted in lecturing in spite of Royal prohibition; and until within living memory an oath not to lecture at Stamford was exacted from all candidates for the Mastership at Oxford. Once more in the seventeen century the jealousy of the older Universities was unfortunately allowed to prevent execution of Cromwell’s project of founding a northern University of Durham. It is impossible to doubt that the cause of Learning in England has been injured by the paucity of its Universities, or that the stagnation of Oxford and Cambridge at certain periods of their history has been aggravated by the total absence of competition. Perhaps even at the present day English education suffers from the too exclusive prestige of her two ancient Universities.” (Rashdall, 2010, p. 397)

The “jealousy of the older Universities” and their efforts to prevent existing schools or studii from becoming universities in name is somewhat reminiscent of the Croatian case analysed in Chapter 6. However, what makes present times different is not so much what universities do, but rather the institutional environment which prescribes organization and self-interested rationality as a highly desirable property for contemporary universities to possess, perhaps as much as the institutional environment of medieval England in Rashdall’s story prescribed allegiance to the royal or divine authority. The “iron cage” of rationality which “imprisons” modern universities is, after all, not of divine origin but of human devising.

On the other hand, as much as the “iron cage” metaphor suggests imprisonment, it can also be read differently. As Czarniawska observes, a cage can also mean protection, safety and support:

“In a zoo, the cages protect visitors from the wild animals, and no less importantly, they protect the animals from the visitors. A cage gives safety, and so does following institutional patterns of behaviour. […] [A] cage, especially if made of iron, offers support: one can lean against it. Again, the normative justification of existing institutions gives support to those who conform to such institutions, a backing that daring entrepreneurs and other deviants decline to use.” (Czarniawska, 2013, p. 18)
Despite the changes universities have as organizations undergone in recent decades, knowledge has remained central to their organizational character. As the home of science and professional training – both major drivers of the rationalization of social life – university is, in a way, leaning on the iron cage\textsuperscript{3}, to borrow Czarniawska’s term. This we can relate to the argument by Meyer and colleagues (2008) that the success of university as an institution in the context of globalization is to be largely attributed to its centrality to the dominant world-cultural myths – all of which revolve around knowledge: faith in science, rationality and human capability. The widely diffused myths of the “knowledge society” and “knowledge economy”, the authors further argue, merely attest to this.

Whether the university is triumphing or suffocating under these conditions – a question which is indeed important – remains beyond this discussion. What remains within its scope, however, is how we go about making sense of this environment and not least of how universities go about responding to it, be they labelled “cultural dopes” or “strategic actors”. Crucially, our task as scholars – of higher education, organizations and beyond – is to elucidate how exactly the environment is changing and how, if at all, new or different organizational responses to these changes are, compared to what they looked like in the past and not least how these responses further “feed” the institutional latticework in which organizations operate.

Organizing the institutional environment through competition, cooperation and open political contestation: a summary of conclusions

The aim of this dissertation has been to take a closer look at (a) the universities’ institutional environment and (b) the way universities as organizations engage with it. Following neo-institutional scholarship I put forward the idea of the environment as made up of (i) the macro-societal alternative world order that is the world society and (ii) the organizational

Organizational fields have been defined by the following three properties: (1) a community of organizations (and other entities); (2) a shared meaning system; and (3) forms of interaction. In the organizational field of universities or a higher education field, national or other, the community typically comprises all universities and other types of higher education institutions. Authorities such as the government in a national field are also considered to be part of the field, although they are not *stricto sensu* considered part of the community of organizations. The shared meaning system features formal rules, categories of organizations and boundaries thereof, status hierarchies and available roles and identities. Finally, the interaction between field members has been addressed by highlighting three possible forms thereof: cooperation, competition and contestation.

In looking into how the institutional environment is constructed and how universities as organizations engage with it, I specifically focus on the following forms of interaction: status competition, meta-organization (as a form of cooperation) and open political contestation. In unpacking the institutional environment and how it is produced, the study on global rankings (Chapter 3) takes a closer look at how rankings produce *status competition* in the global university field. The study highlights three impacts global rankings have on the global field: globalization of the discourse on excellence, scarification of reputation for the said excellence and regular publication of rankings, effectively transforming a stable status order into a dynamic competitive field. It also draws attention to how a new conception of university status is being institutionalized by rankings whereby competition for status is being converted from something that is implicit and inherently local into something that is explicit and a global “fact”. This new conception, it is argued, differs from the conceptions of status in the global field which were dominant before the global rankings appeared.

Global university rankings are, however, only one way of telling status of a university. The study on how universities respond to status dynamics (Chapter 4) unpacks the multifaceted nature of the idea of organizational
status and its empirical manifestations in fields. It argues that university status can be constructed in different ways, and principally by drawing from organizational categorization, present intermediaries and affiliations universities form with each other. This conceptualization may as well apply to organizations in general. Much like the previous chapter, this one also stresses the importance of adequately capturing the institutional environment before trying to understand why organizations act the way they do.

The study on university associations (Chapter 5) shifts the focus from competition to cooperation as a form of interaction: how formal linkages universities create by forming associations accentuate or rewrite boundaries between categories of higher education institutions, within and across different fields. This study is illustrative of the world society thesis that rationalization expands domains for organizations to emerge and act as centres around which social activity revolves. This study also allows us to see the importance of the time-period and specific historical circumstances for understanding the emergence and diffusion of different meta-organizational forms. The historical dimension was also stressed in the study on global rankings as necessary for understanding why certain phenomena today have different effects than they had a century ago. Both studies present efforts to observe and understand social phenomena as they evolve over time.

The studies on Croatia and Serbia (Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, respectively) are a reminder that local meaning systems and not least the open political contestation around them can be important in how universities interact with other field members, what kind of identities they construct and what roles they embrace. These may as well defy or delay the globally diffused scripts pressuring the national fields to rationalize and organize in their image. We could think of these two studies as studies of relative “deviance” or even decoupling and stop looking any further for explanations. However, I believe there is much to learn from studying how alternatives to globally diffused models of “proper” organizing of national fields are locally legitimized.

In the introduction of this dissertation, I stated that my aim was to contribute to, on the one hand, the unpacking of the university’s institutional
environment and, on the other, our understanding of how universities – as organizations – engage with it. To paint a global picture and place it in a historical perspective, I have brought together evidence from higher education literature and beyond. Drawing from the world society theory, I have argued that much of what we have been witnessing with regards to the changes in the universities’ institutional environment in the past several decades is a product of accelerated cultural rationalization. I have argued that, to understand how universities as organizations respond to their institutional environment, we need to pay attention to how universities interact with each other and other entities in their respective organizational fields. This approach ultimately allows us to conceive of field’s members as actively engaged in the construction of fields’ meaning systems and of fields as loci of organizing – beyond the organization itself. As suggested in the introduction, forms of interaction represent both channels in which universities may enact and shape their organizational identities and opportunities for them to shape other elements of their fields, namely, categories and their boundaries, hierarchies, rules, and other possible field-level institutions they – as organizations – inhabit. Therefore, forms of interaction can be seen as important drivers of institutional emergence, reproduction and disruption.

In themselves, however, these forms of interaction are in and of themselves not products of the post-World War II period, for universities have always competed, cooperated and opposed those who wish to exert power on them. The novelty, I argue, lies in two developments. First, it lies in the change in the global cultural models which prescribe legitimate and desirable forms of individual and organizational behaviour, interaction included. Moreover, I believe it is of fundamental importance that we do not lose out of sight that the “mythology” of the world society – much like our knowledge of it – is constantly evolving and is therefore indeterminate. The second novelty lies in the intensity and the rate at which different forms of interaction, in particular status competition and cooperation via meta-organizing take place, and not least their increasingly global character. Arguing the same for political contestation would go beyond the evidence provided in this dissertation, although here as well we need a better understanding of the
tensions between universities and various instances of authority which may arise due to the said broader institutional processes.

Limitations, delimitations and suggestions for research

Before offering suggestions for further research, I wish to briefly reflect on limitations and delimitations which accompany the work presented thus far and which go beyond individual studies. The main limitation of the dissertation comes from the way the work and the manuscript itself have been organized and structured. Choosing an article-based dissertation over a monograph comes with certain advantages. In my experience, these were mainly the ability to work simultaneously on several sub-projects (papers) while developing the overarching idea “in the background”; considerable leeway in choosing the topic(s) to pursue; opportunity to “train” myself in thinking and writing in the article format from the very beginning; and not least the feeling of accomplishment with each manuscript entering a new stage. However, the choice has also presented itself with some disadvantages. The most obvious one for me has been the challenge to maintain focus. Four years is a relatively long period and distractions amount: there are many interesting topics to research and many interesting ways to research one topic. The relative thematic and conceptual disparity between the stand-alone studies, which I consider a major limitation in building and strengthening the overarching argument, is a direct consequence of this challenge.

With regards to delimitations of the dissertation, the most important one stems from its ontological grounding and the assumptions accompanying it, stated at the opening of the first chapter. Reading this dissertation, understanding the value of the theory used and not least the meaning(s) of its core concepts, requires one to put on a social constructivist “pair of glasses”. World society theory is, in my view, a powerful theory whose force can hardly be appreciated by adopting a positivist or realist approach, hence reading it with such a frame of mind may leave one disappointed.
The second delimitation I wish to underline comes from the choice of thematic focus. As I place the organization in the spotlight, I sometimes deliberately silence elements which may divert the attention away from it, unless I consider them relevant for the argument or too relevant to ignore. For example, although my main object of inquiry is the university as an organization, I try to delineate this conception from the one of the university as an institution whenever I find it important that the two are not conflated. But in most other cases, in my efforts to highlight the important as much as possible, I try to reduce or even cancel the “noise” surrounding and permeating the organization. This is, of course, not to say that nothing but the organization matters in our efforts to understand the dynamics pertinent to modern universities. But it is to say that, if we are to study them as organizations, we need to allow for the organizational in them to reveal itself.

In closing this dissertation, I wish to draw attention to three potential avenues for taking the discussion forward, which come in addition to those identified in the stand-alone studies.

First, I argue that exposing forms of inter-organizational interaction and their role in the construction of meaning, roles and identities in fields, could help us have a better grasp of the way the institutional environment is inhabited and co-constructed by organizations. The importance of relations between actors in understanding the emergence of institutions has already been highlighted by scholars (e.g. Padgett & Powell, 2012). As pointed out in the introduction, interactions are infused with meaning and not least because interactions are where meanings are negotiated (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Simmel’s formal sociology (Simmel, 1950), which also draws attention to the importance of studying forms of social interaction (or, to use his term, sociation), has been more than instrumental to our efforts to unpack global rankings (Chapter 3). Symbolic interactionism was of great help in theorizing political contestation in the case of Serbia (Chapter 7). In general, studies included in this dissertation present an effort to approach the relationship between interaction and the construction of meaning but they are far from offering an exhaustive treatise of the ways this can possibly be done.
Second, I call for a more serious approach to historical research, for we can only have a good understanding of what is new about the present if we have a proper understanding of the past. As I tried to show in the study on university associations, accounting for different types of associations depends on our ability to grasp the differences which came with the time periods in which they emerged and further diffused. Similarly, in the study on rankings we tried to highlight how global university rankings depart from earlier ranking practices which, we argued, helps understand why they have such an impact on universities and policy makers today. However, we need more studies which try to improve our understanding of supposedly novel phenomena and which expose the novel elements by placing them against a historical background.

Lastly, we – higher education researchers in the first place – need to move beyond merely describing the effects institutional environment has on universities, be it rankings, standards, NPM or other, to understanding how this institutional environment is made. In particular, we need to have a better grasp of the role university – as a vital institution in the production of rationality – has had in this process and of the way this role has changed throughout history. Because of the aforementioned centrality of the university as an institution, higher education scholars are in an excellent position to study the role of universities in the genesis of societal phenomena affecting virtually all areas of institutional life, such as professions, professional norms, standardization, scientization, and so on. These phenomena still largely remain outside the focus of the field’s leading journals and dedicated edited volumes. Perhaps, the time is ripe for a debate on how contemporary universities – as knowledge institutions – shape the world we live in.

Notes

1 This could explain the proliferation of research both in higher education and organization studies referring to institutional complexity, organizations addressing conflicting demands, strategic actors, or the popularity of the institutional logics perspective (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, &
Lounsbury, 2011). Another explanation for the popularity of the “complexity” debate is that it places organizations in the focus (see e.g. Meier & Meyer, 2016 for a discussion on the topic).

2 Weber’s original term, “shell as hard as steel” (stahlhartes Gehäuse), spoke neither of cage nor of iron. While both suggest some kind of confinement, unlike iron, steel is fabricated by humans (see Baehr, 2001 for a discussion on the distinction and its implications).

3 In reference to the previous note, a shell is probably even more easily associated with protection and safety than a cage.

4 This understanding somewhat departs from the one of Jepperson and Meyer (2011) who reserve to term “institutional” for the macro-societal level.


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Summaries and the statement about co-authored papers
Summary

Organizing Institutional Environment
A sociological inquiry into university responses to global imperatives

Scholars have time and again asserted that universities are, on the one hand, notorious for being resilient when externally pressured and, on the other, remarkably adaptive organizations with an inherent propensity to reinvent themselves. Meanwhile, recent scholarly accounts tend to portray the institutional environment in which universities operate as increasingly more “pluralistic” or “complex”, while in their responses to it universities are typically imagined as something between “victims” of the environmental change and “strategic actors”. In this dissertation I challenge these imaginaries by, on the one hand, taking a closer look at the notion of institutional environment and, on the other, zooming in on how universities – as organizations – engage with it.

Theoretically, the dissertation primarily draws on the sociological neo-institutionalism and its world society theory in which the environment is conceived of as a site of accelerated cultural rationalization. The dissertation suggests an idea of the said environment as made up of (a) the macro-societal alternative world order that is the world society and (b) the organizational field which pertains to the societal-organizational level. An organizational field is defined by the following three properties: (i) a community of organizations (and other more or less bounded entities); (ii) a shared meaning system; and (iii) forms of interaction. In looking into how universities as organizations shape their field’s meaning system, I focus on different forms of interaction: organizational status competition, meta-organization (as a form of cooperation) and political contestation. The dissertation comprises five stand-alone studies which offer answers to the following questions:
- How do global rankings produce status competition between universities?
- How do universities respond to organizational status competition?
- How do university associations affect boundaries in universities’ institutional environment?
- How do universities influence national policy process?
- How does local context empower universities as actors in national field governance?

It is suggested that the forms of interaction highlighted in the studies are not to be seen as products of the post-World War II period, for universities have always competed, cooperated and opposed those who wish to exert power on them. The novelty, I argue, lies in the intensity and the rate at which status competition and cooperation take place, and not least their increasingly global character, which asks for a closer look at both how the institutional environment is changing and exactly how different universities’ responses to these changes are, if at all different.

The main argument of the dissertation is that environmental rationalization – in which the university as an institution has played a vital role as a home of science and higher learning – does not only lead to universities becoming more organized or rationalized internally; rather, paying attention to how universities relate with one another and other entities and to what end allows us to conceive of them as organizers of their institutional environments. Therefore, things like complexity, rankings, competition, categories, standards or national policies do not necessarily just happen to universities; instead, universities may as well be seen as actively engaged in the construction and institutionalization of these phenomena which make up the environments in which they are embedded.
Samenvatting

Het organiseren van de institutionele omgeving
Een sociologische verkenning van reacties van universiteiten op globale uitdagingen

Hogeronderwijsonderzoekers stellen dat universiteiten enerzijds bekend staan als weerbarstige organisaties wanneer ze van buitenaf onder druk komen te staan, maar dat ze anderzijds (ook) organisaties zijn die zich flexibel kunnen aanpassen aan hun omgeving; inherent hieraan is de neiging om zichzelf opnieuw uit te (kunnen) vinden. Recente studies karakteriseren die omgeving waarin universiteiten opereren als in toenemende mate “pluralistisch” of “complex”. In hun reacties op die omgeving, worden universiteiten op verschillende wijzen geportretteerd, variërend van “slachtoffers” van veranderingen in hun omgeving tot “strategische actoren”. In dit proefschrift stel ik deze denkbeelden ter discussie door aan de éne kant het begrip institutionele omgeving onder de loep te nemen en aan de andere kant in te zoomen op hoe universiteiten – als organisaties – omgaan met en reageren op hun omgeving.

Vanuit theoretisch perspectief, leunt dit proefschrift sterk op het sociologische neo-institutionalisme, meer specifiek de world society theory, waarin de omgeving wordt gezien als een locus van toenemende culturele rationalisatie. Het proefschrift stelt die omgeving voor als bestaande uit: (a) een macro-sociologische wereldorde (world society); en (b) het organisationele veld op maatschappelijk meso-niveau. Een organisationeel veld wordt gedefinieerd door de volgende kenmerken: (i) een gemeenschap van organisaties (en andere min of meer gerelateerde entiteiten); (ii) een gedeeld betekenisgevend systeem; en (iii) typen interacties. Door te kijken naar hoe universiteiten – als organisaties – overtuigingen en betekenissen in hun veld vormgeven, bestudeer ik verschillende typen interacties: statuscompetitie, meta-organisatie en politieke betwisting. Het proefschrift omvat vijf studies die antwoorden zoeken op de volgende vragen:
Hoe produceren ranglijsten statuscompetitie tussen universiteiten?
Hoe reageren universiteiten op status competitie?
Hoe beïnvloeden associaties van universiteiten de grenzen in hun institutionele omgeving?
Hoe beïnvloeden universiteiten nationale beleidsprocessen?
Hoe stelt de lokale context universiteiten in staat om als actoren op te treden in de governance van het organisatieveld?

De studies suggereren dat de typen interacties niet zozeer een product zijn van de naoorlogse periode; universiteiten hebben immers altijd al samengewerkt, geconcurreerd en gestreden tegen actoren die hun wil wensten op te leggen. De noviteit ligt in de mate en intensiteit van de processen van statuscompetitie en samenwerking. Dit vraagt om een bestudering van de veranderingen in de institutionele omgeving en hoe universiteiten precies reageren op die verandering, en of universiteiten daarin verschillen.

Het centrale argument van het proefschrift is dat de theoretisch veronderstelde rationalisatie – waarin de universiteit zelf een centrale rol heeft gespeeld als thuisbasis van de wetenschap en hoger onderwijs – niet alleen leidt tot universiteiten die meer georganiseerd zijn of intern gerationaliseerd. Juist door in aanmerking te nemen hoe en waarom universiteiten in verhouding tot elkaar (en andere entiteiten) staan, krijgen we inzicht in hun rol als organisatoren van hun institutionele omgeving. Fenomenen als complexiteit, rangordes, competitie, categorieën, standaarden of nationaal beleid gebeuren niet noodzakelijkerwijs zomaar, universiteiten zelf kunnen gezien worden als actief betrokken bij de constructie en institutionalisering van deze fenomenen.
Statement about co-authored papers

This dissertation consists of an introduction, conclusion and five stand-alone studies. All but two stand-alone studies – Study 1 (Chapter 3) and Study 4 (Chapter 6) are single-authored. In this section I will disclose my contribution to the two co-authored papers.

Study 1, titled “How global rankings produce competition between universities: A sociological view” has been jointly written by myself, Dr. Leopold Ringel and Prof. Dr. Tobias Werron (Bielefeld University). Conceptually, the article builds on Ringel’s and Werron’s previous work on rankings (Werron & Ringel, 2017). The framework which we develop in the paper (to which the three impacts are central) and the empirical material provided are entirely products of collaborative discussions and writing. With the exception of the concluding section, “Conclusion and outlook: towards a sociology of rankings”, which has been written mostly by Werron, the writing has been more or less equally divided by the authors and all three of us took turns in writing up parts and editing the manuscript.

Study 4, titled “Partial Horizontal Differentiation in Croatian Higher Education: How Ideas, Institutions and Interests Shape the Policy Process” has been co-authored with Dr. Martina Vukasovic (Ghent University). The paper is one of the outputs of a research project commissioned by the European Commission titled “Structural Higher Education Reform – Design and Evaluation” (EAC/31/2014). The project was carried out by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente and the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG), Ghent University. I have conducted two of the five interviews which we used for this study. The structure of the paper and the analytical framework have been jointly discussed and decided and the writing tasks were divided more or less equally and subsequently edited by both authors in turns.
Author’s biography

Jelena Brankovic is a Research Associate at the Faculty of Sociology of Bielefeld University in Germany. Her research focuses on organizational responses to global dynamics and she is specifically interested in forms and effects of interaction between organizations. Theoretically, Jelena’s work draws mainly on sociological institutionalism and world society theory, as well as on the theoretical work in scholarly traditions such as, among others, competition, identity, categories and boundaries.

Jelena holds a Master’s degree in higher education, awarded jointly by the University of Oslo, the University of Tampere, and the University of Aveiro, and an equivalent degree in English Language and Literature from the University of Belgrade. Between 2013 and 2017, she worked on her PhD project at the Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent at the Department of Sociology of Ghent University.

Her work experience includes a post as researcher at the Centre for Education Policy in Belgrade and the position of the National Coordinator for the EU TEMPUS Programme in Serbia. She is a member of the International Sociological Association (ISA), European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS), the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) and the Early Career Higher Education Researchers (ECHER) network. Jelena’s work has appeared in Acta Sociologica, Higher Education, Studies in Higher Education and several edited volumes.
Universities are often thought of as unique among institutions and organizations. Certainly, their role in the global institutionalization of education, science, professions and the ever-expanding list of individual rights and freedoms has been pivotal. These developments have, in turn, transformed the environment in which universities operate into one which is ever more challenging to navigate. University leaders and academics nowadays frequently report increasing pressures to follow international standards, to be accountable to various stakeholders and to compete for funds or status, effectively reifying the image of the university as a “victim” of the said broader social changes.

This dissertation challenges this imaginary and suggests that, if we look into the ways universities interact with other organizations, and especially into how this interaction has changed over the past century and how it materializes in local contexts, a somewhat different picture emerges. By focusing on competition, cooperation and contestation, the dissertation argues that it is through interaction that universities enact and shape their organizational identities and in doing so act as co-constructors of their institutional environment. Forms of inter-organizational interaction and changes thereof are, thus, important to consider when looking at institutional emergence, reproduction and disruption.