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Archetypes of organizational actorhood in multiple competitions

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ABSTRACT

As competition in the higher education system has intensified at multiple levels, universities have undergone significant transformations, evolving into organizational actors. This paper contributes to university actorhood research by zooming in at the meso-organizational level of analysis: We develop an empirically grounded framework that shows how new archetypes of organizational actorhood emerge when universities organize their responses to multiple competitions. Utilizing a configurational approach, we conceptualize an archetype as an interrelated response and configurational strategy-structure pattern and its underlying interpretive scheme. A qualitative meta-study based on 33 case studies across 13 countries forms the basis of our analysis. The analysis indicates that there is not one best way for universities to perform actorhood when transforming from initially loosely coupled systems into new forms of organizing. Instead, a variety of robust archetypes of organizational actorhood – adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional – have emerged, going beyond a simple isomorphic adoption of one globally dominant institutional template and country-specific idiosyncrasies of national higher education systems.

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Qualitative meta-study; universities; organizational actorhood; configurational approach; archetypes

Introduction

Higher education institutions have undergone transformations since competition has increased in many areas of the higher education system, especially in the allocation of material and symbolic resources. This development is construed as multiple competitions resulting from different, nested, and interdependent competitive dynamics in which universities are embedded (Bloch, Mitterle, and Seidenschur 2024). These competitions ‘are not simply “out there” but are the socially constructed product that results from the dynamics and interaction of different social systems’ (Krücken 2021, 168). Thus, universities cannot be reduced to ‘passive recipients of institutional pressures’ (Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori 2017, 320) but they are evolving into more autonomous strategic actors that position themselves in these environments (Musselin 2021). The way universities respond to these interrelated dynamics affects organizational logics, as competition ‘drives the evolution of universities into organizations’ (Musselin 2018, 664).

Actorhood research argues that universities have become goal-oriented systems with room for maneuver, institutional accountability, and operationalized practices (Bloch 2021; Elken and Røsdal 2017; Huisman and Burgoa 2023; Krücken and Meier 2006; Zapp, Marques, and Powell

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2021). However, most studies on university actorhood tend to remain within the confines of the new institutional perspective, portraying organizations as 'largely passive recipients of constraining environmental pressures' (Huisman and Burgoa 2023, 1104). As a result, the possibility of proactive organizational agency – particularly the ability of universities to shape, reinterpret, or even co-construct their environments – receives limited attention. Recent scholarship, however, calls for a broader conceptualization of actorhood that goes beyond passive adaptation to institutional pressures and instead emphasizes the capacity of universities 'to act out and for themselves' (Bloch 2021, 489).

Indeed, multiple competitions have increased performance pressures on universities across higher education systems (Zapp, Marques, and Powell 2021) with standardized measures of performance becoming an 'unquestionable orthodoxy' (Naidoo 2018, 611). However, we argue that while multiple competitions cause pressure for change at the field level, a variety of organizational actorhood emerges in response to these external contingencies beyond the 'all-pervasive global or one-size-fits-all standard' (Paradeise and Thoenig 2013, 196). To analyze this variety, our paper shifts the focus from the field-level of higher education systems to the meso-level of organizational analysis.

From this perspective, organizational actorhood is about interpreting and filtering multiple competitive pressures while engaging dynamically with external contingencies and developing a course of action that adapts, responds to and co-designs the context in which universities position themselves (Fumasoli, Barbato, and Turri 2020). Organizational actorhood can neither be reduced to isomorphic adoptions of merely one globally dominant institutional template nor differentiated as a historical path-dependency of national higher education systems with their country-specific idiosyncrasies.

As a contribution to the growing debate on how transformations have triggered new organizational forms, the aim of our study is to explore how different types of organizational actorhood emerge when universities organize their responses to multiple competitions. A plea for the revival of the archetype perspective in these contexts has been made by Greenwood, Hinings, and Whetten (2014) who propose expanding the institutional perspective with its elaborate understanding of field-level processes through configurational ideas to understand organizations as a source of variability. Utilizing a configurational approach (Hinings 2018; Meyer, Tsui, and Hinings 1993), we develop a framework to conceptualize archetypes of organizational actorhood as interrelated patterns of interpretive schemes, organizational responses, and configurations of strategy and structure. Our conceptualization aligns with Giddens' (1984) structuration theory on the recursive relationship between social structures and agency. Accordingly, the organization (i.e. the configuration of strategy and structure) is both the medium for and the outcome of the process of organizing (i.e. the organizational response). This means that the organization both shapes agency and is, in turn, shaped by agency in an ongoing process. We use interpretive schemes (Greenwood and Hinings 1993) of dominant coalitions (March 1962; Mithani and O'Brien 2021) as an analytical concept for studying organizational responses in the complex and politicized decision-making process in universities. This framework allows us to investigate the fine-grained arrangements of strategy-and-structure elements and their interactive, dynamic relationships with the multiple competitive environments.

Our empirical analysis consists of a qualitative meta-study based on a sample of 33 case studies from 13 countries extracted from seven databases. Through abductive reasoning, we derived novel insights from the systematic re-analysis of the cases (Habersang and Reihlen 2024). Our findings show the dynamics between the active process of organizing (i.e. the organizational responses) and the organization (i.e. the configuration) for actorhood. They also indicate that there is not one best way for universities to perform actorhood when transforming from initially loosely coupled systems. Instead, a variety of robust archetypes of organizational actorhood – adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional – have emerged, going beyond a simple isomorphic adoption of only one globally dominant template or country-specific idiosyncrasies in national systems of higher education.

Our study makes a twofold contribution: First, it expands neo-institutional theorizing on actorhood to the meso-level of organizational analysis. By conceptualizing an archetype-of-actorhood framework that understands archetypes as ‘templates of organizing’ (Greenwood and Hinings 1996, 1025), we capture how the dynamics of organizational responses to multiple competitions unfold over time. Second, the qualitative meta-study offers empirical insights for future comparative analyses as it allows for a generalization beyond single case study findings (Finfgeld 2003; Sandelowski, Docherty, and Emden 1997). The archetypes of actorhood emerge in a variety of higher education systems, suggesting either a global convergence of policy reforms (Adelman 2009; Musselin 2011) or that national policies may be less important in explaining the actorhood of universities than is often assumed (Whitley 2008, 2012).

Theoretical background: archetypes of organizational actorhood

The actorhood construct highlights how universities, once depicted as loosely coupled systems resistant to strategic steering (Weick 1976), increasingly present themselves as integrated entities capable of goal-setting, decision-making, and strategic positioning (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013; Krücken and Meier 2006). In general, organizational actorhood defines the socially constructed ‘agency and capacity of organisations to act for and out of themselves’ (Bloch 2021, 489). It understands organizations not merely as ‘aggregations of individuals’ that ‘just occupy a particular role in society’ (King, Felin, and Whetten 2010, 292) but as human-like entities – endowed with identity, personality, and character – that can act intentionally and be held accountable by their environments. From a neo-institutional perspective, actorhood, however, ‘does not appear as choice’ (492), but rather ‘as an expectation’ (Bloch 2021, 494): an institutionalized role that organizations are expected to fulfill by adopting rationalized structures and practices in order to secure legitimacy (Drori, Meyer, and Hwang 2009). Such a neo-institutionalist perspective (e.g. Meyer et al. 1985) is applied in most studies on organizational actorhood in higher education (Fumasoli 2015; Musselin 2021), assuming that the actorhood of higher education institutions is a consequence of changing environmental conditions – also referred to as ‘environmental determinism’ (see Barbato, Fumasoli, and Turri 2021, 1358).

However, recent scholarship (Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori 2017; Bloch 2021; Fumasoli and Huisman 2013; Huisman and Burgoa 2023) has increasingly criticized this perspective for portraying organizations as passive entities, merely utilizing their agency for reactive adaption to external pressures and expectations. Against this backdrop, scholars argue that actorhood should be understood not as an expectation but as an imperative (Bloch 2021). They call for a critical ‘reappraisal of the organisational dimension as a valuable level of analysis’ (Barbato, Fumasoli, and Turri 2021, 1356), emphasizing that organizations take ‘action in the name of the self’ (Bloch 2021, 492). While higher education reforms expanded universities’ formal autonomy – thus creating the conditions for organizational agency – actorhood still needs to be enacted by the organization itself.

We follow this notion and what Giddens (1984) called the duality of structure: we neither assume certain features of the organization to be indicative of actorhood nor do we consider some pre-defined degree of agency necessary for actorhood. Instead, we conceptualize the organizational responses for (re-)constituting organizational configurations of strategy and structure in tandem. A university is not simply an organizational actor by formal designation. Rather, a university performs actorhood by positioning itself strategically, reorganizing its structures, and engaging with its external environment. Actorhood, in this sense, is not a given, but a performed and constructed organizational quality, which varies in scope and intensity, constituting and transforming the structures, which enabled the respective agency in the first place. It refers to the organizational capacity to produce and sustain purposive action from within: not merely in reaction to external pressures, but through the strategic enactment of the organizational capacity within the institutional environment that is increasingly characterized by multiple competitions.

Such increasing competition between universities for reputation, resources, students, and staff is seen as the main driver of change in the past decades (Frost, Hattke, and Reihlen 2016; Musselin 2018). It adds to the traditional competitions between individual scholars and academic communities (Hattke, Vogel, and Woiwode 2016b), resulting in a multiplication of nested and interdependent competitions in higher education (Krücken 2021). Research on the consequences of these multiple competitions has revealed a 'universalized quality' (Frank and Meyer 2020, 5) of the prescribed organizational template. Accordingly, higher education is moving towards 'rationalized universities' (Ramirez 2006, 124) who assume agency for themselves, concisely referred to as the 'actorhood imperative' (Bloch 2021, 489). The merits of research on the global trend towards actorhood notwithstanding (e.g. Drori, Meyer, and Hwang 2009; Ramirez, Meyer, and Lerch 2016), the focus on environmental pressures and system-level changes has come at the expense of systematic knowledge about the variety of intra-organizational characteristics of actorhood. Insights from case studies suggest that strategic capacity and organizational capabilities differ substantially between universities (e.g. Boitier et al. 2018; Thoenig and Paradeise 2016), but the implications of these differences for organizational actorhood remain unclear. To deepen our understanding of organizational actorhood, further research is needed that moves beyond conceptualizing actorhood merely as a function of increased formal autonomy granted to universities. Building on recent research that highlights the agentic potential of universities, our analytical framework broadens the lens to investigate how universities strategically deploy their capacity to act, that is, how they enact and perform their actorhood. This approach foregrounds the diverse intra-organizational capabilities and strategic choices through which universities realize their agency in practice, offering a more nuanced understanding of organizational actorhood beyond the influence of external environmental pressures. Thus, we seek to counter simplistic views of organizations as passive 'cultural dopes' (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Leca 2009, 1) that are shaped by institutional pressures, emphasizing instead their active role in their institutional environment.

To capture the richness of organization as a source of variability, Hinings (2018) has suggested enriching institutional analyses with configurational approaches to examine coherent combinations of organizational strategies and structures. Configuration research is appropriate for understanding variations of organizational repertoires for adapting to and interacting with its system environment. The underlying conception is that configurations are consistent clusters or archetypes of closely related structures (Greenwood and Hinings 1993), i.e. mechanisms and practices in contrast to loosely coupled entities (Fiss, Marx, and Cambré 2013), whether they stem from a conceptual analysis – as typologies – or they are empirically derived as taxonomy (Miller 1996). It's all about identifying different, multidimensional, interacting key elements that demonstrate altogether how organizations operate. Apart from exploring the ideal type 'professional bureaucracy' (Mintzberg 1980), configuration research has not yet examined the higher education research context systematically. Indeed, one of the few comparative empirical studies concludes that 'responses of universities to institutional pressures are more nuanced and complex than simply adopting or resisting,' is from Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori (2017, 320) and raises the question of 'how universities can combine and blend competing principles, while at the same time keeping a coherent identity and being able to work effectively' is from Bleiklie, Enders, and Lepori (2017, 321).

Assuming that 'concrete manifestations of organizational actorhood of universities could be highly variable' (Hwang 2024, 129), we nonetheless expect a certain degree of coherence across organizational responses. This coherence becomes visible in observable patterns of how multiple competitions are interpreted and strategically addressed by diverse universities, enabling the identification of distinct archetypes. The framework depicted in Figure 1 illustrates the archetypes of organizational actorhood, as conceptualized by configurations of strategy and structure, which emerge from specific response patterns and their underlying interpretive schemes.

Our analytical framework draws on the concept of archetypes as multidimensional, context-specific configurations characterized by sets 'of structures and systems consistently reflexive of a single, underpinning interpretative scheme' (Greenwood and Hinings 1993, 1057). Interpretive

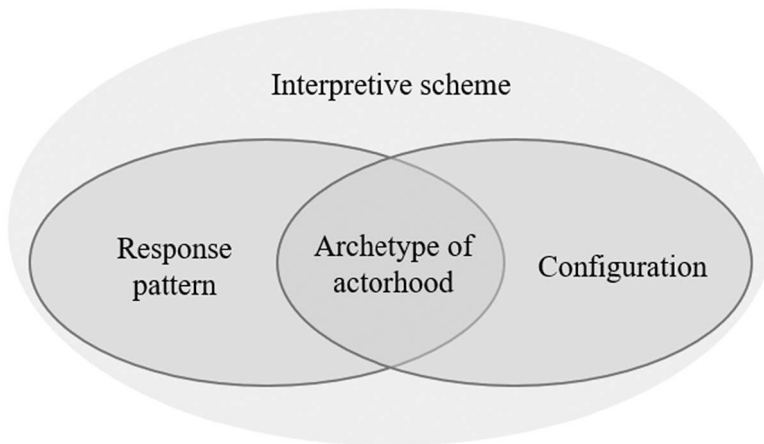


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Archetypes of organizational actorhood.

schemes are sets of beliefs and values, composed of subjective meanings about the organization and its environment (Greenwood and Hinings 1993). Applied to our framework, interpretive schemes describe how the ‘dominant coalitions’ (March 1962) in universities perceive, understand, and evaluate the multiple competitions within their organization and environment and respond accordingly, based on these interpretations. While there are always deviations in how individuals perceive competitive pressures in complex and politicized organizations, such as universities, the dominant coalition offers an analytical frame for distilling the narrative of the central actors who dominate the collective sense-making for the organization as a whole (Mithani and O’Brien 2021) with consequences for the organizational responses to multiple competitions.

Organizational responses – framed in our study as response patterns – highlight the procedural and temporal dimension of how universities translate interpretive schemes into organizing action. Response patterns denote coherent sequences of decisions and practices through which universities relate to their environment, thereby illustrating how universities perform actorhood in practice. Assuming that organizations’ strategic responses vary in ‘the degree of choice and activeness that organizations exhibit’ (Oliver 1991, 74), we conceptualize response patterns as unfolding along a continuum from reactive compliance to active navigation to proactive shaping of external conditions. Importantly, even reactive responses may reflect strategic intent, provided they are grounded in deliberate analysis and coordinated action by the organization itself. Overall, response patterns illuminate varying degrees of how universities enact their agency within institutional environments. They reflect coordinated efforts to address multiple competitions – ranging from reactive to active to proactive behavior – and over time, may lead to new and distinct organizational configurations.

Configurations refer to specific and coherent arrangements of strategic and structural elements that reflect how universities address multiple competitions within their organization. Our framework refers to the well-known definition of configurations as a ‘multidimensional constellation of conceptually distinct characteristics that commonly occur together’ (Meyer, Tsui, and Hinings 1993, 1175). They result from an enhanced room to maneuver and actively orchestrating strategy-structure patterns rather than passive adapting exogenously to external pressures. This is what can be called a holistic perspective, because configurations are about ‘organizations in action’ (Sluismans 2003, 15).

A challenge in studying configurations is the lack of generally accepted requirements for the organizational elements to be considered, let alone what characteristics best describe the attributes of these elements (Grandori and Furnari 2008). In our study, we rely on the seminal work of Krücken and Meier (2006) on universities as organizational actors, which has been applied and elaborated in multiple studies (e.g. Elken and Røsdal 2017; Huisman and Burgoa 2023; Zapp, Marques, and Powell 2021). It proposes four closely related basic elements: focus on goal definition, organizational

accountability, formalization of structure, and emphasis on managerialism. We use the four basic elements as a starting point to define the strategic and structural dimensions of a configuration (Grandori and Furnari 2008). Accordingly, the strategic dimension consists of the definition of goals for competitive positioning (Barbato, Fumasoli, and Turri 2021; Fumasoli and Hladchenko 2023), as well as accountability for achieving these goals (Huisman and Currie 2004). The structural dimension includes the formal organizational designs (Hattke, Blaschke, and Frost 2016a), as well as the distribution of decision-making rights (Frost and Hattke 2018).

Method, data, and analysis

Method

We conducted a qualitative meta-study (Hoon 2013) to overcome the limitations of single case studies when investigating archetypes of organizational actorhood. Qualitative meta-studies use abductive reasoning to derive explanatory patterns from the re-analysis and synthesis of published case studies (Habersang and Reihlen 2024). Based on a purposeful selection of comparable cases with a similar level of detail (Thorne 2022), the method applies inductive and deductive coding techniques to gain insights which go beyond the original studies (Hoon 2013). Our qualitative meta-study draws on the rich repertoire of case studies in higher education research (Bronstein and Reihlen 2014) and allows us to examine cross-national trends beyond singular university-state relationships (Ferlie, Musselin, and Andresani 2008; Ramirez and Christensen 2013).

Sampling

The data selection followed the ENTREQ Statement (Tong et al. 2012) with a transparent audit trail (Supplemental Online Material 1). We generated a Boolean search string to identify cases in the attribute space 'competition' and 'university governance' in seven databases of academic literature (Supplemental Online Material 2). The search string combined key terms to narrow the search results to qualitative empirical studies on organizational responses to competitive pressures in the context of higher education. Our initial search yielded approx. 35.000 search results across all databases, of which approx. 28.000 remained after deleting duplicates. We then applied purposeful sampling with a list of specific inclusion/exclusion criteria to filter out suitable cases (Supplemental Online Material 3). First, we excluded all publications that did not match our research interest (e.g. focus on student experiences, health issues, gender studies, minority issues). Subsequently, we excluded older publications from before 1990, studies that did not include competitive pressures as a starting point for the developments, and all cases that were less affected by the multiplication of competitions (e.g. teaching colleges without research activities). We did not exclude any countries or higher education systems to identify potential overarching patterns. We screened the remaining literature for studies with high methodological quality (e.g. transparency, data triangulation), detailed descriptions of organizational elements (i.e. strategy and structure), procedural explanations (i.e. response patterns), and normative statements from the perspectives of stakeholders (i.e. interpretive schemes). The final sample consists of 33 case studies from 13 countries (see Table 1).

Coding and analysis

Our abductive analytic process combined logical and empirical forms of reasoning (Mingers 2012). We applied open, axial, and selective coding techniques in four sequential steps with several iterations at different levels of abstraction (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Strauss and Corbin 1998). First, we identified the organizational elements and their attributes for each university, which we aggregated into abstract configurations across the cases. This resulted in 190 attributes assigned to 38 elements (Supplemental Online Material 4). Second, we focused on the procedural course of

Table 1. Overview of cases included in the qualitative meta-study.

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; funding body; broad orientation	Competitive pressures reported in the study
Abdaless (2017)	Case 1; Magnolia University (pseudonym)	Budgeting evolution in times of strategic change at a university	England; large; early 1900s; public; generalist	Economic downturn; New Public Management reforms; agenda of corporatization for universities; shift from state funding to funding by students' tuitions
Ahmed (1997)	Case 2; University College London	Changes in the management control systems following the publication of the 1985 Jarratt Report, and the consequences of these changes on academic staff	England; large; 1826; public; generalist	Jarratt Report on the efficiency of UK universities; decreased stable state funding; funding uncertainties
	Case 3; University of Edinburgh		Scotland; large; 1583; public; generalist	Jarratt Report on the efficiency of UK universities; decreased stable state funding; funding uncertainties
	Case 4; University of Essex		England; medium; 1964; public; generalist	As above (Case 2)
	Case 5; University of Nottingham		England; large; 1881; public; generalist	As above (Case 2)
	Case 6; Loughborough University		England; large; 1909; public; generalist	As above (Case 2)
Arnaboldi and Azzone (2005)	Case 7; University of Sheffield	Role of managers, accounting techniques, and the experiences of subunits in a university's incremental transformation	England; very large; 1905; public; generalist	Higher education reforms granting institutions additional organizational autonomy
	Case 8; Beta University (pseudonym)		Italy; very large; unknown; public; specialist	
Arnal (1999)	Case 9; University of Alberta	Perceptions of change, issues and challenges in addressing a major financial crisis	Canada; very large; 1908; public; generalist	Financial pressures due to reduced state funding and increasing accountability requirements by the state and the community
Cekic (2008)	Case 10; Indiana University Bloomington	'Organizational frames used by faculty and administrators' (vi) involved in the implementation and use of responsibility center management (RCM)	USA; very large; 1820; public; generalist	Declining state funding; market forces; changing student body; changes in the job market
Chong, Geare, and Willett (2018)	Case 11; University of New Zealand (pseudonym)	Conceptualization of managerialism and collegiality in times of institutional change by university staff	New Zealand; unknown; unknown; public; unknown	New Public Management reforms; shift from bulk funding system to funding based on equivalent full-time students; legislation in late 1980s monitored universities' performance and allowed income generation; legislation in the late 1990s reduced the autonomy of universities; shift to performance-based funding

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; funding body; broad orientation	Competitive pressures reported in the study
Du (2007)	Case 12; B1 University (pseudonym)	Application of New Public Management reforms at four universities in comparison between two different countries	Scotland; very large; 1583; public; generalist	New Public Management Reforms; Restructuring reform
	Case 13; B2 University (pseudonym)		Scotland; medium; 1875; public; generalist	As above (Case 12)
	Case 14; C1 University (pseudonym)		China; very large; 1896; public; generalist	Governmental 211 project that facilitates cross-institutional collaborations; government decides on merging institutions; increasing transparency and accountability requirements; New Public Management reforms
	Case 15; C2 University (pseudonym)		China; very large; 1912; public; generalist	Government decides on merging institutions; decentralization and higher education system realignment; New Public Management reforms
Egnor (2001)	Case 16; Toshi University (pseudonym)	Change in governance patterns due to the 1998 University Council reforms	Japan; medium; 1952; private; generalist	The 1998 reforms, competition for students; growing dependence on student fees due to decreasing governmental subsidies for private institutions
Esterhazy (2018)	Case 17; Humboldt University of Berlin	Organizational change after a university's application for the newly introduced German excellence initiative	Germany; very large; 1810; public; generalist	Competitive research funding; reduced stable state funding, increasing accountability requirements; need to position in competition for excellence and to showcasing its relevance to the national and international research community
Fumasoli and Lepori (2011)	Case 18; Università della Svizzera italiana	Organizational strategy patterns and positioning after higher education reforms	Switzerland; small; 1996; public; specialist	Federal University Act; Bologna reform; New Public Management reforms; competitive project funding between institutions; additional institutional autonomy
	Case 19; Université de Neuchâtel		Switzerland; medium; 1909; public; generalist	University Acts reinforcing the rectorate and fostering 'strategic capability by means of block grant' (170); increasing competition for students due to newly created applied science institutions; performance-based state funding; financial uncertainty

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; funding body; broad orientation	Competitive pressures reported in the study
	Case 20; Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italian		Switzerland; small; 1997; public; generalist	Federal University Act; need for accreditation which are linked to strict federal requirements; competition with similar institutions for research funding
Haller (2021)	Case 21; St. Joseph University	Characteristics of organizational change in a comparison of two universities and how these changes influenced the respective market position	USA; unknown; 1851; private; generalist	Declining enrollment in Catholic institutions; increased competition for students
	Case 22; Villanova University	differentiation	USA; unknown; 1842; private; generalist	As above (Case 21)
Hodges (2016)	Case 23; Palm State University (pseudonym)	Collaboration process between university members to achieve the institutional-wide goal of grant acquisition	USA; very large; 1700s; public; unknown	New Public Management reforms; increasing transparency and accountability requirements; reduced stable state funding; competition for grants between higher education institutions
Kohtamäki and Balbachevsky (2019)	Case 24; University of Tampere	Institutional changes through expanded organizational autonomy in comparison between two policy frameworks	Finland; very large; 1925; public; generalist	Government promoted the establishment of larger 'and more efficient organizational structures' (333) in national structural development reforms for higher education
	Case 25; University of Sao Paulo		Brazil; very large; 1932; public; generalist	Conflicts between the government and universities, leading to financial independence in 1987; scarcity of resources within the system
McClure (2016)	Case 26; Garfield State University	Processes and role of administrators in prioritizing innovation and entrepreneurship as a strategic goal for the university	USA; large; 1856; public; generalist	Higher education reforms facilitating academic capitalism and pushing for more 'accountability and regulatory schemes' (520), budget cuts by the state; academic capitalism
Rogers (2013)	Case 27; Heel University	Management and strategies of senior leaders at publicly funded universities to solve an institutional fiscal crisis	USA; large; 1897; public; generalist	Financial pressure after the Great Recession; budget cuts by the state
	Case 28; North State University		USA; large; 1899; public; generalist	As above (Case 27)
Rungfamai (2017)	Case 29; Chulalongkorn University	Governance arrangements and associated perceptions of university stakeholders as the institution transformed into a research-oriented university	Thailand; very large; 1908; public; generalist	Asian financial crisis; reduced university funding and shift towards revenue diversification, National Research University project to improve competitiveness
Smith and Martinez (2015)	Case 30; Western University	Reorganization process after the elimination of departments in response to a financial crisis	Canada; very large; 'relatively short history'; public; unknown	Financial pressure after the Great Recession, budget cuts by the state; uncertainties
		Social interactions within the university in response to	Finland; medium; 1860s (reached	Finland becoming 'a mass higher education system'

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; funding body; broad orientation	Competitive pressures reported in the study
Treuthardt and Välimaa (2008)	Case 31; Campus University (pseudonym)	New Public Management reforms	university status in the 1960s; public; generalist	(609); New Public Management reforms; management by results
Weinblatt (2012)	Case 32; University of Toledo	Decision-making processes 'during the preliminary stages of two' (140) university mergers	USA; very large; 1872; public; generalist	Declining state funding; higher education reforms that increase the power of the governor; pressure for collaboration and synergies
	Case 33; University of Colorado Denver		USA; very large; 1973; public; generalist	Declining state funding; pressure for collaboration and synergies

the case studies and derived patterns of how universities organized their actions in response to multiple competitions. Third, we examined the case material with a focus on interpretive schemes by coding the dominant perceptions of stakeholders as reflected in explanatory statements and normative evaluations of the organizational responses as well as the competitive pressures. Fourth, we aggregated the characteristics into archetypes of actorhood that showed analytically discernible coherence in cross-case comparisons. Throughout the cyclic process, we conducted meetings to cross-validate our interpretations against the backdrop of organization studies and higher education research and to elaborate on empirical patterns that had not yet been described in the literature.

Results: three archetypes of actorhood

The analytic process resulted in three distinct archetypes of actorhood. Each archetype comprises a specific interpretive scheme describing the prevailing perception of the multiple competitions, a response pattern which reflects how the university organized its actions, and a configuration consisting of the resulting combinations of strategy and structure. Table 2 summarizes the results (Supplemental Online Material 5 links the table to example quotes from the individual case studies).

Table 2. Archetypes of organizational actorhood in higher education.

		Archetypes of actorhood		
		Adaptational	Orchestrational	Co-constructual
Interpretive scheme: multiple competitions as ...		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... standards for academic activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... opportunities for collective action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... triggers for systemic transformation
Response pattern		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reactive: accepting competitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active: selecting competitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive: creating competitions
Configuration		Cascader:	Absorber:	Modifier:
Strategy	Positioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Providing academic services to society Multidisciplinary scholarship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addressing grand societal challenges Interdisciplinary excellence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generating innovations for society Transdisciplinary relevance
	Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Output legitimacy, accounting-based Funds for performance targets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Input legitimacy, proposition-based Endowments for academic profiles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outcome legitimacy, impact-based Revenues through ecosystem
Structure	Organizational design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hierarchically nested academic units, ... Central administration, shared services, ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... and cross-faculty research centers ... and semi-autonomous research centers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... and clusters with external organizations ... and incubators, transfer offices, and spin-offs
	Decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managerial: top-down Leaders as professional administrators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managerial: collaborative Leaders as academic facilitators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Entrepreneurial: distributed Leaders as agents of change

Adaptational actorhood

This archetype represents a limited degree of actorhood, characterized primarily by a reactive and compliance-oriented use of organizational capacity. It focuses on improving administrative support functions rather than on strategically developing the academic core of the university. Adaptational actorhood is grounded in the belief that competitions define the new standard for academic activities. The reactive response is often characterized by fierce resistance, prolonged negotiations, and administrative enforcement before competitions are internalized as the ‘new rules of the game’. To avoid further opposition to the response, the traditional disciplinary orientations of research and teaching remain largely unchanged. Universities position themselves as providers of academic services and derive their legitimacy from quantifiable outputs which can be easily communicated to external stakeholders, such as scientific publications or the number of graduates. This accounting-based approach is adopted as a strategy for maintaining legitimacy and to attracting additional state funding, which is conditional on periodic performance targets. University-wide targets are broken down into academic units and individual scholars, who are responsible for achieving them. The resulting ‘cascader’ configuration implements sophisticated administrative systems for monitoring and incentivizing measurable aspects of academic performance. It also establishes shared service centers to harmonize administrative processes to enhance cost-efficiency. Accordingly, this archetype requires leaders to be professional administrators rather than proactively drive change. Thus, actorhood is enacted mainly through adaptation within predefined institutional frameworks.

Orchestrational actorhood

This archetype reflects a moderate degree of actorhood, where universities actively leverage their organizational capacity to strategically differentiate themselves within competitive environments. Universities that are classified under this archetype see multiple competitions as opportunities for collective action rather than a threat to academic professionalism. Building on the strengths of their academic profile, the response is to strategically select grand societal challenges as the *raison d’être* of the university, which then requires the establishment of large interdisciplinary research areas. The implementation of these areas of excellence in cross-faculty research centers depends on the successful acquisition of substantial endowments from external funding bodies. The challenge is thus to align the existing profile with the current zeitgeist and to convince external stakeholders of a sophisticated proposal which requires substantial collaborative efforts within the university. Accordingly, the role of leaders is to encourage and facilitate these risky investments by creating favorable conditions, for example, through seed funding, teaching buyouts, or targeted recruitment to supplement promising areas. Once success is established, support is further realized by extending the administrative capacity of the semi-autonomous centers for preferential processing of administrative requests. Here, actorhood is enacted not just reactive but through purposeful strategic action and resource orchestration, reflecting an intermediate level of agency in navigating institutional demands.

Co-constructional actorhood

This archetype embodies the highest degree of actorhood, featuring a proactive and transformative use of organizational capacity. Universities go beyond responding to existing competitions; they proactively reshape or create new competitive arenas. Internally, this archetype encompasses a systemic transformation of the university’s strategy and structure. In a proactive response to multiple competitions, universities reposition themselves as innovation hubs in their environment. The aim of this strategy of outcome orientation and socio-economic impact is to generate revenues from the university’s ecosystem through collaborations, donations, commercialization, or trusts, enabling

universities to (partially) decouple themselves from established competitions and instead design their own competitive arenas. The 'modifier' configuration complements this strategy by establishing structural features that transcend traditional organizational boundaries. This involves experimentation with hybrid structures like incubators, transfer offices, and university spin-offs in regional clusters or networks with partner organizations. Such comprehensive modifications require strong support from key stakeholders, and in some cases, the transformation was unavoidable, as multiple competitions posed an existential threat to the university. Leaders in the co-constructural archetype act as change agents who facilitate entrepreneurial decision-making within the university and in affiliated organizations. Overall, actorhood is enacted through the proactive redefinition of strategic goals and organizational boundaries, therefore, representing the fullest expression of organizational agency.

Discussion

Enacting actorhood: varying deployments of organizational capacity

Our findings reveal that archetypes differ in their scope of actorhood. Universities vary in the extent to which they leverage their organizational capacity in responding to and shaping multiple competitions. This reflects Fumasoli and Huisman's (2013) argument that 'higher education institutions respond to demands, opportunities and threats offered by the environment by displaying different degrees of agency: from reacting and adopting to intervening dynamically to modify the context in which they are embedded.' (161–162).

While we found evidence of a rather passive reaction to the standards set by the multiple competitions, the analysis also revealed an active, opportunity-seeking archetype and a type that proactively transformed the arenas of competition. This sheds light on the debate about the extent to which organizations can perform actorhood in institutionalized environments at all (e.g. Bloch 2021).

The reactive response in adaptational actorhood was the most prevalent in the selected studies. This supports the notion that organizations reactively adapt to their environment (Whitley and Gläser 2014) or are even determined by it (Van Vught and Huisman 2013). The literature described such responses as the unflattering 'McDonaldization' of academia (Parker and Jary 1995; Prichard & Willmot, 1997) or as an 'erosion of shared governance' (Eckel and Kezar 2006), questioning whether the 'governance by numbers' (Osterloh 2010) really works for academic research (Vernon, Balas, and Momani 2018) and teaching (Hattke and Frost 2020). In contrast, orchestrational actorhood goes beyond the mere acceptance of competitive pressures. By developing a strategic profile, universities set themselves apart from other universities (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013) and actively utilize their organizational room for maneuver by 'navigating competition and collaboration' (Maassen et al. 2023). Although there is some variation in the extent to which this active response pattern manifests itself in augmented research performance (Bornmann 2016; Leahey and Barringer 2020), the absorber is commonly associated with positive attributes such as 'frontier research' and 'academic excellence' (Hellström, Brattström, and Jabrane 2018).

The creation of new arenas for competition by the modifier configuration deviates from traditional neo-institutional assumptions about the field-level influence on organizational responses. Instead, it is in line with the notion that competitions are socially constructed (Krücken 2021), suggesting that not only powerful actors like regulatory bodies of the state or accreditation agencies but also organizations in the field proactively invent arenas for competition. The corresponding modifier configuration that is engaged in strategic networking and resource acquisition seems to have emerged as a new template in the institutional repertoire. This process of institutional entrepreneurship (Garud, Hardy, and Maguire 2007) describes the most comprehensive form of organizational actorhood in our data, and the described university-industry-state collaborations are a central feature of the so-called triple-helix university (Etzkowitz 2003), despite considerable criticism of this archetype regarding the commercialization of scientific commons (Armbruster 2008).

Supporting our analytical framework, these findings suggest that archetypes of actorhood possess a dual nature: on the one hand, they are analytically distinct, characterized by normative differences in their interpretive schemes and organizational configurations. On the other hand, these archetypes can be situated along a continuum that ranges from a reactive to a proactive response pattern, reflecting a gradual progression in the extent of actorhood exercised. Given their dynamic nature, however, these dimensions should not be analyzed in isolation but understood in combination. The three archetypes we identify illustrate this interplay between categorial differentiation and gradual progression, providing a nuanced understanding of how actorhood is enacted by universities.

Regulatory influence: going beyond the state level

Much of the higher education literature is 'limited to state-university relationships' (Ferlie, Musselin, and Andresani 2008, 329) and rarely goes beyond national trends (Ramirez and Christensen 2013; Ramirez and Tiplic 2014). Based on a sample from different national contexts, we find that the proliferation of multiple competitions leads to some convergence among national higher education systems, thereby reducing the state's influence on the emergence of diverse forms of organizing. Our study demonstrates that it is not the national higher education system that exogenously determines how a university develops actorhood. Instead, we observe that distinct archetypes of actorhood emerge simultaneously within the same national higher education system. This result highlights the capacity of universities to shape their organizational actorhood themselves by exploiting their room for maneuver, organizing collective action, and strategically positioning in the academic landscape (Barbato, Fumasoli, and Turri 2021; Frølich, Christensen, and Stensaker 2019).

Limitations

The study also bears some notable limitations. Our analysis is based on published case studies that were designed, conducted, and written by other researchers. Naturally, our re-coding and interpretations of these studies are limited by the available material. We encountered a few cases with missing data points and others with ambiguous descriptions which we could not clarify in our discussions, increasing the risk of misclassifications.

A second limitation concerns potential case selection bias. Although we applied a systematic case selection process – including an extensive search in different databases with rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the identification of all eligible cases, and an audit trail to document each step – it reflects the availability of existing studies. As such, research-intensive universities in OECD countries, especially in North America and Europe, are overrepresented, whereas institutions from other world regions, such as Africa or parts of Asia and Latin America, are underrepresented or absent. Accordingly, our findings are most applicable to research-intensive universities embedded in OECD contexts.

Importantly, we may also be missing observations of entire archetypes, especially if academic literature disproportionately focuses on universities that actively respond to competitive pressures. Institutions that do not exhibit strategic organizational transition may be deemed less interesting for publication, leading to a structural bias in the available empirical evidence.

Concluding remarks

This article provides a theoretically grounded framework for studying the active facet of organizational actorhood. By focusing on how universities (pro)actively engage with and shape their environment, this study expands neo-institutional theorizing on actorhood to the meso-level of organizational analysis. It captures how the dynamics of organizational responses to multiple competitions unfold and manifest in distinct configurations, and sheds light on the processes of

organizing in institutionalized fields. The qualitative meta-study provides empirical insights that go beyond the findings of single case studies. We find that archetypes of actorhood emerge in a variety of higher education systems, suggesting either a convergence of policy reforms or that national policy is not as important in explaining the actorhood of universities.

While our study maps distinct archetypes of organizational actorhood, future research could explore their interrelation in greater depth. Such studies might investigate how different archetypes relate to one another – whether they represent sequential stages of development, or competing organizational forms, and examine the temporal dynamics underlying these trajectories.

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