



# Strategic management in higher education: conceptual insights, lessons learned, emerging challenges

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## Introduction

This editorial presents the special issue on strategic management in higher education. The introduction sets the stage for nine empirical contributions focused on different levels of analysis: institutional field, organisational and individual levels. As regards the field and organisation levels, the issue demonstrates how strategic management matters for university strategic positioning, emergence and early institutionalisation of competition in higher education, organisational strategising in complex and coherent higher education fields, university internationalisation strategy and university sustainable quality management. At the level of individual actors, the issue explores the perception of university strategies by middle managers and international office professionals, as well as the strategies of PhD supervisors. The introduction provides an overview of various theoretical perspectives informing the studies of the special issue e.g. institutional theory, population ecology perspectives, complexity leadership theory, and explores connections between them discussing the implications for a future research agenda.

## Background and relevance

Strategy in higher education has been a growing area of research over the last 20 years. Scholars, as well as policy makers and practitioners, have significantly contributed to the body of knowledge related to higher education management and have investigated different aspects of strategy of and in higher education. This has been analysed at the national

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(Gazizova, 2012; Barbato et al., 2019), organisational (Vuori, 2016; Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Van Vught & Huisman, 2013; Shah & Nair, 2011; Luoma et al., 2016; Fumasoli et al., 2020) and individual (Degn, 2015; Ainscough et al., 2018; Torrance et al., 2000) levels of analysis.

At the organisational level, different dimensions of strategic management have gained prominence: mission statements of higher education institutions (Arias-Coello et al., 2020; Seeber et al., 2019; Hladchenko, 2016), development and implementation of strategic plans (James & Derrick, 2020; Morphey et al., 2018), use of strategic management tools like SWOT-analysis and Balanced Scorecard (Hladchenko, 2015). University strategy has been explored regarding various activities such as teaching (Newton, 2010), internationalisation (James & Derrick, 2020; Soliman et al., 2019; Kristensen & Karlsen, 2018; Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2007), the articulation of the research-teaching nexus (Couper & Stoakes, 2010), application and competition for research funding (Talib & Steele, 2000; Litwin, 2009; Boezerooij et al., 2007), and the marketing promotion of higher education institutions (Milian, 2016). The strategy has also been investigated as a response to changing environmental conditions e.g. funding arrangements (Rolfe, 2003), as well as, more recently, to the Covid-19 pandemic (Bebbington, 2021). An important strand of research has developed around institutional positioning and profile building (Vuori, 2016; Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Van Vught & Huisman, 2013; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Wilkins & Huisman, 2019; Morphey et al., 2018; Fumasoli et al., 2020).

At the individual level scholars have explored the strategy development and implementation by different higher education actors e.g. academics (Degn, 2018), deans and department heads (De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009; Degn, 2015; Hladchenko & Benninghoff, 2020; Davis, Jansen van Rensburg, & Venter, 2016; Stansaker & Fumasoli, 2017), doctoral candidates (Odena & Burgess, 2017), students (Ainscough et al., 2018; Torrance et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2017). Strategy as practice has been highlighted as an important approach to understand the complexity of strategy in higher education (Frolich et al., 2013).

Strategy has been investigated in different types of higher education institutions e.g. university colleges (Couper and Stoaker 2010), universities of applied sciences (2016), teaching as well as research-intensive universities (Milian, 2016). The literature provides views on the strategy of higher education in multiple countries: Finland (Vuori, 2016), Denmark (Degn), Canada (Milian, 2016), Ukraine (Hladchenko & Benninghoff, 2020), South Africa (Davis, Jansen van Rensburg, & Venter, 2016), Portugal (Mourato et al., 2019), Australia (Shah & Nair, 2011). However, strategy of higher education remains underexplored in many national contexts outside Western countries.

Though the body of knowledge on strategy of higher education has grown and developed in recent years, there is, on the one hand, a need for taking stock of this diverse literature; on the other hand, the challenges higher education has been facing more recently require new investigations on how strategic management is understood, operationalized, and on the extent it is impactful. In other words, this special issue aims to *bridge the first stage of strategic management studies in higher education to the ongoing and emerging issues* universities are facing when they decide their organizational goals and priorities, how to allocate resources, adapt their governance and select the markets in which to operate.

Drawing from these in-depth cases, we aim to contribute to the understanding of the strategic management of higher education according to the following overarching research questions:

1. How do higher education institutions strategically position themselves in the institutional field of higher education?
2. What specific strategies do they develop in terms of different aspects of higher education e.g., internationalisation, competition, sustainable quality management?
3. What role do university leadership and representatives of different administrative and supportive departments play in the strategic management of the higher education institutions?

## Articles in the special issue

The following articles provide an diverse and engaging range of analyses seeking to address the questions raised in the strategic management of higher education.

Julian Zipparo explores strategic positioning, and the processes and factors influencing the development and content of university strategies and plans, with lessons then applied to open questions of institutional diversity and its determinants. Following a sector level analysis of the contents of university positioning documents, an in-depth case study is developed of a large Australian university, where the interaction of intra-institutional ‘meso’ layers is explored to show a confluence of factors contributing to positioning. The case demonstrates that institutional positioning involves the selective crafting of narratives for multiple purposes, including the seeking and portrayal of internal cohesion, identity enhancement, and resource seeking. Importantly, while cross-institutional comparison of positioning narratives portrays an undifferentiated and somewhat homogenous sector, positioning is found within the case institution to obscure what is significant internal diversity and complexity. University positioning found within compacts showed that while seeking to differentiate, Australian universities converged upon a distinct set of common foci in relation to research. The homogeneity seen at the level of institutions, however, represents homogeneity of institutional level decisions on research positioning, not homogeneity in terms of the research enterprise itself within (and by extension across) institutions. The University of Sydney represents a case where significant intra-institutional complexity belies coherent positioning, in particular at an institutional level. Institutional-level positions reflect attempts to encourage and reach a degree of consensus within a contested environment with multiple differentiated actors and competing institutional logics. This case suggests that within universities there is likely significant complexity and internal diversity not reflected in institutional representations, which are selective and crafted narratives occurring within a context of normative frameworks and practical constraints.

Kerttu Kettunen, Kimmo Alajoutsijärvi, John Arngrim Hunnes and Rómulo Pinheiro investigate the emergence and early institutionalization of competition in higher education in Finnish business schools. Building on key contributions from economics, management studies, sociology, and higher education research, they develop propositions on competition in higher education and formulate the theoretical framework to explore competition in Finnish business schools. Business schools constitute an interesting field for studying competition in higher education because they are the frontrunners and champions of competition-based views in higher education. The main contribution of the study is a novel explanation of the preconditions, emergence, and early processes of institutionalization that drive

higher education institutions to compete and collectively produce the observed competitive transformation. From a broader perspective, the Finnish business school case depicts a narrative of interorganizational relationships between higher education institutions transforming from co-existential and cooperative to competitive. The study shows that competition can be an endogenous feature of the business school field, with market-related elements being present from the outset.

Sandra Hasanefendic and Davide Donina address how higher education organizations strategize in complex and coherent fields. Unlike previous studies which looked at either exogenous (field) or endogenous causes in strategizing, this article integrates them to explain organizational responses. They devise a conceptual framework under the premises of new institutional theory in order to connect macro-transformation in the institutional field to the micro-processes of organizational strategizing. The framework highlights that every combination of the analytical dimensions (field and organization) presents additional possible strategizing practices. Then they test it on the responses to the same change in the field (introduction of research mandate) of three universities of applied sciences located in two countries (Portugal and the Netherlands) by analyzing organizational members' practices. The cross-country perspective allowed to address the non-comparative gap in strategizing research as well as to provide robustness and to improve overall generalizability of findings. Specifically, in relation to the case studies, in the coherent field the organization mirrors field demands internally, whereas in the complex field the organizations exploit the wider repertoires of actions legitimized by field actors to develop different strategizing practices. These findings confirm that strategizing emerges as a result of the interconnections between field and internal organizational dynamics and that organizational member practices must be unveiled as they strongly affect strategizing outcomes. The study results support that both field and organizations warrant investigation in strategizing research since it is not possible to determine the strategizing outcomes just from the combination of theoretical dimensions.

Aleksei Egorov and Daria Platonova contribute to the discussion regarding the correlation between strategic planning and changes in operations as perceived by middle managers and performance of higher education institutions. Considering that the strategy development might have different aims and contribute to positioning, fundraising, teambuilding etc., they focus on strategy as a part of change management. The paper presents the institutional context of strategic thinking in the Russian higher education system, and the analysis of changes in universities' activities with the influence of the strategy implementation. The latter is based on the survey data and represents the perception of universities' middle managers (faculty deans and research department heads). The analysis of survey data is complemented by the calculation of changes in organizational-level performance indicators. The results suggest that middle managers' perception of strategies in general correlates to the changes in actual institutional performance indicators. Findings indicate that most of the department heads do not observe any changes at Russian universities following the development of the strategic plan. This occurs because universities are trying to imitate the use of 'effective' management practices in order to attract more public resources and to build external legitimacy. The regulator stimulates universities to introduce strategies as management tools, universities respond to this formally, developing a document that does not entail any changes in their activities.

Lois Yin Ching Cheung explored the isomorphic tendency identified across universities mimicking successful models. Among a wide range of strategic tools, organisational

legitimacy theory allows universities to focus on exploiting their resources and capability to position idiosyncratically against competitors. This study applies a legitimacy framework on cognitive, moral and pragmatic perspectives, to investigate how universities adopt an internationalisation strategy to achieve the overall institutional objectives. Drawing on a case study of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), the paper explores how the university internationalises in a differentiated position to acquire legitimacy in specific local, regional and global contexts. PolyU strategically emphasises its pragmatic value to connect with its stakeholders in a globalised dimension. The findings broadly support the notion of comprehensive internationalisation; in other words internationalisation strategy is incorporated into other functional strategies to enhance a ‘global’ experience. This finding, while preliminary, raises the significance of local elements in internationalisation strategies, under the influence of soft power from successful higher education systems and constraints of organisational capabilities.

Betul Bulut-Sahin and Orta Dogu investigate the role of international office professionals in the strategic management of internationalization in higher education institutions. The authors assume that key stakeholders in higher education institutions are increasingly involved in the strategy-making process. It is argued that international office professionals (IPs) are one of these key stakeholders and need to be part of strategy development. The study aims to explore IPs’ conceptualization of internationalization, their needs, and roles in the universities, as well as their perceptions of strategic planning, management, and institutionalization of internationalization in European and Turkish universities. In this qualitative research, 23 semi-structured interviews showed that they are not sufficiently involved in the strategy-making process and could not contribute to it as expected. This non-involvement observed in both settings has led them to imitate quantitative global strategies similar to those of other universities, like increasing the number of international students. Moreover, the comparative analysis showed that European universities utilize more democratic and participatory decision-making than Turkish universities, which have little or no participation of IPs in decision-making on internationalization. Findings highlight that higher education institutions should initiate more structures and processes for strategy development with a constructive dialogue by including key stakeholders — international office professionals, particularly — and local, national, regional, and international participants for a shared understanding of internationalization. For better institutionalization of internationalization, deliberate strategies should include curriculum, research, and campus services and facilities, along with student, academic, and administrative affairs.

Tolga Ozsen, Baris Uslu and Ahmet Aypay present a systematic literature review of strategy adaptation for sustainable quality management. Despite its roots in environmental discussions, sustainability has become a critical term influencing every aspect of organisations. As human-oriented institutions, universities have also embraced the ‘sustainable development’ concept on the quality of their internal and external services. Two overarching questions are most important for university managers to strategically guide sustainable quality development in their institutions: Which strategies do university managers adapt to construct a “sustainable quality management” structure in their universities? And how are these adapted strategies related to different aspects/components of universities? A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) protocol is employed to analyse the existing studies in the related literature. The systematic review included five steps sequentially: (i) defining the research question(s), (ii) setting inclusion–exclusion criteria, (iii) recording eligible stud-

ies, (iv) appraising quality of the selected studies, and (v) discussing prominent results. To integrate the results, five enablers in the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) model and the sub-sections given in the European University Association's (EUA) institutional evaluation reports were used. The results revealed that the initial steps for university leadership to establish a 'Sustainable Quality Management' system are integrating a sustainable quality approach to the main strategy document, and then motivating their staff to participate in and enrich the reform-level cultural changes in their universities. This study also discusses the strategies adapted to sustain quality development in universities' teaching, research, societal services, and internationalisation practices.

Martine Schophuizen, Aodhán Kelly, Caitlin Utama, Marcus Specht and Marco Kalz explore the factors enabling of educational innovation through complexity leadership. Leadership in higher education can influence the structural embedding of educational technologies in higher education institutions. However, higher education institutions have to balance dynamic complex interactions while also setting out a clear vision and enacting this vision towards organizational goals. This paper analyses four qualitative case studies with a focus on the choices made by leaders in four Dutch universities that aim to contribute to organisational educational innovation. The data is investigated through the lens of complexity leadership theory in which three types of leadership play an important role: administrative leadership (i.e. top-down oriented), adaptive leadership (i.e. bottom-up oriented) and enabling leadership that emerges as a leadership type between administrative and adaptive leadership and contributes to governing innovation in complex environments. This study sheds light on how leaders made strategic choices and followed up on them to enable the innovative potential of the organisation and create synchronization between top-down and bottom-up efforts. The authors argue that if it is required that higher education is constantly adapted to an evolving knowledge-based society, a new leadership paradigm is needed.

Myroslava Hladchenko analyses the strategising of PhD supervision in Ukrainian higher education. She explores the implications of the national, organisational and individual cultural dimensions for the strategies of PhD supervisors. The intended outcome of PhD supervision is considered to be a doctoral graduate with advanced research skills as well as an original contribution to knowledge production. The study findings indicate that, firstly, institutional and cultural complexities, which refer to the lack of favourable conditions for doctoral supervision, hinder PhD supervisors from achieving the intended outcome. Publication requirements for a PhD also refer to the national cultural dimension. In the Ukrainian case, they constrain the supervisors in their choice of means and ends. Though international publications are compulsory for PhD candidates, there are no specific requirements for international journals which can incite PhD candidates to publish in low-quality journals exploiting an open-access model to obtain financial gains. Thus, in the Ukrainian case, publication requirements for a PhD embed means–ends decoupling as they restrict PhD candidates in their choice of journals and do not encourage them to publish in high-quality reputable and impactful peer-reviewed journals. Secondly, the strategic goals and adopted courses of action of PhD supervisors also depend on their values, beliefs, knowledge and skills. If they are unrelated to the intended outcomes of PhD supervision, PhD candidates are hindered from acquiring advanced research skills as well as making an original contribution to knowledge production.

The contributions to this special issue enrich our understanding of the challenges of strategic management in contemporary universities. At the same time they lay the ground for

researchers to delve deeper into the problems associated to expanding areas of university strategic management. Equally they shed light on how the roles and responsibilities of the university leaders should be shaped to increase the effectiveness of strategic management.

## **Towards a renewed research agenda on strategic management in higher education**

This special issue contributes to the body of knowledge on strategy in higher education in several ways. Firstly, the in-depth analyses provided in this special issue involve organisational and micro levels of analysis pointing to the dynamic nexus between institutional structures and processes and individual actors. Secondly, the diverse empirical cases of the issue involve different areas of application of strategic management in higher education institutions e.g. internationalisation, competition, sustainable quality management, educational innovations, strategic positioning of universities.

At the organisational level of analysis, the findings of the articles contribute to the body of knowledge on how universities as organisational actors develop their strategic actorhood (Meyer, 2010; Krücken & Meier, 2006), and respond to the institutional pressure through institutional diversity and homogeneity. The findings of Zipparo support prior studies highlighting that institutional complexity at the field level results in organisational complexity (Hinnings, 2011; Hladchenko et al., 2018). They also indicate that within universities there is likely significant complexity and internal diversity not reflected in institutional narratives. Institutional positioning is restricted in its capacity to describe – and exert influence upon – activity and behaviour within a university. Hasanefendic and Donina assert that strategizing emerges as a result of the interconnections between field and internal organizational dynamics and that organisational member practices must be unveiled as they strongly affect strategizing outcomes. Kettunen et al. highlight that competition creates organizational boundaries that hamper research collaboration and the spread of good practices, for example.

At the individual level of analysis, articles point to the importance of creating conditions that allow the involvement of individual actors e.g. middle managers, representatives of administrative and supportive departments, academics into the development and implementation of the strategies in university.

The ability of an individual to challenge institutional and organisational pressure as discussed by Hladchenko and Bulut-Sahin & Dogu, relates to either a very high or low social position within the organisation (Lawrence et al., 2011). The articles presented in the issue indicate that individuals in academia admit inconsistencies in institutional and organisational environments but lack agency and legitimised instruments to challenge these inconsistencies e.g. formal implementation of the strategies. These findings resonate with earlier studies highlighting how actors are more willing to implement changes included in strategies whose development they contributed to (Pratt & Corley, 2007). Hence the findings in the special issue support existing academic literature that stresses the necessity of empowering the deans and department heads to apply professional management approaches and play a crucial role in organisational strategy development (Stage & Kaare, 2019; Henkel, 2002; Middlehurst, 2004; Braun et al., 2015).

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