SARA KARLSSON The Active University

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Studies of Contemporary Swedish Higher Education

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Studies of Contemporary Swedish Higher Education

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Abstract

In this thesis, contemporary universities and their response to external pressure are studied. The term “the active university” is put forward as an analytical tool. The active university “acts” in two ways: by taking concrete initiatives and by playing a role. The concept is inspired by theories on strategic actorhood and by new institutional theory.

The thesis presents empirical studies of a number of strategic initiatives undertaken by Swedish universities in recent years. Predominantly drawn from the technical university sector, the initiatives include evaluation projects, organisational change, policy changes and new work practices. The policy context is new public management and recent reforms aimed at improving accountability and management capacity in the higher education sector.

In the empirical studies, “acting as strategy” and “acting as role play” both come to the fore. External rationales to do with quality and competition are frequently put forward as motives for internal change. Many of the initiatives are image-driven. At the same time they can have profound, albeit sometimes unintended, internal consequences.

Sammanfattning

I den här avhandlingen studeras nutida universitet och deras respons på externt tryck. Termen “det aktiva universitetet” används som analysverktyg. Det aktiva universitetet ”agerar” på två sätt: dels genom att ta konkreta initiativ, dels genom att spela en roll. Begreppet är inspirerat av teorier om strategiskt aktörskap och av nyinstitutionell teori.

I avhandlingen presenteras ett antal empiriska studier av strategiska initiativ som svenska universitet har tagit under senare år. Exemplen är framför allt tagna från tekniska universitet och inkluderar utvärderingsprojekt, organisationsförändringar, policyreform och nya arbetsformer. Den politiska bakgrunden är de nya styrprinciper som har införts i svensk offentlig sektor och som bland annat manifesteras av nyligen genomförda reformer som syftar till att öka egenansvaret och ledningskapaciteten i högskolesektorn.

I de empiriska studierna framträder både strategiskt agerande och rollspel. Ofta framhävs externa skäl som handlar om kvalitet och konkurrens som motiv till interna förändringar. Många initiativ handlar främst om att stärka bilden av universitetet utåt. Ändå kan de få djupgående, om än ibland oförutsedda, interna konsekvenser.

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*The papers are not included in the electronic version of the thesis.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who taught me how to read and write.

INTRODUCTION

In the English language, to “act” is to do something. It may also mean to play a role or, less flattering, to “put on an act”. An “actor”, therefore, is someone who gets things done, or someone who pretends to get things done. In my doctoral thesis, I deliberately use this linguistic ambiguity. When I hereafter discuss contemporary universities, I will show how they are subject to pressures that make - or perhaps help - them act. I will present some examples of universities “in action” and discuss the consequences.

It begins with the notion that higher education is important. It affects many of us, directly or indirectly, whether we are students, faculty members, administrators, policy makers, business people or members of the general public. We expect higher education institutions to deliver goods that we regard as necessary for the survival of humankind. This includes the knowledge and manpower required to meet grand societal challenges to our environment, economy, health and well-being. Our expectations on the higher education sector are not only high, but increasing (Frank & Meyer 2007; Olsen 2007).

> [The University] has never before attracted more students and resources and has never before been asked to fulfil more roles, take on more tasks and solve more problems. The University, not industry, is made responsible for the practical and marketable use of new knowledge. The University, not the students, is made responsible for student employability. The University has developed into a key institution that impacts most aspects of democratic societies and many organizations want to use the name in order to improve their status and attractiveness. (Olsen, 2007, p. 53)

For the most part, this is positive. There is good reason to call the contemporary university a global success. However, the other side of the coin is pressure. As the list of expectations and stakeholders grows longer and

is filled up with new, sometimes unexpected items, universities have to find novel courses of action. These actions are the topic of this thesis.

Aim and research question

My thesis work has been driven by a wish to understand the conditions for strategy and action in this important sector. Ultimately, the aim has been to make both theoretical and empirical contributions to the higher education research field.

The overarching research question guiding the thesis is: *How do contemporary universities act in response to external demands?* To answer this question, I build on theories about the university as an organisation. These are theories that seek to explain continuity and change, and the strategic capabilities of universities.

I then apply the theories to five empirical studies, in which initiatives undertaken by Swedish universities in recent years are investigated. The initiatives are analysed from three angles: 1) What was the rationale behind the initiative? 2) How was it implemented? and 3) What were the consequences? Taken together, the three perspectives provide a rich depiction of how universities may "act" in different senses of the word, and what the consequences of their actions may be. Thus, the in-depth descriptions of initiatives provide concrete, up-to-date illustrations of abstract phenomena. This is the empirical contribution.

The theoretical contribution is two-fold. First, the literature review gives the reader a structured overview of theories regarding the university as an organisation, including an account of how the discourse has shifted focus over time. The second theoretical contribution lies in the effort to link empirical data back to theory. The "active university" concept is proposed as an analytical lens through which contemporary universities may be regarded. This concept, which carries both the strategic and the theatrical sides of "acting", has explanatory value. In other words, it can help explain why contemporary universities may act in particular ways.

Overview of the thesis

The thesis is divided into three main parts. Part I provides the foundation. Firstly, the policy backdrop is outlined in some detail, the purpose of which is to describe the nature of the external pressure on higher education. The key concepts of new public management; neoliberalism and the

knowledge society; and network governance are introduced. Secondly, theories about the university as an organisation are presented by way of a literature review. This chapter is principally devoted to institutional and strategic perspectives. The purpose is to present what theorists, over time, have had to say about possibilities for and obstacles to change in the higher education sector, including how universities handle external pressure. Certain concepts, by way of ideal types, intended to capture the role of the university are also presented. A grasp of such theories and concepts, it is argued, is necessary in order to interpret the current situation.

Part II is the empirical section. Here, the methodology, including methods of data collection and data analysis are presented along with reflections on my role as a researcher. Before entering into the empirical studies, the Swedish policy background is outlined. This is in order to place the studies in a common frame, and to show how Swedish higher education policy reflects the larger picture. Following this, the studies as they are manifested in academic papers, are introduced. The description of the papers is more extensive than normal in a thesis of this kind.[1] It explains how the five appended papers, on which the empirical analysis rests, are connected and how they respond to the research questions. This is called for not least because the papers have different means of approaching the overall research question. They also focus on different angles, be it rationale, implementation or consequences. Furthermore, the range of initiatives discussed - evaluation projects, re-organisation initiatives, mergers , policy changes and new work methods - is rather broad.

In part III, the concluding section, I return to the overall research question and link the empirical findings to the literature review in part I. In other words, I summarise the new knowledge that the empirical studies have brought and relate this to the theoretical discourse. Having done so, the "active university" is put forward as a new conceptual contribution, combining both strategic and institutional perspectives. The potential value as well as limitations to this contribution are discussed, and suggestions for further research are made. In a final remark, the potential consequences of "acting" are discussed. Positive opportunities as well as dangers are identified. This is an essential discussion in light of the role

[1] At KTH, a doctoral thesis normally consists of a compilation of papers/articles accompanied by a cover text ("kappa"). Generally, the cover text is limited to a short summary and guide to the articles, whereas in this case the cover text provides a more extensive frame.

that universities play in society. If we regard universities as crucial in meeting the grand societal challenges that lie ahead, then it is important to understand where they themselves are heading.

PART I: LITERATURE REVIEW

The policy backdrop

In order to understand the way that universities act in the face of external pressure, it is important first of all, to grasp more precisely what this pressure entails. In this chapter, I provide an overview of literature on this topic. Here, I discuss the partly converging, partly diverging concepts that have dominated higher education policy in the last decades. I also highlight some emerging ideas. This places higher education in a general policy context and reveals constituent parts as well as ideological references. Through this exposé, the magnitude and complexity of the demands become apparent.

New public management

It is difficult, if not impossible, to discuss change in higher education without mentioning new public management. Whether treated as a matter of fact or, more commonly, as an object of criticism, the topic invariably arises (not least in countries, like Sweden, where universities are predominantly public rather than private). There appears to be an almost instinctive understanding of what it entails without always having to go into the details. The latter may be a reflection of the concept itself. Scholars describe it as neither entirely consistent nor entirely arbitrary (Christensen & Laegreid 2011), but rather a "bundle of specific concepts and practices" (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011, p. 10). It is held together by certain core measures and ideas whose practical application varies.

New public management (initially lacking this label) originally gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s, first introduced in the UK and the US and then spreading to most OECD countries and beyond. Many governments launched new public management under the banner of "value for tax payers' money". The stated goal was to eradicate perceived inefficiencies, to increase customer satisfaction, to professionalise management - and, naturally, to save money doing so. Thus, new public management came to be associated with a withdrawing state and a slimmed-down public service. While most reforms had similar rationales, the actual policies varied, ranging from large structural reforms to single measures, from radical to moderate. Nevertheless, some common characteristics exist. In terms of structure, decentralisation is often encouraged so as to create autonomous expert agencies. In terms of measures, the main thrust is

towards strengthening local management capacity on the one hand, and on introducing *ex post* evaluation and performance control on the other. An increased emphasis on external stakeholders is also typical. New public management is particularly associated with an increased market orientation and an application of business models to the public sector on the grounds of efficiency. In practical terms, this often means the introduction of novel or relabelled work practices within public bodies. Examples include performance-based salary systems, competitive tendering procedures, contract negotiations between and within agencies, quality assurance systems and audits, rankings and league tables and customer satisfaction surveys (Christensen & Laegreid 2011; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011; Power 1999; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008).

The ideological foundations of new public management are multiple. Boston (2011) highlights, *inter alia*, managerialism and neoliberalism. For example, the fundamental new public management idea that public and private agencies can be run in similar manners, i.e. that they have comparable management needs, could be interpreted as a reflection of managerialism. Managerialism is also a source of inspiration when it comes to strong central leadership, and with regard to incentive schemes and performance measurement. In later years, the neoliberal influence has brought in ideals such as commercialisation and customer focus, as well as decentralisation, professionalisation and specialisation (Boston 2011).

In higher education, new public management in the guise of "value for money" first came to the fore when the sector began to expand. The advent of mass education led to calls for increased efficiency (Maassen & Stensaker 2010). It later developed into what scholars have described as a broad reform package (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000) incorporating three core elements: accountability, marketisation and managerialism (Bleiklie et al. 2011; Ferlie et al. 2008; Krücken & Meier 2006).

With regard to accountability, public higher education is part of a legal and financial system that presupposes good administrative order and transparency. Most universities are scrutinised on those grounds. On top of this, they are held accountable by several categories of external stakeholders for the quality of the goods and services they provide: i.e. education and research. This type of accountability is manifest in quality assurance schemes introduced by national governments, and mirrored in international agreements and locally initiated practices (Huisman & Currie

2004; Karlsson et al. 2014; Stensaker & Harvey 2011). Such schemes include the accreditation and *ex post* evaluation of education and research quality, and quality management systems. Much of the discourse on accountability in higher education is centred on such measures, including how well they strike the balance between the need for accountability on the on hand, and trust and institutional autonomy on the other hand (Stensaker & Harvey 2011; Trow 1996).

When it comes to marketisation, the main focus lies on globalisation and the associated intensified competition for funding and reputation. This includes the expectation that universities start acting more like multinational corporations, striving to obtain market shares (Engwall 2008; Fumasoli & Lepori 2010; Pinheiro & Stensaker 2013; van Vught 2008). The rapid growth of rankings and league tables since the turn of the millennium is interpreted as a sign thereof (Hedmo et al. 2005; Sahlin 2013), as is the rise of the world class ideal (Salmi 2009).

Managerialism in higher education, lastly, is frequently interpreted as the strengthening of line management at the expense of collegial decision-making processes (Deem et al. 2010). This is a highly normative discourse in which critics interpret managerialism as forceful central steering with scant regard for internal culture and the views of staff or, alternatively, as a poorly implemented, amateurish version of corporate leadership (Tight 2014), while proponents focus on the strategic possibilities involved in what they regard as more efficient leadership (Ramirez 2010). Krücken and Meier (2006) point to increased goal orientation, structural reform and professionalised management as key ingredients. They note, in practice, the appearance of new professional groupings in management and support positions, as well as a more explicit division of labour and more rigorous follow-up mechanisms. Similarly, Bleiklie et al. observe new roles and responsibilities; and new power structures (Bleiklie et al. 2011).

Over time, scholars have noted how the reality of new public management in higher education has grown increasingly complex. For example, the rise of new levels of governance and quasi-governance has meant additional layers of accountability. Contemporary higher education is not only regulated by national governments but, albeit normally in less formal a manner, by supranational accords and conditions attached to funding. For example in European higher education, there has been an expansion of agreements and agencies that cross national borders. The Bologna

Declaration, the Lisbon Strategy and their respective follow-on agreements are examples of this. Increasingly, external research funding is accompanied by *ex ante*, mid-term and *ex post* evaluation. Another development is the growing importance of national and supranational intermediary bodies in quality assurance and accreditation, including professional accreditation (Hedmo et al. 2006; Stensaker & Harvey 2011). In addition, some individual universities initiate large-scale quality assurance activities on their own accord (Karlsson et al. 2014).

The diverse ideological foundation combined with the realities of implementation, have meant that many new public management reforms have come across as inconsistent. Scholars often describe this by way of paradoxes, one paradox being that while the original aim was to reduce red tape and to stream-line services in the name of cost-cutting, the new cadre of managers have tended to introduce extensive systems (often copied from the private sector) leading to more rather than less administration. This has then become a self-reinforcing growth process (Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg 2014; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011).

Another paradox is that while the role of the state was originally meant to be minimal and arm's length, new public management has often strengthened state presence and contributed towards re-regulation (Hedmo & Wedlin 2008). This is not least because the state holds the audit tool. In an output oriented system, the role of the state is not to interfere with actual delivery but to gather reassurance that results are delivered according to expectations. However, after-control instruments such as performance measurement, assessment, audit and evaluation, have proven to be so powerful that there has been a tendency to overutilise them. Scholars have found ample empirical evidence of this phenomenon in the shape of a new "evaluative state" (Neave 1998) and an "audit society" (Power 1999). Similarly, Pollitt and Bouckaert maintain that some countries "have suffered 'audit explosions', 'initiativitis' and 'target overload'" (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011, p. 204).

A related paradox is that new public management was introduced partly as a means of restoring weak trust in the public sector, but, in many instances, it has led to a (further) decline in trust. New public management reforms have tended to rely on a rational-utilitarian perspective: i.e. a belief that tough audits will satisfy those in doubt. Empirical evidence suggests otherwise. Scholars have noted that quality assurance schemes that signal control and inspection, tend to undermine rather than sustain

trust (Franke & Nitzler 2008; Stensaker & Harvey 2011). If fundamental trust is absent from the outset, it is difficult to restore it through further inspection. What happens instead is that audit becomes routine, as the audit cycle feeds itself and cannot be satisfied, nor abolished (Power 1999).

In other parts of the public sector, these and other paradoxes have been debated for many years. A relative latecomer to new public management, the higher education sector is currently experiencing a growth in these measures (Sahlin 2012; Wedlin 2011). This comes at a time when other agendas are also gaining ground - one of them being the "knowledge society" agenda.

Neoliberalism and the knowledge society

If asked about the role of universities today, most politicians would probably answer that it is to contribute to economic growth and provide a competitive edge in the globalised economy. This is the essence of the "knowledge society" concept. Many governments, in individual nations as well as in regions such as the European community, have embraced and put this idea into practice (Ferlie et al. 2008). Higher education is put forward as the "new star ship in the policy fleet for governments around the world" (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 313). The knowledge society concept has a broad appeal. So much so that it has been described as a hegemonic political thought, questioned by few (Olssen & Peters 2005; Wolf 2002).

The knowledge society concept rests on the principle of social embeddedness. In other words, it presupposes that universities are integrated into politics and society, e.g. by way of university-business-government partnerships in "triple helix" formations (Thune 2010). Some scholars (cf. Eklund, 2013; Olssen & Peters, 2005) describe this as a neoliberal turn. Neoliberalism, in this interpretation, hinges on social embeddedness too and is a marked shift from laissez-faire ideals. It relies on an active state that uses the market as a political instrument to achieve socio-economic ambitions. From a macroeconomic perspective, universities are public assets too important to be left to their own devices, hence the renewed political interest. Governments have to act as "the main owners and controllers of the means of knowledge production in the new knowledge economy" (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 339).

Neoliberal policy also marks a shift with regard to academic work practices. While in a classic liberal model, the academic profession is self-governed and largely shielded from governmental interference (cf. Nybom 2007), in a neoliberal model it is socially embedded. It is expected to enter into contractual arrangements with external stakeholders, who in turn can place demands (Olssen & Peters 2005). In the past two decades, this issue has been widely discussed in the higher education sector, much informed and fuelled by the work of Gibbons et al. (1994) and Nowotny et al. (2001). According to these authors, a paradigmatic shift (Kuhn 1996) in the production of knowledge is called for. In particular, they regard as essential a move from a traditional academic "mode 1" research model to a "mode 2", in which knowledge is produced in "a context of application" (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 3). Their main point is that in order to meet future challenges, novel work approaches will have to be developed. Transdisciplinarity, problem focus, flexibility and reflection will be required in particular. Because universities no longer hold the monopoly on knowledge production and because the issues at stake are societal rather than intra-academic, they will have to open up to the wider community. Put differently, they will have to adapt to their new, socially embedded role.

In the ensuing normative debate (Musselin 2006), criticism has been raised from at least two angles. Firstly, there are scholars who argue that academic freedom and independent professional judgement are undercut by this type of openness to external forces (cf. Ahlbäck Öberg et al. 2016; Hasselberg 2009; Rider et al. 2013). This could be interpreted as a conflict between liberal ideals of professional autonomy and neoliberal ideals of social embeddedness (Olssen & Peters 2005). Secondly, there are scholars who favour external cooperation of a different, more citizenship and sustainability orientated type (cf. Gumport, 2000; Jamison, Hyldgaard Christensen, & Botin, 2011). Here, the conflict relates to the role of universities in society, in which the work of Gibbons et al. has come to symbolise the commercialisation of science. This is an ongoing debate, intensified by the resource-dependence of the higher education sector (further discussed in the next chapter).

Network governance

If new public management and the knowledge society are dominant yet increasingly questioned concepts, network governance is sometimes put

forward as an alternative (Ferlie et al. 2008; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011). Here, it is argued that networks will come to supersede the markets and hierarchies on which neoliberal policies rest. While markets focus on prices and hierarchies focus on routines, networks are concerned with relationships (Powell 1990). They are fundamentally open systems (Scott & Davis 2007).

Network governance, then, is the idea that policy implementation rests on a diverse range of societal actors rather than on a unified nation state. In this model, the state has delegated the provision of services and governs through dialogue and deliberation rather than through precise directives. Knowledge is not disseminated hierarchically from a single source, but largely co-produced and shared informally. Hence, intricate webs of mutual dependence and trust are formed. Proponents of network governance argue that it is the best fit for today's globalised world. It is well suited to meet the complex - often referred to as "wicked" - problems that we are facing: environmental degradation, ageing populations, transport issues, epidemics etc. In this respect, the rationale is strikingly similar to the ideas behind mode 2 knowledge production (Ferlie et al. 2008; Gibbons et al. 1994).

Should network governance gain ground, potential consequences for the higher education sector include the rise of self-governed sectoral networks for the sharing of knowledge, an increase in the number of stakeholders ranging from supra-national bodies from local civil society actors, and the emergence of new organisational forms established through cooperation agreements and mergers. From a government perspective, consequences include a deregulation including a decrease in formal accountability measures, and a more dialogue-based approach to the sector. Ferlie et al. (2008) also contrast the leadership ideology of network governance with that of new public management, and conclude that while the latter is associated with individual, centralised power, the former aims at decentralisation and team-work. Therefore, the incentive structure is based on team performance rather than individual achievement.

By all accounts, network governance is an emergent agenda rather than a widespread empirical reality. Nevertheless, the underlying ideas are worth noting not least as potential reactions against new public management and neoliberalism.

A large and ambiguous agenda

Judging by the above cited literature, the policy demands on contemporary higher education are both considerable and multi-faceted. Scholars point to new public management, neoliberalism and the knowledge society as dominant concepts, and network governance as a possible emerging agenda. Each concept carries internal contradictions, inconsistencies and controversies. While in some respects they overlap, in other respects they are at odds with each other. This, as argued by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011), is to be expected, because public management reform is no exact science and

> management ideas, however fashionable, very seldom get translated in a pure form directly into specific reforms. Rather they flow into a larger pool of ideas, drawn from a variety of sources, which are made use of by political and administrative elites (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011, p. 38)

Policy agendas, thus, do not succeed each other in any logical, linear order, but rather co-exist in intricate ways. A relative latecomer to the new public management reform wave, the higher education sector is probably yet to experience the full width of this (Sahlin 2012; Wedlin 2011). Hence in higher education, the early new public management rhetoric of value for money, centralised leadership and customer focus is still used and extensive accountability schemes are under establishment. In addition to this, the ideals of the knowledge society and network governance are gaining ground. This means that the total change agenda is growing. It has become "more of everything": more market, more politics (Hedmo & Wedlin 2008) and perhaps also more network.

In practice, contemporary higher education is faced with a series of mixed messages and paradoxes. On the one hand, universities are to be streamlined and cost-efficient public agencies, on the other hand they are to be creative, expansive networks feeding the knowledge economy with commercial applications and solutions to every problem under the sun. States signal a withdrawal from the sector, but in some ways take a more active interest than ever. Governments encourage autonomy and market-orientation while at the same time launching extensive evaluation, accreditation and audit schemes. As the knowledge society concept gains widespread approval and new layers of governance are introduced, the

number of stakeholders grows. Everyone appears to want a say in higher education (Maassen & Stensaker 2010).

Coping with this reform tapestry is obviously no easy task. As Svein Kyvik laconically puts it:

> Clear and unambiguous goals combined with small changes are usually regarded as easier to implement than large changes characterised by diffuse and complex objectives (Kyvik, 2002, p. 58).

Theories about the university as an organisation

How do universities handle demands of such magnitude and complexity as those just described? How - if at all - does external pressure influence their behaviour? In order to answer such questions, an understanding of the university as an organisation is fundamental.

This is a long-standing theoretical debate which merits a relatively extensive chapter. A key issue is whether universities should be regarded as special or whether they are, or are in the process of becoming, much like other organisations (Musselin 2006). A related discussion is whether universities should be seen primarily as path dependent, stable organisations based on a firmly cemented internal culture immune to external impulses, or as open systems that can be influenced by external factors such as national and supranational policies and economic forces (Olsen 2007). According to the former school of thought, reform initiatives are likely to be unsuccessful unless they fit in with the existing organisational culture. This is, broadly speaking, the institutional perspective. The latter reasoning emphasises possibilities for change. This is the strategic perspective.

Below, I explore both perspectives, showing how different vantage points lead to different conclusions (cf. Suchman 1995). I also bring in a temporal dimension, showing that the discourse has altered focus over time so that, nowadays, more confidence is placed on the strategic capabilities of universities.

Being stable, being special: Institutional perspectives

The many faces of institutionalism

Most people associate the word institution with a physical entity such as a school or a hospital. However in institutional theory, an institution is a much wider concept. Here, institutions are “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North, 1990, p. 3).

According to institutional theory, institutions frame our existence and influence our behaviour a lot more than rational choice theory would have it. As individuals, we do not make decisions based on free and unbiased information and utility calculations. Our rationality is bounded. We

are constrained both by formal institutions such as laws and regulations and by informal institutions such as norms, values and cultural understandings (Scott 2001). Within organisations, the internal "logic of appropriateness" forms a normative backdrop determining what is legitimate behaviour (March & Olsen 1989).

Institutions, thus, play a role in providing stability and reducing uncertainty within a political or an organisational context. They favour what is known as path dependence, serving to "narrow conceptually the choice set and link decision making through time" (North, 1990, p. 98). That is, they are part of the historical pattern that influences future events, setting limits to what is achievable in terms of change. Whether they are seen a blessing or a curse is a normative issue: it depends on one's views on the current state of affairs, and whether reform or status quo is seen as desirable. It may be negative for those wishing to implement educational or other types of reform (Edström & Kolmos 2014), positive for those seeking to maintain status quo. Empirically, institutional theory has been used to explain why some systems and organisations persevere despite obvious inefficiencies (North 1990). From a political science point of view, it has provided insights into the difficulties involved in implementing reforms.

It should be said at the outset that institutionalism is not one, but many perspectives. It is sometimes described as having one "classical" and one "new" orientation. Core works within so called new (or neo-) institutional theory include papers by Meyer and Rowan (1977) and by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), and a contributed volume edited by Powell and DiMaggio (1991). At the time, these texts served to revitalise institutional theory, organisation studies and sociology. By emphasising the role of the institutional environment in shaping organisations, they offered an alternative to then dominant political theories focusing on organised interest groups and rational choice theories focusing on actor behaviour (Dahler-Larsen 1998). Notably, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) brought forward the concept of isomorphism as an alternative to the Weberian notion of the "iron cage" of bureaucracy (Weber 2009). Isomorphism is when organisations imitate and incorporate the norms and values of their institutional environment, with the end result that organisations are becoming increasingly similar. Over the years, this has been a widely used concept in organisational studies, including in research into higher education.

New institutionalism is an evolving field. At this stage, the above-mentioned seminal papers are not "new" but decades old, themselves regarded as classics upon which many subsequent texts are built. In itself, new institutionalism houses at least three major schools of thought: historical institutionalism, institutional economics, and sociological institutionalism, with remarkably little interaction and limited mutual cross-referencing (Hall & Taylor 1996). Perspectives vary from functional-utilitarian to power-oriented and cultural-sociological (Melander 2005). There are also branches of institutional theory, such as actor-centred institutionalism (Scharpf 1997), that integrate other, seemingly contradictory, schools of thought. One of the main dividing lines within contemporary institutionalism concerns the extent to which institutional change is acknowledged. Some works, notably within so called Scandinavian institutionalism (cf. Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), specifically focus on this. I will revisit this matter, as it is of great relevance to this study.

For now, suffice it to say that institutionalism is a broad umbrella and a compelling concept used by many scholars for different purposes. In order not to lose sight of the research question at hand, I have limited my analysis to those versions of institutional theory that, over time, have been particularly prominent in the higher education discourse. Valuable contributions on this topic have been made by Musselin (2006), Fumasoli and Stensaker (2013) and Cai and Mehari (2015).

Loose coupling and garbage cans

In my literature review, I find that higher education research has been particularly influenced by sociological institutionalism, not least the classic works of the 1970s and 1980s (Cai & Mehari 2015). The internal norms that shape the university as an organisation are in the forefront in this literature. To a large extent, this research evolved as a reaction against attempts at applying rational and political organisation models to the sector. This cannot be done, it is argued, because universities and their decision-making processes do not follow such logics. They are not linear effects of formal blueprints and/or political directives. Neither are universities production organisations with easily measurable results (Musselin 2006). Instead, they are what Meyer and Rowan (1977) call highly institutionalised organisations, whose first and foremost aim is to remain legitimate. The primary building blocks of such organisations are

their myths and ceremonies, rather than their activities. They therefore function in somewhat unexpected ways. Rational management instruments such as career incentives, performance indicators and forecasting tools do exist, but they have ceremonial rather than enforcement roles.

> In place of coordination, inspection, and evaluation, a logic of confidence and good faith is employed (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 340).

Following this line of reasoning, decision-making in academia is described as the epitome of what Cohen et al. (1972) call a "garbage can". This means that decision-making is characterised by uncertainty in strategy as well as method and membership.

> From this point of view, an organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 2).

All this may appear chaotic, but it is not necessarily so. According to scholars like Weick (1976), March and Olsen (1976), Meyer and Rowan (1977), Birnbaum (1990) and Brunsson (2002), there are several ways in which institutionalised organisations, like universities, can be managed successfully. Such organisations can be maintained in a loosely coupled (sometimes referred to as decoupled) state, in which policy and structure on the one hand, and day-to-day activities and core values on the other hand, are kept apart. This is an arrangement where at one level, the organisation can respond to various new requirements while at another level, it can remain intact. Brunsson calls this behaviour hypocrisy. He uses the term not so much in a pejorative sense but rather to describe a practical solution, a means of ensuring that everyone is contented. In popular language, we might speak of window-dressing.

Loose coupling is a solution to the organisational paradox of on the hand being ruled by myth and ceremony, on the other hand having to deal with practical matters. It is also a way of preserving organisational stability and safe-guarding against undue external interference and uncertainty (Meyer & Rowan 1977). It has, not least, a role in protecting the independence of professional groups within the organisation. The fact

that this type of theory has been applied to the university sector, where professional autonomy is an important issue, is therefore hardly surprising. Here, universities are described as bottom-heavy (Clark 1983), meaning that the disciplinary-based and professional on-the-floor logic carries more clout than the administrative top management logic. Strong individuals and academic groupings, likened to tribes protecting disciplinary territories (Becher & Trowler 2001), are seen to set the "real" agenda. Hence in academia, loose coupling is interpreted as an efficient way of handling the competing and seemingly incompatible agendas of its various stakeholders: academics, the state and the market. Through loose coupling, academics are successfully shielded from policy matters. This in turn protects the institutional framework - the norms and values - of the university.

Universities as specific organisations

What, then, characterises professional groups and culture in academia? From the literature, I have identified two principal standpoints: one consensual and one that acknowledges diversity. The consensual view presumes shared values and practices across the sector. Here, the classic Mertonian ideals are in focus (Musselin 2006). A picture is painted of universities as collegial communities of scholars, anchored in an individualist, inward-oriented and prestige-driven academic culture. Jamison at al (2011) use the Bourdieu-inspired term "habitus" to describe this worldview, which could be seen as exerting a "frozen ideology" (Liedman 2006). Over time, this consensual perspective has been criticised for its "idealised, romanticised and mythical" (Tight, 2014, p. 295) if not anachronistic worldview, too tightly linked to exceptional universities such as those of the British Russel Group and the American Ivy League. It has also lost terrain following empirical studies showing striking diversity in the higher education sector (Olsen 2007). These studies conclude that not all, in fact very few, universities fit the consensual worldview. This is not least evident in the difficulties involved in creating a common European Higher Education Area, pointing to enormous variation in practices within and across countries (Neave 2003).

Recent studies, therefore, are more prone to acknowledge diversity in the higher education sector. Institutional theory is applied to this phenomenon too. Diversity, it is argued, can be explained from a path dependence perspective. In other words, universities differ precisely be-

cause they each have managed to shield their own unique norms, values and culture from excessive external influence. All universities will not be the same, because they have different histories and different internal logics, and their decision-making mirror this. Each university has achieved stability in its own way. As expressed by Shattock:

> University structures are critically affected by an institution's age, disciplinary mix, physical location and size (Shattock, 2003, p. 77)

However, even if sectoral diversity is acknowledged, the perception that universities are special compared to other organisations endures. They are still, it is argued, exceptions from the organisational standard. To a large extent, this is due to their core activities - teaching and research - which are seen as fundamentally different from other work practices. It is also due to its mix of state, market and academy logics. Arguably, the combination of internal professorial rule and external steering risks making the management level in universities much weaker than in other organisations (Clark, 1983).

Musselin (2006) is an advocate of the 'specific organisation' view and identifies two distinguishing characteristics in particular: functional loose coupling in teaching and research, and unclear technologies. She observes loose coupling e.g. in the lack of cooperation - even interaction - between teachers and researchers and in the absence of cross-disciplinary projects. Regarding unclear technologies, Musselin asserts that teaching and research are extraordinarily difficult to describe and measure. They are not delivered and produced in straightforward manners, and it is difficult to know that a certain input will lead to a predictable output. More funding does not necessarily lead to better research, new teaching methods do not automatically lead to improved study results, and so on.

> In many ways, research and teaching thus possess certain characteristics that are not shared by other work activities. This specificity should not be overestimated (as it often was the case in the past) and the recent trends in rationalising, measuring, assessing academic activities showed that they indeed can partially be affected by these processes. Nevertheless they also strongly resist such changes and this is due to their special features. (Musselin, 2006, p. 11)

Engwall (2008) has another take on the issue but comes to a similar conclusion. He compares universities to multinational corporations, and identifies some crucial differences in their organisational set-up. Universities have a different historical heritage than corporations, and they also have other aims: focusing on prestige rather than profit. Furthermore, at least in countries like Sweden they are a public good and a part of the policy chain. This means that they cannot, and should not, be managed through standardised business models. Strict hierarchy and strong control mechanisms run counter to the higher education ethos. Similar to Musselin, Engwall argues that teaching and education set universities apart.

In summary, institutional theory is often used to explain stability in the higher education sector. By and large, this is done from a university-internal perspective, in which the internal norms, values and logic of appropriateness are in focus. This does not necessarily infer a conservative academic culture *per se*, but rather a general resilience against change and external influence. The concept of loose coupling is frequently used as a way of explaining why reform efforts do not always achieve the intended, deep impact. A consistent theme in this literature is the perceived inertia in the sector. A related, important theme is the depiction of universities as extraordinary, as organisational exceptions. In the next section, I will discuss some challenges to this perspective.

Being responsive, being complete: Strategic perspectives

Resource dependence and academic capitalism

Resource dependence is a theoretical framework which has been applied extensively to higher education. Widely associated with the works of Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), resource dependence theory emphasises the external context, i.e. the environment in which the organisation is located. In some respects, it could be seen as a political-economic version of institutional theory as it, too, focuses primarily on structure rather than agency. The quest for resources could be interpreted as a coercive pressure leading to isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). However, while there are overlaps, there are also some important differences, mainly related to the material dimension:

> The principal difference between resource dependence and recent versions of institutional theory is their relative emphasis on the material conditions of the environment as contrasted with cultural norms, values, and social expectations (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978, p. xvi)

Internal values and external material conditions perform very different roles in the two frameworks. If the internal norms act as constraints in institutional theory, the external environment is an enabler in resource dependence theory. In the latter case, it is the pressure from the external environment that forces organisations to take action, and to change. This is because of the power involved in the material dimension. All organisations depend on resources deriving from their environment for their survival.

In the higher education discourse, resources are perceived in two ways, either as something measurable such as research funding and student numbers, or as something symbolic such as status. Scholars who argue that reputation is the overriding goal of higher education tend to use a broad definition that includes both (cf. Engwall 2008; van Vught 2008). It is, however, the measurable side that is the most value-laden and hence the most disputed. This can be related back to the previously described neoliberal policy backdrop. Many scholars react strongly against what they regard as inappropriate marketisation of higher education. Gumport (2000), for example, views as problematic not so much the fact that universities connect to the outside world but rather that this connection is one-sidedly commercial. From her point of view this is a threat to the university as a public body and as a promoter of social, intellectual values. Jamison et al. (2011), who focus on the science and technology field, come to a similar conclusion. They are critical of the currently dominant market-driven perspective, which they regard as a reflection of human hubris. Another line of criticism is rooted in the consensual worldview. Here, the influence of the external environment on professional academic practice is seen as an ethical problem and as an intrusion into academic freedom. More often than not, the aim of this literature is to evoke critical debate, e.g. through titles signalling crisis such as “the breakdown of scientific thought” (Rider et al. 2013).

Resource dependence theory has also been used in empirical studies. Notably, Slaughter and Leslie (1997) and, later, Slaughter and Rhoades

(2004) have performed extensive comparative studies of higher education systems. They use the term “academic capitalism” as an analytical tool to understand the profound transformation that they observe. Academic capitalism is defined as “institutional and professorial market or market-like efforts to secure external moneys” (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 8). Their conclusion is that higher education can no longer be analysed purely in sociological terms, focusing on cultural aspects of professional practice. Material resources have to come into the picture. This is because globalisation, underscored by national policy, has changed the rules of the game, so that universities have been forced onto competitive markets where their “products” - human capital in the form of graduates and knowhow - have become commodities. All this has affected both university management and academic practice. For example, it has led to more emphasis on the commercial uses of research and to a reduction in teaching time. They observe

> major changes in the nature of academic labour; changes in what academics do, how they allocate their time, changes that may be much greater than most academics realize as they undertake their work on a day-to-day basis (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 112)

The relationship between resource dependence and strategy is ambiguous. On the one hand, the external environment can influence the higher education sector and achieve change that - according to the above studies - is empirically observable. On the other hand, this change is not actively instigated by the universities themselves. While by no means passive, they do not set the agenda themselves. Instead, they follow the rules of the global market, much in accordance with the saying ”He who pays the piper calls the tune” (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 68).

> The perspective developed denies the validity of the conceptualization of organizations as self-directed, autonomous actors pursuing their own ends and instead argues that organizations are other-directed, involved in a constant struggle for autonomy and discretion, confronted with constraint and external control (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978, p. 257).

From this point of view, the external environment is a destabilising as much as an empowering factor. Some core elements of resource dependence theory, such as global power struggles, commodities and materialism, bring Marxist ideas to mind. At the same time, Pfeffer and Salancik do acknowledge that there is room for management to manoeuvre even within heavily resource dependent organisations.

Universities as strategic actors

Before the 1990s, actor-centred approaches were relatively uncommon in the higher education literature. There were few proponents of the idea of the university as a rational organisation based on clear preferences, calculated decision-making and loyal implementation chains (Dahler-Larsen 1998). However, recent years have seen a renewed interest in strategy and actorhood. The theoretical foundation can be described as a modified form of game theory, in which universities are seen as collective actors (Rothstein 1988) acting within a larger political-economic structure. In this discourse, political science meets organisation studies in a joint interest in policy implementation.

By and large, the result is not a "purist" actor approach but rather an integrative one (Covaleski & Dirsmith 1988; Scharpf 1997). Here, actors are, on the one hand, rational in the sense that they have conscious preferences and strategic capabilities. On the other hand they have limited options due to their institutional environment (external as well as internal) including power structures and interests. Put differently: actors can play the game, but they are bound by its rules. Christine Oliver (1991), in a study of strategic responses to external pressure in the higher education sector, identifies a range of possible courses of action. Universities can opt to acquiesce, compromise, avoid, defy or manipulate policy directives. Thus, by saying that universities do have a choice she rejects instrumental policy implementation models, while at the same time acknowledging that their choice is conditional on the environment. Furthermore, universities are not merely affected by policy implementation, they can also actively influence policy formulation (see also Geschwind, 2010). Along similar lines, Gornitzka summarises:

> First, organisational response to environmental expectations is shaped by intra-organisational factors, such as power distributions and institutional values, identities and traditions. Second, organi-

> sational actors seek actively to interact with environmental constituents in order to shape and control dependency relations. They exercise strategic choices within the constraints imposed by their environment, but also by using the opportunities the organisational environments provide (Gornitzka, 1999, p. 27-28).

The above quote is one example of how the term organisational actor (or, alternatively, strategic actor) has come to be used in the higher education discourse. Krücken and Meier define the term as

> an integrated goal-oriented entity that is deliberately choosing its own actions and thus can be held responsible for what it does (Krücken & Meier, 2006, p. 241)

Here, the university is regarded as an able collective actor. According to Krücken and Meier, universities have undergone profound organisational change in response to pressure from the external environment. A typical contemporary university, in their view, is characterised by accountability, goals and missions, formal technologies and professional management practices. Ramirez, too, concludes that universities are approaching a rational ideal. They do not only have goals, but they also allocate resources such as action plans, staff and leadership to fulfil them. Universities are closing the loops, ensuring that policy implementation does not stop at window-dressing. These scholars refute the institutionalist claim that universities are loosely coupled systems. Perhaps they used to be, but this is no longer the case (Ramirez & Christensen 2012; Ramirez 2010).

The new emphasis on strategic actorhood can be seen as a normative shift (Musselin 2006) coinciding with the broad economic and political agenda furthering ideas such as new public management (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011) and the new production of knowledge (Gibbons et al. 1994), outlined in the opening chapter. Contrary to many resource dependence theorists, this group of scholars tends to see globalisation, market-driven competition and other recent developments as opportunities rather than threats. Some scholars join policy makers in coming up with concrete suggestions on how to handle the new conditions. One example is Clark (1998) who argues that universities must meet the challenges head on, and that there are gains in store for those who do. In a longitudinal study of five European higher education institutions, he presents

examples of successful adaptation. His conclusions are further discussed below in connection with the concept of the entrepreneurial university. Another example is the proposal by Massy (2011) on how universities ought to tackle increased demands with regard to accountability and quality assurance. He maintains that university management teams should seize opportunities for change. In his view, their ability to embrace and implement a reform is down to three aspects: salience, power and alignment. The ideal would be to accomplish ”deep adoption” which, according to Massy, may happen if a university has clarity of mission, detailed action plans and specified outcomes.

Universities as complete organisations

The discourse in which universities are described as organisational actors mirrors a larger discourse within organisation and policy studies. In this regard, Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) identify a general trend within the public sector. In many parts of the world, there are attempts at reforming public bodies to make them behave more like complete organisations. This is against the backdrop that traditionally, many public bodies have been “arenas” held together by external demands or “agents” with weak identities. Now, the aim is to transform them into “actors”; a stronger organisational form. According to Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, this requires embracing all three aspects of organisation: identity, hierarchy and rationality. Above all, a complete organisation needs to have means of securing its autonomy. It has to be coordinated and controlled as a coherent entity, by professional managers. Further, it needs to have an ability to plan ahead and to follow through in a purposeful manner. Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson call this organisational intentionality. In practice, it means establishing

> clear organizational boundaries, local hierarchical control over recruitment and over the activities of its members, a clear idea of its own special mission and characteristics relative to other organizations (in particular those with similar tasks), goals for the organization as such rather than general external objectives, and a local management responsible for achieving organizational results (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000, p. 735)

There are obvious similarities between the complete organisation ideal and the picture of the university as a strategic actor painted by Krücken and Meier, Ramirez and Clark. The arguments are much the same. Resource dependence theory, by contrast, runs counter to this idea. A heavily resource dependent university can hardly be seen as a complete organisation. Unable to keep sufficient command over its priorities and resources, it is not autonomous enough to qualify. The complete organisation concept is also at odds with a consensual view of the university sector. From a complete organisation perspective, a sector cannot be consensual. More than a 'specific' sector, it is a matter of individual universities striving to be unique. What counts is not the idea of the university, or the sector as a whole, but the individual entity. In order to become a complete organisation, each university needs to set itself apart from others, including other higher education institutions and other public bodies. It has to distance itself both from the academic community and from the political system. In effect, it also needs to invest more in its internal affairs, integrating formerly loosely coupled parts of the university (cf. Bromley & Powell 2012).

Therefore, viewing universities as complete organisations is a new, far from trivial, development. According to Krücken and Meier, it marks a paradigmatic shift in higher education research:

> In this process, two hitherto unquestioned features of the universities are challenged: the uniqueness of the national university system and the uniqueness of the university as a specific type of organization. /…/ this contradicts decades of research on universities in the social sciences (Krücken & Meier, 2006, p. 244)

In summary, the strategic perspective on higher education is a challenge to the institutional perspective. Where institutional theory is used to explain stability and inertia, strategic theory is used to explain responsiveness and transformation. Empirical studies point to external political and economic factors which have a profound impact on the sector. They also provoke a normative discourse (Musselin 2006). Some scholars come out against the perceived interference with academic culture, either as a matter of principle or because of the commercial content, or both. Other scholars are pragmatic or enthusiastic in the face of change. The pressure on universities to become strategic actors and complete organisations is

seen by some as a stimulating opportunity. By all accounts, it seems to require a radical re-think of the role of universities.

Institutional theory revisited

A changing discourse

Thus far, the literature review has shown that the theoretical discourse on higher education has altered focus in the last few decades. While in the 1970s and 1980s the emphasis was on continuity, in the last few decades the emphasis has been on change.

While scholars do point to growing empirical evidence to support this shift, it remains to be seen whether or not it is a paradigmatic change of the magnitude suggested by proponents of strategic actorhood. Certainly, many historians would warn against the inclination to regard one's own time as more turbulent and more special than any other time. In the long-term perspective, the current situation may not prove to be particularly important and it is a common mistake to assume that it marks the culmination in a determinist chain of events, or to interpret the past in such a light (Hessenbruch 2006). There may also, as argued by Sahlin (2012), be a tendency to take traditional ideas for granted, and to overstate the importance of new ideas by charting and analysing every piece of them. Paying attention to new structures does not mean that they have taken over. After all, there is a lot of power (perhaps more) in tacit myths and ceremonies. As regards higher education, scholars have observed that contemporary universities still house a mix of different logics which, moreover, have been present for a long time (Barnett 2011; Birnbaum 1990; Clark 1983; Larsen 2007; Olsen 2007). Therefore, the notion of historic stages in which one model (the specific university) is fully replaced by another (the complete university) in a linear fashion, appears overly simplistic.

Recently and partly in light of the above concerns, new versions of institutional theory have become prominent in the higher education discourse. This includes so called Scandinavian institutionalism, claiming to offer a more nuanced understanding of organisational change. These are approaches that acknowledge that on the one hand, change is happening, but on the other hand, that it is neither mechanical nor absolute. Here, the focus is on institutional change, manifest in a mix of the old and the new. The bottom-line is that, even if institutions provide stability and

predictability, institutions do change. They may do so in order to remain legitimate and survive in times of uncertainty, and in a gradual manner. Organisational change is seen as a legitimisation process in which new norms and behaviours, starting from a more formal and perhaps self-conscious phase, become increasingly taken for granted. Such processes "can be efficacious as they reduce the cognitive load associated with decisions, as well as decrease risks by providing well-rehearsed modes of communication and action and ready-made categories for resolving uncertainties" (Colyvas & Powell, 2006, p. 311). Thereby the organisation, by adapting its value system to the surrounding community, seeks to protect its future.

Below, some core ideas from this school of thought are presented. While the literature is not necessarily specific to higher education, it is commonly applied - in the papers underpinning this thesis and elsewhere - to this sector. Arguably, an understanding of concepts such as fashions, translation and image is fundamental to understanding how, and why, contemporary universities act.

Changing through fashions

As already noted, earlier versions of institutional theory drew heavily on the concept of isomorphism to explain how change comes about. It was argued that when organisations within the same sector are influenced by the same external pressure, there is a tendency towards imitation. Change occurs as organisations adapt in similar manners and develop similar new value systems (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). Such change was viewed mainly as ceremonial and decoupled from the day-to-day running of the organisation (Meyer & Rowan 1977). Recent institutional theory, however, takes issue with these notions, claiming that they are too instrumental as well as too narrow.

According to this school of thought, organisations do imitate, but with both more variety and more depth than was previously thought. There are a number of ways through which imitation can occur. For one, ideas do not always have a clear origin. More commonly, imitation takes place as a chain reaction akin to Chinese whispers, where the original source and meaning of the idea is difficult to distinguish. In some cases, ideas are mediated by leading organisations who act as role models for others within the same field (Sahlin & Wedlin 2008; Stensaker 2007). Some of the most influential ideas come in the shape of abstract fashions rather than

as concrete reform packages. Czarniawska and Joerges, following Latour, describe these fashions as global ideas which travel aided by technology. Ideas are objectified, e.g. in the shape of brands, missions, slogans and symbols, repeated and thus strengthened continuously (Czarniawska & Joerges 1996).

Importantly, organisations have ways of receiving and transforming fashions. The concept of 'translation' is central in recent institutional theory. From this perspective

> ideas do not remain unchanged as they flow but are subject to translation. To imitate, then, is not just to copy, but also to change and to innovate (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008, p. 219).

In other words, organisations do not passively absorb new ideas through automatic diffusion processes (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2008; Czarniawska & Joerges 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin 2008). Rather, they "actively mould them into an internally accepted format" (Karlsson et al., 2014, p. 248). Fashions are not sufficient in themselves but their success depends on how they are perceived to fit in and hence are received locally (Stensaker 2007). The encounter between new ideas and existing culture varies from one organisation to another. Therefore, different organisations will put forward different responses to similar environmental demands. Another reason for this variety is that the external pressure is ambiguous, and therefore possible to interpret in many different ways. Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) maintain that most ideas are already "out there" but that there are almost infinite possibilities for interpretation and problem fit. A further reason for variety is that organisations and their leaders tend to resist the idea of imitation, even when presented as best practice. They do not want to be seen to be copying each other, but prefer to come across as unique (Karlsson et al. 2014; Musselin 2006; Ramirez 2010).

Recent institutional theory does not only redefine the concepts of isomorphism and diffusion. It also discusses the consequences of fashions, maintaining that the effects of new ideas are more profound than was previously acknowledged. Sahlin and Wedlin note that fashions have been found to result in new identities both for organisations and for entire fields (Sahlin & Wedlin 2008). Similarly, Czarniawska and Joerges argue that the power of fashions is often stronger than anticipated within the

organisation. An organisation may translate an idea to fit the local culture, with the expectation that very little will happen, but "the result usually encompasses much more change and innovation than was desired" (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996, p. 47). This is because of the strength of the objectification process and because of the existence of so called master-ideas, carried by influential groups within the organisations, which provide a link between the old and the new. Thus, fashions influence institutions, in turn creating new institutions in a process that can be likened to a paradigm shift.

In similar vein, the theories on loose coupling are also being reconsidered. For example, Bromley and Powell (2012) find declining empirical support for the notion of loose coupling between policy and practice. The title of their article is illustrative: "from smoke and mirrors to walking in the talk". By this they mean that the days of deliberate window-dressing and ceremonial adoption of policies are largely over and that contemporary organisations have to make real efforts towards implementation. The gap between policy and practice is decreasing. If at all, loose coupling now occurs between means and ends in that "policies are implemented but the link between formal policies and the intended outcomes are opaque" (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p. 489). While this has created new uncertainties, the overall development is one in which contemporary organisations have moved one step nearer to a rational ideal. New ideas, translated into policy, are more likely than before to be put into practice.

Rationalisation and image-consciousness as fashions

As implied by the above, rationalisation could in itself be interpreted as a fashion. If so, it is not interpreted in a Weberian, realist sense. When Weber used the "iron cage" metaphor, he asserted that organisations are forced by the capitalist order into becoming rational bureaucracies. This is a profound, persistent process in which human beings, human interaction and organisations become increasingly ruled by the demand for efficiency and competitiveness. It is also a state of "disenchantment" in which the role of myths and faith is diminishing (Weber 2009).

As already noted, new institutional theory from DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and onwards, have updated and rephrased the iron cage concept, by referring to isomorphism. From this perspective, rationalisation is indeed happening but not in the Weberian meaning. Rather, rationalisation should be seen as one of the widely circulated ideas that become

myths within organisations. Hence, rationalisation is an ideal as much as a fact but in this capacity, it is highly influential. Bromley and Powell (2012) maintain that it is the pressure upon organisations to be rational that makes policy-practice decoupling difficult: increasingly, organisations are questioned against rational standards. The rational ideal is also, according to Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000), the reason why the complete organisation and strategic actor concepts are gaining ground. From this perspective, the quest for the complete organisation is a logical adjustment to rational management ideals. Reform-makers and public bodies instinctively embrace the actor concept and regard it as best suited to meet the demands of contemporary society. It has an air of strength to it which makes it more attractive than other organisational forms.

From this perspective, the question is not so much whether the organisation "is" rational, but rather whether it "appears" rational. This in turn raises the question of image. Gabriel (2005) maintains that it is time to abandon the iron cage metaphor altogether and in its place speak of glass cages or even glass palaces. Glass, he argues, is more appropriate as a symbol of our image-conscious times as it has "an emphasis on display, an invisibility of constraints, a powerful illusion of choice, a glamorization of image" (Gabriel, 2005, p. 24). His argument is that contemporary organisations are less concerned with efficiency, missions and targets *per se,* and more with the picture that is painted externally. In line with sociological research studying the profound impact of modern capitalism on society (cf. Ritzer, 2004; Sennett, 1998), Gabriel argues that organisations are

> increasingly turning to the consumer as the measure of all things, a consumer who seeks not merely the useful and the functional, but the magical, the fantastic and the alluring (Gabriel, 2005, p. 9)

Therefore in place of tangible results, the importance of appearance is growing. This offers the opportunity of re-enchantment and re-mystification through consumerism. On a similar note, Czarniawska (1997) finds theatrical metaphors particularly apt. She maintains that many organisations - or, more specifically, their leaders - use narrative techniques to master situations that would otherwise be uncontrollable. Thus

> a successful performance combines the theatrical tradition, whereby the audience participates and the actors improvise as the play proceeds, with a formalistic ritual drama, in which everyone knows the rules (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 38)

From this viewpoint, making and telling a convincing story is the key to power in organisations. It is important to follow a script and to have an audience watching. Again, what matters is not the substance, but the way in which organisations view themselves and are viewed by others.

Of course, much of this discourse comes with an underlying tone of social criticism. Without elaborating on postmodernism and/or extreme modernity and its critics (cf. Bauman, 2012; Giddens, 1990), the problem could be summarised as lack of meaning and authenticity. In other words the goods on display - which could be an organisation - run the risk of being seen as illusory rather than real. The authenticity of the glass palace and the actor on the stage can always be questioned. Furthermore, because success is not an absolute, measurable concept, the effort that goes into organisational image-building is potentially endless. This risks creating ambivalence and insecurity, as neither employees nor managers can ever be sure what is expected of them or that they have done enough (Bauman 2012; Gabriel 2005; Sennett 1998).

Conceptual understandings of the university

Before moving to the empirical section and because the policy backdrop and the theoretical perspectives paint a rather complex picture, it may be helpful to present some concepts which can help visualise - in ideal type format - the role of the university.

Some scholars use ideal types to highlight what they regard as significant stages in the development of universities. In a broad historical exposé, Barnett (2011) proposes the term *metaphysical university* to describe the pre-nineteenth century university which was rife with religious and mystic functions; and the term *scientific university* to describe the birthplace of the great natural science discoveries. A modern and more specific example is the successful *research university* of the post-world war United States, as described by Cole (2009).

In the last few decades, conceptual understandings have reflected the demands of internal and external stakeholders by way of the state, the market and the academic community (cf. Clark 1983). In his categorisa-

tions, Birnbaum (1990) captures the role of the academic profession and the state in particular. He proposes four ideal types: the *collegial university*, the *bureaucratic university*, the *political university* and the *anarchical university*. Here, the model collegial university is based on professional competence, the "first amongst equals" principle, and consensus by way of shared visions and shared responsibilities. The bureaucratic university, in turn, is a rule-oriented and hierarchical organisation based on rational ideals and goal orientation, while the political university is characterised by conflicts of interest, power struggles and negotiation. Lastly, the anarchical university is the epitome of a "garbage can" decision-making body where individual academics pursue their own goals in autonomous fashion, more or less in the absence of strategic direction. Similar but not identical categorisations are used by Larsen (2007) who substitutes hierarchical for bureaucratic and negotiation-oriented for political, and also adds a clearer market dimension.

Of course, scholars are careful to point out that these are abstract concepts. In reality, universities do not come in pure versions but rather have mixed identities which reflect historical as much as contemporary demands. There are many "enduring aspects of university organization and governance" (Olsen, 2007, p. 36). For example, Barnett maintains that even though the metaphysical university is long gone, some of its ideas and norms are still present in contemporary universities. Collegial, bureaucratic and corporate modes co-exist as separate so called institutional logics (Thornton & Ocasio 2008; Thornton et al. 2012).

Below, two conceptual understandings of the role of the university are presented in more detail. They have been selected as they illuminate and simplify the theoretical perspectives presented above. Both perspectives are multifaceted in the sense that they take several institutional logics into account.

The entrepreneurial university

The first concept, the *entrepreneurial university*, could be seen as a representation of the theories on strategic actorhood. As seen by Clark (1998) and Barnett (2011), the term entrepreneurial equates to being active and innovative in the face of change. Entrepreneurialism, in this interpretation, is a positive response to external demands.

> In evermore turbulent settings, universities can become robust as they develop problem-solving capabilities built around a flexible focus. But to do so they must become uncommonly mindful of their characterological development. Facing complexity and uncertainty, they will have to assert themselves in new ways at the environment-university interface. But they will still have to be universities, dominated as ever by educational values rooted in the activities of research, teaching, and study. (Clark 1998, p. 129)

In Clark's view, moving in the direction of entrepreneurialism is neither an automatic nor an arbitrary process. He proposes a five-pronged strategy which, in his view, balances the various logics and stakeholders. First, he points to "a strengthened steering core", comprising both line management and academic leadership. Second, he advocates "an expanded developmental periphery", reminiscent of mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons et al. 1994), promoting challenge-driven, cross-disciplinary and applied science projects and work methods. Third, "a diversified funding base" is imperative. In other words, Clark, in contrast to resource dependence theorists, views funding structures as steering opportunities: universities that manage to obtain funding from a variety of sources also increase their manoeuvring space. Fourth, "a stimulated academic heartland" is necessary. By this Clark suggests a value shift so that managerial perspectives and the perspectives of the academic tribes (Becher & Trowler 2001) become increasingly similar. This is a process which by and large needs to take place at local level. Fifth, Clark advocates "an integrated entrepreneurial culture". This aspect is dependent on, and a logical consequence of, the first four points.

According to Clark, specialised universities have the best potential to become entrepreneurial. This is because they, compared to comprehensive universities, are more culturally unified and therefore able to draw up strategies that fit all internal academic specialisations. Being focused helps when formulating an entrepreneurial response. Clark also claims that technical universities and business schools tend to be forerunners when it comes to entrepreneurialism. For cultural and financial reasons, other disciplines are less motivated. At the same time, he notes that within entrepreneurial universities, humanities and social science departments are highly innovative e.g. when it comes to community and media outreach.

In Barnett's interpretation, the entrepreneurial university is a multifaceted concept. He notes that the concept carries market connotations which often provoke negative reactions from critics of academic capitalism, but that there are many alternative ways to be entrepreneurial. He differentiates between hard and soft entrepreneurialism, where the former is outspokenly profit-oriented while the latter is geared towards renewal and risk-taking in general.

The liquid university

The second concept, the *liquid university,* is inspired by the postmodern notion of liquid modernity (cf. Bauman 2012) and can be related to some of the core ideas within new institutional theory. Barnett (2011) puts forwards this conceptual understanding, not so much as a contemporary empirical reality but as a possible future scenario. Taking a critical stance, he portrays the liquid university as a rather spineless entity that responds to just about any call from the outside without having genuine interest or will to change.

> The liquid university is amoeba-like. It is always on the move and interacting with its environment. It is not exactly shapeless; rather it is a never-ending succession of shapes. The liquid university reaches out here, and then there. It touches, it feels its environment, and responds. It moves on, assuming a new shape, but only fleetingly. (Barnett 2011, p. 110)

The liquid university builds on the notion of loose coupling, as discussed above. Thus on the one hand, the liquid university may well be successful in securing new research funding, in attracting new students and in securing political platforms. It often acquiesces (cf. Oliver 1991) to external demands. On the other hand, it does so only on the surface. Academic practices at local level are effectively shielded from significant influence and no substantial change is achieved. In lieu of content-related ambitions, perpetual response becomes an end in itself (cf. Spear 2006).

Barnett also foresees that the liquid university will foster liquid identities. Professional roles are affected by the fact that the relationship between the university and the surrounding world is liquid, without clear boundaries. In this scenario, the academic tends to drift to and fro. A teacher is also expected to be a project leader, educational developer and

community liaison officer etc. Conversely, managers and support staff increasingly traverse into academic domains. This relates to the discourse on so called third spaces in academia (Whitchurch 2008) which is further investigated in the empirical section.

PART II: EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Methodology

In the literature review, a broad picture has been painted. The multiple, at times contradictory, demands placed on higher education have been described, and theories on university responses have been put forward. In this section, the thesis moves from the general to the specific; from recounting previous research to reporting on my own work and findings. Part II is devoted to empirical studies of contemporary Swedish higher education.

From theories to empirical studies

Broadly speaking, my thesis work could be defined as theory based. The five appended papers all build, in different ways, on strategic and institutional theories. In essence this is a classical social science approach which does not presuppose that the behaviour of individuals and organisations can be explained and predicted using natural science methods. Rather, the aim here is to explore a phenomenon in order to reach a greater understanding of the same. Conducting in-depth empirical studies in order to provide concrete, enlightening illustrations of abstract concepts works well with such an aim (Baillie & Douglas 2014; Case & Light 2011; L. Cohen et al. 2011; Yin 2009). Combining a theory based approach with empirical studies means that the theoretical perspective can help lift the individual case and turn it into something larger, and arguably, more interesting than an isolated observation. To do so, it is important to dig deep and provide detailed descriptions (Merriam 1998; Yin 2009).

In this instance, the empirical studies cover a broad spectrum. They investigate several different areas: evaluation projects, mergers, reorganisation initiatives, policy changes, professional roles and work methods. What they have in common is an element of change: either by way of an initiative (such as an evaluation project) or a process (such as the emergence of new roles for administrative staff). In their different ways, they all relate to the overarching research question. They are concrete examples of how universities have acted in the face of external pressure.

The studies approach the issue of change from three different angles: 1) What was the rationale behind the initiative? 2) How was it implemented? and 3) What were the consequences? The first question contrib-

utes to the overarching research question by highlighting the importance attached to external (and internal) demands when motivating why a particular initiative is called for. Thus, it illustrates the way that the university perceives its role and its goals, and the importance assigned to outside audiences and appearances. The second question contributes by fleshing out the practical details about the initiative and how it has been put in place, resourced and followed up. It discusses the concrete implementation of strategic plans, long-term visions and systems for accountability. Relatedly, the third question concerns tangible impact but also image-related effects such as status and visibility, and value-related changes.

The choice of empirical study objects has been framed by the opportunities that I have had to coordinate and take part in specific research projects and gather a certain body of empirical data (see also reflections on my role as a researcher, below). They are, nonetheless, chosen with care, based on alignment with the research question at hand, as well as the potential general interest. While they go into some specifics that do not apply everywhere, they illustrate phenomena that are generally relevant. For example, not every university is merging with a perceived competitor, but every university is affected by state and market demands. Similarly, the Swedish higher education sector has unique characteristics but in other ways it is also emblematic of the larger change agenda. Therefore is possible to learn from these examples.

Technical universities, including KTH, feature prominently in the empirical studies. Again a pragmatic choice, this is nonetheless motivated from a general interest point of view. As already mentioned, it is generally expected that technical universities be entrepreneurial, early adopters of change, particularly compared to multi-faculty universities (Clark 1998; Krücken & Meier 2006). Technical universities and engineering education are frequently assigned a particular role in reform processes. Because of the intrinsic links of the engineering profession to environmental, economic, technological, societal and political development (Jamison et al. 2011), educating the engineers of tomorrow is seen as a strategic undertaking. Likewise, technology is often highlighted, alongside medicine, when discussing the role of research in meeting grand challenges. However, many statements to this effect are sweeping generalisations rather than empirically tested findings. Given its presumed importance, there is in fact a marked lack of studies devoted to the technical university sector. It is therefore worthwhile exploring some examples from this field.

Data collection and data analysis

The methods used for data collection and data analysis were similar across the five studies. With the exception of the study of research evaluation projects where a mixed methods design (Creswell 2009) was used, the studies principally relied on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009).

As per the research question, the main level of analysis is that of the higher education institution: i.e. a meso-level between the (inter)national or systemic level and the individual or group level (Tight 2012). The choice of interviewees could be described as purposive sampling (L. Cohen et al. 2011). In other words, interviewees were selected for their expertise: competence and specialised knowledge pertaining to the object of study - in many cases, their everyday working life. This matches the quest for in-depth accounts (rather than statistical explanation, which would have motivated a probability sample). Because the objects of study are university-wide initiatives introduced by central management, interviews with senior management were called for in all cases. Interviewees included presidents/vice-chancellors, deans of faculty, vice-presidents and heads of administration. When discussing the rationale for change, interviewees also included senior academics (some holding management posts) and administrative staff with an insight into the underlying motives, e.g. people who had been assigned preparatory roles. When investigating implementation and consequences, interviewees also included project managers and staff members at local level. Hence, the study of research evaluations included key informants from seven research groups at KTH, and the study of new administrative roles included key informants from three administrative fields of practice. These are individuals who could recount how their day-to-day practices had been affected by the initiatives and change processes.

All interviews followed similar formats. They were based on interview guides that were tailor-made for different categories of informants: senior management, project management, faculty members, administrative staff, external stakeholders etc. Interview guides were broadly structured around the three areas of rationale, implementation and consequences. Actual interview questions were phrased so as to favour informal conversation about topics well known to the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). Regarding rationale, questions enabled a conversation revolving around external demands and stakeholders versus internal culture. Dis-

cussion topics included the way in which the university perceives its role and its goals, and the importance attached to outside audiences. With regard to implementation, interviews centred on how the initiative had been put in place, resourced and followed up. Interview questions opened up for a discussion on the importance attached to strategic plans, long-term visions and systems for accountability. Regarding consequences, interviews focused on concrete effects but also on image-related matters such as status and visibility, and changes in values.

Each interview lasted 45-90 minutes and normally took place in the work place of the interviewee. I conducted some interviews alone and others together with co-authors. Yet other interviews were conducted by my co-authors. The latter was for practical reasons and as part of joint undertakings or, in the case of the comparative study of educational quality projects, in order to counteract bias on my part. As seen in table 1, the combined number of interviews across the five studies is substantial, averaging 25-30 interviews per paper. In total as part of my thesis work, I have conducted 59 interviews on my own and 36 interviews together with co-authors.

Table 1. *Number of interviews per paper*

	Intervi-ews	**Infor-mants**	**Interviews conducted by this author**	**Interviews conducted together with co-author(s)**	**Interviews by co-author(s)**
Not just another evaluation	27	35	16	5	6
Takeovers in Swedish higher education	30	31	8	4	18
Legitimate action (case B only)[2]	18	19	18		
Evaluation as a travelling idea	23	35	17	6	
Those who walk the talk	27	27		21	6
Total	125	147	59	36	30

[2] This paper combines three cases (A-C) and uses data from a total of 78 interviews.

Along with increased experience in the craft of interviewing (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009), it is my appraisal that the quality of interviews improved over time. Such improvements included reducing interview time without losing content; phrasing interview questions well so that they could lead to rich responses; and spotting interesting themes worth follow-up in the midst of interviewing.

In all cases, documents were also studied, ranging from macro-level (e.g. national and international policy documents) to meso-level (e.g. university strategies and project descriptions). The role of the documents varied. In the comparative study of educational quality projects, documents were principally used as background literature, whereas in the study of rationales for change, documents were analysed on a par with interview data.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. After reading and re-reading the transcripts, and listening to the recordings, the interview transcripts were coded using qualitative data software (NVivo). This software is commonly used in grounded analysis as it facilitates an inductive approach: gradually moving from concrete statements to, if possible, theory formation (L. Cohen et al. 2011). Even though this differs considerably from my own approach which is theory based, NVivo was a useful tool because it forced me to consider all constituent parts of the data and on occasion, it challenged some of my prior understandings. The data analysis process therefore could be described as "guided":

> Guided analysis refers to categories of data analysis that are determined a priori and which guide the analysis, but which are modified through interaction with the data as the process of analysis unfolds. (Jacobs, 2014, p. 75)

In the first phase of coding, the work focused on individual sentences or paragraphs that were coded in concrete and specific wording without conscious consideration of the overarching research question. In the second phase, these codes were grouped into broader categories. Most of the work took place at or just before this stage as this involved reconsidering, identifying overlaps and re-coding of initial codes. In one of the studies - that of new administrative roles - the coding was conducted jointly with my co-author. Allowing for re-coding and joint coding were important

means to check for consistency and increase reliability. Once saturation was reached, each dataset typically comprised approximately 10-15 broad categories which in turn comprised anything between 2 and 25 codes. To a large extent, the categories could be related back to interview questions: e.g. “aim and background”, “role of senior management”, “external pressure”, and ultimately, to theory.

Preparing and conducting the interviews as well as structuring the findings into codes and categories created a strong familiarity with the data, facilitating qualitative content analysis (L. Cohen et al. 2011; Schreier 2012). This means that rather than counting frequencies, the data was read and interpreted category-wise. Some categories were found to contain codes of particular relevance to the research question. Reading the underlying sentences and paragraphs making up these codes was an important part of data analysis. At this stage, a theoretical interpretation was possible. For example, when informants raised topics such as ”global competition for students”, ”the national quality assurance system” or ”grand societal challenges”, this could be linked to the broader discourse to do with external demands and university responsiveness.

From the category-wise reading of the data, illustrative quotes were identified. Some of these quotes were subsequently included in papers. For research ethics reasons, quotes have been used with care: while interviewees did not explicitly ask for anonymity, the origin has been presented by function (e.g. “senior academic”), not by name. Similarly, statements where the interviewee expresses a strong personal opinion have not been quoted at all as this would have risked revealing the identity of the interviewee as well as undermining the trust upon which the interview situation rests.

My role as a researcher

My thesis work has been undertaken on a part-time basis, alongside my day job as Quality Assurance Officer at the KTH University Administration. Throughout the process, I have strived to stay aware of how this situation might influence my research design, including choice of research questions and approach to data. Similarly, I have had reason to reflect upon my professional history as a public servant frequently involved in evaluation projects and higher education policy analysis. The closeness to the study object has required reflexivity and conscious methodological choices.

According to Alvesson (2003), Melander (2005), and Brannick and Coghlan (2007), undertaking research within a familiar organisation or field has certain advantages. This is not least because the researcher has ready access to data, people and knowledge to which a "professional stranger"-researcher is normally excluded. The insider researcher has multiple opportunities to identify real life phenomena of general interest, as they occur, and thus pose interesting research questions to the right people. These are valuable opportunities to provide rich and nuanced descriptions and analyses. In my own experience, there is some merit in this argument. Without doubt, my day job and professional history have put me in the privileged position of having access to highly relevant study objects and data. Throughout and alongside my thesis work, I have made many observations worthy of further study. I have, in a manner of speaking, been part of a flow of potential research topics, some of which I have been able to pursue. A further, not unimportant, bonus has been the potential application: it has been motivating to conduct research in the knowledge that findings can be used in a real life setting.

Having said that, I am also highly aware of the challenges involved in insider research. While all qualitative research (arguably, all research), has to deal with subjectivity and bias in one way or another, the issue is particularly pronounced in insider research where the researcher lives and breathes her own research. This researcher brings many preconceived notions to the research project and also operates in a setting which carries certain dominant values. In a worst case scenario, the researcher is unable to take a step back and question her worldview, and uses the research project as a means only to confirm culturally acceptable prior understandings. Thus the main risk is not subjectivity *per se* but the inability to acknowledge and process it due to blind spots. Relatedly, an insider researcher may not see the forest for the trees. In other words she may find it difficult to identify areas of general and theoretical interest because of the detailed knowledge that she possesses. There are also ethical dilemmas attached to the role. Informed consent, for example, is an issue in an open research process where there is no prior agreement on who is going to contribute to the research project and under what terms (Alvesson 2003; Bleiklie et al. 2015; Brannick & Coghlan 2007).

Literature suggests some techniques for dealing with these challenges. Firstly, it is imperative to clearly state one's starting point - theoretical as well as personal - and hence facilitate outside critical scrutiny (Larsson

2005). Secondly and along the way, it is crucial to consider alternative theoretical frameworks and test alternative interpretations of data, in short: to continuously seek ways of seeing matters from someone else's perspective. The fact that we all have multiple professional and personal identities can be used to advantage in this respect (Alvesson 2003). These are approaches that I have utilised throughout my thesis work. As seen in my theoretical framework, I have put substantial effort into understanding the differences between the strategic and the institutional perspectives, and to see the merits of both. I have not shied away from highly normative literature, furthering either corporate, bureaucratic or intra-academic agendas, but I have contrasted them with alternative viewpoints. Because higher education research often lacks the perspective of "the other", I would argue that maintaining such a balanced approach is in itself a contribution to the field.

Through my thesis work, not least a significant amount of reading, I have gained a clearer understanding of the various stakeholders that shape the change agenda in higher education, and I have tried to do them justice by identifying their respective rationales. My professional self-understanding has also widened as a consequence of the formal entry into the realm of theory, peer review and academic seminars. In the doctoral student capacity, I have been able to regard from the outside the role of administrative support staff and the practices of quality assurance and evaluation, in which I have been involved for many years. Some of my research findings have been somewhat disheartening. This includes realising that many evaluation projects are undertaken in order to satisfy external audiences rather than for actual enhancement purposes. Though by no means a blind believer to begin with, the thesis work has given me a more nuanced and (self-)critical perspective. For the most part, this is an unsurprising and welcome development. To my mind, there would be little point in embarking on a thesis project unless you allow it to change the way that you view the world.

A third technique for dealing with the disadvantages of insider research is, of course, to modify the research design in order to counteract some of the subjectivity and to allow for more outside perspective in data collection, data analysis and theory formulation. In my case, I made a deliberate choice to collect data through formally designed projects. Where possible, I opted for a comparative and collaborative approach which created a healthy distance to KTH. For example, in the comparative

study of four educational quality projects, my co-authors conducted interviews at KTH while I conducted interviews elsewhere, after which we compared our findings. In the comparative merger study, KTH did not feature at all. The studies related to research evaluation and sustainability policy concerned areas within KTH in which I had marginal previous involvement, whereas the study of administrative roles in higher education had a strong general albeit not specific (given that the selected roles did not cover my area of practice) bearing on my day job. In all instances and in the latter ones in particular, the semi-structured and relatively standardised interview format helped to create additional distance. It also enabled me to seek informed consent and to clarify the purpose of the project. In my view, this is a more ethical approach compared to the open forms of insider research.

In summary, I brought to my doctoral studies an insider perspective on KTH, the Swedish higher education sector, quality assurance and administrative roles in academia. Throughout the process I have attempted to put this to good use, while at the same time creating distance. The end result is a thesis, in which my day job features prominently, but it is not the only focus and I am not the only person discussing it.

Sweden: the policy backdrop

Before presenting the five empirical studies in more detail, they need to be placed more clearly within a common framework of Swedish higher education policy. Below, I outline the change agenda as it applies to Sweden. As will be evident, Swedish higher education policy in many respects mirrors the larger change agenda and its in-built complexities and contradictions.

New public management in Swedish higher education

When it comes to new public management, Sweden is often grouped with its Scandinavian neighbours and the Netherlands and described as a selective adopter rather than an index case. In other words, Sweden is said to have implemented elements of the reform agenda rather than its totality (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011). Other analysts argue that Sweden, while still perceived to be a strong welfare state with high taxation rates and a large public service, has in fact undertaken far-reaching reforms that merit attention (Ferlie et al. 2008; Hansen 2011).

Undoubtedly, Sweden was influenced by the first new public management wave in the 1980s and early 1990s. In line with the general trend, reforms were introduced and motivated on grounds of increased efficiency. The centralised planning process of the 1970s was discarded as outdated and inefficient. The new policy drive had several new public management-inspired components, of which decentralisation was one. Building on a longstanding tradition of decentralised government, additional services, including the school system, were placed under municipal rule. Managerialism and output control were also introduced, and a customer focus was encouraged. From the 1990s and onwards, privatisation became another significant reform feature as a substantial share of public agencies and services were privatised in the name of free choice. Furthermore, Sweden is also known to be an advocate of accountability schemes and an early adopter of evaluation practices. In recent years, governmental evaluation schemes have become increasingly output-oriented (Hansen 2011).

Taking higher education as a case in point, the last few decades have seen a radical governance shift from regulation and detailed directives to deregulation and performance measurement. A sea change was the 1993

reform through which higher education institutions were granted substantial autonomy over academic posts, resource allocation, programme design and curricula - aspects which hitherto had been centrally regulated. Deregulation was matched with the strengthening of output control measures such as audits, quantitative indicators and evaluation. A performance based funding system was introduced, largely based on students' attainment of academic credits and on research output (Andrén 2013; Engwall 2007; Fägerlind & Strömqvist 2004; Pinheiro et al. 2014).

Performance based funding and evaluation

Much of this trajectory has been carried through to contemporary higher education policy. Wedlin (2011) observes a continuous movement towards certain ideals, such as increased output orientation, steering by performance review and evaluation, and the incorporation of market logics. They form, not least, the underlying principles of the funding system. In Sweden, higher education is almost exclusively state-funded, whereas research funding derives from a mix of public and private sources such as councils, foundations and companies. Less than half of the total research funding consists of direct state funding. For some research intensive universities this figure is only a third or a quarter, meaning that the majority derives from external funding. Performance measurement comes into most parts of the funding system for both education and research.

In the case of education, the national quality assurance system plays such a role. The establishment of a national system for *ex post* evaluation was a logical consequence of the deregulation of the sector in the 1990s. A nation-wide quality assurance scheme was to guarantee that quality would be upheld in a decentralised system. Since then, self-evaluation and peer review have been common features in all evaluation schemes, but the focus and aims have shifted over time (Ministry of Education and Research 2015). In the early 2000s, the main thrust was towards quality enhancement via an evaluation model combining presage, process and product factors. In other words, not just outcomes but also prerequisites and processes were assessed (Franke & Nitzler 2008; Gibbs 2010). This scheme, managed by the then Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, was subsequently replaced by a substantially more output-oriented system run in the 2011-2014 period.

The 2011-2014 scheme targeted the subject level and focused on a particular manifestation of attained learning outcomes, namely student degree projects (bachelor and master dissertations). For the higher education institutions, degree awarding powers were at stake in case of quality shortfalls. Conversely, additional funding was allocated to those who excelled. Both comprehensive in its scope and powerful in its sanctions, this system was controversial and met with criticism on methodological and ideological grounds. A follow-up study commissioned by the Swedish Parliament concludes that while the system had quality enhancing features, it also had drawbacks such as time and resource consumption in the sector (Dansk Center for Forskningsanalyse vid Aarhus Universitet 2014). A revised national quality assurance system is to be implemented by the Higher Education Authority as of 2016 (Ministry of Education and Research 2015). Compared to the 2011-2014 system, this system places more emphasis on internal quality assurance systems within higher education institutions and on quality enhancement. In parallel to the national system, some universities have also initiated their own evaluations and educational quality projects. This phenomenon is further discussed in one of my papers (Karlsson et al. 2014).

In the case of research, performance based resource allocation has been in place since 2009, based on two main indicators: ability to attract external funding; and research production and citation rates. The system was introduced in parallel with a resource boost of an additional approx. 2.1 billion SEK to Swedish research. A study of the effects of the resource allocation system concludes that the resource increase has had much more impact than the redistribution mechanism *per se* (Universitetskanslersämbetet 2015). In 2014, the Swedish Research Council was assigned by the government to present a proposal for a new performance based funding system involving peer review of research quality and relevance (Vetenskapsrådet 2014). Meanwhile, as discussed in one of my papers, some universities have undertaken research evaluation exercises on their own accord (Karlsson & Geschwind 2013a; Pinheiro et al. 2014).

The ability to attract external funding has become an important aspect in performance review at most levels. This focus, combined with the already large share of external funding at many universities, has sparked a debate on the consequences of resource dependence in the system. According to Öquist and Benner (2012), it has created a lack of stability

which has hampered the long-term strategic capacity of university leaders as well as the creativity of individual researchers, ultimately putting Swedish research at a competitive disadvantage. In their view, Swedish universities are reactively ”responding primarily to external stimuli and adapting their recruitment and resource allocation to the research-funding market” (Öquist & Benner, 2012, p. 63).

Autonomy and managerialism

If the 1993 reform was the first major initiative aimed at deregulation, it was followed by another reform in 2010. Implemented via amendments to the Higher Education Act and Higher Education Ordinance as of Jan 1, 2011, this “autonomy reform” was designed to give Swedish higher education institutions more freedom to choose their own internal organisation, career paths and decision-making structures. Notably, having a collegially governed faculty board as part of central management became optional rather than mandatory. The reform also included deregulation in the areas of faculty appointments and finance (Ministry of Education and Research 2010). An underlying aim was to increase the steering capacity of university management, which in turn would make for improved results, i.e. better quality education and research.

> Greater freedom from control by parliament and government gives university colleges and universities better abilities to adapt their operations to their circumstances and needs - and to increasingly rapid changes in those (Ministry of Education and Research, 2010a, p 15, my translation).

Thus the autonomy reform carries new public management ideals, signalling a withdrawal of the state as well as managerialism. It also has marketisation connotations, making explicit reference to globalisation and knowledge society. Efficient governance is seen as a prerequisite for competitiveness.

> Against this background, Sweden’s universities and university colleges require the best possible conditions to be able to operate successfully. They operate, and must do so even more in the future, in global competition. The governmental control and the rules applied to the sector affect how well they are able to live up to their mis-

> sions and how well they are able to be an active and progressive force in the international and ever-changing knowledge society (Ministry of Education and Research, 2010a, p 14, my translation).

Compared to the reform of 1993 and to reforms in other countries, the 2011 autonomy reform can be described as relatively modest. It is a modification of the existing legislation rather than a full remake. Nonetheless, it has provoked some debate. Critics argue that the abolition of the faculty board as a compulsory decision-making body is a threat to collegiality by cementing the trend towards appointed rather than elected leaders and towards hard-core managerialism (Sahlin 2012; Sundberg 2013). Indeed, a study commissioned by the Swedish Parliament concludes that the power of vice-chancellors and central university management has increased. At the same time, tradition and culture within the higher education institutions have also played a major role in how the reform has been implemented (Dansk Center for Forskningsanalyse vid Aarhus Universitet 2014). Many universities have adopted local regulations similar to the previous national legislation, thereby securing collegial representation in key decision-making processes (Pinheiro et al. 2014). A recent governmental Commission of Inquiry into management and governance in Swedish higher education does, however, point to a lingering lack of clarity with regard to the division of labour between collegial and line management. Arguing that both are needed but that they fulfil different needs, the commission urges higher education institutions to spell out responsibilities and decision-making powers more clearly (Bremer 2015).

No coherent package, but considerable demands

In Sweden, the reform agenda has not come as a coherent package but rather in the shape of key initiatives (mainly legislation and evaluation schemes) related to university autonomy and performance appraisal. Laden with references to accountability, managerialism and marketisation, they are bearers of new public management. They also forward the ideals of the knowledge society. The following paragraph, quoted from the recent proposal for a new national quality assurance system for higher education, aptly summarises the demands placed on Swedish higher education institutions:

> Universities and university colleges play a central role for the development and prosperity of society as well as individuals. They are to be high quality education providers, constitute a force of critical reflection in society and act like greenhouses for new knowledge and innovation. High quality education at universities and university colleges is important and is becoming increasingly important in light of increased internationalisation and the move towards increased autonomy for universities and university colleges, promoted by the government. Internationalisation creates new opportunities but also leads to increased competition. In this situation, Sweden needs to strengthen its position by competing on the basis of competence and quality. Increased autonomy is, according to the government, an important precondition for universities and university colleges to be able to face the competition and to improve quality, but increased freedom must be accompanied with a well functioning system for quality evaluation (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015, p. 5, my translation)

In summary, there can be little doubt that Swedish universities are subject to external pressure. Their resource dependence, on the state for higher education funding and on a variety of public and private sources for research funding, is considerable. Funding agencies - the state included - place demands on universities that they have to meet. Many of these are well-founded from a tax payers' point of view, including the expectation that students meet the intended learning outcomes and that high quality research is produced. From a university management point of view, however, they pose difficult dilemmas. The 2010 autonomy reform signals a new political contract based on higher education institutions taking a more pronounced strategic responsibility for the planning and delivery of high quality research and education. At the same time, university leaders may find their strategic manoeuvring space circumscribed by time-consuming quality assurance schemes and growing resource dependence. Hence, even though all policy measures have similar aims - enhancing the quality of research and education in the name of global competitiveness - they may work in many different directions.

The papers

The papers appended to this thesis all investigate Swedish universities and the way that they have acted in response to external pressure as described above. The papers approach this topic from several different angles. Below is an overview of how the papers are connected and how they relate to the overall research question. After this, the individual papers are presented in more detail.

Overview of the papers

Table 2 provides details about the five appended papers, including current publication status.

Table *2. List of papers*

Author(s)	Title	Publication	Publication status
Karlsson, S., Fogelberg, K., Kettis, Å., Lindgren, S., Sandoff, M., & Geschwind, L.	Not just another evaluation: a comparative study of four educational quality projects at Swedish universities.	Tertiary Education and Management, 20(3), 239–251	Published in 2014
Karlsson, S., & Geschwind, L.	Takeovers in Swedish higher education: comparing the "hostile" and the "friendly." In R. Pinheiro, L. Geschwind, & T. Aarrevaara (Eds.), Mergers in Higher Education - The Experience from Northern Europe.	Dordrecht: Springer	Published in 2016
Geschwind, L., & Karlsson, S.	Legitimate action: Exploring the rationale behind major change initiatives in higher education		Submitted in 2015
Karlsson, S.	Evaluation as a Travelling Idea: Assessing the consequences of Research Assessment Exercises		Submitted in 2015
Karlsson, S. & Ryttberg, M	Those who walk the talk: The role of administrative professionals in transforming universities into strategic actors		Submitted in 2016

Table 3 provides an overview of the types of initiatives and change processes discussed in the papers.

Table 3. *Study objects in the papers*

	Evaluations and quality projects	**Mergers and re-organisation initiatives**	**Policy shifts and reform**	**New professional roles and work methods**
Not just another evaluation	x			
Takeovers in Swedish higher education		x		
Legitimate action		x	x	
Evaluation as a travelling idea	x			x
Those who walk the talk				x

Table 4 gives an overview of the angle investigated in each paper; whether rationale, implementation and/or consequences.

Table 4. *Angles investigated in the papers*

	Rationale	**Implementation**	**Consequences**
Not just another evaluation	x	x	x
Takeovers in Swedish higher education	x	x	x
Legitimate action	x		
Evaluation as a travelling idea			x
Those who walk the talk			x

Not just another evaluation: A comparative study of four educational quality projects at Swedish universities

Authors	Sara Karlsson, Karin Fogelberg, Åsa Kettis, Stefan Lindgren, Mette Sandoff, Lars Geschwind
Publication	Tertiary Education and Management (published 2014)
Study object	evaluations and quality projects
Angles	rationale, implementation, consequences

This is a comparative study which explores four self-initiated educational quality and evaluation projects undertaken at KTH (Education Assessment Exercise, EAE), and at the universities of Gothenburg (Better Learning in University Education, BLUE), Uppsala (Creative Educational Development, CrED) and Lund (Education Quality 2011, EQ11). All four projects were undertaken during a similar time period (2010-2012). The study seeks to understand how the four Swedish universities, in and through these initiatives, handled the tension between internal academic norms and external state and society driven demands. Thus, the projects are regarded as university responses to external pressure.

Data collection for this study was principally undertaken in 2013. I coordinated the study in collaboration with co-authors from the other universities. A desktop analysis of strategic documents was followed by semi-structured interviews with key informants such as university leaders, project managers and panel members involved in the four projects. In all, 27 interviews with a total of 35 individuals were conducted. As the main author, I took lead responsibility for data collection, data analysis and synthesis/writing. All co-authors contributed substantially, e.g. by conducting interviews, making theoretical contributions and/or by checking for factual accuracy.

The study reveals some thought-provoking similarities as well as differences between the four projects. In terms of implementation (e.g. project design, aim and stakeholders) and early effects, the projects are radically different. For instance, at the University of Gothenburg, the responsibility for self-assessment and audit were delegated to faculty and programme levels, while at Lund, Uppsala and KTH international panel visits

were organised centrally. Otherwise the main dividing line is that between the projects at Uppsala and Lund universities on the one hand, and the projects at Gothenburg and KTH on the other hand, where the former were framed as enhancement initiatives whereas the latter followed more traditional evaluation formats. For example, at Lund, it was an explicit ambition to do something different and "not just another evaluation" while at KTH, the evaluation format was more or less undisputed.

Despite these and other fundamental differences, the projects are found to be based on similar rationales related to the shared external context. The timing of the projects is no coincidence. On the contrary, the heightened pressure towards accountability, reputation building and strategic management in this time period is apparent in the way that the initiatives are justified. Interviewees refer to a need to show proactive leadership, to further a common vision for the university, and to map and communicate the quality of education to internal as well as external audiences. Furthermore, the projects are seen as means to raise the status of education - even challenging the dominance of research in contemporary university life. In other words, there is a belief that initiatives of this kind can lead to substantial change.

The findings are interpreted using new institutional theory, and the concept of translation in particular. Hence, it is acknowledged that external pressure was instrumental in enabling all four initiatives. At the same time, what then occurred was not an automatic process with the same result everywhere. Translation, by way adapting to the local culture, was crucial and explains the differences between the projects. In conclusion

> The universities, in their quality processes, take external state and society driven demands into account, but they actively mould them into an internally accepted format (Karlsson et al. 2014, p. 248).

To a varying degree, the universities took measures to distance their initiatives from the new public management ideals of the external policy environment. The fact that many internal stakeholders were concerned about evaluation fatigue, critical of the national quality assurance system, and sceptical of performance measurement, had to be taken into account and had a bearing on the projects. At Uppsala and Lund in particular, the initiatives were framed in a context of professional academic values and

quality enhancement. The choice of peer review in lieu of quantitative indicators was obvious in all cases.

Finally, it is noted that the university leaders largely reject the notion of imitation (or, in theoretical terms, mimetic isomorphism). They do not want to be seen to be copying each another but prefer to present the project as their own idea entirely. Thus it is concluded that

> the element of strategic choice is important to university self-images. They each put forward their own narrative. In the age of autonomy, university management wants to present a unique project, and 'not just another evaluation' (Karlsson et al. 2014, p. 249).

Early findings from this study were disseminated by way of a peer reviewed conference paper and presentation at EAIR The European Higher Education Society 35th Annual Forum in Rotterdam, the Netherlands on 28-31 August 2013 (Karlsson et al. 2013). The study was subsequently published in research article format in Tertiary Education and Management, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2014 (Karlsson et al. 2014). As part of the collaboration effort, feedback seminars were also held at all four universities. At the seminars, findings were presented and discussed with internal stakeholders including management, students and faculty members. The study was also presented at a national conference in September 2014 hosted by the Swedish Higher Education Authority. On this occasion, the study provided input into the on-going process of developing a new national quality assurance system.

Takeovers in Swedish higher education: Comparing the "hostile" and the "friendly"

Authors	Sara Karlsson, Lars Geschwind
Publication	Mergers in higher education - The experience from Northern Europe (published 2016)
Study object	mergers
Angles	rationale, implementation, consequences

This is a comparative study of two relatively recent mergers in Swedish higher education: firstly, the takeover of Stockholm Institute of Education (SIE) by Stockholm University (SU), on 1 January 2008 and secondly, the takeover of Gotland University College (GUC) by Uppsala University (UU) on 1 July 2013. The study investigates how these takeovers were motivated; how they were implemented, communicated and received by stakeholders; and what the short- to mid-term consequences have been. Mergers, not least in the shape of takeovers, are portrayed as potentially dramatic change initiatives associated with increased competition and firm-like behaviour in the higher education sector. In the public debate, the two mergers in question have been portrayed as "hostile" and "friendly", respectively. This study seeks to go beyond these ideal types and discuss alternative interpretations and implications.

The study forms part of a longitudinal study of the GUC-UU merger, undertaken by researchers from KTH commissioned by Uppsala University over a 3.5 year period. I mainly participated in this undertaking in the spring 2013- spring 2014 period, which included the first interview phase (27 interviews) underpinning this particular study. With regard to the SIE-SU merger, previous studies were available which in turn were based on extensive interview data. This was supplemented by a small number (3) of new and additional interviews. As main author, I took lead responsibility for data analysis and synthesis/writing. The interview task was shared between my co-author and I. My co-author also made substantial contributions to the paper itself, including suggesting the title.

The comparison between the two takeovers confirms, at one level, the general perception that the SIE-SU merger was a hostile process charac-

terised by academic conflict and political interference, whereas the GUC-UU merger was a friendly process driven by mutual understanding, financial necessity and personal commitment. On the whole, it is concluded that cultural-ideological disputes related to core values such as the definition of quality and the role of a profession are much more difficult to handle than financial dilemmas. Likewise, the political context is found to be of utmost importance. The SIE-SU merger could be characterised as a "forced" takeover, where the national government intervened in order to solve a politically high profiled problem (to do with the quality of teacher training in the country). The GUC-UU merger took place some years later, in a different political context, when the government used an incentives strategy. This merger could rather be described as "forced voluntary".

Beyond the hostile-friendly dichotomy, the cases are found to be more complex. Winners and enthusiasts are identified in the SIE-SU process too, as well as losers and critics in the GUC-UU process. What is more, despite the differences in process, both mergers are found to have had some positive short- and mid-term effects e.g. with regard to student interest and academic reputation. Another commonality is that both mergers were implemented relatively quickly (in 1-1.5 years). In part, this contradicts earlier research emphasising that in order to be successful, mergers need to take part between culturally compatible, equal parties through lengthy and well-thought out consolidation phases.

An implication of this study is that regardless of whether the implementation process is smooth or not, change initiatives of this type can have profound effects on curricula, teacher contracts and academic culture. However, that the definition "success" is in the eye of the beholder, is apparent not least in the SIE-SU case where one camp came out ahead in the ideological battle.

This study was published by way of a chapter in the Springer volume Mergers in Higher Education - The Experience from Northern Europe (Higher Education Dynamics) (Karlsson & Geschwind 2016). Findings have also been presented in several academic contexts, including an international seminar on higher education mergers in the Nordic countries hosted by the University of Agder in Kristiansand, Norway in May 2014. Through the longitudinal GUC-UU study, the findings have been communicated to Uppsala University in particular.

Legitimate action: Exploring the rationale behind major change initiatives in higher education

Authors	Lars Geschwind, Sara Karlsson
Publication status	Manuscript submitted
Study object	re-organisation initiatives, mergers, policy shifts
Angles	rationale

This paper explores three major change initiatives taken by Swedish higher education institutions in recent years: A) a major re-organisation initiative resulting in a reduced number of organisational units entitled schools; B) a policy shift and organisational reform introducing new leadership and support structures for sustainability; and C) a takeover of a small university college by a large multi-faculty university. The study focuses on the rationale behind these far-reaching undertakings, asking on the one hand how they were presented by institutional management and on the other hand how they were interpreted and perceived by academic and administrative staff.

To some degree, this paper is the result of an inductive process. It was not designed as a separate study but rather reports on findings from three separate studies (A-C above). A co-author to this paper, I had different roles in the respective data collection processes. While I had no part in study A, I was responsible for all data collection in study B and I undertook part of the data collection in study C. As co-author, I was responsible for data analysis and synthesis in relation to studies B and C. I also provided continuous and substantial input to the overall theoretical framework and analysis.

The study identifies a difference between external and internal rationales for change. The rationales that are commonly put forward in official documents, confirmed by many interviewees, are externally oriented. They refer, *inter alia*, to the need for quality enhancement, adjustment to European standards (e.g. within the Bologna process), increased ranking positions and better academic reputation. Interviews with staff, however, also point to other rationales which are more internally oriented. In studies A and C in particular, interviewees mention financial motives such as

the need to rationalise and streamline in order to cut administrative costs. In all studies, interviewees also emphasise the role of individual actors, for example vice-chancellors on a mission to make an organisational imprint and senior academics with longstanding commitments to a particular policy area.

New institutional theory, in particular the notion of legitimacy, is used to interpret these findings. Thus the issue is not to identify the "real" rationales behind the initiatives but rather to identify the "legitimate" rationales. In this instance, externally oriented rationales are found to be more legitimate than internally oriented ones. This in turn has to do with the specific characteristics of the higher education sector. Like all public sector organisations, higher education institutions are under pressure to strengthen financial control and steering and to reduce costs where possible. This is the reality that interviewees recount. It is, however, too "petty" a narrative to be used in the official versions. This study suggests that in order for a change initiative to be legitimate in the higher education sector, it needs to be well aligned with the prevailing academic culture. Higher education being a prestige and reputation oriented sector, arguments to do with ranking and quality are legitimate to use in most contexts, whereas cost-cutting is not.

In this sense, this study concurs with the notion of the university as a "specific" organisation. It shows that rationales commonly used to motivate change in other public, or private, organisations, are unlikely to be put forward in higher education. At the same time, the study also concludes that the very awareness of cultural codes can be put to strategic use by university leaders. Using a legitimate, externally oriented rationale such as "quality" and "reputation" can in fact be a vehicle for achieving considerable internal change.

An early version of this study was presented by way of a conference paper and presentation at the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) Annual Conference in Rotterdam, the Netherlands on 3-5 July, 2014 (Geschwind & Karlsson 2014). The manuscript has been submitted with a view to publication in an international journal.

Evaluation as a travelling idea: Assessing the consequences of research assessment exercises

Authors	Sara Karlsson
Publication status	Manuscript submitted
Study objects	evaluations
Angle	consequences

This paper discusses the consequences of two self-initiated Research Assessment Exercises (RAE) undertaken at KTH in 2008 and 2012. The ambition behind these evaluation projects was, generally, to improve research quality and, specifically, to encourage publication in internationally acclaimed peer reviewed journals. In the second RAE in particular, the importance of societal impact was also stressed. This study discusses whether or not the exercises led to or contributed towards the desired changes, and/or other effects with regard to research management and work practices.

Data collection for this study was undertaken in 2013, as a research component added to a meta-evaluation of the RAE projects. The meta-evaluation was commissioned by KTH management, with a view to learning from experience (Karlsson & Geschwind 2013a, 2013b). Key informants included members of senior KTH management, project managers and external panel members. In order to exemplify and capture changes occurring at local level, members of seven research groups which had also formed assessment units during the RAE processes were interviewed. These research groups were selected in order to achieve a broad span in terms of discipline (technology, natural sciences, social science, art) and research tradition (experimental, theory-based, applied). In total, 23 interviews and one focus group meeting were conducted. In addition to interviews, bibliometric data principally related to Web of Science coverage and average field normalised citation rate were used. This data was generated by the bibliometric group at the KTH School of Education and Communication in Engineering Sciences (ECE). As sole author, I took full responsibility for the analysis and writing of this paper.

The study finds that it is difficult, from the bibliometric data alone, to establish a measurable impact of the RAE projects on publication patterns at KTH. The bibliometric approach has limitations, not least due to the considerable time lag involved in international publication. It takes time to get published and even longer to be cited. In the meantime, interview data provide in-depth accounts of how the day-to-day practices within research groups at KTH have been affected. In conclusion, the study finds that some of the consequences relate less to research quality *per se*, and more to the management of research. The two rounds of RAE are found to have contributed towards an increased focus on leadership, communication and good administrative order. Interviewees recount that record keeping has improved, websites have been designed and evaluation results have been fed into the strategic plans and follow-up processes. For better and worse, the RAEs have contributed towards increased visibility, exposing internal hierarchies. The shame factor involved in a poor RAE result is a strong motivation for improvement. So much so that the most apparent impact is found with regard to groups that underperformed in the first RAE, but managed to improve in time for the second RAE.

New institutional theory, particularly the notion of travelling ideas, is used to interpret the findings. Research evaluation is interpreted as part of a global fashion, a broader move towards more performativity and strategic management in the sector. Initiating evaluations is seen as a logical response to outside expectations, aided by the use of symbols and champions. As per new institutional theory, it is argued that the long-term consequences of the RAE exercises may turn out to be profound. Given the research-intensive as well as industry-driven environment at KTH, the research groups are found to be receptive to travelling ideas related to prestige, ranking and impact.

Findings from this study have been presented in several academic contexts, inside as well as outside of KTH. This includes presentations at the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) Annual Research Conference in Newport, Wales on 10-12 December 2014 and at the European Educational Research Association (ECER) Conference in Budapest, Hungary on 8-11 September 2015. The appended manuscript has been submitted to an international journal and is currently under review.

Those who walk the talk: The role of administrative professionals in transforming universities into strategic actors

Authors	Sara Karlsson, Malin Ryttberg
Publication status	Manuscript submitted
Study objects	professional roles, work methods
Angle	consequences

This study highlights the role of administrative staff in contemporary higher education, as a case of how new work methods may result in widespread institutional change. More specifically, the study explores the role of administrative staff in strategic processes. It is a comparative study of three technical/technically oriented universities in Sweden: KTH, Chalmers University of Technology and Luleå University of Technology. Three areas of practice are studied in particular: internationalisation, business liaison and research funding support.

For this study, statistical background data was gathered in order to provide a general picture of administrative staff in Swedish higher education. My co-author took lead responsibility for collecting, analysing and presenting this data. We then took turns conducting and notetaking at interviews. A total of 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2015 with key informants from the three chosen areas, and with university directors. The interview data covers a broad range of issues to do with work methods, roles and responsibilities, cooperation patterns and professional relationships within the university. For this particular paper, interview data to do with the involvement of administrative staff in strategic processes, was singled out in particular. As main author, I took lead responsibility for the data analysis and writing of the paper while my co-author made significant contributions at all stages. The overlap with her focus areas (culture and identity) is considerable.

At a general level, the study notes a qualitative shift with regard to administrative staff in Swedish higher education. The share of administrative staff relative to all staff has remained stable over time, but the educational attainment (including share of Ph.D. holders) has increased. Interview data provide in-depth accounts of day-to-day practices. Interviewees

describe themselves as expert support staff, facilitating strategic decision making and implementation. Frequently, these professionals are asked to coordinate the drafting of mission statements, visions and strategic plans. Perhaps even more importantly, they also take lead roles in the implementation and follow-up phases, continuously reminding academics and fellow support staff of the overall goals of the university.

Interviewees point to certain qualifications and experience which, in their view, are important in order to do the job. This includes networking and keeping up to date with external policy developments. In the research funding support role in particular, a Ph.D. qualification can be important for legitimacy purposes. However, attitude is seen as no less important than qualification. Interviewees emphasise the importance of positive working relationships with academic staff and leaders. In this connection, it is generally not seen as acceptable to step into the academic domain. Rather, the role of the administrative professional is to work behind the scenes.

The findings are interpreted with the help of theories on strategic actorhood and institutional change. The works of Bromley and Powell (2012) (also alluded to in the title of the paper) are referenced in particular. This connects to the expectation that contemporary universities will go beyond window-dressing and "walk the talk": i.e. implement and evaluate their own strategies. In the paper, it is argued that the role of administrative professionals is often overlooked in this discussion. As seen in the study, these professionals commonly see themselves as bearers and promoters of the organisational aims of the university as a whole. By their own account, they have means and channels to use their qualifications and experience to further these aims. Thus it is argued that their influence may be indirect, but nevertheless crucial when it comes to transforming universities into strategic actors.

This study was first presented at The Association of Swedish Higher Education (SUHF) Conference on the Quality of Administration on 18 August, 2015. The appended paper has been submitted to a special issue of an international journal. The submission follows an invitation based on an extended abstract submitted in 2015.

PART III: CONCLUSIONS

The active university

The overarching research question guiding this thesis has been: How do contemporary universities act in response to external demands? As seen in the literature review, a few decades ago many scholars would have said that universities do not act at all. Universities, they would have argued, are stable entities built upon specific cultural understandings which are more or less immune to outside pressure. If they do act, the university has means - such as loose coupling between policy and practice - of protecting the academic heartland from change. Universities stick to familiar paths.

The examples put forward in this thesis take issue with such theories. By definition, they are all cases of major change. I explore drastic reorganisation initiatives and merger processes - perhaps one of the most radical forms of change there is. One of the mergers was implemented despite fundamental cultural differences. The other merger involved Uppsala University, Sweden's oldest university and arguably one of the strongest bearers of academic tradition in the country. In neither of the cases did this present an insurmountable obstacle to action. I also study a policy-related shift aiming to promote sustainability, by no means a trivial move. Further I explore evaluation and educational quality projects, which on the surface appear to be one-off happenings but in fact, came with far-reaching internal change agendas such as "strengthening the status of education", "rectifying the imbalance between education and research" and "changing the way that academics publish their research findings". Likewise, the development of new roles for administrative staff in higher education may be occurring somewhat under the radar, but nonetheless marks a significant cultural shift. The examples that I bring forward would not have existed were universities characterised by complete inertia.

Indeed, it is doubtful that there ever was such a thing as a "passive university". The fact that the university is not just a longstanding institution of historic value but also a contemporary global success story is testimony to its capacity to continuously adjust to new circumstances. Over time, universities have found means of staying relevant and embracing change, in their own ways. As argued by Barnett

> the university moves on, and often by adding layers of form and meaning to its existing forms and meanings. To look deeply into the contemporary university is to see a multi-layering of strata of self-images of the university, evident in the different practices and self-understandings of its incumbents (Barnett 2011, p. 110).

The question, then, is not so much whether contemporary universities are active or not. They are, like their predecessors were. The question is rather what characterises their particular form of action. Based on my theoretical and empirical studies, I propose that the "active university" of today could helpfully be understood as a mix of acting as strategy and acting as role play. I find that the ambiguous term "act" aptly combines the two sides to contemporary universities. It embodies both the entrepreneurialism of strategic actorhood and the liquidity of institutionalism.

Acting as strategy

Acting as strategy is one response to external demands. As seen in the literature review, this entails that universities start behaving much like other organisations, including private corporations. They set up goals and targets, they put resources into implementing them - including new types of management and support functions - and they follow through on their undertakings. In other words, they have a greater degree of intentionality (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000). Whether or not this is a desirable development is, as has been noted throughout this thesis, subject to much debate. However, critics and enthusiasts have one thing in common: they regard the strategic turn in higher education as a matter of fact.

In my own empirical studies, I wanted to take a closer look at this perception. My conclusion is that all studies, in one way or another, support the notion that external pressure can facilitate strategic action. The comparative study of educational quality projects shows that contemporary external policy conditions can spark strategic initiatives more or less simultaneously in different places. The impulse from the outside to "do something" is powerful. As shown in the paper on rationales for change, externally oriented rationales can also be effective levers when change needs to be negotiated internally. Some externally oriented rationales to do with quality and reputation strike a chord in academia. It is legitimate to act strategically in order to further such aims.

The studies that focus on implementation and consequences can also be given a strategic interpretation. In the study of research evaluations, researchers and managers at KTH testify that they, having been through two RAEs, have become more deliberate in how they manage research and how they link evaluation results to strategic processes. This can be interpreted as a new intentionality. Similarly, the study of new administrative roles in academia indicates that this cadre of professional staff can make a difference when it comes to ensuring that policies are followed through. The changing profile of the administrative workforce, moving in a specialist direction, could be interpreted as an investment in strategic actorhood. Both studies concur with recent research suggesting that policy and practice are no longer strictly decoupled (cf. Bromley & Powell 2012). On the contrary, in the contemporary university the academic heartland can be deeply affected by external pressure - e.g. manifest in research evaluations.

Thus, at one level, my empirical studies show universities taking action in a deliberate, goal oriented sense and following through via implementation and performance management systems. They do so in response to external demands. On its own, however, this observation is too shallow. It implies a linear perspective where the university responds to demands in an instrumental fashion. It says little about internal culture, and does not take into account the nature of external demands. For this, institutional theory is more helpful.

Acting as role play

Acting as role play is another response to external demands. Built upon the new institutional theories outlined in the literature review (cf. Czarniawska 1997; Gabriel 2005), this is a more critical take on the actions of contemporary universities. What matters here, is not so much the action in itself, but the way in which universities view themselves and are viewed by others. The making and telling of a convincing story is the key to power. In this case, it is important to play the role of the rational organisation. The active university, thus, is an entity that takes action but, more importantly, one that is *seen to* take action. Similarly, the issue is not so much whether the university *is* rational, but rather whether it *appears* rational in the eyes of external stakeholders. The actor seeks to please the audience.

My empirical studies confirm the importance attached to image and reputation. For example, the study of educational quality projects points to the significance attached to external panels; internationally acclaimed scholars invited to observe the projects first hand. Clearly, these can be interpreted as image-building exercises. The same study emphasises the importance of being a forerunner, as all four universities claim to be "first in the country" to undertake a project of this kind. Implicitly, passivity has low status and of course, no-one wants to risk being "last in the country" to do something. The self-image is that of a university that takes proactive action.

The need to present a coherent narrative also comes across in the studies. In the study of rationales for change, the motives that are put forward are both grand and well suited to the internal culture of the university. Here, the narrative is that of the prestige-driven, quality minded academic entity. Alternative explanations to do with the personal drive of individual leaders or - worse - petty affairs to do with budgets and staffing have no place in this narrative. It may be impossible to identify the "real" rationale - what matters is how the rationale is presented and received. Another example is the framing of educational quality projects and research evaluation exercises. Here, my studies show that these are presented as part of a bigger narrative about the university and its aims. They are seen as logical consequences of strategic plans, teaching and learning guidelines, research priorities and quality assurance policies. This could be interpreted as giving the projects a rational frame.

An undercurrent in my empirical studies is the complexity of the demands placed on contemporary universities. The universities are expected to fulfil the ambitions of the knowledge economy and contribute to the betterment of society in numerous ways. They are also expected to be strategic and rational organisations. At the same time they are highly resource dependent and experience increased competition for research funding and students (Slaughter & Leslie 1997). In all my studies, interviewees have expressed awareness of these complexities, as well as a willingness to respond. As suggested in the literature review, acting as role play may offer universities a way to master a situation that would otherwise be uncontrollable.

The consequences of acting

Even though they are responsive to external demands, universities are unlikely to absorb new ideas in an instrumental manner. Instead, they will "translate" them to suit the local culture. This is the new institutional perspective outlined in the literature review.

The comparative study of educational quality projects illustrates this point. It shows how external demands - in this case, the drive towards accountability and evaluation - were understood and acknowledged, but further negotiated within the parameters of university culture. The universities had to frame their initiatives to fit in with local circumstances, and transform them into something that could be accepted by internal stakeholders (Karlsson et al. 2014). This meant that impulses that were common to the higher education sector at large came out quite differently in the four different settings.

By extension, this also means that some of the consequences may be unexpected and not what policy makers originally intended. This point is confirmed by the study of research evaluations. Here, it is concluded that the main effects may not have been related to research quality but rather to research management, strategy, communication and good administrative order. These are profound cultural changes affecting behaviour at local level, suggesting that an institutional change of some magnitude is underway. As universities adapt to new realities, they are altering themselves in the process. Organisational theorists speak of institutional change, arguing that

> Widely circulated ideas have proved to result in or contribute to changes in individual organizations' identities, in field transformations and in more general institutional changes (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008, p. 220).

Value, limitations and suggestions for further study

The aim of my thesis work has been to make empirical as well as theoretical contributions to higher education research and policy. The empirical contribution mainly comes in paper format, by way of five in-depth descriptions of change initiatives and change processes in contemporary Swedish higher education. As in all qualitative research, the value of these studies lies in the fact that they dig deep. In other words, the ambition has been to provide rich enough depictions so that the reader can understand the particular situation and thereafter decide whether or not the findings are transferable to other contexts. The idea, thus, is not a mere recounting of data but an interpretative narrative based on theory (L. Cohen et al. 2011; Jacobs 2014). This does not enable generalisation in a statistical sense (i.e. drawing conclusions about a population based on a sample). Rather it enables analytic generalisation, whereby knowledge from individual studies contribute to theory (Yin 2009).

In principle, it is possible to learn from all types of empirical studies, including unusual and farfetched ones. Nonetheless, I have seen a need to frame my studies in a way that would interest more than a selected few. I have done so by outlining the general policy backdrop and by applying theory. Hence while the studies go into details that do not apply everywhere, they cover areas of general importance. For example, not every university is engaged in large scale evaluation projects, but every university is affected by the increased emphasis on managerial autonomy and accountability. Similarly, the Swedish higher education sector has some unique features, but it also mirrors a broader change agenda.

From a Swedish perspective, a recent review commissioned by the Swedish Research Council (Geschwind & Forsberg 2015) identifies some areas that are urgent yet currently under-researched. Given the importance of these topics in policy and practice, it calls for more research e.g. on academic work; quality and quality enhancement work; and policy making and leadership. It is hoped that this thesis can fill some gaps in this regard. The study of administrative staff in academia is one example, raising a topic which is much debated but seriously under-researched.

The theoretical contribution lies in the literature review, through which I have attempted to present in reader friendly fashion the policy

demands placed on contemporary universities and connect them to the evolving theoretical discourse on the university as an organisation. With a few exceptions (cf. Musselin 2006), this kind of broad overview is seldom found in the higher education research literature. Compiling the literature review has therefore been crucial to my own understanding of the field, and my hope is that it may benefit others too.

Another theoretical contribution lies at the conceptual level. The "active university" concept is proposed as an analytical lens through which contemporary universities may be regarded. This concept has explanatory value. In other words, it can help explain why contemporary universities may act in particular ways. It takes into account the nature of the external pressure placed on universities today: both the strong push towards becoming a "complete organisation" and the complexity of the demands which results in play acting. By combining the strategic and the institutional perspectives, this concept arguably captures the ambiguities of university responses better than, for example, the "liquid" or the "entrepreneurial" concepts by themselves. The concept should be seen as an ideal type which facilities the understanding of contemporary universities. It illustrates response strategies, not entire identities. Real universities can be described as more or less collegial, bureaucratic and corporate, housing many complementary logics. Regardless of these identities, it is valuable to regard their response strategies through the "active university" lens.

In my studies, I have focused on projects initiated by university management. To some extent, I have explored how these initiatives have been received at local level, amongst academic and administrative staff. I have not, however, taken a bottom-up perspective, nor have I investigated the interaction between top-down and bottom-up perspectives in change processes. My studies capture universities at a specific point in time. Understanding the long-term consequences of what is happening today, would require a longitudinal approach. More research about what is happening at the level of the "academic heartland" is essential.

Technical universities feature prominently in my studies. Descriptions and analyses of change initiatives undertaken in this sector are given in the papers. In the comparative study of educational quality projects, the technical university comes across as more accepting of external ideas related to quality assurance and evaluation than the other, multi-faculty universities. Similarly, in the study of research evaluation projects it is

concluded that the technical university is receptive to travelling ideas related to accountability and performativity. These are tentative findings in support of the idea that technical universities have a specific response to change, compared to other universities. Further research, including in-depth cross-analysis of data from my own studies, could usefully explore this issue further. Are technical universities, in fact, more change-oriented than other universities, and do they therefore have more profound impact on society? If so, what conditions set them apart from others? These are important research questions to take further.

Final note

In this thesis, I have discussed acting as role play as a feature of contemporary university responses to external pressure. Given the immensity and the complexity of the external pressure, this response is understandable. Following Czarniawska (1997), role play could be seen as a means of controlling an essentially uncontrollable situation. Reading through the list of expectations and stakeholders, it is easy to conclude that the task - if it were to be interpreted in a literal sense - is impossible. A certain element of role play may be required in order not to lose a privileged position and in order to negotiate conflicting demands.

It may be tempting to think of role play as innocent and without consequence. However, this and other studies have shown that even if an initiative is undertaken on unclear grounds - perhaps primarily to please an outside audience - it may still have real effects. Unexpected, even unwanted, consequences may occur which can be difficult handle. As seen in the study of research evaluations, one such effect may be that academics on the ground begin to engage in role play. In a worst case scenario, this becomes cynical game playing where perception overrides substance.

As argued by Barnett (2011) and other critics, role play is hardly a long term solution. At some point, the lack of substance is likely to become a problem. Acting without purpose risks undermining the legitimacy upon which the university is so dependent. In reality, choices will have to be made in the face of conflicting external demands. There will also be pressure to develop a distinct profile, which sets the university apart from others, and to achieve something tangible in this regard. Actions cannot just be smokescreens but need to contribute to some form of deliberate transformation. To a large extent this is a matter of authenticity.

The proponents of strategic actorhood, therefore, have a point. Contemporary universities need to set up goals and follow through with their undertakings. This does not mean that they need to turn to hard core, managerial methods taken straight from multinational corporations. On the contrary, they may be better off turning to softer version of entrepreneurialism, as proposed by Clark and Barnett. This would be a university that reinvents itself in the face of external pressure while at the same time guarding its soul. I would certainly support Bromley and Powell in their call for

> more reflective and proactive responses to external pressures. We would encourage leaders to focus thoughtfully on shaping tools, such as systems of reporting, monitoring and evaluation, in ways that are more directly linked to their organization's core activities, and to search for ways to influence the nature of external standards in the environment. (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p. 519)

Purposeful goal-orientation of this kind would not only make the university a stronger player. It would also be an idealist turn, a return to the core mission of the university.

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