



The determinants of university strategic positioning: a reappraisal of the organisation

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Published online: 12 December 2019

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Abstract

This paper makes a contribution to the debate on university organisational actorhood by theorising the determinants of institutional strategic positioning. It argues that besides environmental forces and managerial rationality, the organisational dimension needs to be accounted for. Addressing the mixed empirical evidence in the relevant literature, we conceptualise the organisational dimension as a meso-level intervening variable mediating both external influences (outside-inside) and organisational action (inside-outside). We operationalise the organisational dimension along three components: organisational structure, identity and centrality, which are further elaborated in sub-components and indicators. A set of hypotheses to be tested in empirical research is provided. The paper offers new perspectives on the dynamics of change in higher education and on strategic agency of organisational actors.

Keywords Strategic positioning · Determinism · Intentionality · Organisational actorhood · Institutionalism · Higher education

Universities as strategic actors and the changing academic field

The dramatic growth of the higher education sector has transformed the way in which universities operate. It has urged them to accommodate increasing numbers of diversified students, to carry out different types of research activities to achieve academic excellence and impact, to strengthen services to their communities and legitimise themselves as economic, technological and innovation engines locally and regionally (Van Vught 2008; Toma 2012; Van Vught and Huisman 2013). Equally, universities have been required to diversify their funding streams to face stagnating or shrinking

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public resources and to act in a more integrated fashion in order to compete appropriately in the markets of their choice (Bonaccorsi 2009; Rossi 2009b; Paradeise and Thoening 2018). Under the pressure to participate in the construction of the ‘knowledge society’ universities have also undergone several reforms aimed to make them more efficient, effective and sustainable (Krücken and Meier 2006; Bleiklie and Kogan 2007; Laudel and Weyer 2014; Seeber et al. 2015). These on-going transformations have been mostly considered external pressures endangering the university’s missions and autonomy. More recently though the scholarly debate has turned to how universities themselves are able to develop organisational capabilities allowing the selection of a course of action and the modification of the niche in which they are located (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013; Cruz-Castro et al. 2016; Paradeise and Thoening 2016). University positioning has consequently become a central issue for higher education researchers, policy makers and institutional leadership (Marginson 2007; Klumpp et al. 2014; Marginson 2015; Shadymanova and Amsler 2018). In this paper, positioning is intended as the process through which higher education institutions locate themselves in specific resource niches within the higher education system (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013).

Against this backdrop, scholars of organisation and higher education have analysed the processes of strategic positioning—strategic planning and decision making, sense-making and sense-giving in strategic change and branding and identity construction (Pedersen and Dobbin 2006; Frølich et al. 2013; Mampaey et al. 2015; Stensaker 2015; Seeber et al. 2019; Paradeise and Thoening 2018). Equally, outcomes of strategic positioning have been investigated to make sense of how universities locate themselves in the academic field according to their educational portfolio, research output, technology transfer and regional development (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2008; Ljungberg et al. 2009; Vuori 2016; Seeber et al. 2019; Barbato and Turri 2019; Barbato et al. 2019).

However, while processes and output of university strategic positioning are being widely debated, their determinants have been essentially overlooked. Implicitly, some authors assume external pressures compelling universities to react in rather pre-defined ways (Van Vught 2008; Vaira 2009), while others posit room to manoeuvre of the university leadership in redefining missions, activities and markets to engage with (Martinez and Wolverson 2009). Empirical evidence suggests further scrutiny, as mixed results have given way to articulated explanations that reflect rather idiosyncratically the data at hand instead of providing more general explanations to such heterogeneous findings.

To shed light on the determinants of university positioning this paper, firstly, presents a literature review from a theoretical, analytical and methodological angle. Secondly, the paper points to the further development of a conceptual framework by integrating the organisational dimension (Selznick 1949; Clark 1983; Paradeise and Thoening 2013; Fumasoli 2015) conceived as a meso-level intervening variable between the macro variable (the environment) and the micro variable (the management).

The paper is organised as follows: in the next part, the literature review on the determinants of university positioning highlights existing gaps in our knowledge. In the third part, we develop a conceptualisation of the organisational dimension for analysing the drivers of strategic positioning and we generate sets of relevant hypotheses. In the final section, we discuss how the conceptual contribution of this paper can foster new research into the changing higher education sector.

Literature review

Methodology

In order to grasp the scholarly debate on the determinants of university positioning, a literature review has been carried out, based on different bibliographical databases, specifically, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. As we aimed at the broadest possible search, we have looked up several keywords, namely ‘Positioning’, ‘Institutional positioning’, ‘Strategic positioning’, ‘Market position’ and ‘Profiling’, in connection with ‘Higher Education’ or ‘University’, ‘Diversity’ or ‘Differentiation’. After having noticed that several publications referred to the marketing literature, the keywords ‘Marketing’, ‘Mission statements’ and ‘Branding’ have been included in the literature review to ensure the largest possible coverage of relevant themes. Since the object of analysis is the institutional positioning of universities, publications that investigate positioning at the level of either degree programmes or higher education systems are not included in this literature review.

In the first stage of the literature review we have focused on titles and keywords, and gathered almost 600 publications. In the second stage, we have looked at either their abstracts or full-texts in search for relevance to our research question, i.e. how can the determinants of university strategic positioning be understood. Following this selection, we have eventually considered 108 publications (Table 1). Articles published in scientific journals (88) have been found in journals on Higher Education (60), in Economics and Management (20), Sociology (2) and in Organisation studies (5). The remainder comprised 18 book chapters or books as well as 2 conference papers. Sixteen of the 108 publications are conceptual works, 31 empirical studies, whereas the remaining 61 are both conceptual and empirical. Moreover, 44 publications present a qualitative methodology, 40 a quantitative analysis, and 5 a mixed-methods approach. Finally, we observed that 60 works have been published after 2010, 41 between 2000 and 2010, while 7 before 2000. This underlines the recent increasing attention towards university positioning. For detailed information about the 106 publications of the literature review see Table 1 in the appendix.

Findings

Our literature review shows that two theoretical frameworks are mostly used: the environmental determinism perspective and the managerial rationality approach. We outline hereafter the both perspectives and their contribution in explaining university positioning.

The environmental determinism perspective

Neo-institutional theory claims that university positioning is generated by the quest for legitimacy in order to comply with the external pressures of the surrounding environment (Van Vught 2008). Legitimacy is ‘more important than efficiency in sustaining organizational survival’ (Mampaey et al. 2015, p. 1181), thus making universities heavily influenced by the exogenous pressures of the organisational field since adaptation and compliance provide resources and ultimately survival (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Legitimacy can be described as ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, within some socially constructed system of norms, values and beliefs [...]’ (Suchman 1995, p. 574–575). The system of norms and values is expressed by the

Table 1 Classification of the publications of the literature review based on several characteristics

Author(s) and year	Source	Topic/research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Ahmed et al. (2015)	Higher Education for the Future	To apply concepts of strategic management into HE	Conceptual	Strategic management school
Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet (1998)	International Journal of Educational Management	Students' perceptions of English ex-polytechnics and how these can be used to position themselves in order to attract future students successfully.	Empirical (UK)—quantitative	
Barbato and Turri (2019)	Studies in Higher Education	How the quantitative analysis of positioning paths of universities helps to understand more deeply the diversity of HE systems	Empirical (Italy and England)—quantitative	
Bevelander et al. (2015)	South African Journal of Business Management	What business schools tell in their mission statements and how these provide a basis for strategic positioning	Empirical (a sample of international Business schools)—qualitative	
Bobe and Kober (2015)	Education + Training	To measure the organizational capabilities of universities and how these are bundled to provide a long-term competitive advantage	Conceptual and empirical (Australia)—quantitative	Resource-based view
Bonaccorsi (2009)	Book chapter	How to measure differentiation and positioning of universities in doctoral education	Conceptual and empirical (Aquameth dataset)—quantitative	Strategic management school
Bonaccorsi (2014)	Book	Several issues on universities' performances, diversity and their contribution to the knowledge economy	Conceptual and empirical (EUMIDA dataset) — quantitative	Strategic management school and micro-economics
Bonaccorsi and Daraio (2007)	Book	To provide micro-based evidence on the evolution of the strategic profile and positioning of universities in terms of research, education and third mission	Conceptual and empirical (six European countries)—quantitative	Strategic management school and micro-economics
Bonaccorsi and Daraio (2008)	Scientometrics	Limits of ranking indicators and illustration of an alternative methodology based on the concept of positioning indicators	Empirical and methodological (Aquameth dataset)—quantitative	
Bowl (2018)	Studies in Higher Education	How universities balance (communicate) distinctiveness and equality of educational opportunities based on their status	Conceptual and empirical (England and New Zealand)—qualitative	Resource dependence theory and Neo-institutionalism
Brandt (2002)	Higher Education	What kind of strategies universities use to answer to the different demands for continuing education, looking for any signs of differentiation	Empirical (Norway)—qualitative	

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and year	Source	Topic/research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Brankovic (2014)	Book chapter	To identify those forces that might affect the positioning of private universities in the Balkans.	Conceptual and empirical (Western Balkans) – quantitative	Resource dependence theory and Neo-institutionalism
Brown et al. (1993)	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	To propose a model positioning concept for metropolitan universities	Conceptual	Strategic management school
Çatı et al. (2016)	Education and Science	To identify positioning strategies through which universities want to be distinctive in the mind of prospective students	Conceptual and empirical (Turkey)–qualitative	Strategic management school
Cattaneo et al. (2018)	Studies in Higher Education	How different levels of competition affects the diversification and specialization positioning strategies of universities over time	Conceptual and empirical (Italy)–quantitative	Strategic management school
Cruz-Castro et al. (2016)	Research Evaluation	To evaluate and compare the responses of Spanish universities to the existence of the ERC	Conceptual and empirical (Spain)–qualitative and quantitative	Organizational capabilities
Davies and Glaister (1996)	Higher Education Quarterly	How mission statements have been introduced by universities and the appropriateness of their use	Conceptual and empirical (England)–quantitative	Neo-institutionalism
Deiaco et al. (2009)	Book chapter	The existence of competition in higher education and how and why European universities are learning to compete	Conceptual	Economic theory (Schumpeter’s vision of competition)
Dorozhkin et al. (2016)	Journal of Environmental Science and Science Education	To develop a set of marketing actions in order to position a university and assess it	Empirical (Russia)–quantitative	
Erhardt and von Kotzebe (2016)	Tertiary Education and Management	To describe and measure the status quo of horizontal differentiation among German universities, highlighting further possibilities for increasing distinctiveness	Conceptual and empirical (Germany)–qualitative and quantitative	Strategic management school
Fahy et al. (2010)	Conference paper	To analyse the competitive positioning of UK universities	Empirical (UK)–quantitative	
Finley et al. (2001)	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	To analyse mission statements of Canadian universities and suggest alternatives to improve these strategic instruments	Empirical (Canada)–qualitative	
Frølich et al. (2013)	Higher Education	How individual universities deal with (interpret) institutional pluralism through strategising	Conceptual	Old and New-institutionalism, sense-making approach and Strategic management school

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and year	Source	Topic/research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Fumasoli (2018)	Book chapter	Conceptualization of strategic planning and positioning in higher education	Conceptual	Strategic management school
Fumasoli and Lepori (2011)	Higher Education	To investigate the nature of organizational strategies of universities focusing on the internal development process and the content of strategies (positioning)	Conceptual and empirical (Swiss)–qualitative	Strategic management school
Fumasoli and Huisman (2013)	Minerva	How universities position themselves and how this process impact on diversity	Conceptual	Organisation theory
Furey et al. (2014)	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	To investigate brand promises from universities belonging to different mission groups	Empirical (UK)–qualitative	
Gaehgins (2015)	Book chapter	How small universities can face and respond to the ‘Excellence Initiative’ in Germany	Empirical (Germany)–qualitative	
Haezendonck et al. (2017)	International Journal of Inclusive Education	How the ‘growth-share matrix’ can be used to position themselves in the social inclusion dimension and How this instrument can be used by universities	Conceptual and empirical (Flanders)–quantitative	Strategic management school
Harrison-Walker (2009)	Academy of Educational Leadership Journal	To define the concept of strategic positioning, explain its importance and discuss its application for policymakers	Conceptual	Marketing literature
Hartley and Morphew (2006)	The Journal of Higher Education	How colleges and universities mission statements differ in terms of content and how they differ between various institutional types	Conceptual and empirical (USA)–qualitative	Neo-institutionalism
Hartley and Morphew (2008)	The Journal of Higher Education	To examine themes of colleges’ viewbooks, how these vary by institutional type and which messages are communicated to students on the academic purposes of HE	Conceptual and empirical (USA)–qualitative	Strategic management school and Neo-institutionalism
Hou et al. (2012)	Higher Education Research & Development	To analyse global rankings in order to inform strategic plans and positioning for world-class universities	Empirical (International rankings)–quantitative	
Huisman and Pringle (2011)	Canadian Journal of Higher Education Oxford review of Education	Application of Porter’s five force model to Ontario HE system	Empirical (Ontario)–qualitative	

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and year	Source	Topic/research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Huisman and Mampaey (2018)	Science and Public Policy	How much the images of universities are different and similar, and how universities want external stakeholders to look at them.	Conceptual and empirical (UK)–qualitative and quantitative	Neo-institutionalism and Resource dependence theory
Huisman et al. (2008)		To discuss the use of research funding mechanisms as an instrument to either maintain or promote diversity in HE systems	Empirical (OECD dataset)–quantitative	
Huisman et al. (2002)	Tertiary Education and Management	Whether and How some universities established during the late '60s managed to develop their original goal of being 'distinctive' organizations	Conceptual and empirical (Netherlands, Denmark and Norway)–qualitative	Neo-institutionalism, Resource dependence theory and Strategic choice theory
Huisman et al. (2015)	Research Evaluation	How to conceptualise and measure diversity	Empirical (EUMIDA dataset)–quantitative	
Hüther and Krücken (2016)	Research in the Sociology of Organization	How the embeddedness of universities in nested organizational fields can produce homogenisation and differentiation among universities	Conceptual	Neo-institutionalism (nested field structure)
James and Huisman (2009)	Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management	How much mission statements of universities differ and (or not) compared with policies and market demands and pressures	Empirical (Wales)–qualitative	
Jamieson and Naidoo (2007)	European Journal of Education	How a university position itself in the changing market for doctoral study	Empirical (England)–qualitative	
Jin and Horta (2018)	Tertiary Education and Management	How two Chinese prestigious schools intend to position themselves in an external changing environment	Conceptual and empirical (China)–qualitative	Neo-institutionalism and Resource dependence theory
Kayombo and Carter (2017)	Journal of Education and Vocational Research	To identify the position of ZCAS university's brand in Zambia as a case study and to establish the position in relation to the other competitors	Conceptual and empirical (Zambia)–quantitative	Strategic management school
Klemenčič (2016)	Book chapter	How much institutional research supports positioning within Central Europe universities	Conceptual and empirical (Central Europe)–qualitative	Strategic management school and Organizational capabilities
Klump et al. (2014)	Comparative Education		Empirical (Germany and the Netherlands) – qualitative	

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and year	Source	Topic/research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Kosmützky (2012)	Tertiary Education and Management	To explore and compare policy approaches on differentiation and profiling/positioning in German and Dutch HE systems What mission statements of German universities contain, if they express a distinctive market position and which is their function	Conceptual and empirical (Germany) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism and organization theory
Kosmützky and Krücken (2015)	International Studies of Management & Organization	How German universities balance sameness and distinctiveness within mission statements	Conceptual and empirical (Germany) – qualitative	Organization theory and Competitive groups theory
Ivy (2001)	International Journal of Educational Management	How universities and Technikon use marketing to differentiate their institutional image and therefore to position themselves	Conceptual and empirical (UK and South Africa) – quantitative	Marketing literature (institutional image)
Landel and Weyer (2014)	Research in the Sociology of Organization	To investigate the relationship between universities' opportunities to shape their research profiles and the changing role of the state as well as the impact of research-profile building activities inside universities	Conceptual and empirical (Netherlands) – qualitative	Authority relation perspective
Leiber (2016)	Book chapter	What are the key contents of mission statements? What purposes of universities mission statements assist and are used by them?	Empirical (Germany) – qualitative	
Lepori et al. (2014)	Studies in Higher Education	To investigate convergence and differentiation in HE binary systems	Conceptual and empirical (Switzerland) – quantitative	Neo-institutionalism and Population Ecology theory
Ljungberg et al. (2009)	Book chapter	To investigate how structural characteristics influence the positioning of Swedish universities and their obtainment of external funds	Conceptual and empirical (Sweden) – quantitative	Strategic management school
Lowry and Owens (2001)	Services Marketing Quarterly	How a university can position itself based on a step by step approach (flowchart)	Conceptual	Marketing literature
Lynch and Baines (2004)	Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management	To apply Resource-based view to the UK HE reality, underlying its potentiality, setting a research agenda	Conceptual	Resource-based view
Maassen and Potman (1990)	Higher Education	How Dutch universities respond to the new planning system	Conceptual and empirical (The Netherlands) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism
Mackay et al. (1996)	Higher Education Management	To what extent universities strive to differentiate themselves in a context of expanding demand for HE	Empirical (UK) – qualitative	

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and year	Source	Topic/research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Mahat (2015)	Conference paper	To analyse the strategic positioning of academic organizations (medical schools) in a regulated environment	Conceptual and empirical (Australia) – qualitative and quantitative	Strategic management school
Mahat and Goedegebuure (2016)	Theory and Method in Higher Education Research	To apply the Porter's five forces framework to medical higher education in Australia	Conceptual and empirical (Australia) – quantitative	Strategic management school
Mampay et al. (2015)	Higher Education Research & Development	How branding of Flemish universities meets competitive and institutional pressures by balancing distinctiveness and legitimacy	Conceptual and empirical (Flanders) – qualitative	Strategic balance perspective and Translation theory
Mampaey (2018)	Studies in Higher Education	To shed lights on the dynamics underlying homogeneity vs heterogeneity in HE by focusing on translation rules adopted by universities	Conceptual and empirical (Flanders) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism and Translation theory
Marginson (2007)	Journal of Studies in International Education	To analyse the global position and positioning-taking strategies a HE system and of its universities	Conceptual and empirical (Australia) – quantitative	Bourdieu Theory of Social Fields
Marginson (2015)	Higher Education	The positioning of Australian research universities in East Asia	Empirical (Australia) – quantitative	
Maringe (2006)	International Journal of Educational Management	To investigate those elements students consider important in choosing university and courses of study and how this impact on positioning	Conceptual and empirical (UK) – quantitative	Marketing literature
Martinez and Wolverton (2009)	Book	Overview of the strategy literature applied to HE field	Conceptual	Strategic management school
Mashhadi et al. (2008)	World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology	Application of the European Foundation of Quality Management model to position top Iranian business schools	Conceptual and empirical (Iran) – quantitative	Strategic management school
Mathooko and Ogutu (2015)	International Journal of Public Sector Management	How much Porter's five forces model influence the choice of strategies adopted by public universities in Kenya.	Conceptual and empirical (Kenya) – quantitative	Strategic management school
Mazzarol and Soutar (2008)	International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing	To explore if the strategic positioning behaviour of Australian educational institutions impacts on their competitiveness	Conceptual and empirical (Australia) – quantitative	Strategic management school

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and year	Source	Topic/research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Mintzberg and Rose (2003)	Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences	To identify the nature of strategies (deliberate vs emergent) and positioning attempts of McGill University over time	Conceptual and empirical (Canada) – qualitative	Strategic management school
Morphew (2009)	The Journal of Higher Education	How institutional diversity has changed over a period of 30 years	Conceptual and empirical (USA) – quantitative	Neo-institutionalism
Morphew and Huisman (2002)	Higher Education in Europe	To understand patterns of homogenisation (academic drift) and differentiation in HE systems	Conceptual and empirical (USA and Netherlands) – quantitative	Neo-institutionalism
Morphew et al. (2018)	Studies in Higher Education	How do the strategies used to balance the multiple (public and private) identities of research public universities compare?	Conceptual and empirical (Northern Europe and North America) – qualitative	Strategic balance perspective
Mourad (2010)	International Journal of Educational Management	To investigate the effect of internationalization on positioning strategies of Egyptian universities	Empirical (Egypt) – qualitative	
Naudé and Ivy (1999)	International Journal of Educational Management	How old and new universities in the UK are responding to a rapidly changing external environment	Empirical (UK) – quantitative	
Niculescu (2006)	Journal of Organizational Change Management	To assist the decision-making processes of universities on topics like market structure analysis, market segmentation and positioning	Empirical (Romania) – qualitative	
Olivares and Wetzel (2014)	CESifo Economic Studies	To explore the existence of economies of scale and efficiency in German HE sector and the technical scope in German HE sector	Empirical (Germany) – quantitative	
Opoku et al. (2008)	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	How Swedish universities position themselves in the market space by looking at online brand personalities	Conceptual and empirical (Sweden) – qualitative	Marketing literature (brand personality)
Paradeise and Thoenig (2013)	Organization Studies	What academic quality means for universities and how they achieve that, looking for difference between institutions	Conceptual and empirical (France, Italy, USA, China, Switzerland) – qualitative	Recognition (Merton 1973)
Paradeise and Thoenig (2016)	Minerva	How three types of organizational capability influence the strategic capacity of four ideal-types of universities (reputation and research performances)	Conceptual and empirical (6 countries) – qualitative	Organizational capabilities and sociology of organization

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and year	Source	Topic/research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Pedersen and Dobbin (2006)	American Behavioural Scientist	Comparison between organizational culture and neo-institutionalism theories in order to reconcile them	Conceptual	Neo-institutionalism and Organizational culture
Pietilä (2014)	Higher Education	How academic leaders conceive research profiling and how these are connected to the goals leaders are trying to achieve with profiling	Conceptual and empirical (Finland) – qualitative	Micro-level Neo-institutionalism and sensemaking approach
Pizarro Millan (2017)	Higher Education Quarterly	How Canadian universities are depicting themselves towards external stakeholders and which type of symbolic resources employed to do it	Conceptual and empirical (Canada) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism
Pizarro Millan and Quirke (2017)	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	How for-profit career colleges market themselves externally by adopting alternatives strategies to legitimate themselves	Conceptual and empirical (Ontario) – qualitative and quantitative	Neo-institutionalism
Richardson et al. (1995)	International Journal of Public Sector Management	To explain why customer responsiveness is a crucial aspect for universities and how to match it	Conceptual	Political contingency perspective and Strategic management school
Rossi (2009a)	Tertiary Education and Management	To empirically investigate the relationship between the organizational features and strategies of universities	Empirical (Italy) – quantitative	
Rossi (2009b)	Higher Education Policy	and their ability to obtain external research funds How universities' responses towards competition impact on the horizontal diversity of higher education systems	Conceptual and empirical (Italy) – quantitative	Review of different theoretical perspectives on competition and diversity of HE systems
Rossi (2010)	Studies in Higher Education	How massification, privatization, increasing competition for students and research funds stimulate diversity between universities	Empirical (Italy) – quantitative	Review of different theoretical perspectives on processes promoting or hampering diversity of HE systems
Rutter et al. (2017)	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	How brand personality can be a powerful mechanisms for distinctive strategic positioning efforts	Conceptual and empirical (UK) – qualitative	Marketing literature (brand personality)
Sauntson and Morrish (2011)	Book chapter	How the discourses of managerialism impact universities in the UK by looking at what mission statements communicate and represent	Empirical (UK) – qualitative	

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and year	Source	Topic/research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Seeber et al. (2012)	Research Evaluation	To investigate the a regional HE relational space in research and teaching and its determinants; to identify indicators to represent the relative position of each university	Conceptual and empirical (Italy) – quantitative	Network analysis (relational arenas)
Seeber et al. (2019)	Studies in Higher Education	To understand the factors influencing the content of universities' mission statements.	Conceptual and empirical (UK) – quantitative	Organizational identity and Strategic balance perspective
Shadymanova and Amstler (2018)	Book chapter	Evaluation of the insitutional strategies in terms of differentiation vs homogeneity after increasing autonomy and competition in a post-soviet country	Empirical (Kyrgyzstan) – quantitative	
Silander and Haake (2016)	Studies in Higher Education	How the new system of evaluation and funding research influence research profiles of Swedish universities	Conceptual and empirical (Sweden) – qualitative	Neo-institutional isomorphism and Translation theory
Strike and Labbe (2016)	Book chapter	To test if strategic plans are meaningful means through which catching the self-expression of university's identity	Empirical (Germany) – qualitative	
Tammi (2009)	Higher Education	how Finnish universities have reacted to the changes in their external environment in terms of funding	Conceptual and empirical (Finland) – quantitative	Economics of science (Institutional analysis of university behaviour, Geuna 1999)
Teixeira et al. (2012)	Higher Education	To explores empirically the issue of diversity in higher education and in particular, to measure programmatic diversification in higher education	Empirical (Portugal) – quantitative	
Toma (2010)	Book	To describe the internal structure and management strategies within universities by focusing on the organizational capacity concept	Conceptual and empirical (USA) – qualitative	Strategic management school and Organizational capabilities
Toma (2012)	Book chapter	What is strategy and positioning for universities and how prestige move universities to position themselves	Conceptual	Strategic management school and Neo-institutionalism
Váira (2009)	Book chapter	To provide a descriptive and analytical account of the process convergence and differentiation that are shaping European HE systems and institutions	Conceptual	Neo-institutionalism and Population Ecology theory

Table 1 (continued)

Author(s) and year	Source	Topic/research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Ván Vught (2008)	Higher Education Policy	Development of a conceptual framework to explain differentiation and dedifferentiation processes in higher education	Conceptual	Neo-institutionalism, Population Ecology theory and Resource dependency theory
Ván Vught and Huisman (2013)	Tuning Journal of Higher Education	Why positioning is becoming an increasingly important topic and how to represent it quantitatively	Conceptual and methodological	Strategic management school
Vuori (2015a)	Education + Training	How a foresight project can support institutional positioning through sensemaking processes	Conceptual and empirical (Finland) – qualitative	Sensemaking approach
Vuori (2015b)	Tertiary Education and Management	How institutional positioning emerges in the sensemaking activities between the Ministry of Education and Finnish universities	Empirical (Finland) – qualitative	
Vuori (2016)	Higher Education Quarterly	How Finnish universities of Applied sciences implement their profiling strategies	Conceptual and empirical (Finland) – qualitative	Strategic management school
Wæraas and Solbakk (2009)	Higher Education	To analyses aspects of a branding process carried out within a university	Conceptual and empirical (Norway) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism and Organizational identity
Warming (2004)	Review of Industrial Organization	How and why German universities differentiated in the extent to which they specialise some disciplines and between teaching and research	Empirical (Germany) – quantitative	
Warming (2007)	Book	How German universities position themselves individually and within strategic groups	Conceptual and empirical (Germany) – quantitative	Strategic management school
Wilkins (2019)	International Journal of Educational Management	How UAE universities compete and position themselves in the HE market through the use of strategic group analysis	Conceptual and empirical (United Arab Emirates) – quantitative	Strategic management school
Wilkins and Huisman (2019)	Studies in Higher Education	To identify and investigate the positioning and differentiation strategies adopted by late entry higher education institutions in a mature HE market	Conceptual and empirical (United Arab Emirates) – qualitative	Strategic management school

institutional environment of higher education systems (Brankovic 2014). Neo-institutional theory illustrates the isomorphic nature of institutional pressures, characterised in coercive (pressures from political power, i.e. government, evaluation agencies), mimetic (imitating the most successful organisations) and normative (norms of conducts and values from professionals) (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Whereas compliance towards these isomorphic forces strengthens the societal legitimacy of universities, distinctiveness is perceived to be a consequence of irrational behaviour (Toma 2012).

Secondly, population ecology theory focuses on the influence of competitive environments downplaying agency for single organisations (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). The initial assumption is that organisations, as organisms in nature, fundamentally rely on their ability to acquire resources necessary to thrive, such resources are given by the environment (Morgan 1986). When resources are scarce, organisations face competition that will select only those organisations able to obtain a resource niche and ultimately survive (Hannan and Freeman 1989). Hence, the nature, number and distribution of organisations in a given space is dependent on both resource availability and level of competition, making competitive environments the main critical factor in shaping the position of universities over time (Van Vught 2008; Lepori et al. 2014). This correspondence between environmental conditions and organisations' trajectories is depicted by Hannan and Freeman with the term 'structural isomorphism' (1989, p. 62). The lower the diversity of environmental conditions are (i.e. availability of resources), the higher is the similarity of universities' positioning, since each organisation will tend to position comparably in order to secure the scarce resources (Birnbbaum 1983).

Despite the different characterisations of the environment, both neo-institutionalism and organisation ecology converge in contending that the increasing homogeneity of organisations is an outcome of deterministic processes (Morphew and Huisman 2002; Van Vught 2008; Morphew 2009).

Empirically, Maassen and Potman (1990), show how Dutch universities tend to display legitimacy-seeking behaviours when conditioned by coercive (from the government) and normative (from academic communities) pressures to enhance distinctiveness of their institutional profiles. Pietilä (2014) and Silander and Haake (2016) share similar results: they find that strategic profiling is used symbolically to comply with coercive and mimetic forces, in other words universities thrive through legitimacy without introducing any actual change in their core activities.

Brankovic (2014) demonstrates that private universities in Western Balkans emulate their public competitors (mimetic isomorphism) in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their fee-paying students. Rossi (2009b) presents similar findings: facing growing levels of competition, Italian universities do not differentiate their positions but strengthen their specialisations in more popular disciplines and meet the preferences of the student population.

Finally, mission statements and strategic plans provide empirical evidence confirming the university's quest for legitimacy. Investigating UK universities, Davies and Glaister (1996) argue that the relevance of mission statements seems to be perceived in terms of meeting the demands of external stakeholders rather than offering the opportunity to develop shared aspirational goals within the institution. Hartley and Morphew (2008) and Wæraas and Solbakk (2009) similarly show that, despite some attempts to position themselves distinctively against their own competitors, universities systematically communicate widely accepted institutional values to gain legitimacy leading to a sort of 'conformity trap' (see also Mampaey 2018, p. 2). Finally, Pizarro Milian (2017) analyses the marketing practices of Canadian universities, illustrating how both teaching-oriented and research-intensive

institutions seek to emulate the same institutional template as a result of mimetic and normative pressures. Hence, even under increasing competitive pressures, legitimacy still appears to be a crucial determinant in affecting significantly how universities characterise themselves (Sauntson and Morrish 2011).

This said, more recent strands of research (Quirke 2013) seem to question conformity as the only option available for organisations to obtain legitimacy, due to the multiple institutional logics and stakeholders at play within the academic field. Pizarro Milian and Quirke (2017), investigating promotional profiles of Canadian For-Profit Colleges, prove that these low-status institutions behave beyond the mere mimicking of traditional public research-oriented universities and draw on different discourses about their modernity, and the practical and employer-oriented nature of their degrees.

The managerial rationality perspective

A managerial rationality approach posits purposiveness and actions of the senior management as the main determinant of institutional positioning (Fumasoli 2018). According to the strategic management literature and other sociological approaches (Resource dependence theory; Resource-based view), the environment cannot be treated as a ‘set of intractable constraints’ (Astley and Van de Ven 1983, p. 249), but it can be altered according to the actions and goals of the top-management (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Porter 1985). Managerial rationality is thus characterised as a strategic process, comprising intents and actions at the same time (Fumasoli and Lepori 2011).

Institutional positioning as a strategic process assumes a twofold meaning (Mintzberg and Waters 1985; Mintzberg and Rose 2003). On the one hand, positioning can be described as the result of a deliberate intent and planning process of the management. On the other hand, it can also be characterised as ‘emergent’, in other words, a dynamic process resulting from the ongoing relationship between the organisation and the opportunities and constraints available in the organisational environment (Ahmed et al. 2015; Fumasoli 2016, 2018). Institutional positioning becomes thus the result of deliberate and emergent management’s attempts to deal with the external competitive environment in order to create a competitive advantage for the organisation (Porter 1985; Martinez and Wolverson 2009; Toma 2012).

Differently from the environmental perspective, where universities mirror each other’s actions in search for legitimacy, the managerial rationality approach contends that universities’ ability to engage in competition and foster distinctiveness (or competitive advantage) drives organisational success. Competition derives from scarcity of resources and the need to acquire them (Deiaco et al. 2009), creating the essential premise for distinctive positioning (Cattaneo et al. 2018). Along this line Mahat and Goedegebuure (2016, p. 226) underline how the core dimension of positioning is ‘to understand and cope with competition’.

Concerning the outcomes of the positioning process, only the ability to differentiate themselves from competitors, through the creation of a unique and non-reproducible profile, allows universities to achieve competitive advantage (Mazzarol and Soutar 2008; Martinez and Wolverson 2009; Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). As described by Bonaccorsi and Daraio (2007) (see also other microeconomic research by Warning 2004, 2007; Olivares and Wetzel 2014), a unique position is built through inputs (mix of resources employed) and outputs (activities provided) and effective and efficient processes. The inherent assumption in this perspective entails the ability of senior management to design and implement the most suitable combination of input-process-output.

Studies on the outcome of positioning processes focus on measures of country-level differentiation over time (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2008; Bonaccorsi 2009; Fahy et al. 2010; Ljungberg et al. 2009; Van Vught and Huisman 2013; Bonaccorsi 2014; Huisman et al. 2015) and aim to demonstrate how competition enhance systemic diversity (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007; Huisman et al. 2008; Tammi 2009; Rossi 2010; Teixeira et al. 2012). Several studies focus on internal processes, instruments and approaches adopted by the institutional leadership (Finley et al. 2001; Lowry and Owens 2001; Harrison-Walker 2009). These studies are based on the five forces model (Huisman and Pringle 2011; Mathooko and Ogutu 2015), the role of institutional research (Klemenčič 2016), the analysis of ranking indicators (Hou et al. 2012), the development of organisational capabilities (Lynch and Baines 2004; Bobe and Kober 2015) specific analytical techniques and management tools such as strategic group analysis (Wilkins 2019), growth-share matrix (Haezendonck et al. 2017) and operational models like that of the European Foundation for Quality Management (Mashhadi et al. 2008) or the ‘Model for Metropolitan Universities’ (Brown et al. 1993). Finally, in the marketing literature, research focuses on the impact of students’ preferences (Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet 1998; Maringe 2006; Niculescu 2006; Mourad 2010; Dorozhkin et al. 2016; Kayombo and Carter 2017). Yet, in these papers, the determinants of positioning are mainly tacit while universities are assumed to be able to choose their course of action in a rational fashion.

A few studies highlight more explicitly the role of the management. Rossi (2009b) shows that, despite a highly institutionalised environment, some Italian universities were able to prioritise either research or teaching activities. Fumasoli and Lepori (2011) illustrate how the positioning patterns of three Swiss higher education institutions result to both deliberate and emergent strategies, even if with different degrees of success. Similar results can be found in Mahat (2015) regarding the distinctive positioning attempts of medical schools in Australia. Naudé and Ivy (1999) illustrate how ‘newer’ UK universities use marketing services to identify alternative niches and differentiate themselves vis-à-vis ‘traditional’ universities.

Jamieson and Naidoo (2007) outline how an English elite university, as a result of its strategic evaluation of external challenges, decides to position itself by broadening the portfolio of doctoral education. Lastly, a group of empirical studies analyse strategic plans (Brandt 2002; Strike and Labbe 2016; Morphew et al. 2018), mission statements (Hartley and Morphew 2006; Bevelander et al. 2015; Leiber 2016), branding activities (Opoku et al. 2008; Furey et al. 2014; Çatı et al. 2016; Rutter et al. 2017) and institutional images (Ivy 2001) in order to investigate how universities leverage on external constraints and opportunities eventually building unique profiles.

The variety of these studies illustrates the increasing scholarly interest on how competitive forces trigger strategic responses by university top management and their quest for positioning by differentiation.

Attempts at balancing conflicting hypotheses

Once we focus on the empirical findings, we find mixed evidence to support either hypotheses of environmental determinism or managerial rationality. On the one hand, several studies show distinctive strategic processes in highly institutionalised contexts (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007; Rossi 2009b; Mahat 2015), where convergence processes are expected (see also Kraatz and Zajac (1996)). On the other hand, emulative and compliant behaviours are observed in increasing competitive contexts (James and Huisman 2009; Silander and Haake 2016; Pizarro Milian 2017).

MacKay et al. (1996) find a weak and unclear relationship between increasing managerialism and distinctive responses of UK universities towards external competition, whereas Erhardt and von Kotzebue (2016) depict a low level of horizontal differentiation in German higher education in spite of a ten-year growing competition.

A number of scholars highlight that it cannot be taken for granted that competition increase systemic diversity since there are other factors that mediate this effect. For example Rossi (2009a, 2010) argues that students' preferences for social sciences and humanities influenced over time subject mix choices of Italian universities, leading to an increase in the number of courses within these two faculties. Consequently, despite growing competition for students, a closer look at their demands reveals growing homogeneity of educational portfolios, as also illustrated by Shadymanova and Amsler (2018) in relation to the Kyrgyz higher education system. Similar results are presented by Teixeira et al. (2012, p. 350) who show that the effect of increasing competition on programme offer is mediated by 'student demand and regulatory effectiveness' and also varies significantly between public and private universities.

On the other hand, Lepori et al. (2014) find in their longitudinal study of Swiss higher education institutions that both convergence and differentiation forces co-exist at the same time (see also Hartley and Morphew 2006, 2008; Wilkins and Huisman 2019). Cattaneo et al. (2018) highlight how Italian universities balance imitation and differentiation depending on the different levels of local competition.

Our literature review also indicates how some empirical papers have addressed these mixed evidences. Drawing from the works of Oliver (1991) and Deephouse (1999), who use jointly strategic management, resource dependence and neo-institutional perspectives, positioning is conceptualised as a 'balance' between legitimacy and distinctiveness. Since higher education systems have become both more institutionalised and increasingly competitive, legitimacy and distinctiveness might indeed be crucial assets for universities.

Deephouse suggests that distinctive positioning can only be 'as different as legitimately possible' (1999c, p. 47). A university needs distinctiveness to secure resources, but it cannot ignore field norms, or it would lose the support of its main stakeholders (Mampaey et al. 2015) and in particular of its funders (Morphew et al. 2018).

This conceptualisation opens up for potential polymorphic results (Pedersen and Dobbin 2006; Paradeise and Thoenig 2013), given that despite similar institutional pressures, universities can display different responses (Oliver 1991; Greenwood and Suddaby 2006; Morphew et al. 2018).

By analysing strategic documents, several studies claimed that convergence and differentiation could be optimally balanced within universities, (Huisman et al. 2002; Kosmützky 2012; Fumasoli 2015; Mampaey 2018). Mampaey et al. (2015, p. 11), prove that Flemish universities were able to offset their 'conformity to macro-level institutional values by communicating organization-specific meanings' of these values, thus gaining both legitimacy and distinctiveness at the same time.

Kosmützky and Krücken (2015) contend that German universities balance similarity and distinctiveness by positioning themselves in different, but internally homogeneous 'competitive groups', which permit them to shield competition from universities with different profiles and push for competitiveness within the same group. Confirming these results, Seeber et al. (2019) argue further that this trade-off depends not only on the institutional proximity between UK higher education institutions, expressed by the affiliation to a specific mission group (Russell group, 1994, Million+, University Alliance, GuildHE), but also on the geographic proximity between them.

Bowl (2018), Jin and Horta (2018) and Huisman and Mampaey (2018) consider age and status of universities and illustrate how older and higher-status institutions prefer not to deviate from historically based institutional expectations, whereas younger and lower-status universities are more prone to unconventional positioning paths.

The organisational dimension

The literature review points to the unresolved relationship between determinants and outcomes of university positioning. Equally, it illustrates the limitations of the ‘balancing’ perspective that conflates environmental and managerial hypotheses, explaining a variety of patterns in positioning through case-specific combinations of environmental determinism and managerial rationality.

We believe that this ambiguous picture can be clarified by introducing an additional variable in the overarching conceptual framework, that is, the organisational dimension. Theoretically, we argue that the organisational variable is the missing link between determinants and outcomes of positioning and would therefore contribute to the further development of more accurate hypotheses.

The organisational dimension is not a new concept. Its relevance has been highlighted since the Old institutionalism. Famously Selznick (1949, p. 10) stated that an organisation, more than a tool in the hands of management, ‘has a life of its own’. Drawing on Selznick’s work, March (1962) characterises organisations as ‘political coalitions’, underlining that negotiation and bargaining between internal participants are the ordinary *modus operandi* within organisations. In doing so, March provides a more nuanced view of organisational dynamics in contrast with a limited focus on superordinate goals and missions of leadership and/or ownership. In other words, each organisational subunit holds its distinctive values and vision about themselves and the external environment in which they operate. In higher education research Selznick’s student Burton Clark has described universities’ main organisational characteristic as ‘bottom heaviness’ (Clark 1983), explaining that history, traditions, professional identities and disciplinary loyalties combine to produce complex and resilient organisations that exist quite separately and autonomously from their institutional leadership. More recently, Paradeise and Thoenig (2013) have used the concept of ‘local order’ to argue that universities should be treated as potential meso-level orders and action levels. In this way, ‘it is possible to break free from the all-pervasive global or one-size-fits-all standard’ (Paradeise and Thoenig 2013, p. 196).

We put forward that the organisational dimension acts as an intervening variable against the effects of both environmental pressures and managerial rationality. In doing so, our characterisation is twofold: firstly, the organisational dimension acts as a filter *from* exogenous pressures (A); secondly, it shapes opportunities and constraints for senior management to engage *towards* the environment (B).

Filtering environmental forces

The role of the organisational dimension as a ‘filter’ has been treated in different ways in the higher education literature. Clark (1983, p. 99), speaking about the identity that characterises each university, calls it a ‘switchman’ able to mediate external pressures according to a unique internal mix of cultural beliefs.

Paradeise and Thoenig (2013, p. 196), referring to ‘local orders’, suggest how a university ‘may incorporate the changes arising from the global standardisation process, while at the same time getting these to fit with all the organisational arrangements, cognitive processes and values that it uses for taking action and making decisions. Although specific standards of academic excellence have achieved global reach, Paradeise and Thoenig (2013) show how different cognitive and normative organisational patterns lead similar universities to conceptualise differently their vision of academic excellence and as a result, to undertake different positioning trajectories.

In a similar perspective, the theory of translation (Latour 1984; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008) also sheds light on the mechanisms at play within organisations. Against this backdrop, environmental pressures are translated internally through the perceptions of the main organisational actors, based on a common historically constructed identity, adjusting macro-level ideas to the local organisational settings (Czarniawska and Wolff 1998).

Put differently, universities reflect cognitive, cultural and normative attitudes that lend them ‘a variable sensitivity and responsiveness to changes taking place in the environments in which they operate’ (Paradeise and Thoenig 2013, p. 202). Consequently, even facing the same incentives and pressures, universities display different positioning patterns, according to how they interpret and internalise the expectations and demands of both their institutional and competitive environments.

Assumption 1: The organisational characteristics of a university mediate its understanding and interpretation of the pressures from the external environment.

Shaping the course of action

Each organisation is characterised by its distinctive history, power structure, routines and practices that emerge over time and become institutionalised (Selznick 1949; March and Olsen 1989). These organisational factors provide formal constraints and benchmarks according to which organisational members (including senior management and leadership) fulfil their own tasks and make sense of the external environment. Olsen and March (2006), called this frame of action ‘logic of appropriateness’. In their view, human action is driven by rules of appropriate behaviour that are shaped by organisational values and settings, and these ‘rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate’ (Olsen and March 2006, p. 689). Hence, actors seek to perform their tasks ‘encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices, and expectations of its institutions’ (Olsen and March 2006, p. 689).

In accordance with this theoretical explanation, universities’ behaviour significantly involves established practices and shared cultural values, more than the rational calculation of consequences from the top management. For instance, several empirical studies highlight how concepts like ‘shared-governance’ and ‘academic involvement’ are core values and rule of action in universities, and therefore managerial rationality cannot be expressed in the way of a top-down and ‘close’ leadership either (Clark 1998; Stensaker and Vabø 2013; Laudel and Weyer 2014; Stensaker et al. 2014).

Consequently, conceiving the organisational dimension as a set of constraints and opportunities ultimately means to describe strategic positioning as an ‘organisational fabrication’ (Paradeise and Thoenig 2016, p. 298), or as a socially constructed process, that

is made sense of in the interaction between the environmental incentives and the internal organisational rules, frames of actions and cultural values.

In conclusion, a positioning trajectory cannot be intrinsically conceived as the mere will and action of an entrepreneurial leadership, given that organisational rules impact significantly both the direction, coherence and rationality of the positioning effort.

Assumption 2 The organisational characteristics of a university affects its management's rationality to position the university in the external environment.

Operationalization of the organizational dimension

Having conceptualised the organisational dimension as the intervening variable mediating *both* environmental determinism and managerial rationality, we operationalise it along three components: organisational structure, identity and centrality. We draw on the existing literature in management and organisation studies as well as higher education studies and further develop the three components and their indicators. In doing so, we build a conceptual framework which, on the one hand, articulates organisational structure, identity and centrality, on the other hand, allows us to formulate hypotheses that may be used for empirical research on university positioning.

Organisational structure

The organisational structure can be investigated by looking at governance and task allocation, mission and the size of the university.

Governance can be defined as the set of processes through which decision-making is organised and coordinated within universities, whereas task allocation refers to how roles and duties are distributed throughout the organisation. Governance can be analysed through its degree of centralisation, formalisation, standardisation and flexibility (Maassen et al. 2017). Centralisation refers to the dispersion of authority to make decisions within universities, in other words where the locus of the decision-making is, and can be observed along the continuum centralised–diffused. The collegial and academic oriented decision-making that has traditionally shaped universities has been questioned by managerial reforms that aimed to organise hierarchically decision-making processes, increase the power of executives and leadership and ultimately enhance a stronger leadership (Bleiklie and Kogan 2007). Formalisation concerns ‘the degree according to which communication and procedures are written and filed’ (Maassen et al. 2017, p. 245), implying a continuum between legal requirements and spontaneous intents and actions. Similarly to centralisation, managerial reforms introduce higher level of formalisation through reporting duties, accountability requirements and stronger administrative offices that control and implement central decisions instead of supporting in a piecemeal way the individual initiatives of the academic community. Related to formalisation is the degree of standardisation, or the extent to which decision-making occurs according to rules that are applied invariably to all situations. Equally, roles definitions, requirements and rewards are depersonalised. Standardisation can be critical within knowledge-intensive organisations, where problems and practices have been historically handled ‘ad hoc’, based on the principles of self-governance, academic freedom and professional expertise. Lastly, governance can be studied through flexibility, or the ability to adapt

rapidly to exogenous and endogenous challenges. On the one hand, centralisation, formalisation and standardisation might enhance the administrative capacity of universities to position themselves, reducing inertia and enhancing organisational actorhood. On the other hand, flexibility is also crucial, since it allows universities to rapidly adapt and respond to challenges, hence also modifying their positioning. Centralisation, formalisation, standardisation and flexibility, in some combination, are necessary conditions for strategic positioning. In other words, university organisational structures need to display a certain level of all of them at the same time.

The second sub-component, ‘mission’, refers to the functions as well as the disciplinary fields in which the university focuses its activities. University functions and disciplines are, at least to some extent, organised hierarchically, prioritising the importance of some (e.g. research and natural sciences) against others (e.g. teaching and humanities). While teaching and research historically shape the core activities of universities, growingly diversified demands from society, particularly economic sectors and labour markets, exert pressures on universities to change priorities between their activities, as well as suggesting a potential risk of ‘mission overload’ when it comes to knowledge exchange, technology transfer and community engagement. Quantitative scholars have developed a set of ‘positioning indicators’ and techniques on the orientation of universities towards these core functions as well as their relationships (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2008).

Thirdly, size can be measured in terms of budget, students and academic staff, as well as in terms of scope of the subject mix, making a distinction, for instance, between generalist and specialist universities (Ljungberg et al. 2009; Huisman et al. 2015). The relation between organisational size and complexity affects university governance and decision-making processes, as well as the administrative capacity of universities to position themselves (Toma 2010; Fumasoli and Lepori 2011).

Proposition 1a: Centralisation, formalisation, standardisation and flexibility are necessary conditions for strategic positioning.

Proposition 1b: The broader the mission, the lesser effective the strategic positioning is.

Proposition 1c: The larger the organisational structure, the lesser centralised, formalised, standardised and flexible the governance is, accordingly the less effective its strategic positioning.

Organisational identity

Universities’ identity can be conceptualised as the result of different but complementary sources (Clark 1983): symbolic, cultural and social dimensions (Clark 1983; Stensaker 2015), in other words some unique beliefs and values shared by the internal members of the organisation (Gioia and Thomas 1996) that steer their commitment (Selznick 1957; Aldrich and Ruef 2006; Cruz-Castro et al. 2016).

First, identity is shaped within disciplines through different knowledge traditions, categories of thought, codes of conduct and admission requirements (Becher and Trowler 2001). In this sense, disciplinary identities constitute an element of fragmentation of universities’ identity (Clark 1983; Frølich et al. 2013). Nevertheless, recent ‘managerial reforms’ aimed to create and strengthen the organisational identity as a means of creating more ‘complete organisations’ (Kosmützky 2012). This could be further achieved internally, through collective

processes of sense-making (Vuori 2015a, b), and externally, by defining a clear distinctive image through mission statements and branding activities (Paradeise and Thoenig 2013; Furey et al. 2014).

A second source of identity is the university culture (Clark 1983), defined as the membership and identification of internal members with their academic organisations (Aldrich and Ruef 2006). The bonding power of the university organisational identity is affected by several factors such as organisational scale, age, integration and struggle, as well as, importantly, by the competitiveness of the external environment, since such pressures tend to trigger claims of uniqueness and a sense of collective effort. The university culture might be said to be a source of institutional coherence, acting as a risk-reducing device (Fumasoli et al. 2015), supporting potentially both conservative and innovative positioning patterns.

Thirdly, the culture of the academic profession comprises core values such as professional autonomy (freedom of teaching and research) and collegial self-government. These are shared universally, at least across disciplines and universities and (to a certain degree) across national higher education systems. It can then be expected that the academic profession culture, while integrating university fragmented disciplinary affiliations, also pushes towards positioning by conformity. The academic professional culture, described as a normative isomorphic pressure by neo-institutional studies (Rhoades 1990; Silander and Haake 2016), intrinsically strives for homogeneity across universities and national higher education systems, even if recent managerial reforms have challenged its foundations based on collegiality and academic freedom.

Finally, part of the universities' identity comes from specific traditions and historically based patterns of each national context (Ivy 2001). Beliefs concerning the complementary and/or substitute nexus between teaching and research, the access to tertiary education and employment of graduates are generally shared among universities of the same country, establishing commonalities that uniform the HE system. The national higher education system culture may suggest homogeneous positioning patterns within country borders. However, globalisation and internalisation phenomena, expressed also by global rankings, indicate the 'nested' nature of organisational fields, opening to potentially diversified and more complex positioning paths (Hüther and Krücken 2016).

Given these multiple sources of identity, it might be difficult to describe just one overall university identity, while different identities can be balanced within an overarching narrative (Wæraas and Solbakk 2009; Frølich et al. 2013; Morphew et al. 2018). Organisational identity can therefore be conceptualised as a multidimensional variable along a continuum between integration and fragmentation that impacts differently positioning outcomes.

Proposition 2a: The more integrated disciplinary, institutional, professional, national identities are, the more effective the strategic positioning.

Proposition 2b: The more disciplinary, institutional, professional, national identities are aligned *among* each other, the more effective the strategic positioning.

Proposition 2c: The older the university is, the more resilient the organisational identity, accordingly the less effective the strategic positioning.

Organisational centrality

Organisations are located in specific locations within the organisational field. Against this backdrop, strategic positioning is to be understood as the process of changing (or maintaining

and strengthening) a university in the specific niche that is most beneficial in providing the necessary resources for survival and further growth and thriving. We conceptualise the organisational field as a multidimensional space of centres and peripheries that are linked to the availability of material and symbolic resources. This means that more central positions cater for more resources, but are characterised by more competition. More peripheral positions are scarcer in resources, but are less susceptible to competitive forces. Along this line, centrality is the measure of the location of a university along a continuum between centre and periphery. Equally, we consider centrality as encompassing geographical, political, economic and social aspects (Fumasoli 2015).

Geographical centrality indicates the location where a university operates in terms of being in a major city or in the countryside, in border regions or in mainland, in densely or sparsely populated areas (Kosmützky 2012; Mathooko and Ogutu 2015). The resources connected to geographical centrality are infrastructures—public transports and means of communication—large and diversified student bodies and workforce. Political centrality points to the extent to which universities are close to political institutions and public authorities—regulatory and funding bodies. In this way universities can engage with and influence policy processes that affect their possibilities to gather material (funding) and symbolic resources (reputation) (Fumasoli 2018). Economic centrality points to universities operating in economically developed areas—industry, business and technology—where they have access to a broader range of opportunities to initiate public-private partnerships, Research and Development activities, innovation, enterprise and knowledge transfer, as well as contract research, collaborations with employers.

Finally, social centrality characterises proximity to other universities and university-related actors (such as mission and interest groups). While social centrality, too, involves higher competition, it also provides with opportunities for cooperation with competitors (i.e. in a research consortium or a strategic partnership). More in general, universities can activate collaborative relations with other universities, such as undertaking joint teaching, project-based networks, from whose embeddedness universities gain resources, status and critical mass (Gahtgens 2015; Vuori 2016; Brankovic 2018).

Geographical, political, economic and social centrality are correlated to some extent, hence, by way of illustration, a university in the capital city is more likely to access a wide range of resources such as infrastructures, public and corporate funding, students and staff, as well as status and reputation.

Proposition 3a: The more geographically, politically, economically and socially central the university is, the more access it enjoys over material and symbolic resources, accordingly the more effective its strategic positioning.

Proposition 3b: The more socially central the university is, the higher the level of competition affecting its strategic positioning.

Proposition 3c: The more socially central the university is, the more opportunities for cooperation with competitors and other actors affecting its strategic positioning.

Concluding remarks

The background of this paper is the increasing relevance of strategic positioning of universities, which has become a major topic in the scholarly debate about the current transformation

of universities into organisational actors. We have argued that in order to understand better university strategic positioning, the determinants of university positioning need to be uncovered and accounted for.

Our comprehensive literature review has revealed that, although mostly implicitly, two conflicting hypotheses have been used in research so far: on the one hand, environmental determinism contends that university positioning is defined by external forces. On the other hand, managerial rationality posits that universities position themselves according to intentional design by the senior leadership. Attempts at balancing these two hypotheses have been made both in management studies (Oliver 1991; Deephouse 1999) and higher education research (Gornitzka 1999) in order to accommodate the resulting mixed empirical evidence. Equally, determinism and rationality have been partly conflated by arguing that it depends on the external conditions or on the level of analysis whether environmental pressures or managerial behaviour can be used to explain empirical findings.

To advance our theoretical understanding of university positioning, we have argued that the organisational dimension needs to be considered as a meso-level intervening variable affecting both environmental and managerial hypotheses. Hence, the organisational dimension filters environmental forces within the university, as well as shapes the course of action of the university in the environment. Subsequently, we have operationalised the organisational dimension into three components, organisational structure, identity and centrality, that can be systematically applied in future research. Hence, we have provided an overarching conceptual framework that not only accommodates both the environmental and the managerial hypotheses, but also allows for theory-driven analysis on strategic positioning. Such framework explains more coherently what appeared to be contradictory in previous studies. At the same time, we have elaborated on the mechanisms linking different micro-, meso- and macro-levels of analysis by distinguishing the forces at play in the environment, the voluntarist actions of university leadership, and the social structures of the universities themselves.

The three components of the organisational dimension—structure, identity, centrality—have been operationalised for measurement and have generated several expectations that can be tested in further research on university positioning. A promising avenue for empirical studies would be to observe how these three components correlate among each other, for instance, how does organisational structure affect organisational identity and, consequently, strategic positioning? Do universities with fragmented organisational identity position themselves more effectively in more central locations, or can they gather the necessary resources also located in the periphery?

The further examination of our propositions points to two fundamental issues: firstly, the capacity of university management to redesign the organisational dimension according to its strategic positioning objectives. Secondly, the impact of the organisational dimension in the shaping of aspirational strategies that are shared across the university.

Our analytical framework can be used with qualitative and quantitative methodologies, since its operationalisation allows for in-depth case studies where internal processes of decision making, sense making and change management can be focused. At the same time, it can be used in statistical analysis drawing on large datasets featuring standardised university characteristics where factor analysis and cluster analysis can be carried out.

Finally, the organisational dimension holds promise not only to analyse the positioning of universities but could be applied and adapted to organisations in other sectors.

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