Archetypes of Organizational Actorhood. A Qualitative Meta-Study of Universities' Responses to Multiple Competitions

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Dedicated to my family, my friends, and Achim.

Abstract

Driven by the proliferation of multiple competitions for financial, human, and symbolic resources, universities have evolved from loosely coupled systems into strategic organizational actors. Against this backdrop, scholarly debates drawing on neo-institutionalist theories and comparative studies of state-university relationships have illuminated how environmental conditions shape universities' actorhood, examining whether and to what extent universities exercise strategic agency. Expanding such environmentally deterministic accounts, this study adopts an organization-centered perspective that emphasizes universities' strategic capabilities to perform actorhood from within. Asking how archetypes of organizational actorhood emerge, the study conceptualizes them as dynamically unfolding constellations of interrelated response patterns and organizational configurations, grounded in distinct interpretive schemes of multiple competitions.

Drawing on a qualitative meta-study, the analysis reinterprets and synthesizes case studies of 33 universities from 13 countries that were identified through a transparent audit trail and examined in an iterative, abductive analytical process. The findings demonstrate that there is no single "one best way" for universities to organize themselves in response to multiple competitions. Instead, three robust archetypes of organizational actorhood have emerged – adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional – which differ systematically in how universities mobilize their scope for action, ranging from reactive, compliance-oriented alignment with externally defined performance criteria (adaptational), to active navigation of competition and collaboration through the strategic selection of competitions (orchestrational), to the proactive co-construction of competitive arenas through reciprocal engagement with external actors (co-constructional).

Overall, the results demonstrate that universities are not passive recipients of environmental pressures. Rather, they develop distinct organizational responses to multiple competitions that extend beyond isomorphic adaptation to a globally dominant template or to country-specific idiosyncrasies of national higher education systems. In doing so, this study highlights the value of a dynamic, configurational perspective on organizational archetypes for explaining how organizations, embedded in institutionalized fields, endogenously enact strategic agency in heterogeneous, yet patterned, forms of collective action.

Zusammenfassung

Im Zuge der Ausbreitung multipler Wettbewerbe um finanzielle, personelle und symbolische Ressourcen haben sich Universitäten von lose gekoppelten Systemen zu strategischen organisationalen Akteuren entwickelt. Vor diesem Hintergrund haben wissenschaftliche Debatten, die auf neo-institutionalistischen Theorien sowie vergleichenden Studien zu Staat-Hochschul-Beziehungen aufbauen, aufgezeigt, wie Umweltbedingungen die Akteurschaft von Universitäten prägen, indem sie der Frage nachgehen, ob und in welchem Ausmaß Universitäten strategische Handlungsfähigkeit besitzen und ausüben. Über solche umweltdeterministischen Erklärungen hinausgehend nimmt diese Studie eine organisationszentrierte Perspektive ein, die die strategischen Fähigkeiten von Universitäten betont, Akteurschaft aus sich heraus hervorzubringen. Ausgehend von der Frage, wie Archetypen organisationaler Akteurschaft entstehen, konzeptualisiert die Studie diese als dynamisch entfaltende Konstellationen miteinander verflochtener Reaktionsmuster und organisationaler Konfigurationen, die in spezifischen interpretativen Schemata multipler Wettbewerbe verankert sind.

Auf Grundlage einer qualitativen Meta-Studie synthetisiert die Analyse Fallstudien von 33 Universitäten aus 13 Ländern, die über einen transparenten Audit Trail identifiziert und in einem iterativen, abduktiven Analyseprozess ausgewertet wurden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass es keinen einheitlichen „one best way“ gibt, wie sich Universitäten in Bezug auf multiple Wettbewerbe organisieren. Stattdessen haben sich drei robuste Archetypen organisationaler Akteurschaft herausgebildet – adaptational, orchestrational und ko-konstruktional –, die sich systematisch darin unterscheiden, wie Universitäten ihren Handlungsspielraum mobilisieren. Die Archetypen reichen von einer reaktiven, compliance-orientierten Ausrichtung an extern definierten Leistungsstandards (adaptational) über eine aktive Navigation zwischen Wettbewerb und Kooperation durch die strategische Selektion von Wettbewerben (orchestrational) bis hin zur proaktiven Ko-Konstruktion wettbewerblicher Arenen durch reziproke Verflechtungen mit externen Akteuren (ko-konstruktional).

Insgesamt verdeutlichen die Ergebnisse, dass Universitäten keine passiven Empfänger externer Anforderungen sind. Vielmehr entwickeln sie eigenständig organisationale Antworten auf multiple Wettbewerbe, die über isomorphe Anpassung an ein global dominantes Template oder an länderspezifische Idiosynkrasien nationaler Hochschulsysteme hinausgehen. Damit unterstreicht die Studie den analytischen Mehrwert einer dynamischen, konfigurationellen Perspektive auf organisationale Archetypen, um zu erklären, wie Organisationen in institutionalisierten

Feldern strategische Handlungsfähigkeit endogen in heterogenen, zugleich aber strukturierten Formen kollektiven Handelns hervorbringen.

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Preface

The thesis represents the culmination of my doctoral research conducted at the University of Hamburg and is situated within the framework of the research group funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), which aimed to deepen the understanding of "Multiple Competitions within the Higher Education System" (FOR 5234). The project included eight subprojects located at different universities across Germany, from sociological, economic, and business administration perspectives, examining the effects of multiple competitions on organizational, intermediary, and individual actors. This thesis specifically focuses on how universities, as organizational actors, strategically respond to multiple competitions by shaping their room for maneuver and organizing collective action. Insights from this subproject have also been synthesized in a peer-reviewed journal article (Frost et al., in press).

1 Introduction

Governing and organizing within universities has attracted growing scholarly attention in response to comprehensive higher education reforms and intensifying competition among institutions. Recently, the German Science Council (2018) has identified competition as one of the most extensively employed instruments of New Public Management. Its expansion has substantially increased organizational demands, often exceeding universities' strategic capacities and generating unintended consequences for governance practices. Yet, much of the existing research has focused primarily on policy reforms and external drivers of organizational change, frequently overlooking "the complex reality of the university as an organization possessing its own structures, cultures and practices" (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013, p. 479).

Drawing on a qualitative meta-study of 33 university case studies, this study examines how the systemic logic of competition is translated into organizational practices when universities, as organizational actors, leverage their strategic agency in response to multiple competitions. Adopting a configurational perspective, this study identifies three emerging archetypes of organizational actorhood that reflect cross-national patterns of universities' varying interpretations of multiple competitions and the resulting, interrelated organizational responses and coherent strategy-structure configurations.

1.1 Universities' Organizational Transition Under Multiple Competitions

For a long time, universities were described as "prototypes of loosely coupled systems" (Weick, 1976) and as "organized anarchies" (Cohen et al., 1972), characterized by high levels of individual autonomy, collegial governance, and decentralized decision-making structures. By the 1980s, however, the governance *of* and *within* universities increasingly came under criticism for being inefficient, opaque, and insufficiently responsive to societal and economic change. Against this backdrop, neoliberal reform agendas were gradually introduced across public sectors in many countries, aiming to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of public organizations (Hood, 1995; Ferlie et al., 2008). These developments marked a fundamental shift in both how universities are steered and how they manage themselves.

In this context, traditional regulatory mechanisms – such as detailed state directives, academic self-regulation, and collegial self-control – were progressively supplemented or partly replaced by competition-based modes of governance. Competitive steering was promoted as a means to improve organizational performance by incentivizing efficiency and differentiation. As Naidoo

(2016, p. 1) critically observes, these reforms were underpinned by a "magical belief" that competition – particularly with regard to material and symbolic resources – could function as a universal remedy for the perceived shortcomings of higher education systems.

The growing competition orientation in higher education reflects a fundamental transformation commonly described as the proliferation of "multiple competitions" (Krücken, 2021). Competition itself is by no means new to higher education; however, its form, scope, and organizational embedding have changed substantially over recent decades (Musselin, 2018). Historically, competition primarily characterized interactions among individual scholars, academic communities, and nation-states, centering on scientific discovery and reputational standing (Kosmützky & Meier, 2026). Yet it was never institutionalized to the extent observed today.

Contemporary higher education is instead marked by highly organized, resource-intensive, and formally structured competitions for financial, human, and symbolic resources that engage individuals, universities, and nation-states alike, thus spanning micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Musselin, 2018). Importantly, these multiple, nested, and interdependent competitions do not simply exist but are socially constructed and actively maintained as a governance mechanism through the interplay of the science system, the state, and the university organization (Krücken, 2021).

Multiple competitions within higher education are transforming the modus operandi within universities, leading to the emergence of new organizational forms. Competition has become an "unquestionable orthodoxy" (Naidoo, 2018, p. 611), exposing universities worldwide to increasingly standardized performance metrics. As a result, universities are evolving into collective organizational actors that actively compete for financial, human, and symbolic resources, thereby confronting growing demands for coordination and organizational complexity. As Kosmützky and Meier (2026) emphasize, competition does not merely intensify and diffuse across the field of higher education but also acts as a driver of organizational change. In this sense, competition "drives the evolution of universities into organizations" (Musselin, 2018, p. 664) as universities' responses to competitive pressures gradually reshape their internal organizational logics (Hattke et al., 2016b).

Against this backdrop, universities are increasingly expected to enhance their capacity to learn, adapt, and reposition themselves in a proactive and strategically anticipatory manner rather than through reactive adjustment alone (Meyer, 2002). At the field level, this dynamic fosters growing diversity in organizational forms and strategic behaviors, as universities respond to shared competitive pressures in divergent ways. Reflecting this shift, Teece (2018, p. 92) argues that

the long-standing depiction of universities as organized anarchies has become "unacceptable" for contemporary governance, as traditional modes of university management are "no longer adequate" for navigating competitive and performance-oriented environments.

Universities' organizational transition has become a central concern in contemporary higher education research. Scholarship on organizational actorhood examines universities' evolution into goal-oriented, strategic actors (Krücken & Meier, 2006) that increasingly display the characteristics of "complete organizations" (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). As rationalized institutions, universities are attributed the capacity "to act for and out of themselves" (Bloch, 2021, p. 289), encompassing expanded decision-making authority aimed at strengthening strategic capabilities, coordinating collective action, and enlarging organizational room for maneuver (Frost et al., 2016). Empirically, this organizational turn into strategic actors manifests in four closely interrelated elements identified by Krücken and Meier (2006): the definition of organizational goals, the strengthening of accountability mechanisms, the elaboration of formal organizational structures, and the rise of the management profession. Together, these developments are reflected in the increasing centralization of decision-making through professionalized management structures and the organization of support and control functions, which Steck (2003) refers to as the "corporatization" of higher education institutions.

The organizational turn of universities has not only transformed their internal functioning but also reshaped the scholarly discourse on higher education governance. Whereas earlier research was primarily rooted in sociological and institutional traditions, more recent work increasingly draws on management and public administration scholarship to explain how leadership structures and administrative control instruments condition universities' strategic capacity (Thoenig & Paradeise, 2018). As a result, universities are now widely conceptualized as strategically steered organizations whose capacity for action hinges on managerial coordination and the deployment of management tools and practices – including strategic planning, performance measurement, budgeting systems, and management control systems – that had long been established in corporate and governmental contexts (Vale et al., 2022).

1.2 The Neglect of Universities' Strategic Agency

Much of the existing literature on universities' organizational transition is shaped by an assumption of environmental determinism (see Barbato et al., 2021), portraying universities primarily as entities being molded by exogenous forces. Within this body of research, two dominant analytical perspectives can be distinguished: global convergence and national divergence. While both perspectives contribute important insights into how environmental conditions shape

universities' scope for action, they do so at the expense of understanding how universities enact strategic agency from within – through their own capacities for coordination and collective action.

The global convergence perspective, rooted in neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), emphasizes processes of organizational convergence toward one legitimate, rational university model (Drori et al., 2006; Ramirez, 2010). Large-scale survey and panel data lend empirical support to this view by tracing the diffusion of broad higher education trends across national boundaries (Lee & Ramirez, 2024). However, these studies operate at a high level of abstraction, typically relying on indicators such as institutional size, formal structures, academic program portfolios, student demographics, or budgets. As a result, they offer limited insight into organizational heterogeneity arising from universities' strategic action (Greenwood et al., 2014), particularly with regard to the dynamic interplay between organizational restructuring and strategizing (Bleiklie et al., 2017b).

The national divergence perspective, by contrast, foregrounds country-specific regulatory and governance frameworks that enable or constrain universities' actorhood (Whitley, 2008, 2012; Whitley & Gläser, 2014). Empirical contributions in this tradition commonly draw on comparative case studies of state-university relationships (Bleiklie et al., 2017c; Kogan et al., 2006; Paradeise et al., 2009). While these analyses provide context-sensitive accounts of how national idiosyncrasies shape university governance, they often devote less attention to the complex intra-organizational dynamics within universities themselves.

Taken together, both perspectives privilege external – either global or national – determinants of organizational change and tend to conceptualize universities as largely passive or reactive actors. In doing so, they leave universities' strategic agency analytically underdeveloped. Bloch (2021) captures this contradiction by arguing that dominant portrayals of universities as passive conformers to isomorphic pressures are in tension with theoretical accounts of organizational actorhood that emphasize strategic agency – a tension that calls for analysis at the meso-organizational level.

Responding to critiques of environmental determinism, a growing strand of research has shifted attention toward the active dimension of universities' organizational actorhood. Rather than conceiving universities primarily as passive adapters to external pressures, this perspective emphasizes how they purposefully interpret, translate, and shape their institutional environment (Bloch, 2021; Huisman & Burgoa, 2023). In the context of reforms that have expanded institu-

tional autonomy, Fumasoli and Stensaker (2013) therefore call for an analytical linkage between universities and their institutional environment that moves beyond state-university relations and transcends earlier depictions of universities as organized anarchies or as a distinct organizational form with predefined characteristics. Along similar lines, Bleiklie et al. (2017a) argue that universities' engagement with institutional pressures cannot be reduced to simple compliance or resistance; instead, the core challenge lies in understanding how universities reconcile and integrate competing organizational principles in ways that sustain both institutional coherence and organizational functionality.

While existing empirical research demonstrates substantial variation in universities' strategic capacities (e.g., Boitier et al., 2018; Thoenig & Paradeise, 2016), the implications of this variation for organizational actorhood remain insufficiently theorized. Qualitative case studies have generated rich insights into how individual universities, embedded in unique contexts, address the flux in higher education through strategic and collective action (Bronstein & Reihlen, 2014). However, such studies are often context-specific, largely descriptive, and limited in their capacity to explain cross-organizational and cross-national patterns of organizational change (Ferlie et al., 2008; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013; Wilkesmann, 2019; Tight, 2012). To advance understanding of how universities leverage their expanded room for maneuver in navigating multiple competitions, these dispersed empirical insights therefore need to be systematically integrated and reinterpreted from a meta-perspective.

1.3 Universities' Actorhood in Multiple Competitions

To address the outlined problem, this thesis aims to answer the following research question:

> How do archetypes of organizational actorhood emerge when universities organize their responses to multiple competitions?

This question directs attention to how universities interpret multiple competitions within higher education and how they enact their strategic agency in response, thereby giving rise to distinct organizational configurations.

Guided by the analytical framework applied in this study, the research question is examined through three interrelated dimensions: how universities make sense of multiple competitions through organization-specific interpretive schemes; how they organize action in response, producing distinct response patterns; and how these interpretive schemes and response pat-

terns stabilize into coherent organizational configurations. Together, these dimensions provide the analytical basis for explaining the emergence of distinct archetypes of organizational actorhood in higher education.

1.4 Identifying Archetypes of Organizational Actorhood Through a Configuration-Based Qualitative Meta-Study

This study aims to advance understanding of how universities, as organizational actors, respond to multiple competitions by conceptualizing and empirically identifying distinct archetypes of actorhood in higher education. In doing so, it speaks directly to ongoing debates on how systemic transformations give rise to new organizational forms, echoing recent calls to foreground organizing and to ask "how and why organizing matters" (Sahlin et al., 2024).

To date, dominant neo-institutional perspectives on the transformation of higher education governance have tended to conceptualize universities' organizational actorhood as an abstract construct shaped primarily by external contingencies. While this approach has been instrumental in elucidating "actorhood as expectation" from a field-level perspective (Bloch, 2021, p. 490), it reinforces Greenwood et al.'s (2014, p. 1211) critique that much institutional scholarship focuses on whether organizations adopt particular structures or practices, while devoting insufficient attention to the internal dynamics through which field-level pressures are interpreted and translated into organizational action. In response, higher education scholars increasingly call for more fine-grained analyses of actorhood at the meso-organizational level, aimed at unpacking how universities enact "actorhood as imperative" (Bloch, 2021, p. 492). From this perspective, organizations are not merely shaped by external pressures but actively guide how such pressures are interpreted and translated strategically into collective action, thereby influencing their organizational trajectories from within (Fumasoli et al., 2020). This study takes up that challenge by emphasizing the active dimension of universities' turn into strategic actors and, in doing so, contributes empirically to ongoing debates about whether, how, and to what extent universities exercise organizational agency in higher education (Bloch, 2021).

Responding to calls to re-center the organizational level as a meaningful unit of analysis (Barbato et al., 2021), this study revitalizes the archetype approach (Greenwood et al., 2014) to advance an organization-centered understanding of how universities leverage their strategic agency in response to multiple competitions. Drawing on Greenwood and Hinings (1993), this study conceptualizes archetypes of organizational actorhood as comprising interrelated response patterns and configurations, both shaped by an underlying interpretive scheme through which multiple competitions are perceived and addressed. This analytical framework enables a

nuanced examination of how universities enact actorhood over time and captures the diversity of governance repertoires beyond the conventional dichotomy between bureaucratic-academic and corporate-managerial ideal types (Bleiklie et al., 2017a). By foregrounding organizations' interaction with external contingencies and their intra-organizational arrangements, the study reinforces the organization as a central locus of analysis in institutional theory (Greenwood et al., 2014) and contributes to long-standing debates on how novel organizational archetypes emerge within institutional fields (Brock, 2006; Brock et al., 2007; Greenwood & Hinings, 1993).

By examining how distinct archetypes of organizational actorhood emerge as universities organize collective action and align strategy and structure, this study seeks to advance institutional theory through a configurational lens that foregrounds organizations as sources of variability (Hinings, 2018). While neo-institutional theory is particularly strong in explaining field-level dynamics of organizational convergence, a configurational perspective complements it by accounting for organizational differentiation. Following Hinings (2018), this study builds on the premise that the core assumptions of institutional theory are especially compatible with a configurational approach, given their shared emphasis on patterned and enduring organizational arrangements. By shifting analytical attention from macro-level field dynamics to the meso-level of organizations, this approach enables a more fine-grained understanding of how universities leverage their room for maneuver and exercise strategic agency within the highly institutionalized field of higher education.

Moreover, by employing a qualitative meta-study – still rarely used in higher education research – this study aims to identify recurring patterns of universities' transition into strategic actors. Revealing such patterns requires an empirical breadth that single-case or small-*N* studies cannot provide. The qualitative meta-study offers precisely this scale (Sandelowski et al., 1997): by synthesizing diverse, in-depth empirical case studies not originally intended for a qualitative meta-analysis (Hoon, 2013), it aggregates sufficient organizational variation to distinguish idiosyncratic developments from robust, cross-organizational patterns. In doing so, this approach supports theory development on how new organizational forms emerge as universities enact actorhood in response to multiple competitions.

Building on this methodological rationale, the empirical foundation of this study comprises 33 case studies from 13 countries. These cases were identified through a rigorously filtered pool of 27,648 topic-related publications across seven databases and selected in accordance with the ENTREQ protocol (Tong et al., 2012). Together, they provide high-quality, in-depth accounts

of universities' organizational responses to systemic transformation in higher education. In line with Thoenig and Paradeise's (2016) argument that meaningful comparison in higher education research should rest on organizational capabilities rather than legal status or national location, case selection followed substantive criteria. Accordingly, the included case studies document, first, how universities organize action in relation to multiple competitions; second, how these responses are manifested in the strategic and structural dimensions of organizational configurations; and third, how the organization collectively interprets competitive pressures. Across all cases, competition manifests in various forms, ranging from funding and reputation to staffing, student recruitment, and organizational legitimacy. Yet the central source of analytical insight lies in the variation of organizational responses – specifically in how universities mobilize organizational capacities and enact strategic agency in addressing these pressures. This variation provides a strong comparative basis for configurational theorizing on the emergence of new organizational forms under conditions of institutional transformation. To identify organizational patterns that cannot be inferred from isolated cases alone, the analysis applies abductive reasoning in iterative cycles, enabling the development of theoretical insights that extend beyond both the original case studies and the existing literature (Mingers, 2012; Peirce, 1955; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021).

1.5 Advancing Higher Education Research Through Cross-National Patterns of Universities' Strategic Agency

The study foregrounds the active dimension of organizational actorhood and contributes to ongoing debates on how multiple competitions in higher education have fostered the emergence of heterogeneous new organizational forms. By systematically reinterpreting existing empirical case studies through a qualitative meta-study informed by a configurational perspective on actorhood archetypes, the analysis generates novel insights into universities' strategic agency. Drawing on 33 in-depth case studies that examine how individual universities respond to multiple competitions, the findings demonstrate that there is no "all-pervasive global or one-size-fits-all standard" (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013, p. 196) according to which universities enact actorhood. Rather than converging on a single organizational model, universities' transitions from loosely coupled systems give rise to the coexistence of three robust archetypes of actorhood: adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional. These archetypes move beyond externally deterministic explanations based either on isomorphic adoption of one globally dominant template or on idiosyncrasies of national higher education systems. Instead, they highlight the organizational variability that emerges as universities leverage their room for maneuver in

reactive, active, or proactive ways. Taken together, these insights provide the foundation for the three core contributions this study makes to the theorization and empirical understanding of organizational actorhood under conditions of multiple competitions in higher education.

First, the study advances neo-institutional theorizing on organizational actorhood by conceptualizing an archetype-of-actorhood framework that views archetypes as "templates of organizing" (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996, p. 1025). This framework emphasizes the dynamic, unfolding nature of organizational responses to multiple competitions over time, resulting in new organizational configurations. Thus, it renders organizational configurations fruitful for the research areas of competition and higher education institutions. While traditional institutionalist approaches in higher education research tend to view universities' actorhood as a product of external determinants (see Barbato et al., 2021), largely limited to broad systemic influences (e.g., Whitley, 2008, 2012; Whitley & Gläser, 2014), this study shifts analytical attention toward the intra-organizational mechanisms through which universities enact actorhood, namely how they make sense of and respond to competitive pressures and build distinct yet coherent organizational configurations.

By integrating universities' procedural responses into organizational configuration research – a line of inquiry that has gained increasing prominence in recent organizational studies (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017) – this study dynamizes research on archetypes of actorhood. Adopting a procedural perspective, it seeks to explain how organizational phenomena emerge, evolve, and change over time, highlighting processes of adaptation and interaction within organizational contexts (Hinings, 2018). In contrast to earlier configurational studies that primarily described stable patterns, this study advances a dynamic use of configurations as analytical devices for theory development (Hinings, 2018), capturing the mechanisms underlying pattern formation and transformation. By focusing on the meso-organizational level, this approach enables a more fine-grained analysis of how organizational responses to competitive environments unfold over time.

Second, the study introduces the qualitative meta-study as a methodological approach to higher education research, particularly in the analysis of university governance and multiple competitions. While existing empirical research in this field has relied predominantly on qualitative case studies that are well suited to generating rich, context-sensitive insights into university governance, such studies often remain largely descriptive and provide limited leverage for identifying broader explanatory patterns (e.g., Bronstein & Reihlen, 2014; Wilkesmann, 2019). Qualitative meta-studies build on this rich empirical base by systematically synthesizing and

reinterpreting existing case studies (Finfgeld, 2003; Habersang & Reihlen, 2025; Hoon, 2013; Paterson et al., 2001; Sandelowski et al., 1997; Thorne, 2022). Long-established in health sciences (e.g., Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Timulak, 2009), qualitative meta-studies have more recently gained traction in organization and management research (e.g., Combs et al., 2019; Habersang et al., 2019). Their distinctive contribution lies in their capacity to integrate findings across multiple case studies, develop interpretive translations, and identify recurring explanatory patterns within specific contexts (Rousseau et al., 2008; Sandelowski et al., 1997). Applied to the study of university governance, the qualitative meta-study thus enhances the robustness and generalizability of empirical insights by moving beyond isolated case evidence and enabling theory development at a more general level. In doing so, it offers a promising methodological avenue for advancing the understanding of how universities organize and respond to competitive pressures.

Third, the study provides valuable empirical leverage for future comparative research. While much of the existing literature on university governance has productively focused on state-university relations but remains largely confined to national trends and patterns (Ferlie et al., 2008; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013; Ramirez & Tiplic, 2014), the findings of this qualitative meta-study suggest that national higher education systems do not necessarily determine exogenously how universities enact organizational actorhood. Rather, the analysis shows that distinct archetypes of actorhood can coexist within the same national higher education system, while identical archetypes may emerge across different national contexts. This pattern points either to a far-reaching convergence of reform trajectories or to a more limited structuring influence of national policies on universities' organizational evolution than often assumed. Taken together, these findings highlight universities' capacity to actively shape their actorhood from within through strategic agency, collective action, and positioning efforts within the academic landscape (Barbato et al., 2021; Frølich et al., 2019). In this respect, this study lends support to Ramirez and Tiplic's (2014) call for more systematic research on emerging organizational forms across countries.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into six chapters, each building progressively toward a comprehensive understanding of how universities enact actorhood in response to multiple competitions.

Chapter 2 – State of the Art – provides an in-depth review of the existing scholarly literature. It traces the institutional change that has led to the proliferation of multiple competitions in

higher education and examines how universities have evolved from traditionally loosely coupled systems into strategic organizational actors. This chapter also synthesizes the analytical perspectives – global convergence, national divergence, and organizational divergence – to highlight current gaps in understanding how universities actively shape their organizational actorhood.

Chapter 3 – Analytical Framework – develops the theoretical foundation for this study. Drawing on configurational and archetype theory, it introduces the archetype-of-actorhood framework, which conceptualizes organizational actorhood as a dynamic interplay of interpretive schemes, response patterns, and strategy-structure configurations. This framework guides the empirical analysis presented in later chapters.

Chapter 4 – Methodology – presents the qualitative meta-study approach employed to analyze 33 university cases across 13 national higher education systems. It details the transparent audit trail, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the coding and analytical procedures, and the abductive reasoning process that underpins the development of theoretical insights.

Chapter 5 – Results – outlines the empirical findings. It first describes the initial configuration common to many universities before competition intensified. It then elaborates three robust archetypes of organizational actorhood – adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional – illustrating how universities interpret and respond to multiple competitions and how these responses give rise to coherent organizational configurations.

Chapter 6 – Discussion – integrates the analytical and empirical insights of the dissertation. It reflects on the empirical findings in relation to the literature and highlights the study's contributions to research on organizational actorhood and multiple competitions, discusses theoretical and methodological implications for higher education and organizational research, reflects on limitations, and delineates directions for future research.

2 State of the Art: Multiple Competitions within Higher Education and the Evolution of Universities into Organizational Actors

Governing and organizing within universities has garnered increasing scholarly interest. Driven by institutional change closely linked to comprehensive higher education reforms and growing competition among institutions, the modus operandi within universities is undergoing transformation. While universities were traditionally considered organized anarchies (Cohen et al., 1972) and prototypes of loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976), in recent decades they have evolved into complete organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000), i.e., goal-oriented, strategic, organizational actors that act for and out of themselves (Bloch, 2021).

This chapter systematically examines these intertwined developments: it first outlines the institutional and competitive transformations reshaping higher education, then analyzes universities' organizational turn toward actorhood, and finally synthesizes analytical perspectives that have sought to explain these shifts.

2.1 Point of Departure: Institutional Change and the Proliferation of Multiple Competitions

For several decades, higher education has undergone significant institutional change. Neoliberal ideology has permeated higher education systems worldwide, aiming to enhance their effectiveness and efficiency through market principles and managerial techniques. These ideas – commonly grouped under the broad label of New Public Management (NPM) – have largely supplanted the traditional approach to public administration (Hood, 1991), including the highly institutionalized field of higher education (Ferlie et al., 2008). A defining consequence of NPM-inspired higher education reforms has been the implementation of competition as a central governance mechanism. By placing universities in direct competition for financial, human, and symbolic resources – resources they can attract only through strategic use of their expanded organizational autonomy – reforms have rendered institutions increasingly accountable for their actions, thereby advancing their transition into strategic organizational actors.

2.1.1 Traditional University Governance and the Historical Absence of Strategic Agency

Higher education institutions – especially research-oriented universities – have long been regarded as a special type of organization. They are institutionally complex, professionally dominated, and defined by the inherently open-ended nature of their core activities – research and

teaching (Doyle & Brady, 2018). Despite their centuries-old history – the University of Bologna dates back to 1088 (Rüegg, 1992) – their fundamental structures have remained strikingly stable across time and national contexts (Musselin, 2007; Stichweh, 2023), reinforcing the longstanding view of universities as robust public knowledge institutions.

Long before contemporary debates on universities' organizational actorhood emerged, influential contributions in organizational theory have examined the distinctive characteristics of universities. These works emphasized that universities, by virtue of their structural and cultural characteristics, were traditionally not conceived as strategic organizational actors. Instead, they were portrayed as organizations whose internal fragmentation and unique decision-making processes fundamentally conflicted with the idea of coherent, goal-oriented agency (Hattke et al., 2016a).

One central conceptualization underpinning this view is Cohen et al.'s (1972) classic portrayal of universities as organized anarchies. Their analysis presents universities as institutions characterized by ambiguous or conflicting goals, non-standardized and unpredictable work processes, and shifting patterns of involvement in decision-making. Rather than functioning as integrated organizations, universities are characterized by multiple and pluralistic goal-systems (Frost et al., 2016), where decisions emerge from the contingent coupling of problems, solutions, and actors (Cohen et al., 1972). This dynamic is argued to be reinforced by the Humboldtian ideal (Hasse & Krücken, 2009), which anchors universities in long-standing academic norms: a self-regulating "republic of science" (Polanyi, 1962) in which authority stems from peer recognition rather than hierarchical command. Consequently, decision-making tends to be collegial, slow, and consensus-based, typically involving extensive consultation across faculties and departments. In this context, academic leaders are not regarded as executive managers but as *primus inter pares* – first among equals – reflecting their symbolic and representative role within a horizontally structured academic community. Within this organizational template, academics derive their identity and authority primarily from their discipline rather than from the university that employs them (Clark, 1983).

Karl Weick's (1976) conceptualization of universities as loosely coupled systems further reinforces the depiction of universities as weakly integrated organizations. In Weick's analysis, universities exhibit weak internal integration and limited interdependence between organizational subunits. Faculties, departments, and academic disciplines operate with substantial autonomy, and their activities could be modified or removed without fundamentally affecting the

organization as a whole (Maassen & Stensaker, 2019). This structural fragmentation undermines institution-wide coordination and renders the formulation or enforcement of organization-level strategies exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. Capturing this traditional condition with ironic precision, Mintzberg and Rose (2003) describe universities as "a set of activities held together by common parking lots" (p. 286), underscoring the minimal internal integration that traditionally defined the university's organizational structure. Musselin (2007) similarly observes that academic work is so individualized that colleagues often remain largely unaffected by each other's daily activities – an additional indication of the institution's limited organizational cohesion.

These classical accounts converge on a shared insight: they depict universities not as strategic actors (Hattke et al., 2016a) but as "incomplete organizations" that lacked identity, hierarchy, and rationality (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000, p. 722).

Traditional state-university relations further reinforced the absence of universities' strategic agency. Historically, most universities were embedded in relatively stable public-sector arrangements in which governments exercised substantial control over finances, infrastructure, and personnel decisions, while leaving academic affairs largely to professional self-regulation[1] (de Boer et al., 2007; Bleiklie et al., 2017a). While the resulting compartmentalized governance order (Bleiklie et al., 2017b) – rooted in a historically evolved "social pact" between state and university (Pinheiro & Stensaker, 2014, p. 3) – provided stability and protected academic autonomy, it simultaneously constrained universities' room for maneuver and dampened incentives for strategic organizational action.

2.1.2 A Call for Change: The Rise of New Public Management in Higher Education

By the late twentieth century, public administration – including higher education governance – had entered a new era. Although traditional governance arrangements in higher education cre-

[1] The extent of institutional decision-making authority varied between national higher education systems. The hierarchical system of state control was particularly pronounced in Europe, where public funding was dominant and closely linked to bureaucratic oversight. In contrast, universities in the United States traditionally enjoyed a comparatively greater degree of financial and institutional autonomy, allowing for a broader organizational capacity to act (Capano & Pritoni, 2020). However, the historical lack of decision-making capability at the organizational level has been observed in various higher education systems worldwide as elaborated by Krücken and Meier (2006), including the German and French systems, where state control and academic oligarchy dominated governance structures (Hasse & Krücken, 2013). Particularly in the French context, professors identified themselves more strongly with their disciplines than with their organization (Musselin, 1999). Similarly, in Great Britain, while collective decision-making was emphasized in bottom-heavy universities, they did not operate as robust top-down actors (Clark, 1983). Even in the United States during the 1960s, universities were not perceived as strong organizational actors due to their lack of integration and absence of a powerful strategic core, as elaborated by Krücken and Meier (2006).

ated a strong sense of professional identity and legitimacy, they were increasingly seen as inadequate in light of new social, economic, and political pressures. Across many OECD countries, the expansion of student enrollment, rising public expenditures, and growing political expectations concerning the contribution of universities to innovation, labor markets, and economic competitiveness placed the higher education sector under intensified scrutiny (Bleiklie, 2018; Ferlie et al., 2008). The prevailing model – grounded in professional autonomy, trust-based delegation, and stable input funding – was criticized for being inefficient, opaque, and insufficiently responsive to societal change. Universities were increasingly portrayed as black boxes (Ferlie et al., 2008), poorly accountable for public resources, largely immune to external steering, and only weakly aligned with strategic national priorities. These perceptions provided fertile ground for sectoral reforms that fundamentally redefined the institutional fabric of higher education governance.

Against this backdrop, New Public Management (NPM) emerged as a reform paradigm that promised to modernize public service (Ferlie et al., 2008; Hughes, 1998; Ongaro, 2009). Originally developed in Anglophone countries – particularly the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand – in the 1980s, NPM quickly gained traction across a wide range of policy sectors, including education, healthcare, and welfare, and evolved into a global reform agenda (Hood, 1991; Ongaro, 2009). Its influence was both normative and operational: NPM not only reversed existing public administration logics but also introduced new instruments for governing public institutions.

At its core, NPM aimed to improve the so-called "3 Es": efficiency, effectiveness, and economy – thus, the functioning of public organizations (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). NPM advocated for a results-oriented, market-based approach to public governance, borrowing heavily from private-sector management practices (Hood, 1995; Ferlie et al., 2008). It sought to replace state control over universities with decentralized and competitive arrangements, offering increased institutional autonomy in exchange for performance-based accountability. This paradigm shift was accompanied by a new vocabulary, including terms such as a modernization of the public sector (Ongaro, 2009) in continental Europe, respectively marketization in Anglo-Saxon countries (Bleiklie, 2018), a re-invention of an entrepreneurial government (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), and a market-based public administration (Lan & Rosenbloom, 1992). Yet, among these terms, the umbrella concept NPM has remained the most widely applied (McLaughlin et al., 2002), encapsulating a range of diverse management orientations, techniques, and practices, thus functioning as a governance toolbox.

Although NPM encompasses a broad orientation and a variety of governance instruments, its core doctrines can be summarized as follows (Hood, 1992, 1995; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004):

- A focus on performance and outcomes: Emphasizing results over processes and governing through measurable indicators of success.
- Decentralization and disaggregation: Shifting authority away from central bureaucracies and breaking up large monolithic systems into more autonomous units.
- Market orientation and competition: Creating quasi-markets and incentive structures based on competition among providers, consumers, and internal units.
- Management by objectives: Prioritizing goal setting, performance contracts, and strategic management over traditional professional norms.
- Cost-efficiency and fiscal discipline: Applying budgeting constraints and performance audits to reduce public spending and improve value for money.

These doctrines can be distilled into three core elements – disaggregation, competition, and incentivization (Dunleavy et al., 2006) – reflecting a broader ideological shift, which is encapsulated in reform slogans such as "doing more with less" (e.g., Osborne, 1993), "value for money" (e.g., Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2023), or "less state, more market" (e.g., de Boer et al., 2007). Although the height of NPM reforms has long passed, these core principles continue to inform how many OECD governments steer their public sectors (Wynen et al., 2014), including higher education.

Within the higher education sector, NPM doctrines have redefined the governance of universities. As de Boer et al. (2007) note, "traditional state-centered governing arrangements have been critiqued and replaced by alternative modes of governance" (p. 27). Instead of exercising direct control over many university operations, governments have increasingly adopted a model of steering at a distance (Capano, 2008; Kickert, 1995). This approach has allowed higher education institutions greater formal autonomy but conditions this on their ability to deliver measurable results (Capano, 2008). Funding, recognition, and legitimacy have increasingly been tied to performance metrics, output indicators, and compliance with national objectives. Universities have been expected to align with external demands and funding streams (Deiaco et al., 2012), and to demonstrate academic outputs to funders, regulators, and society at large (Huisman & Burgoa, 2023). Usually, such performance demonstrations have been formalized in performance agreements negotiated with the government (Thynne & Wettenhall, 2004). Simultaneously, in many countries, expanded student choice and the introduction or rise of tuition fees have fostered a consumer mentality among students and their families (Ferlie et al., 2008). This

broader paradigm shift has not replaced traditional logics but added new ones. Rather than displacing professional and bureaucratic forms of governance, the market logic introduced by NPM has been layered onto them, creating a pluralistic environment in which multiple institutional logics coexist and often compete. Concepts such as academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), (new) managerialism (Deem, 2001; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Shepherd, 2018), and audit university (Power, 1997) illustrate how market-oriented reforms have altered both the structures and cultures of higher education.

While there is broad consensus that a paradigm shift within higher education has occurred globally, much of the literature focuses on the variations of NPM adoptions across countries, emphasizing that NPM is far from uniform (e.g., Bleiklie et al., 2017c; Broucker et al., 2016; Kogan et al., 2006; Ongaro, 2009; Paradeise et al., 2009). These comparative studies emphasize that public management operates within national contexts (Hood, 1991) and argue that NPM's cultural, ethical, and political dimensions may clash with national traditions – particularly in countries like France, Germany, and those in the Mediterranean (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011), while market-oriented logics had already been present in U.S. higher education well before the NPM reforms (Berman, 2012). Accordingly, Bleiklie (2018) links cross-national variation in higher education systems to historically evolved, country-specific governance structures embedded in legal, financial, and evaluative arrangements. Ferlie et al. (2008) find different patterns in ten NPM indicators in higher education, concluding that multiple subtypes of NPM have emerged. Seeber et al. (2015) reinforce this view, showing that politico-administrative regimes influence how modernization ideas are adopted and put into practice among 26 universities across eight European countries.

Despite national variations in the timing and form of NPM implementation, scholars widely agree that its core principles have diffused worldwide. For instance, Bleiklie (2018) synthesizes the findings of recent comparative studies, identifying four global trends in higher education: first, the justification of reforms through an ideology emphasizing efficiency and quality in research and teaching; second, the introduction of formal structures facilitating evaluation processes and competitive research funding; third, the strengthening of managerial control; and fourth, the diminishing link between institutional and individual autonomy. Likewise, Ramirez (2010) highlights the worldwide diffusion of accounting and excellence regimes that require universities to present their performance in standardized and comparable ways, emphasizing the role of global scripts over historical and national idiosyncrasies. Thus, notwithstanding dif-

ferences in historical trajectories, the literature points to a broad shift in higher education systems toward a shared organizational logic shaped by marketization and managerial governance (Frost et al., 2016).

2.1.3 Competition as a Governance Mechanism for Coordinating Action in Higher Education

A defining consequence of NPM-inspired higher education reforms has been the formal implementation of competition as a core governance mechanism. From a governance perspective, competition functions as a distinct steering instrument for coordinating action. Whereas governance in general is a multilevel phenomenon that refers to the processes and mechanisms through which action is coordinated and decisions are made in contexts where authority is dispersed and multiple actors interact (Frost et al., 2016; Kezar & Eckel, 2004), competition in particular can be understood as a mechanism that channels action in a common direction through the prospect of rewards and the fear of losses among actors pursuing the same scarce good or objective (Benz, 2007).

Although governance mechanisms seldom occur in isolation, competition in higher education is analytically separable from other modes of coordination (Krücken, 2021; German Science Council, 2018):

- Community coordinates action through collegial norms, peer judgment, and professional self-regulation within academic communities. It relies on informal trust-based relations that foster integration and collective identity without producing rivalry. Competition, in contrast, transforms peer judgments into formalized comparisons that guide rewards and sanctions, thereby differentiating successful and unsuccessful actors.
- Hierarchy coordinates action through legal-rational authority, binding rules, and command structures. Competition, by contrast, coordinates indirectly through relative comparisons, affording actors more autonomy while still steering behavior through external evaluation.
- Negotiation coordinates action through bargaining and dialogue in direct communication to reach joint outcomes, often seeking compromise and inclusiveness. Competition differs by coordinating indirectly through external evaluation and comparison, rewarding some actors and sanctioning others without requiring interaction or agreement among them.

Although competition has gained prominence under NPM, it has not displaced other governance mechanisms; instead, university governance has evolved into hybrid configurations in

which competitive steering coexists with alternative modes of coordination, often reinforcing hierarchical control in the form of managerial self-governance while standing in tension with traditional academic self-governance (de Boer et al., 2007).

The diffusion of NPM in higher education has been accompanied by a strong market rhetoric emphasizing efficiency, responsiveness, and consumer choice through competition. From a classical economic perspective, competition is indeed primarily a market mechanism: it arises when several actors strive for a good that not all can obtain (Stigler, 1972), and prices serve as the central coordination device. Under conditions of perfect competition, prices aggregate information, signal scarcity, and discipline inefficient actors, thereby aligning individual utility maximization with efficient resource allocation (Stigler, 1972).

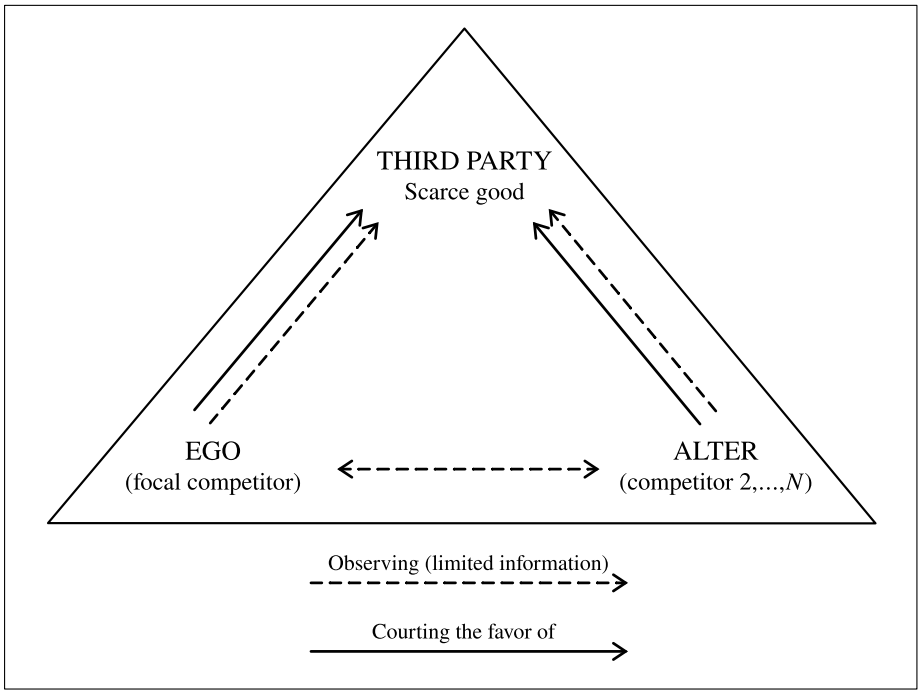
However, such a price-based logic applies only partially to higher education and science. In open science, knowledge production and teaching exhibit key features of public goods – non-rivalry, uncertainty of outcomes, incomplete contracts, and pervasive information asymmetries (Agasisti & Catalano, 2006). These characteristics constrain the feasibility of price coordination and increase the risk of market failure (Agasisti & Catalano, 2006). With only a few exceptions (e.g., tuition fees, patents, executive education), higher education therefore does not function as a classical market in which competition and exchange coincide. As a result, competitive coordination in higher education operates not through the invisible hand of prices, but through the visible hand of quality evaluations (Musselin, 2018; Naidoo, 2018). Rankings, performance indicators, peer review, and assessment procedures effectively determine who wins in competition for funding, students, staff, prestige, or legitimacy. Regardless of the particular resource at stake, competition in higher education is fundamentally a competition over quality (Musselin, 2018), even when this quality is only indirectly measured or symbolically represented.

Given these limitations of the market analogy, a sociologically grounded understanding of competition is more appropriate for the higher education context. Building on Simmel (2008), competition can be conceptualized as a triadic constellation in which at least two actors strive for the same scarce and desirable good while a third party controls its allocation (see Figure 1). Competitors must not confront each other directly; instead, they observe one another as well as the third party – such as a funding agency, students, ranking organization, or university leadership – whom they seek to convince of their superiority. Because the allocation of the competitive good lies in the future, competition is forward-looking and thus distinct from antagonistic conflict. In Simmel's formulation, competition channels individual ambitions while producing

outcomes perceived as legitimate, since inequality results from rule-based comparison rather than arbitrary power (Szöllösi-Janze, 2021).

Figure 1

Triadic Structure of Competition



Note. Reproduced from Kosmützky and Meier (2026, p. 21).

Building on Simmel, Arora-Jonsson et al. (2020, 2021) deepen the sociological understanding of competition by emphasizing that it is not a natural condition but a socially constructed arrangement (see also Wolfmayr, 2023). They identify four constitutive elements that do not necessarily have to be constructed simultaneously for competition to exist. These four elements are the actors involved in competition, the relationships in which those actors relate to each other, the scarcity of the competitive good, and the desire to obtain it (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2021, p. 21). Competitors must mutually recognize each other, attribute to one another an interest in the same exclusive good, and acknowledge a third party's authority to allocate it. This third party may even consist of imagined publics whose perceived attention competitors seek to attract (Werron, 2015).

Arora-Jonsson et al. (2020) also draw attention to fourth parties – actors who design, institutionalize, and maintain competitive arenas such as ministries, research councils, rankings producers, or inter-university alliances. These actors shape the rules and structure of competition. Whether the competitive good is tangible (e.g., funding) or intangible (e.g., reputation), neither

direct exchange nor any interaction among the actors is required; mutual awareness alone constitutes them as actors in competition and thereby influences their behavior (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020).

Wolfmayr (2023) builds on this work by translating these elements into four dimensions of a "competitization" process: competition by scarcity, by mechanism, by imaginary, and by agency. Emphasizing the latter – the capability to behave competitively – Wolfmayr underscores that competition should not merely be understood as an environmental force shaping organizational behavior (see Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020) but also as a form of action that organizations actively perform. Kosmützky and Meier (2026) extend this argument by foregrounding the performative dimension of competing, highlighting how actors observe signals from third parties and other competitors, and actively court those third parties by "performing, strategic[ally] informing, influencing valuation criteria, and attracting attention" (p. 22).

Building on these general definitions and perspectives, the subsequent section reviews the specific characteristics of what have come to be described as multiple competitions in higher education.

2.1.4 Multiple Competitions: The Peculiarities of Competition in Higher Education

Competition is by no means a new phenomenon in higher education; on the contrary, science has always been inherently competitive. Scholars such as Merton, Bourdieu, and Latour emphasize that research has traditionally been organized around rivalry and recognition, functioning as "a motor of sorts for scientific activity" (Musselin, 2018, p. 659). Yet this competitive dynamic unfolded primarily at the national level, where higher education and science were seen as key resources for economic development and military strength, and at the individual level, within academic communities in which scholars sought reputation and intellectual influence by striving to be the first to discover, theorize, and publish (Musselin, 2018). These historical forms of competition were informal and symbolic in nature rather than professionally organized and well equipped in the way contemporary forms of competition are (Musselin, 2018).

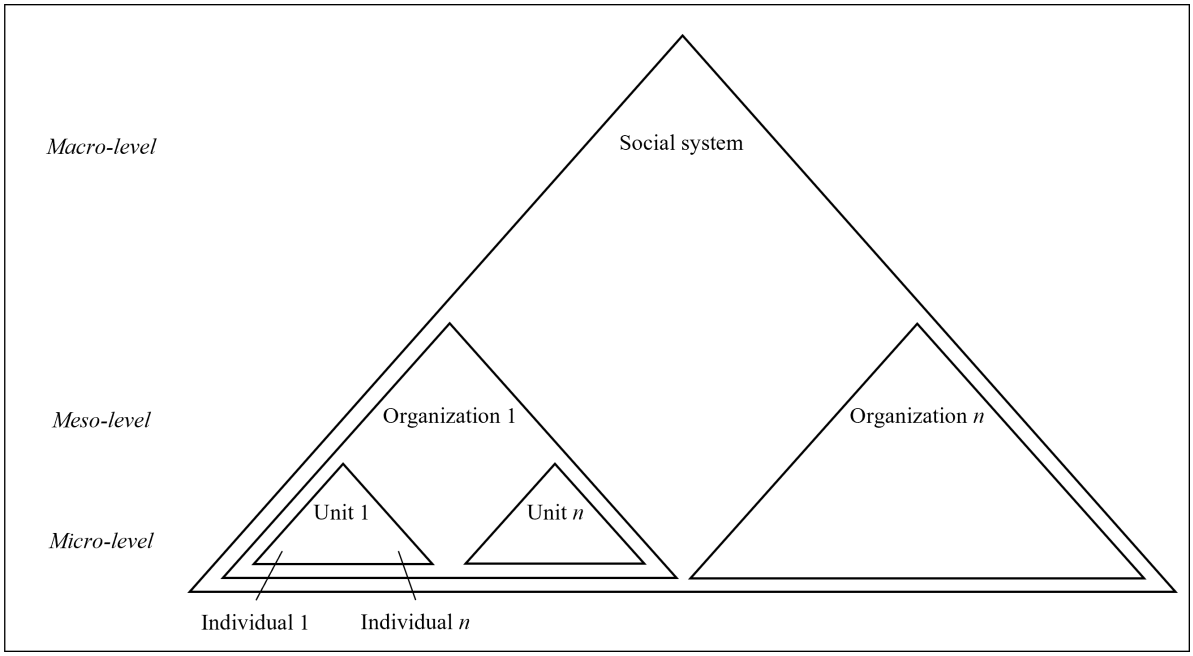
Over recent decades, competition within higher education has escalated (Hart & Rogers, 2023). Driven primarily by the diffusion of NPM-inspired reforms, but also by the expansion of higher education and the forces of globalization (Sporn, 2018), competition has multiplied and intensified within academia, mirroring a broader societal trend in which competitive logics now permeate all levels of social life (Naidoo, 2016).

2.1.4.1 A Dense Web of Interrelated Competitions Across Macro-, Meso-, and Micro-Levels

The changing nature of competition in higher education has been characterized by recent scholarship as a complex, overlapping web of plural competitive arenas – each with its own logics, rules, and evaluative mechanisms. Musselin (2018) highlights that competition has multiplied on several levels simultaneously: "individual, institutional, national and international" (p. 660). Krücken (2021) coins the term multiple competitions to capture the interdependence of plural competitions on several levels, defining it as a situation in which "individual and collective actors are simultaneously embedded in different, nested, and interdependent competitions, in which they strive for material and symbolic resources that they perceive as scarce" (p. 168).

Figure 2

Multiple Competitions as Nested Triadic Structures



Note. Adopted from Kosmützky and Meier (2026, p. 21).

The interdependence of multiple competitions creates a governance architecture in which actors in one competition are simultaneously embedded in others – whether horizontally, vertically, or temporally related (Buenstorf et al., 2025). Vertically nested competitions link actors of different hierarchical levels, for example the entire university organization, its organizational subunits, and ultimately their individual members. Horizontally, competitions connect actors at the same level, such as at least two universities, organizational units, or individual scholars. Temporally, competitions can unfold either synchronously, when competitions take place at the same time, or asynchronously, when the outcome of one competition influences the outcomes

of subsequent ones. Viewed through Simmel's (2008) triadic structure, multiple competitions form a complex web of interlaced triadic constellations (see Figure 2), in which individual constellations are embedded within and connected to one another. The resulting dense web of interrelated competitions influences not only the actors embedded within them but also the higher education system as a whole (Krücken, 2021).

2.1.4.2 Multiple Competitions as a Social Construction by Diverse Actors

Higher education operates through induced competition (Wilkesmann, 2016): rather than being "simply 'out there'" (Krücken, 2021, p. 168), new forms of competition are socially constructed. This construction process involves a variety of actors, as the literature shows. Naidoo (2018), for example, distinguishes between actors outside and inside the university, categorizing them as macro and micro actors, whom he metaphorically describes "as 'shamans' that breathe life into the phenomenon and that are responsible for its generation, constitution and reproduction" (p. 605). According to his analysis, macro actors – including governments, international organizations, and global corporations – generate competition by creating quasi-markets, enforcing benchmarking and performance comparisons, and advocating for for-profit provision. Micro actors – including university leaders, academics, and students – reproduce competition by translating external pressures into institutional practices, co-producing status hierarchies, and embracing consumerist logics.

Musselin (2018), in contrast, highlights the role of diverse private actors, public authorities, and research universities themselves in organizing, equipping, and engaging in competitions. Private firms, she argues, have been central through the development of bibliometrics and big data, commercializing citation indices and creating global rankings that institutionalize impersonal assessment standards. Public authorities have intensified competition by establishing research councils, evaluation agencies, and excellence schemes that allocate resources through selective, project-based funding, thereby formalizing and standardizing competitive mechanisms. Universities, in turn, are not merely subjects of these competitions but also active participants: their leaders adopt competitive strategies, use rankings and evaluations as management tools, and increasingly legitimize decisions by referring to the outcomes of competitive schemes. In this way, Musselin (2018) demonstrates how competition has become institutionalized by being more organized and more equipped, relying on impersonal devices rather than interpersonal judgment (p. 657).

Krücken (2021), in turn, argues that competitions are socially co-produced through interrelated and mutually reinforcing interactions among three social systems: the science system, the state,

and the university. First, the science system has played a central role in the construction of multiple competitions. Drawing on Weber's (1978) notion of rationalization, Krücken (2021) argues that society's growing "trust in numbers" (p. 168) has been crucial for constructing and legitimizing competition in higher education, replacing stable hierarchies with numerical assessments and comparisons. In recent decades, this long-term process has been accelerated by technological advancements and the availability of big data, which have enabled the metricization of an ever-wider range of academic activities. Research outputs, external funding acquisition, teaching performance, international mobility, and forms of public engagement can now be quantified and compared, making competition more visible and systematic (Krücken, 2021). Ranking agencies and bibliometric platforms function as what Arora-Jonsson et al. (2020) describe as fourth parties, providing shared reference points that integrate otherwise isolated actors into a common competitive framework and reinforcing the globalization of academic competition.

Second, the state produces competition in higher education by shifting its governance role from one primarily based on negotiation and hierarchy to one that increasingly relies on competitive principles (Krücken, 2021). Under the paradigm of NPM, governments have reduced stable block grants and expanded performance-based funding, selective excellence schemes, and international benchmarking programs. In this way, public authorities deliberately design competitive arenas in which universities and academics must position themselves. Particularly in contexts where direct regulatory power is limited – such as federal systems or the European Union – competition has become a preferred governance device to pursue political agendas through monetary incentives rather than legal coercion.

Finally, universities themselves are transforming from "loosely coupled expert organizations" (Krücken, 2021, p. 171) into strategic organizational actors. They build managerial capacities, establish performance management systems, and actively monitor their environment through rankings and benchmarks. University leaders increasingly orient institutional strategies around competition for funding, students, staff, and status, while new administrative units translate external pressures into internal contests over funding and visibility. In this way, competition is not only imposed on universities from the outside but also enacted and intensified within their organizational structures.

2.1.4.3 Universities as Competitors for Financial, Human, and Symbolic Resources

Multiple competitions are turning universities into competitors (Bloch et al., 2024; Musselin, 2018). Historically, competition among universities themselves played only a marginal role

and, in many systems[2], was virtually absent as universities were regarded as broadly equivalent entities with limited incentives or opportunities to differentiate themselves (Musselin, 2018). Today, however, inter-organizational competition has become a structural feature of higher education and is consistently described as a global phenomenon (Hart & Rogers, 2023; Krücken, 2021; Naidoo, 2016). Universities of all types and statuses now operate within a pervasive logic of competition, reflected in multiple arenas centered on diverse resources – including funding, staff, students, and status – that are essential for universities' survival and success (Hart & Rogers, 2023; Krücken, 2021).

Inter-organizational competition for financial resources has become one central arena in which universities increasingly compete with one another (Krücken et al., 2025). As stable state funding has steadily stagnated or declined, universities have been pushed to secure additional competitive funding from governments, students, and other private sources (Jongbloed, 2004). Public funding regimes have shifted from negotiated, input-based allocations toward performance-based formulas and competitive schemes, compelling universities to compete for research grants and excellence initiatives designed to enhance academic quality and strengthen the competitiveness of national universities (Crețan & Gherghina, 2015). At the same time, tuition fees have become a major driver of inter-organizational rivalry not only for private universities but increasingly also for public institutions, where fee income and performance-based funding link enrollment numbers and graduation rates directly to institutional budgets (Chevaillier & Eicher, 2002; Kelchen, 2016; Marginson, 2018). Beyond tuition fees, universities increasingly compete for private revenue streams such as donations, industry contracts, and commercial activities, though regulatory and structural constraints limit revenue diversification in many higher education systems (Jongbloed, 2004). Although the growing reliance on private funding sources offers greater financial flexibility and reduces dependence on public subsidies, it simultaneously exposes universities to higher levels of fiscal risk and uncertainty (Stachowiak-Kudla & Kudla, 2017). Taken together, induced financial competition places universities under greater fiscal pressure while at the same time opening new avenues for resource generation, thereby expanding their organizational room for maneuver.

[2] Historically, competition in systems such as France and Germany was organized at the level of disciplines or academic careers rather than between universities as organizations, which were largely treated as equivalent (Musselin, 2018). In contrast, universities in the United States and the United Kingdom developed distinctive identities earlier, with inter-organizational competition intensifying further through the growing prominence of rankings (Musselin, 2018).

Alongside financial resources, competition for human resources has become one of the most consequential arenas in higher education, as universities create value in large part through human capital – understood as the knowledge, skills, and experiences embodied in faculty, staff, and students – which constitutes one of their most critical and least replicable assets (Secundo et al., 2017). Rivalry for academic staff has intensified into a global "war for talent" (Ng, 2013, p. 280), since outstanding researchers are indispensable for securing competitive grants, producing high-impact scholarship, and enhancing institutional visibility (Abramo et al., 2016; Gerhardt et al., 2024). This competition extends equally to administrative staff, whose roles have expanded in response to increasingly complex governance environments and heightened accountability demands. Across both groups, universities seek to attract talent through employer branding and competitive employment packages (Bendaraviciene et al., 2013). Yet, retaining skilled personnel also depends on organizational flexibility, as institutions constrained by rigid administrative procedures risk losing them to more autonomous competitors (Dill, 2001). Students, finally, constitute a critical human resource not only in financial terms but also for universities' legitimacy and status (Geiger, 2022). As the provision of education constitutes a core mission of higher education, the ability to attract and graduate students validates institutional relevance in the eyes of governments and society (Naidoo, 2018). Simultaneously, student selectivity functions as a positional good that signals institutional quality (Braxton, 1993; Marginson, 2006). In recent years, this competition has expanded into new student markets. Universities increasingly recruit international students, who often pay higher tuition fees, and universities also target non-traditional learners through online, hybrid, and part-time programs, which allow them to capture market niches and diversify their student base (Salama & Hinton, 2023). Across these contexts, a broader consumerist logic has emerged in which students are positioned as consumers whose choices intensify inter-organizational competition (Tomlinson, 2016).

Beyond financial and human resources, universities also compete intensively for symbolic resources – above all status and reputation – which serve as powerful proxies for quality in a sector where performance is difficult to measure directly (Branković, 2018). Rankings, excellence labels, and accreditation systems translate complex academic activity into simplified comparative metrics, creating visible hierarchies that amplify inter-organizational rivalry. The first widely recognized global ranking was the Academic Ranking of World Universities, better known as the Shanghai Ranking, which was launched in 2003 to benchmark Chinese universities against global competitors. Its success spurred the rise of other international rankings, most

notably the Times Higher Education (THE) ranking, which has since professionalized and commercialized the field by offering consultancy services alongside its ranking products (Musselin, 2018). The status competition generated by these evaluation instruments drives the formation of categories and alliances. On the surface, this appears paradoxical: competition implies rivalry, whereas alliances are built on cooperation. Yet in practice, cooperation has itself become a strategic resource, as selective groups enhance institutional visibility, legitimacy, and competitiveness (Gunn & Mintrom, 2013; Maassen et al., 2023). Prominent examples include the American Ivy League, the Chinese C9 League, the European League of European Research Universities (LERU), the British Russell Group, the Canadian and German U15 – each bringing together research-intensive universities that claim leadership status. Branković (2018) conceptualizes such alliances as part of the mechanism through which universities construct and sustain their position in the status order, alongside categories and evaluative intermediaries. Therefore, these associations function as both vehicles of collective interest representation and symbolic markers of prestige that distinguish their organizational members from the wider higher education field (Musselin, 2018). In this competitive setting, high status generates cumulative advantages: prestigious universities attract internationally renowned staff and high-achieving students (Geiger, 2022; Horstschräer, 2012), thereby reinforcing their position and making upward mobility particularly difficult for lower-ranked institutions (Branković, 2018). This process corresponds to what Merton (1988) described as the "Matthew effect", i.e., the tendency for advantages to accrue disproportionately to those who already hold them – "the rich getting forever richer, while the poor become poorer" (p. 610). Importantly, these status dynamics interact closely with financial and human resource competition. Success in securing research funding strengthens universities' ability to attract talented staff; outstanding staff help recruit high-achieving students and generate high-impact outputs; and these achievements, in turn, elevate symbolic standing and increase access to further resources. Inter-university competition is therefore not segmented across arenas but interdependent, an argument already emphasized by Krücken's (2021) conceptualization of multiple competitions.

Remarkably, many of these inter-organizational competitions transcend national borders since financial, human, and symbolic resources increasingly circulate internationally (Dill, 2001; Dill & Sporn, 1995). Universities, for instance, compete for supranational research grants, internationally mobile academics and students, and recognition through global rankings and selective alliances. These transnational competitions particularly shape the strategies of already successful universities, for whom global comparison has become the primary reference point (Musselin, 2018; Maassen et al., 2023). Yet their reach extends beyond the elite: the global

visibility and stratification produced by these arenas influence expectations, behavior, and strategic options for universities across the entire field.

2.2 Universities' Organizational Turn into Strategic Actors

As universities have turned into competitors, they have gradually evolved into strategic organizational actors. This development is remarkable given that universities were historically not regarded as organizations capable of coherent and purposive decision-making (Krücken & Meier, 2006). On the contrary, they were long described as loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976) and organized anarchies (Cohen et al., 1972), whose essential nature was seen as constraining strategic agency. However, broader societal changes, public sector reforms inspired by NPM (Pinheiro & Stensaker, 2014), and globalization of higher education (Krücken & Meier, 2006) have fundamentally altered this picture. In contemporary higher education, the notion of the university as an organized anarchy has become "unacceptable" for university governance, as the "status quo in management is no longer adequate" (Teece, 2018, p. 92).

To navigate competitive environments, universities must actively make use of the room for maneuver that has been granted to them through higher education reforms. This room for maneuver rests on expanded organizational autonomy, particularly in three core decision-making domains (Ashby, 1966, p. 296, as cited in Berdahl, 1990, p. 172):

- The freedom to select staff and students and to determine the conditions of their membership,
- the freedom to determine curriculum content and degree standards,
- the freedom to allocate funds (within the amounts available) across different categories of expenditures.

Organizational autonomy in these domains captures, on the one hand, the formal extent of a university's decision-making rights, that is, its managerial autonomy, and, on the other hand, its actual ability to exercise this authority in practice, which refers to "the level of independence of the agency vis-à-vis the government in actually using the delegated decision-making competencies" (Verhoest et al., 2004, p. 105). While scholars have highlighted the persistent gap between formal and actual autonomy – some arguing that much autonomy remains merely procedural (Treuthardt & Välimaa, 2008), others emphasizing its relational nature shaped by internal governance structures and external environments (Bleiklie et al., 2015) – there is broad consensus that universities' organizational capacity to act has significantly increased in recent decades (Bleiklie et al., 2017a; Maassen et al., 2017).

Importantly, however, this formally granted organizational autonomy constitutes only the structural precondition for competitive behavior (Nokkala, 2012). It does not automatically translate into strategic action. To convert their expanded room for maneuver into strategic action, universities must actively make choices, define priorities, and embed them in organizational practice. They must "act as a single unit pursuing collective aims" (Pinheiro & Young, 2017, p. 130), since the cumulative performance of individual university members is no longer sufficient for success in inter-organizational competitions. In other words, to compete effectively, universities must mobilize collective action by aligning the efforts of their members and integrating diverse activities to generate synergies that make the organization more than the sum of its parts (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2024). In this sense, being competitive means more than merely surviving in an environment of rivalry. It refers to a university's ability to secure a favorable position in the higher education sector by leveraging its resources and capabilities effectively to generate distinct advantages over other institutions (Hart & Rogers, 2024). Ultimately, these developments illustrate Musselin's (2018) conclusion: "Competition therefore drives the evolution of universities into organizations" (Musselin, 2018, p. 664).

2.2.1 Organizational Actorhood: Universities Acting in Their Own Right

The transition of universities into strategic, goal-oriented, integrated, and complete organizations has become a key concern in contemporary higher education research, encapsulated in the concept of organizational actorhood.

Universities' organizational actorhood builds on their transition into formal and complete organizations (Frølich et al., 2017). Since universities have been increasingly exposed to competitive pressures, held accountable through performance metrics, and granted greater formal autonomy, they have developed key organizational features – identity, hierarchy, and rationality – that reflect those of complete organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000, p. 721). Deepening this organizational transition, Ramirez (2010, p. 46) argues that universities are now expected to act as fully fledged organizations: they must formulate goals, engage in strategic planning, rely on professionalized staff and specialized systems, and continuously assess their performance in order to adjust goals, priorities, and resource allocations accordingly. Contemporary scholarship thus conceptualizes universities – like other public institutions – "first and foremost as organizations, having typical organizational problems and needing efficient organizational solutions" (Krücken & Meier, 2006, p. 242).

Today, the shifting modus operandi within universities is widely acknowledged and has been the subject of numerous higher education publications. Scholars describe universities as "stakeholder universities" (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007, p. 478), "entrepreneurial universities" (Clark, 1998), "service universities", "corporate actors" (de Boer et al., 2007, pp. 30, 32), "enterprise universities" (Marginson & Considine, 2000), and "public enterprises" (Zapp et al., 2021, p. 539), underscoring their growing resemblance to firms and other organizational forms. All these concepts share the observation that universities have undergone profound structural transitions and increasingly develop strategies to position themselves vis-à-vis competitors. This transition of universities into organizations lays the foundation for the concept of organizational actorhood.

Organizational actorhood denotes the idea that organizations are not merely passive structures or aggregates of individual behavior (King et al., 2010), but purposive and legitimate actors in their own right (Bloch, 2021). They are attributed "human-like" qualities such as intentionality and responsibility (Halgin et al., 2018, p. 646), which makes it possible to hold them accountable for their actions (Krücken & Meier, 2006). At its core, organizational actorhood rests on the capacity to act, that is, the agentic ability to make purposeful decisions and engage in strategic behavior (Halgin et al., 2018; King et al., 2010).

A foundational conceptualization of universities' organizational evolution is offered by Krücken and Meier (2006). They identify four pivotal elements of universities' transition into organizational actors: goal definition, accountability, the elaboration of formal structures, and the rise of the management profession.

The first core element of universities' transition into organizational actors is goal definition (Krücken & Meier, 2006). Krücken and Meier (2006) observe that universities increasingly define their own goals rather than merely executing externally imposed mandates, while society expects them to articulate and achieve these goals (Ramirez, 2010). This development is particularly evident in the widespread adoption of mission and vision statements (Krücken & Meier, 2006), which are now published on the websites of universities around the world (Arias-Coello et al., 2020; Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015; Seeber et al., 2019). Even universities in developing countries articulate goals using similar language to that found at leading institutions in OECD countries – invoking terms like "excellence", "internationalization", and "innovation" – regardless of these institutions' actual reputation and accomplishments in these areas (Krücken & Meier, 2006, pp. 248–249). On the one hand, mission statements reaffirm univer-

sities' traditional core missions of teaching and research by presenting them as deliberate organizational commitments rather than inherited roles (Krücken & Meier, 2006). On the other hand, they articulate goals that extend well beyond these tasks, reflecting expanding societal expectations, including knowledge transfer (Hwang, 2024). Importantly, the articulation of organizational goals in mission statements serves different purposes (Krücken & Meier, 2006). In some cases, they function as instruments of genuine organizational change by empowering internal actors to mobilize around shared strategic aims. In others, they serve primarily as symbolic devices signaling conformity with institutional expectations that confer legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Although mission statements do not always guide day-to-day decision-making (Krücken & Meier, 2006), they frequently inform inter-organizational resource allocation decisions (Zapp et al., 2021). For example, they serve as benchmarks in public evaluation procedures in the United Kingdom and as prerequisites for accreditation in Germany (Krücken & Meier, 2006). Taken together, the trend toward explicit goal formulation marks a significant step in the transition of universities into strategic actors that claim autonomy, assume responsibility, and present themselves as accountable and purposive organizations within their institutional environment.

A second key element in Krücken and Meier's (2006) conceptualization of universities as organizational actors is accountability. This concept reflects the growing expectation that universities must justify their actions, decisions, and performance outcomes to external stakeholders. The most visible indicator of this development is the proliferation of evaluation and accreditation procedures, often promoted by transnational organizations such as the OECD, the World Bank, or the European University Association (Krücken & Meier, 2006). These actors advocate a governance model that links increased institutional autonomy to clear and transparent accountability mechanisms. In line with this, Zapp et al. (2021) note that extensive accountability instruments have been introduced to ensure organizational efficiency and transparency while "coordinat[ing] and justify[ing] past and future actions" (p. 544). Krücken and Meier (2006) argue that this development reflects a broader social trend toward what Power (1997) terms the audit society, in which organizations – including universities – must subject their activities to standardized and formalized measurement systems to maintain legitimacy. The academic sphere, traditionally characterized by informal peer evaluation and professional autonomy, is increasingly governed by formal metrics such as bibliometric indicators. These input and output measurements build on the assumption that "the value of higher education should, as well as could, be documented" (Elken & Røsdal, 2017, p. 377), even though these instruments are not guaranteed to result in improvement (Hendry & Dean, 2002). While such instruments remain

controversial, Krücken and Meier (2006) observe a growing acceptance of quantification even within the academic community itself, including among deans, department heads, and university administrators (Huisman & Currie, 2004; Minelli et al., 2015). A further shift concerns the level at which accountability is attributed. Historically, responsibility in academia was largely individualized, centered on the professional conduct of scholars. Today, however, universities are held accountable as organizations (Krücken & Meier, 2006). They are expected to clarify and account for their institutional decisions, including what they choose not to do (Krücken & Meier, 2006). This organizational form of accountability implies that outputs – whether in teaching, research, or third-mission activities – are not only measurable but also seen as the direct result of intentional institutional strategies. In the aggregate, accountability has become a central feature of university governance. It reshapes both internal practices and external perceptions, reinforcing the notion of the university as a rational, self-steering, and collectively responsible actor in an increasingly evaluative environment.

The third central element in Krücken and Meier's (2006) framework on organizational actorhood is the elaboration of formal structures. This element refers to the growing complexity, differentiation, and rationalization of universities' internal organization. While historical differentiation in higher education primarily occurred through the development of new academic disciplines and subdisciplines, the contemporary expansion of university structures goes far beyond this academic logic. Today, universities increasingly establish administrative units and support structures that address a wide array of organizational concerns. They demonstrate their organizational actorhood by creating specialized offices that not only manage internal complexity but also mirror external expectations and evolving technical realities. These units now extend far beyond teaching and research, encompassing areas such as quality management, organizational development, internationalization, knowledge transfer, sustainability, and diversity (Elken & Røsdal, 2017; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Zapp et al., 2021). One prominent example, highlighted by Krücken and Meier (2006), is the rise of technology transfer offices, which began proliferating in the 1980s. Activities that were once handled informally by individual researchers have since become institutionalized functions, formally embedded in universities' missions and administrative infrastructures (Bercovitz et al., 2001; Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2016; Muscio, 2010; O'Gorman et al., 2008; Siegel et al., 2007). This structural development reflects a broader rationalization trend in which universities increasingly embrace the idea that research outcomes and knowledge flows can – and should – be managed through formalized processes (Krücken & Meier, 2006). The expansion of organizational units reflects this logic, even though the effectiveness of some of these structures, such as technology transfer offices,

remains contested (Friedman & Silberman, 2003; Siegel et al., 2003; Thursby & Kemp, 2002). Still, Krücken and Meier (2006) argue that their very existence signals a shift toward intentional, coordinated organizational behavior. Rationalization entails not only structural elaboration but also the stronger integration of universities into cohesive systems (Elken & Røsdal, 2017). This increased system integration is manifested in tighter coupling (de Boer et al., 2007; Middlehurst, 2004) and stronger vertical integration (Maassen & Stensaker, 2019), developments that generate interdependencies and heighten coordination demands (Maassen et al., 2023). In essence, the elaboration of formal structures underlines universities' transition into multifaceted, integrated organizations. It demonstrates how universities increasingly behave like purposive actors, equipped with internal capacities to formulate strategies, manage diverse operations, and respond systematically to environmental demands.

The fourth and final element in Krücken and Meier's (2006) analysis of universities' transition into organizational actors is the rise of the management profession. This development captures the growing presence and influence of professional management roles within universities. According to Krücken and Meier (2006), the modern university is no longer governed solely by academic self-regulation and collegial decision-making. Instead, it is increasingly shaped by actors who are explicitly tasked with steering and coordinating the organization (Whitchurch, 2008, 2010). These include professionals in areas such as strategic planning, quality assurance, financial controlling, human resources, international relations, and organizational development. This ascent reflects a broader expectation that universities act not merely as academic institutions but as strategically governed organizations (Boitier & Rivière, 2016). Members of the institution in leadership positions serve as key agents in defining organizational priorities, implementing reforms, and aligning internal structures with external demands (Kogan, 2007; Teece, 2018). Their growing prominence is reinforced by rising organizational complexity and the need for coordination across increasingly differentiated units and objectives (Maassen & Stensaker, 2019). This managerial expansion and professionalization is paralleled by transitions within the academic profession itself (Henkel, 2007; Kogan, 2007; Musselin, 2007). Academics increasingly take on managerial and coordinative responsibilities, for instance, acquiring and managing externally funded research projects (Musselin, 2005). This "managerial turn" (Krücken et al., 2013, p. 417) within the professorate signals a shift from predominantly disciplinary scholarship toward hybrid roles that combine academic leadership with organizational management (de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009; Gordon & Whitchurch, 2010). While the rise of management roles can be interpreted as a pragmatic response to organizational complexity, Krücken and Meier (2006) also view it as a symbolic expression of actorhood. The presence of

dedicated managers signals that universities take responsibility for their directions, decisions, and performance. Even if the degree of managerial influence varies across national and institutional contexts (Teichler, 2021), the trend toward the institutionalization of management roles is evident across higher education systems (Krücken & Meier, 2006). Taken together, the rise of the management profession marks a critical stage in universities' organizational turn. It reinforces the understanding of universities as intentional, self-steering actors capable of deliberate decision-making, coordinated action, and strategic engagement with their environments.

2.2.2 Divergent Perspectives on Universities' Organizational Transition

Since Krücken and Meier (2006) published their four-element conceptualization of universities' organizational turn, organizational actorhood has become a vibrant and contested theme in higher education research. Krücken and Meier's (2006) conceptualization marked a decisive step by portraying universities as goal-oriented, accountable, and managerialized organizations, and there is broad agreement that universities worldwide have undergone profound organizational transitions (e.g., Bloch, 2021; de Boer et al., 2007; Drori et al., 2006; Gornitzka et al., 2017; Huisman & Burgoa, 2023; Mattei, 2014). Yet despite this general consensus, subsequent scholarship has not reached a shared understanding of what organizational actorhood precisely entails or how much agency universities can and do exercise. Instead, the literature remains divided over how to interpret the nature, direction, and implications of these transformations. Drawing on this extensive body of work, three perspectives that appear to be competing at first sight can be distinguished, each reflecting a different analytical vantage point on institutional and organizational change in higher education (Musselin, 2021), and corresponding to the theses identified by Vaira (2004):

- a global convergence perspective,
- a national divergence perspective, and
- an organizational divergence perspective.

Overall, these perspectives reflect an ongoing debate over whether global trends, particularly the proliferation of competitive principles through NPM reforms, have driven convergence toward a singular, globally legitimate university model; whether national specificities continue to shape the way universities evolve; or whether universities themselves, by strategically leveraging their organizational capacities, have actively driven diversification in higher education, as intended by policymakers (Maassen & Potman, 1990). Each perspective emphasizes different sources of influence – global norms, national policy contexts, or organizational agency – and

implies different degrees of institutional, respectively organizational homogenization or heterogenization. The following subsections elaborate on these three perspectives and the scholarly debates surrounding them, thus providing the foundation for the analytical framework of this study.

2.2.2.1 Global Convergence Perspective: Actorhood as a Scripted Path to Legitimacy

A first analytical perspective on universities' organizational transition centers on the idea that universities worldwide are converging toward a common organizational model. From this viewpoint, universities' organizational actorhood is not primarily the result of endogenous strategic agency, but of externally imposed, globally circulating scripts that prescribe what a "proper" university should look like (Zapp et al., 2021, p. 545). Convergence is thus understood as a response to powerful isomorphic pressures generated by globalization and the transnational diffusion of neoliberal reform agendas.

At the system level, this perspective argues that national differences in higher education governance increasingly erode under global pressures. Gumport (2000), for example, frames the growing similarity of higher education systems as a "macro-trend" (p. 67) driven by the expansion of managerial practices, the rise of student-consumerism, and the stratification of academia. Vaira (2004) likewise interprets contemporary reforms as manifestations of a globally circulating neoliberal script – marked by a reduced role of the state, the managerialization of universities, and the linkage of education and research with economic competitiveness – actively promoted by international organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, and EU. Zapp et al. (2021) further stress that universities operate in an increasingly transnational environment shaped by the worldwide diffusion of NPM principles and market-oriented reforms. Notably, signs of convergence appear even in countries that initially resisted neoliberal pressures, as the case of Sweden demonstrates (Beach, 2013). Reflecting on specific indicators of globalization within higher education, van Damme (2019, p. 12) identifies mutually reinforcing globalization engines, including international research collaborations, student and staff mobility, harmonized curricular and degree frameworks, shared quality assurance and accreditation systems, and the rise of global rankings that make cross-border university comparisons widely accessible. Together, these fundamental trends suggest that organizational change is shaped less by national trajectories and more by universities' embeddedness in an increasingly transnational higher education field, a point underscored by work highlighting the emergence of a global higher education regime (Frank & Meyer, 2007; Ramirez et al., 2016; Zapp & Ramirez, 2019; Zapp et al., 2021).

At the organizational level, the convergence argument draws heavily on neo-institutional theory. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), organizations operating within the same organizational field – that is, a set of all relevant organizations that are linked via a shared purpose or engaged in related activities, and collectively form an institutional identity (see also Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Mazza & Strandgaard, 2004; van Gestel & Hillebrand, 2011) – tend to become increasingly similar over time. This homogeneity cannot be fully explained by the rational goal of efficiency maximization (Weber, 1952, 1968). Instead, it results from three institutional mechanisms that shape how organizations respond to uncertainty and constraint (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Coercive isomorphism occurs when organizations adjust their structures and practices to comply with formal regulations, legal requirements, or powerful stakeholders. In higher education, such pressures become visible when universities adopt state-mandated quality assurance systems or performance-based funding requirements to secure public resources (Ansmann & Seyfried, 2022; Marini, 2021; Seyfried et al., 2019). Mimetic isomorphism arises when organizations facing ambiguous goals or uncertain technologies align themselves with peers perceived as successful or legitimate. This is evident when universities replicate organizational templates associated with high-status institutions to enhance legitimacy in competitive environments (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Marini, 2021). Normative isomorphism, finally, stems from professionalization processes, whereby shared training, credentials, and professional networks socialize organizational members into common norms and institutional templates. In higher education, this can be seen in the diffusion of standardized quality-management and evaluation practices, as professional communities and shared expert norms lead universities to converge on similar procedures and organizational routines (Anafinova, 2021; Seyfried et al., 2019). Together, these mechanisms push organizations toward conformity with institutionalized expectations of legitimate organizational behavior, producing organizational homogeneity within institutional fields. This dynamic is highly relevant to higher education, where universities are widely assumed to respond to a common set of evolving institutional expectations (Fay & Zavattaro, 2016; Heinze & Josek, 2025; Morphew & Huisman, 2002; Stensaker & Norgård, 2001).

From this neo-institutionalist standpoint, universities appear as actors by conformity rather than by autonomy: they adopt a singular rationalized template of a globalizing, world-class university model (Etzkowitz et al., 2008; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Mohrman et al., 2008; Ramirez, 2006) – encompassing strategic planning, quality assurance, technology transfer offices, diversity offices, or standard accountability instruments – not necessarily because these enhance performance, but because they symbolize modernity, transparency, and responsiveness (Drori

et al., 2006; Drori et al., 2009; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer, 2000). Hasse and Krücken (2009), for instance, highlight how German universities, once grounded in the Humboldtian ideal, increasingly derive legitimacy from adopting globally institutionalized governance and management structures. Hüther and Krücken (2016) likewise argue, in their conceptualization of nested organizational fields, that at the global field level European universities increasingly converge toward the model of a complete organization. Thus, in this convergence perspective, actorhood is essentially seen as a global script of a managerial-corporate ideal type that universities seek to enact in order to maintain legitimacy (Ramirez & Meyer, 2013; Zapp et al., 2021).

Empirical studies further reinforce the organizational convergence argument by showing how universities across the global higher education field adopt increasingly similar patterns. Lee and Ramirez (2024), analyzing 500 universities worldwide, identify the near-global proliferation of organizational units such as development, diversity, and international offices. They interpret these findings as signs of convergence toward an "idealized American model" (p. 91), assuming that actorhood is most fully developed in American universities. According to them, universities elsewhere seek alignment with this model, albeit to varying degrees across regions. Pineda and Steinhardt (2023), drawing on a global bibliometric analysis, show that even highly contested instruments such as student evaluations of teaching have diffused internationally, from the United States into China, Latin America, and German-speaking countries, acquiring legitimacy as global accountability tools despite differing local traditions. Kezar and Bernstein-Sierra (2019), based on qualitative empirical evidence, show how elite university associations, such as the Association of American Universities, exert powerful normative pressures that promote convergence by diffusing shared standards and legitimized practices across the wider field. Complementing these findings, Mejía et al. (2020), in a multi-case study of Colombian higher education institutions, demonstrate how coercive state regulations, mimetic imitation of peer institutions, and normative professional pressures jointly produce organizational homogeneity within the sector. Together, these studies highlight how diverse universities, across markedly different contexts, adopt similar structures and practices, reinforcing the idea of a convergent global organizational model.

Taken together, the global convergence perspective suggests that global trends define the terms of universities' actorhood. Accordingly, actorhood is argued to be shaped less by universities' internal agency than by their compliance with a rationalized, globally institutionalized model of the modern university.

Yet, while scholars broadly acknowledge the existence of cross-national trends in higher education, their implications for universities' actorhood remain contested. Many regard universities' organizational transition as more complex and nuanced than suggested by the convergence perspective. Even scholars who argue for the diffusion of a global university model driven by institutional pressures, at the same time, acknowledge national and regional variations in how this model manifests (e.g., Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Christensen et al., 2014; Dobbins & Knill, 2017; Hüther & Krücken, 2016; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013; Ramirez, 2006; Shin, 2018; van Damme, 2019). As van Damme (2019) notes, convergence pressures coexist with persistent forces of divergence, pointing toward the second analytical perspective: national divergence.

2.2.2.2 National Divergence Perspective: Actorhood as Constrained by Country-Specific Idiosyncrasies

A second analytical perspective on universities' organizational transition emphasizes national divergence and conceives universities' actorhood as contingent upon country-specific political, cultural, and administrative contexts. From this viewpoint, universities do not enact actorhood according to a single global model but negotiate their role as organizational actors within nationally embedded governance arrangements. Actorhood is therefore filtered through national logics that reinterpret and modify global trends (Vaira, 2004; van Damme, 2019).

Proponents of this perspective regard national politics and governance cultures as powerful forces that reshape global pressures in context-specific ways. While acknowledging the existence of worldwide trends, they argue that convergence accounts invoke excessively globalist top-down determinism. Instead, global scripts are domestically refracted through national needs and histories, producing plural and often divergent organizational trajectories (Vaira, 2004; van Damme, 2019). As Marginson (2004) cautions, higher education remains regulated within national jurisdictions, and as Hwang (2024) notes, while "universities around the world share a lot in common with one another, universities are also creatures of national systems" (p. 129), characterized by substantial organizational heterogeneity.

Comparative system-level research strongly supports this view (Tight, 2012). A wide body of scholarship shows that similar reform agendas – particularly those inspired by NPM – yield different outcomes across national higher education systems. Maassen et al. (2011), for instance, emphasize that higher education reforms differ across countries, arguing that their outcomes depend on the state's role, governance modes, and overarching country-specific policies

(p. 480). Bleiklie (2018) similarly asserts that national policy frameworks – shaped by distinctive administrative regimes and policy instruments – largely determine how reforms such as NPM manifest across countries. Paradeise et al. (2009), in their comparative analysis of seven European countries, find that national contexts significantly influence the trajectories and outcomes of organizational change in universities, even amidst broader converging trends. Thus, they conclude that those systems remain highly divergent rather than unified. Likewise, Kogan et al. (2006) examine higher education reforms in Sweden, Norway, and England across three levels of analysis – state policy, institutional governance, and individual academic identities and professions – and highlight both overarching trends and country-specific idiosyncrasies in the transformation of higher education systems. Recent large-*N* research on impact evaluation adds further nuance: although publicly funded universities worldwide are increasingly required to demonstrate their social value, Williams and Lewis (2025) show that distinct national priorities shape what counts as socially relevant impact in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Hong Kong.

At the organizational level, empirical studies indicate that national variation in policy and governance translates into different trajectories of organizational change. Bleiklie et al. (2017c), studying 26 universities across eight European countries, find that although universities have generally moved toward more hierarchical and formalized structures consistent with the corporate-managerial model, this transition has neither been uniform nor complete. Instead, many institutions have evolved into hybrid forms that combine elements of the bureaucratic-academic and corporate-managerial models. In this light, autonomy, hierarchy, and formalization – often invoked as key dimensions of actorhood – are no global constants but vary considerably across countries and institutions, shaped by national policy environments and the strength of NPM pressures (Bleiklie et al., 2017c). Consequently, isomorphic pressures, where present, are understood as rooted in national institutional arrangements rather than imposed by global conformity (Vaira, 2004). At the same time, Kosmützky and Nokkala (2014) highlight persistent blind spots outside OECD contexts, particularly in regions such as the former Soviet Union and Sub-Saharan Africa, limiting generalizations.

Theoretically, national divergence scholarship draws on a broad and heterogeneous range of approaches. While Vaira (2004) references frameworks such as national business systems, neo-contingency theory, and societal effects, much comparative work focuses directly on national policy frameworks (Musselin, 2011) to trace how domestic institutions generate institutional pluralism (Kraatz & Block, 2008) and organizational hybridity (Pache & Santos, 2013). Increasingly, institutional logics (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008) are used to capture how competing

normative orders shape universities' responses to reform, as recently suggested by Bleiklie et al. (2017a).

This national divergence perspective also informs research on the scope of universities' organizational actorhood. Whitley (2008, 2012) shows that universities' ability to act autonomously depends heavily on the extent of authority granted by the state. His typology – distinguishing between hollow, state-contracted, state-chartered, and private-portfolio universities – demonstrates how national policy regimes condition institutional discretion over resources, staffing, and internal structures. Later refinements (Whitley & Gläser, 2014) reveal uneven increases in strategic autonomy and organizational capacity across OECD countries, producing hollow, state-chartered, and autarkic organizational types. Overall, this line of research concludes that universities' actorhood is often constrained rather than fully realized, as national policy environments continue to limit their ability to act as autonomous strategic organizations (Whitley, 2012).

In sum, the national divergence perspective conceptualizes universities' organizational actorhood as contextually embedded and nationally bounded. While universities may reference global scripts of accountability, competition, and managerialism, their actual capacity to act strategically depends on national governance arrangements, policy traditions, and institutional legacies. Thus, although this perspective rejects the notion of a uniform global university model, it still attributes significant weight to external environments – only this time at the national rather than transnational level – thereby reinforcing a form of environmental determinism in understanding organizational actorhood.

2.2.2.3 Organizational Divergence Perspective: Actorhood as Strategically Enacted by the Organization Itself

A third analytical perspective on universities' organizational transition shifts the focus from global and national forces to the organizational level, emphasizing universities' capacity to actively construct their actorhood rather than having it externally scripted or predefined. From this viewpoint, universities' organizational transition is not merely an outcome of external pressures but stems from their own strategic agency – their capacity to interpret, translate, and address competitive pressures in ways that generate organizational heterogeneity through processes of strategy-building, identity formation, and collective action (Vaira, 2004).

This perspective challenges the assumption of environmental determinism that casts universities as passive recipients of external pressures. Scholars such as Bloch (2021), Thoenig and Paradeise (2016), and Huisman and Burgoa (2023) argue that universities' agency should not

be seen solely as a response to external expectations, but as intentional and self-initiated organizational behavior. Bloch (2021), for instance, conceptualizes actorhood as an imperative rather than a mere expectation, shifting attention away from portrayals of universities as predominantly reactive to environmental demands and toward capturing the intrinsic agency associated with relationship-building and ecosystem engagement. Similarly, Thoenig and Paradeise (2016) question the explanatory primacy of national systems, noting that "such a meso-deterministic perspective suggests that universities may position themselves as proactive actors or principals, and not just as agents of national reforms and political demands" (p. 293). Extending this argument, Huisman and Burgoa (2023) argue that earlier applications of Krücken and Meier's (2006) framework adhere too closely to a neo-institutional perspective that portrays universities as overly passive, thereby underestimating the actual leeway universities possess to proactively and anticipatorily shape their agency and explore the legitimacy boundaries of their actions. They emphasize the (pro)active dimension of agency, highlighting that actorhood emerges from within organizations and can take both reactive and anticipatory forms. In this sense, actorhood is not a passive condition but an active organizational process, shaped by identity formation, legitimacy-seeking, and anticipatory governance.

From this viewpoint, institutional change does not necessarily produce uniformity; instead, organizations respond to environmental pressures in diverse ways. By leveraging their organizational room for maneuver, universities assert agency and contribute to organizational variability, challenging the assumptions of global convergence. Pinheiro and Stensaker (2014) capture this complex interplay between external and internal factors in the transition of universities succinctly, emphasizing that while prevailing global frameworks influence higher education at the macro-level, the actual meso-level outcomes of higher education institutions can vary significantly. Likewise, Vaira (2004) notes that organizational responses vary markedly even under similar environmental conditions, depending on the degree of strategic maneuvering and internal capacity. Thus, rather than simply adopting global models, universities reinterpret and translate these templates in ways that generate distinct organizational forms. This view implies that institutional convergence and organizational divergence can coexist.

Recent scholarship on strategizing reinforces this perspective by placing organizational strategy processes at the center of analysis (Fumasoli & Hladchenko, 2023). Whereas earlier organizational research focused primarily on structures, strategy has emerged as the organizational mechanism through which actorhood is substantiated. As Woelert and Stensaker (2025) argue, growing uncertainty and competition have prompted universities to evolve into strategically governed organizations. No longer confined to operational substrategies negotiated with the

state, universities' strategy today aligns with Chandler's (1990) classic definition as the formulation of long-term goals and objectives, along with the deliberate selection of courses of action and the allocation of resources required to pursue them. In this sense, strategy is understood as a coherent pattern of organizational decisions and actions aiming at goal attainment that is relevant to the organization, recognized as such, and shared by its members in a collective pursuit (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011, p. 159). It functions as a link between the university and its environment (Frølich et al., 2017) and addresses how universities make the "best use of existing resources in the short run, while enlarging the scope of autonomy in procuring additional resources in the long run" (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2008, p. 15).

Empirical research demonstrates that universities can deliberately enact their actorhood through strategic collective action. Most studies rely on case study designs, examining how one or a few selected institutions respond to competitive pressures. Pinheiro and Stensaker (2014), for example, show how Aarhus University strategically reshaped its organizational culture, structure, and resource allocation through centralized leadership, structural reorganization, and targeted human resource initiatives. Vuori (2016) finds that Finnish universities of applied science pursued institutional positioning by defining priority areas and building regional partnerships, triggering structural and operational changes consistent with these profiles. Strategic actorhood, in this context, is not equated with formal autonomy alone, but is reflected in an institution's capacity to align its environment, internal structures, personnel policies, and external networks with a coherent strategic vision. However, Vuori also notes that human resource strategies remained underdeveloped, suggesting that the realization of full strategic actorhood is uneven across organizational domains. Elken and Røsdal (2017), studying two Norwegian university colleges, similarly demonstrate that goal setting, structural reforms, and managerial professionalization constitute key pathways through which universities construct actorhood – albeit in ways shaped by institutional legacies and sector-specific logics. Alongside such deep organizational transitions, universities also deploy more symbolic but strategically consequential instruments. Branding efforts – through reputational management, visual identity building, and integrated marketing – serve to cultivate distinct profiles in competitive environments (Butt & Rehman, 2010; Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014; Drori et al., 2013; Judson et al., 2008; O'Sullivan et al., 2024). Mission statements function in a similar way: by articulating long-term commitments and positioning universities within particular niches or aspirational peer groups, they operate as identity narratives that consolidate internal alignment and strategic intent externally (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015; Lopez & Martin, 2018; Seeber et al., 2019; Velazquez et al., 2006).

Yet strategizing remains a challenging endeavor within universities. Scholars highlight tensions between internally motivated goals and pressures to conform to external demands (Doyle & Brady, 2018). Maassen and Stensaker (2019) remind us that "having a strategy is not the same as implementing it, and the relationship between governance and strategy implementation is definitely more complicated than often assumed" (p. 459). Developing and implementing coherent strategies often proves difficult due to vague strategy formulations, a lack of concrete operationalization into subgoals and programs, and insufficient planning tools – such as an overreliance on historical data and the omission of non-financial performance metrics (Agasisti et al., 2008). Moreover, strategic processes tend to oscillate along a continuum between rational planning and emergent sensemaking, with substantive strategizing occurring outside formalized structures through negotiation and interpretation (Frølich et al., 2017). These dynamics show that strategic agency is performed not in linear planning cycles but through complex, contested, and sometimes fragmented organizational practices.

In sum, the meso-organizational level perspective reframes organizational actorhood as an imperative that highlights universities' capacity for strategic agency (Bloch, 2021). It challenges neo-institutional accounts by shifting attention from external constraints to organizations' internal capacity to define strategies, reorganize structures, and coordinate collective action to secure critical resources in competitive environments (Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Huisman & Burgoa, 2023). Organizational change is thus understood not as a passive adaptation process but as the outcome of universities' purposeful efforts to shape their institutional position. This view underscores universities' scope for action, expressed in deliberate and strategic intra-organizational practices (Bloch, 2021; Vuori, 2016), and conceptualizes actorhood as universities' organizational capacity to purposefully navigate and transform their institutional environment.

2.2.3 Toward an Integrated Understanding of Universities' Strategic Agency

Although extensive research has examined how universities respond to environmental pressures, the field still lacks a coherent understanding of how organizational actorhood is enacted in practice.

As illustrated in the previous subchapters, cross-national empirical studies lend support to the global convergence perspective by tracing the diffusion of broad organizational trends across national boundaries (e.g., Lee & Ramirez, 2024; Pineda & Steinhardt, 2023). Yet these studies tend to overlook the nuanced processes through which universities attend to such pressures, as well as the inherent heterogeneity of organizational responses (Greenwood et al., 2014).

Empirical work aligned with the national divergence perspective typically examines state–university relationships (e.g., Bleiklie et al., 2017c; Kogan et al., 2006; Paradeise et al., 2009). While providing rich accounts of how national idiosyncrasies shape university governance, this research often does so at the expense of analyzing the intra-organizational dynamics through which universities themselves navigate and shape change.

More recent empirical studies – often based on single-case or small-*N* comparative designs (Bronstein & Reihlen, 2014) – foreground universities' own strategic agency and offer valuable and in-depth insights into how universities, embedded in unique contexts, address the flux in higher education strategically through collective action. However, these studies remain largely descriptive, dispersed, and limited in generalizability (Wilkesmann, 2019; Tight, 2012), offering few comprehensive insights into robust, cross-national patterns of organizational change (Ferlie et al., 2008; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013).

To systematically integrate these existing yet isolated empirical insights, this study repositions the organization at the center of institutional analysis (Greenwood et al., 2014). It applies a qualitative meta-study design and introduces an analytical framework that centers on the meso-organizational level, enabling a systematic examination of how universities interpret multiple competitions and perform actorhood by developing coherent strategy-structure combinations in response to them. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question:

How do archetypes of organizational actorhood emerge when universities organize their responses to multiple competitions?

3 Analytical Framework: Exploring Archetypes of Organizational Actorhood

This chapter introduces the analytical archetype-of-actorhood framework that provides the conceptual foundation for this study. The following sections briefly outline how the construct of organizational actorhood has been conceptualized at the interface of organization studies and higher education research before presenting this study's analytical framework, which centers on how universities actively leverage their strategic capacity in response to multiple competitions. Employing a configurational approach, the framework conceptualizes an archetype of actorhood as emerging from the dynamic interplay of interrelated response and configurational strategy-structure patterns, both of which are grounded in an underlying interpretive scheme. These constitutive components of an actorhood archetype are defined in detail to pave the way for the subsequent empirical analysis.

3.1 Organizations Bringing Actorhood to Life

As reviewed in Section 2.2, universities' turn into organizational actors is well established (Krücken & Meier, 2006). The actorhood construct captures how universities – once depicted as loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976) and organized anarchies (Cohen et al., 1972), resistant to strategic steering (Fumasoli, 2011) – have evolved into complete organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000) capable of decision-making, goal-setting, and strategic positioning (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013). Such research understands universities' actorhood as a consequence of proliferating multiple competitions, defined as "different, nested, and interdependent competitions" (Krücken, 2021, p. 163), and views organizations as anthropomorphized entities (Halgin et al., 2018), endowed with a distinctive character (King, 2015) and intentionality (King et al., 2010), and capable of making self-claims to actorhood and presenting themselves as value-driven, agentic, and responsible actors (Bromley & Sharkey, 2017).

The existing body of scholarship on organizational actorhood in higher education is deeply influenced by broader developments in organizational and institutional theory that conceptualize how organizations become, perform, and are recognized as social actors within institutional environments (Lawrence et al., 2009; Meyer, 2010). Reflecting a shift from viewing organizations as being passive recipients of their institutional environments toward emphasizing their strategic agency (Huisman & Burgoa, 2023), scholarship on universities' actorhood can be

grouped into global convergence, national divergence, and organizational divergence perspectives (see Subsection 2.2.2).

The global convergence and national divergence perspectives contribute to understanding organizational actorhood by explaining how environmental conditions shape universities' strategic agency. While the global convergence perspective highlights processes of organizational homogenization toward one legitimate, rational university model through isomorphic pressures (e.g., Drori et al., 2006; Mohrman et al., 2008; Ramirez, 2006), the national divergence perspective emphasizes country-specific peculiarities and constraints of universities' actorhood, which it examines through comparative studies of state-university relationships (e.g., Bleiklie et al., 2017c; Kogan et al., 2006; Paradeise et al., 2009).

Yet both perspectives share the assumption of environmental determinism, or at least of the environment's significant influence on universities' actorhood (see Barbato et al., 2021). Consequently, they largely downplay organizational agency, portraying organizations as passive "cultural dopes" (Lawrence et al., 2009, p. 1) that reactively adapt to institutional pressures (Lawrence et al., 2009). Rather than asking how universities enact actorhood from within, these perspectives instead question whether, and if so to what extent, universities actually possess the autonomy or sovereignty to act for and out of themselves (Bloch, 2021; Zapp et al., 2021). As a result, at the meso-organizational level, actorhood is treated as a static status or a monolithic black box, with the very existence of inherent strategic agency being scrutinized rather than assumed, conceptually differentiated, or empirically examined.

Expanding such environmentally deterministic accounts, an organization-centered perspective emphasizing universities' strategic capabilities has gained prominence in recent years (Bloch, 2021; Huisman & Burgoa, 2023). This body of research is rooted in scholarship that reintroduced agency into institutional theory in the late 1980s, highlighting organizations' capacity to reinterpret, negotiate, and reshape their institutional environments (DiMaggio, 1988; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Oliver, 1991). Proponents stress organizations' strategic agency, conceptualizing universities as collective actors endowed with a room for maneuver that enables them to act intentionally and purposefully in the name of the self (Bloch, 2021; Huisman & Burgoa, 2023). Shifting attention from understanding actorhood as an expectation to viewing actorhood as an imperative (Bloch, 2021), this research investigates how universities make the best use of their resources and strategically position themselves within the competitive higher education landscape (e.g., Barbato et al., 2021; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Fumasoli et al., 2020).

Seeking to contribute to this organization-centered stream, this study conceptualizes actorhood neither as an externally conferred status derived from societal expectations about how a modern university should look and behave, nor as a legal condition shaped by country-specific policy frameworks that grant or restrict universities' organizational autonomy. Instead, while acknowledging that an expanded room for maneuver is an important precondition for strategic behavior, this study assumes that such scope for action alone is insufficient for actorhood to exist. Actorhood must be actively performed through strategic collective action by the organization itself. In this vein, performing organizational agency is understood as interpreting and filtering multiple competitive pressures while engaging dynamically with external contingencies and developing a course of action that adapts, responds to and co-designs the context in which universities position themselves (Fumasoli et al., 2020).

This perspective underscores that while the existence of organizational actorhood is taken as a conceptual premise of this study, the ways in which universities act for and out of themselves constitute an empirical question. Following Bloch's (2021) argument that such enactments cannot be specified in advance but must be revealed through empirical inquiry, this study focuses on uncovering how universities bring actorhood to life in practice. To lay the groundwork for empirically examining how universities enact their strategic agency from within, this study introduces an archetype-of-actorhood framework that applies a configurational approach to explore the "repertoire of strategies and structures" through which university organizations respond to multiple, often competing institutional demands (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 318).

3.2 An Archetype-Based Approach to Organizational Actorhood in Institutionalized Fields

While acknowledging that universities may enact organizational actorhood in diverse ways (Hwang, 2024), this study seeks to distill such organizational variability into a limited number of abstract patterns that, in turn, constitute distinct archetypes of actorhood.

Archetypes are multidimensional and context-specific heuristic models that capture distinct yet coherent combinations of organizational key characteristics that occur with above-average frequency, thereby distinguishing between different organizational forms and behaviors (Miller & Friesen, 1977; Short et al., 2008). They serve as empirically anchored classification schemes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993) that combine strategic and structural organizational dimensions.

Archetypes are situated within institutional fields that structure organizational life. Following DiMaggio and Powell (1983), an organizational field denotes "those organizations that, in the

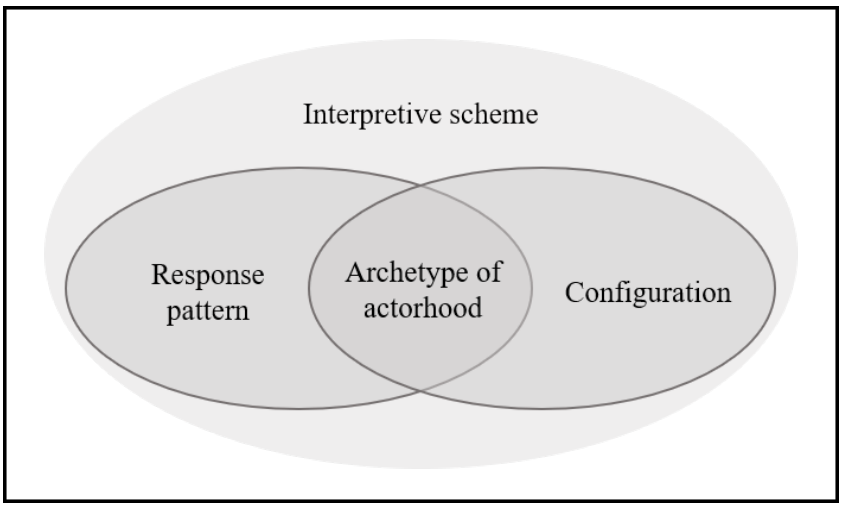
aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life" (p. 148). Collectively, this set of organizations pursues shared purposes and engages in interconnected activities that, through their ongoing interaction, shape the overall dynamics and shared understanding of the field (van Gestel & Hillebrand, 2011). In this institutional understanding, organizations – including universities – are not viewed merely as entities that *have* a formally structured organization. Rather, they *are* organizations: socially embedded actors whose behavior is shaped by both formal and informal structures and processes circulating within the field (Meyer et al., 2007). Within such organizational fields, organizations conventionally coalesce around a prevailing archetype that anchors shared understandings of legitimate organizational design and practice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

According to Greenwood and Hinings (1993), archetypes serve not only as ideal-type templates that typically dominate an institutional field but also as analytical tools for studying strategic change, that is, organizational transformation occurring when the prevailing interpretive scheme sustaining a dominant archetype is challenged and replaced by an alternative. While Greenwood and Hinings (1993) acknowledge that periods of institutional turbulence may temporally give rise to coexisting archetypes, Brock (2006) and Brock et al. (2007) extend this conception, arguing that institutional fields can enter prolonged phases of archetypal plurality. During such phases, organizations reinterpret and renegotiate the prevailing field logic, giving rise to hybrid, incoherent, or transitional configurations that challenge established legitimacy structures. This extended understanding integrates both the institutional embeddedness of archetypes and the agentic role of organizations in reshaping field-level orders through their own sensemaking and strategic action.

Drawing on Greenwood and Hinings' conceptualization (1993), the archetype-of-actorhood framework applied in this study defines an archetype as "a set of structures and systems consistently reflexive of a single, underpinning interpretive scheme" (p. 1957). As illustrated in Figure 3, this framework conceptualizes an archetype of actorhood as emerging from the dynamic interplay of interrelated response patterns and configurational strategy-structure patterns, both grounded in the underlying interpretive scheme through which the university makes sense of the multiple competitions in which it is embedded.

Figure 3

Analytical Framework of Organizational Actorhood Archetypes



Emphasizing that an actorhood archetype emerges dynamically through the interaction of these interdependent components, this approach moves beyond conceiving organizational actorhood as a static and abstract construct. Instead, it integrates stability and change through strategic agency and emerging configurations (Brock et al., 2007; Greenwood & Hinings, 1988). It thereby enables an analysis of how deeply institutionalized logics can be challenged, adapted, and reconfigured – giving rise to novel organizational forms within the field of higher education (Brock et al., 2007). More fundamentally, this framework allows the analysis to move beyond the question of whether and to what extent universities possess actorhood (Bloch, 2021), by elucidating *how* universities actively bring actorhood to life within an institutional field shaped by multiple competitions.

In the following sections, these interrelated components that constitute an actorhood archetype are unpacked in greater detail to clarify their specific roles within the framework.

3.2.1 Interpretive Schemes: Making Sense of Multiple Competitions

Interpretive schemes provide direction for the emergence of archetypes of actorhood. They are defined as "sets of beliefs and values, composed of subjective meanings about the organization and its environment" (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993, p. 1052), thus providing the normative frames that render organizational action meaningful and coherent (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988) and conferring legitimacy on organizational processes and structural arrangements (Adler & Lalonde, 2019). By extending analytical attention beyond systems and structures to the beliefs, values, and ideals that organizations embody, a focus on interpretive schemes enables a more comprehensive understanding of organizational archetypes (Brock, 2006).

In the context of higher education, interpretive schemes capture how universities, as collective actors, perceive, understand, and evaluate the multiple competitions in which they are embedded. While individual members' perceptions contribute to this process, this framework focuses on the collective sensemaking of "dominant coalitions" (March, 1962; Mithani & O'Brien, 2021) within the organization as a whole (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995).

Within the archetype-of-actorhood framework, interpretive schemes add explanatory value in two respects. First, they clarify how strategic change is triggered within universities. Strategic transformation is understood as driven by shifting patterns of commitment to prevailing versus alternative interpretive schemes. When support for the prevailing interpretive scheme erodes while commitment to an alternative scheme gains strength, the resulting misalignment between embedded and current values and beliefs creates a fragile state that renders the organization prone to transformation (Bartunek, 1984; Brock et al., 2007; Greenwood & Hinings, 1988). Second, interpretive schemes help explain why diverse archetypes of actorhood emerge even under similar conditions. Because interpretive schemes are inherently subjective, universities may interpret and evaluate competitive pressures differently, despite being exposed to broadly comparable external demands (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988).

In sum, interpretive schemes underscore that universities' responses to multiple competitions depend not (only) on the external pressures themselves but on how those pressures are interpreted within the organization. Once an interpretive scheme of multiple competitions gains sufficient commitment, it provides orientation for how the university shapes its response.

3.2.2 Response Patterns: Organizing Action to Address Multiple Competitions

Response patterns capture how universities organize action in relation to multiple competitions. They highlight organizing as a mode of action involving strategizing, mobilizing, and sustaining change (Ganz, 2002; Bimber et al., 2012; Cardoso et al., 2019) and expand analytical attention from strategy understood primarily in terms of content or outcomes and toward strategizing as an ongoing process (Doyle & Brady, 2018), thereby foregrounding the dynamics of organizational transition (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013). In doing so, this perspective addresses a recurrent limitation in higher education research, which has tended to privilege structural arrangements and formal shifts in authority across hierarchical levels over the processes through which change unfolds (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013). By foregrounding the dynamic interplay between universities' agency and external pressures, response patterns underscore that those practices are not externally predetermined but internally developed through forms of action ranging

from reactive adjustment to proactive exertion of influence. Examining strategic responses to institutional pressures thus extends institutional theory by illuminating the active facet of organizational agency. Following Oliver (1991), organizational behavior need not be passive but may span from conformity to active resistance. In this sense, response patterns highlight that universities can exercise a broader range of strategic choice in their actions than is often assumed, moving beyond reactive compliance toward reflexive forms of transformation (Pollock et al., 2018).

In this study, response patterns unfold dynamically and denote the extent to which universities use their room for maneuver by translating interpretive schemes into coordinated action. Universities may respond reactively by conforming to external demands; actively by shaping responses to navigate existing contingencies; or proactively by initiating change from within and anticipating emerging challenges. This spectrum of organizational agency aligns with Huisman and Burgoa's (2023) observation that organizational action is not limited to reactivity but may also involve proactive and anticipatory forms. Similarly, Sporn (2001) emphasizes that adaptation itself can involve active or proactive strategic actions undertaken to cope with emerging conditions. Importantly, although reactive responses might appear passive at first sight, they nonetheless constitute a form of agency when they are grounded in deliberate action and informed organizational analysis (Fumasoli, 2011).

Overall, this reactive-proactive continuum of organizing action reflects "the paradox of embedded agency" (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006, p. 27; Seo & Creed, 2002, p. 221), highlighting that organizational actors are able to transform the very contexts that simultaneously shape their actions. This paradox is grounded in the observation that universities often face substantial constraints that limit their strategic room for maneuver – stemming from stakeholder expectations, institutional norms and values, organizational characteristics, and path-dependency – yet nonetheless retain the capacity to shape the direction of their organizational transition and their position within an increasingly competitive environment (Fumasoli, 2011).

Taken together, conceptualizing response patterns along the reactive-proactive spectrum not only captures the variability of universities' engagement with multiple competitions but also establishes the crucial link between distinct interpretive schemes and the emergence of specific organizational configurations.

3.2.3 Configurations: Integrating Strategy and Structure into Coherent Patterns

Lastly, configurations provide an analytical lens to trace how universities' nuanced responses to multiple competitions evolve into coherent patterns of strategy and structure. A configuration

is defined as a "[…] multidimensional constellation of conceptually distinct characteristics that commonly occur together" (Meyer et al., 1993, p. 1175). In this sense, a configuration represents a specific and distinguishable arrangement of organizational elements which are interconnected, interdependent, and can mutually reinforce each other, thereby creating synergies (Fiss et al., 2013; Sluismans, 2003). While the specific organizational elements selected to describe a configuration vary according to the researcher's analytic focus, they can generally be grouped into strategic and structural dimensions. Configurations are therefore conceptualized as strategy-structure-patterns, since their explanatory power derives from the integration of these two dimensions (Miller, 1996). This approach echoes Chandler's (1990) seminal work "Strategy and Structure", which emphasized the relevance of linking organizational strategy and structural design as interrelated key dimensions of organizational analysis.

An essential assumption in configuration research is that of equifinality (Meyer et al., 1993), which describes that one configuration cannot be fundamentally classified as better or worse than another as organizations do not operate according to a one-size-fits-all approach or a one-best way logic, once coined by Taylor (1947). Rather, the principle of equifinality assumes that different configurational patterns can equally promote an organization's success in internal operations and its interaction with the environment (Hinings, 2018; Siggelkow, 2002). Applied to the context of higher education, this means that diverse configurations enable universities to respond to multiple competitions successfully.

Although two approaches to developing configurations are distinguished – typologies and taxonomies – the boundary between them is in practice blurred. Typologies are conceptually derived classification schemes (Short et al., 2008) designed to guide theorizing and hypothesis building (Burns & Stalker, 1961), while taxonomies are empirically grounded classification schemes developed from multivariate observed data (Short et al., 2008; McKelvey, 1982) that yield novel insights from organizational realities (Miller, 2018). Nevertheless, typologies often build on empirical insights, and taxonomies require theoretical grounding; both ultimately aim to explain organizational differences and are typically developed through an iterative process of induction and deduction.

Configurations advance theory by making complex organizational characteristics analytically accessible. According to Hinings (2018), they serve three purposes: identifying recurring patterns of organizational key elements, providing generic classification tools for comparison across organizational populations, and explaining case-specific coherence by analyzing the fit between organizational elements. Importantly, since "configurations are about organizations in

action" (Sluismans, 2003, p. 15), Hinings (2018) also emphasizes that "the future of configurational thinking may well lie less in theorizing a number of limited, stable patterns, and more in utilizing configurations as ways of understanding organizational change and development." (p. 505). This dynamic perspective is particularly relevant for the study of universities, which are increasingly embedded in multiple competitions. In such contexts, configurations are best understood not as static classifications but as dynamic lenses that reveal how strategic and structural elements are continuously realigned to maintain internal coherence and external congruence.

Despite its explanatory potential, the configurational perspective has rarely been applied systematically in higher education research. The most well-known contribution is Mintzberg's (1979) classification of universities in their entirety as prototypes of the professional bureaucracy, which distinguishes them from other organizational forms but does not account for variations among universities themselves. Later studies demonstrate that universities develop more diverse configurations to address changing environmental conditions. Hardy (1991), for example, calls for a more differentiated understanding of university forms that depart from the model of the professional bureaucracy and shows how a holistic configurational approach reveals "the richness and diversity of organizational life" (p. 366). In a similar vein, Bleiklie et al. (2017b) emphasize that empirical research increasingly reveals a more nuanced reality, arguing that classifying universities strictly as either bureaucratic-academic organizations or corporate-managerial organizations is inconsistent with empirical evidence. Recent empirical work has focused particularly on entrepreneurial universities, offering a detailed picture of how different strategy-structure patterns shape their capacity for societal engagement. Bronstein and Reihlen (2014) and Sánchez-Barrioluengo and Benneworth (2019), for instance, show how the modern demand for knowledge transfer correlates with increasingly differentiated entrepreneurial university configurations. Adler and Lalonde (2019) extend this line of research by examining whether universities are developing post-bureaucratic configurations, emphasizing profile diversification, revised administrative roles, and stronger partnerships with industry. Taken together, these contributions illustrate the added value of a configurational perspective for theorizing universities' diverse transitions in response to the flux in higher education, while also underscoring that this approach has yet to be systematically developed in higher education research.

In this study, configurations are constructed by integrating strategic and structural dimensions, operationalized through a set of organizational elements derived from existing research on universities' organizational actorhood (Krücken & Meier, 2006). When describing a configuration,

there is no generally agreed set of organizational elements to be considered, nor consensus on their defining characteristics. While a configuration "should respect some basic laws of composition of organizational elements" (Grandori & Furnari, 2008, p. 460), the selected elements depend on the specific research interest, which in the case of this study concerns universities as organizational actors. Building on Krücken and Meier's (2006) seminal work on universities' organizational turn into strategic actors, this study draws on four closely related elements – goal definition, organizational accountability, formalization of structure, and managerialism – that have been widely applied in higher education research (e.g., Elken & Røsdal, 2017). Within the archetype-of-actorhood framework, these four elements are taken up in a broader sense and reinterpreted to emphasize the active agency inherent in universities' expanded scope for action. They are assigned to the strategic and structural dimensions of a configurational pattern, which – when integrated – provide a comprehensive picture of how universities enact their actorhood within their internal organizational arrangement. The strategic dimension captures how universities deploy their strategic capabilities to make the best use of resources (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2008) and includes the elements of goal definition, interpreted as positioning, and organizational accountability. The structural dimension refers to the organizational architecture and the distribution of decision-making authority, encompassing the elements of formalization of structure, understood as organizational design, and managerialism, interpreted as decision-making.

- **Positioning** refers to the differentiation strategies through which universities occupy specific niches and secure access to relevant resources (e.g., Barbato et al., 2021; Fumasoli et al., 2020; Fumasoli & Hladchenko, 2023; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013). It is an expression of the university's active utilization of its room for maneuver, which manifests itself in mission statements, organizational goals and strategic plans (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015; Oertel & Söll, 2017), and leads to organizational differentiation and diversification (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2008; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013). An elaborated positioning strategy serves as an essential strategic tool (van Vught & Huisman, 2013) as it reflects the organization-wide orientation, directs organizational decision-making, and helps to acquire additional resources (James & Derrick, 2020). Ultimately, positioning revolves around how universities translate strategic intent into distinct organizational profiles that enhance their competitive standing.
- **Accountability** is understood as the responsibility of universities to manage resources effectively and efficiently and to secure legitimacy through transparency toward internal and external stakeholders (Zapp et al., 2021). It functions as both a prerequisite for and a consequence of universities' strategic capacity, serving as a central condition for the

legitimacy of organizational action (Macheridis & Paulsson, 2021). It aims at making the best use of available resources (Bonaccorsi & Daraio, 2008) – that is, continuously improving the ratio between inputs and outputs, or, as increasingly emphasized, between inputs and outcomes – which requires systematic measurement, evaluation, and optimization of collective performance through quality management processes (Kallio & Kallio, 2014; ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012). Thus, accountability centers on the question of how universities make the optimal use of their resources and demonstrate this in a transparent and credible way.

- **Organizational design** refers to the formal architecture of the increasingly complex university organization, specifying the degree of (de)centralization and highlighting newly established units and positions. It captures how hierarchical relations are structured and distributed within formal organizational arrangements (Fumasoli, 2015) and underscores the growing organizational complexity (Dooley, 2002) that results from universities' efforts to address diverse internal and external demands. While tighter vertical and horizontal integration increases interdependence and coordination demands within the organization (de Boer et al., 2007; Maassen et al., 2023; Maassen & Stensaker, 2019), structural differentiation through newly established central units fosters synergies by pooling resources in shared services, thereby enhancing universities' strategic capacity and competitive advantage (Teece, 2018). The key issue, then, is how universities design organizational structures that balance the benefits of structural differentiation with the coordination demands of tighter integration.
- **Decision-making** captures the formal and informal processes, as well as the status groups involved in developing, implementing, and legitimating decisions within the university (Barbato et al., 2021; Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Stensaker & Vabø, 2013). Considered "at the heart of governing and governance" (Peters & Pierre, 2016, p. i), decision-making in universities – once characterized as organized anarchies (Cohen et al., 1972) with pluralistic goal systems (Frost & Hattke, 2018) – has shifted from collegial and decentralized forms toward more managerial, top-heavy, centralized, and organization-wide processes (Deem, 1998; Hasse & Krücken, 2013; Shattock, 2013; Wilkesmann & Wagner, 2024). While this shift is often, though not always (Bleiklie et al., 2015), accompanied by increasing formalization and bureaucratization (Christensen, 2011; Ramirez & Christensen, 2013), it presents leadership with the challenge of legitimizing top-down decisions and initiating strategic change in response to competitive pressures and environmental uncertainty (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Hattke et al., 2014; Kezar et

al., 2011; Stensaker & Vabø, 2013). Thus, decision-making ultimately addresses the question of how commitment to a course of action is achieved while balancing competing governance modes.

3.3 Summary

The analytical framework developed in this chapter reconceptualizes universities' organizational actorhood from an externally determined condition into a dynamic, organization-centered capacity to act (Bloch, 2021). The framework places the university as an organization at the core of the analysis and asks how universities actively enact actorhood when responding to multiple competitions. Drawing on configurational and archetype theory (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993; Hinings, 2018), it conceptualizes archetypes of actorhood as emerging from the dynamic interplay of three interrelated components: interpretive schemes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993), which capture how universities collectively make sense of multiple competitions; response patterns (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013; Oliver, 1991), which trace how they organize and coordinate action along a reactive–proactive continuum; and configurations (Hinings, 2018; Meyer et al., 1993; Miller, 1996), which integrate strategy and structure through the organizational elements of positioning, accountability, organizational design, and decision-making.

Taken together, this archetype-of-actorhood framework provides a dynamic lens for understanding how distinct combinations of sensemaking, strategic action, and organizational configurations crystallize into empirically observable archetypes of organizational actorhood in higher education. It lays the foundation for identifying empirically grounded patterns of organizational actorhood, heeding Bloch's (2021) argument that universities' enactment of strategic agency cannot be specified in advance but must be revealed through empirical inquiry.

4 Methodology: A Qualitative Meta-Study

The choice of an appropriate research design is essential for ensuring the rigor and quality of any research project. This chapter outlines the methodological approach employed to investigate how archetypes of organizational actorhood emerge when universities respond to multiple competitions. Given that actorhood cannot be assumed a priori but must be uncovered empirically (Bloch, 2021), the study requires a research design capable of integrating rich yet scattered qualitative evidence in order to derive overarching patterns that remain invisible within single-case or small-*N* case studies. To meet this aim, this study adopts a qualitative meta-study, a re-interpretive synthesis of existing qualitative research that enables the development of theory on organizational actorhood (Finfgeld, 2003; Habersang & Reihlen, 2025; Hoon, 2013; Paterson et al., 2001; Sandelowski et al., 1997; Thorne, 2022).

The following sections explain the rationale for this approach, its methodological underpinnings, and the specific procedures used to identify, select, analyze, and synthesize the empirical case studies that constitute the dataset of this study.

4.1 Seeing the Bigger Picture: The Rationale of Qualitative Meta-Studies

To analyze universities' organizational actorhood in multiple competitions, this study employs a qualitative meta-study. A qualitative meta-study is an interpretive research approach that systematically re-examines and synthesizes the findings of multiple qualitative case studies (Finfgeld, 2003; Hoon, 2013; Paterson et al., 2009), which were originally not intended for linkage (Hoon, 2013). By integrating these dispersed studies, it enables the development of a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon than any single study can offer. It operates on the premise that qualitative case studies – often rich, detailed, and deeply embedded in specific contexts (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) – contain theoretical insights that can be revealed and extended when these studies are brought into systematic comparison and integration. Methodologically, the qualitative meta-study treats published qualitative studies themselves as the unit of analysis, focusing on their reported findings, interpretive claims, conceptual categories, and methodological decisions rather than re-analyzing empirical raw data (Finfgeld, 2003).

This shift in analytical focus distinguishes qualitative meta-studies from other qualitative approaches. By examining the interpretive products of primary researchers, a qualitative meta-study uncovers how different scholars have conceptualized a phenomenon, which empirical patterns they identified, and which theoretical explanations they advanced (Paterson et al., 2001). Analyzing these studies in relation to one another allows researchers to detect shared

mechanisms, divergent interpretations, and latent theoretical tensions across the body of qualitative work. The method is therefore inherently interpretive and translational: it involves comparing, recontextualizing, and synthesizing qualitative findings to construct a broader conceptual narrative (Thorne et al., 2004). Because qualitative case studies are highly situated, the qualitative meta-study must strike a careful balance between preserving contextual richness and abstracting from it – what Sandelowski et al. (1997) describe as the challenge of "summarizing a poem" (p. 366). The goal is not to flatten the insights of individual studies but to distil what carries theoretical relevance across them.

The overarching purpose of a qualitative meta-study is thus theory development (Campbell, 2003; Hoon, 2003). By juxtaposing rich qualitative accounts from diverse settings, the method allows scholars to reveal underlying mechanisms, recurrent patterns, and higher-order relationships that remain obscured in isolated single-case or small-*N* case studies (Sandelowski et al., 1997). In this sense, qualitative meta-studies produce theoretical or conceptual contributions that are greater than the sum of the individual studies (Campbell et al., 2003; Habersang & Reihlen, 2025). This interpretive and iterative process requires repeatedly moving between individual findings and emerging cross-study patterns to refine theoretical insights and increase the level of abstraction (Habersang & Reihlen, 2025; Küberling-Jost, 2019; Sandelowski et al., 1997; Timulak, 2009).

Despite variation across methodological traditions, qualitative meta-studies share a common set of core steps (Habersang & Reihlen, 2025): a systematic search for relevant and eligible studies, their selection based on transparent criteria, the interpretive analysis of their findings, and the synthesis of these insights into higher-level conceptual or theoretical insights. To situate this approach within the broader methodological landscape, it is useful to clarify how qualitative meta-studies differ from a selected set of related methods. Unlike narrative, systematic, or critical literature reviews – which primarily summarize or categorize bodies of research – a qualitative meta-study is guided by a focused analytical question and seeks to develop new theoretical understanding rather than descriptive overviews (Hoon, 2013; Sandelowski et al., 1997). It also differs from secondary analysis because it does not revisit original raw data but instead synthesizes the published interpretations and conceptual framings offered by primary researchers (Thorne et al., 2004). Moreover, in contrast to quantitative meta-analysis, the qualitative meta-study relies on interpretive reasoning rather than relying on statistical techniques to aggregate findings and derive precise estimates from numerical data across multiple studies (Borenstein et al., 2009; Thorne, 2022; Timulak, 2009). Finally, unlike qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), which identifies causal pathways and tests deterministic hypotheses based on

set-theoretical logic (Hildebrandt et al., 2015; Ragin, 2014; Rihoux & Ragin, 2009), qualitative meta-studies adopt an open and interpretive approach to synthesizing existing empirical research.

The existing methodological literature employs varying terms to refer to approaches that synthesize qualitative studies at a meta-level. These terms include *qualitative meta-analysis* (e.g., Habersang et al., 2019; Küberling-Jost, 2019; Levitt, 2018; Timulak, 2009), a label referring to the earliest substantive work in this field conducted by Stern and Harries (1985); *qualitative meta-synthesis* (e.g., Bronstein & Reihlen, 2014; Hoon, 2013; Thorne, 2022; Thorne et al., 2004; Paterson et al., 2009; Rauch et al., 2014) or simply *meta-synthesis* (e.g., Jensen & Allen, 1996), terms adopted to avoid associations with quantitative meta-analysis and to emphasize the interpretive nature of synthesizing qualitative findings (Finfgeld, 2003); and *qualitative meta-study* (e.g., Habersang & Reihlen, 2025; Paterson et al., 2001), a label used in this study because it highlights the comprehensive scope of the approach, including not only the synthesis of findings but also a reflective engagement with the theoretical and methodological assumptions embedded in the primary studies (Finfgeld, 2003; Hoon, 2013).

4.2 The Untapped Potential of Qualitative Meta-Studies in Higher Education Research

The qualitative meta-study employed in this study builds on the extensive availability of qualitative case studies in higher education research, particularly in governance and management (Bronstein & Reihlen, 2014). Over recent decades, the overall volume of scientific publications has expanded dramatically across academic disciplines (Bornmann & Mutz, 2015; McGrail et al., 2006), including in higher education research specifically (Kyvik & Aksnes, 2015). This substantial growth in scientific output has coincided with an increase in the relative share of qualitative studies, reflecting the growing methodological acceptance of qualitative approaches. While Eisenhardt (2021) noted that during the 1980s, “there were only few published qualitative studies and almost no guidance on how to execute theory-building research” (p. 147), qualitative research has since become one of the dominant approaches for examining organizational phenomena within higher education and across the broader field of organization research. As a result, higher education scholarship now offers a rich and diverse corpus of qualitative case studies that illuminate intra-organizational phenomena within universities (Tight, 2012).

These qualitative case studies offer significant advantages for examining universities. Case study research is especially appropriate in the early, theory-building phases of organizational

research, when key variables, relationships, and underlying mechanisms have yet to be uncovered (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994). Rather than investigating phenomena independent of their contexts, case studies support in-depth, context-sensitive analyses that uncover how and why organizational phenomena unfold (Eisenhardt, 1989; Langley, 1999). By integrating multiple data sources (Yin, 2014), they enable rich theoretical insights grounded in 'real-world contexts', providing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Moreover, researchers interested in studying phenomena in higher education, such as the internal organization of universities, often benefit from direct access to these institutions due to their own affiliations, while their personal ethnographic experiences enhance their ability to understand the observations they make.

Despite their strengths and steadily growing number, qualitative case studies also present limitations. Due to their context-specific nature, case studies offer depth but limited generalizability (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gibbert et al., 2008), in particular, because the sample size normally comprises only one or a few cases, given the substantial resources required for examining each case (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As a result, even comparative qualitative studies often remain too context-bound to support broader theoretical generalization. This limitation is further exacerbated by the fact that existing qualitative insights are insufficiently integrated across studies (Hoon, 2013; Sandelowski et al., 1997), partly because organizational researchers tend to prioritize new data collection over re-examination of existing research (Hoon, 2013). As a consequence, overarching patterns of organizational behavior often remain unidentified.

A qualitative meta-study directly addresses these limitations. By rigorously and systematically integrating dispersed case studies, it enhances the generalizability of qualitative research, extends the analytical scope beyond individual cases, and generates theoretical or conceptual insights that would not emerge from studying cases in isolation (Habersang & Reihlen, 2025; Sandelowski et al., 1997). Through the 'analysis of existing analyses' (Hoon, 2013, p. 524), the method allows researchers to consolidate the extensive yet fragmented body of empirical research on universities' organizational transition, thereby providing a more systematic foundation for theorizing archetypal patterns of actorhood.

A further advantage of qualitative meta-studies in the higher education context lies in their capacity to reveal emerging organizational patterns across national boundaries. Much of higher education scholarship examines state-university relations and emphasizes how national idiosyncrasies impact the functioning of universities (Ferlie et al., 2008), an orientation that Dale (2005) characterizes as "methodological nationalism" (p. 124). Many of these empirical studies

adopt a comparative research design (Antonucci, 2014; Kosmützky & Nokkala, 2014; Reale, 2014; Teichler, 1996), emphasizing variations among universities embedded in different national contexts (Ramirez & Tiplic, 2014). While such studies effectively capture country-specific developments, they often overlook global trends (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013), as they "are less sensitive to growing commonalities or tend to dismiss these as superficialities" (Ramirez & Tiplic, 2014, p. 452). Although valuable studies on global organizational trends exist, analyzing structural shifts through large-scale survey data, panel datasets, or publicly available institutional information (e.g., Lee & Ramirez, 2024; Pineda & Steinhardt, 2023; Williams & Lewis, 2025), such approaches provide limited insights into the meso-level organizational transition through which universities construct and perform strategic agency. A qualitative meta-study complements these approaches by integrating richly contextualized empirical evidence from universities embedded in diverse governance regimes. It allows for the identification of both common and distinct organizational trajectories, revealing cross-national patterns of universities' strategic responses to multiple competitions. This integrative capacity makes the qualitative meta-study particularly well suited for theorizing universities' actorhood, which manifests in configurations of organizational practices that transcend national borders while remaining sensitive to local conditions.

Despite their demonstrated value for advancing theory, the qualitative meta-study method "is still in its infancy" in organizational research (Habersang & Reihlen, 2025, p. 211) and higher education research (Adler & Lalonde, 2020). Although the approach has gained traction in sociology, anthropology, and education (Timulak, 2009), its most mature applications appear within the health sector (Finfgeld, 2003; Thorne et al., 2004; Paterson et al., 2009), particularly in nursing (Finlayson & Dixon, 2008; Sandelowski et al., 1997; Thorne, 2022) and psychotherapy (Levitt, 2018; Timulak, 2009). In contrast, organizational research has only recently begun to attract growing interest in qualitative meta-studies (Combs et al., 2019; Habersang et al., 2019; Küberling-Jost, 2021; Rauch et al., 2014), despite earlier recognition of the value of synthesizing qualitative insights (Rauch et al., 2014). This renewed momentum has led to the proliferation of methodological protocols and standards for conducting meta-studies in organization research, although their variation has produced discrepancies in the execution of procedural steps across and within protocols, resulting from differing interpretations by scholars (Habersang & Reihlen, 2025).

Within higher education research, qualitative meta-studies are rare and predominantly focused on micro-level issues, particularly students' experiences (Aarto-Pesonen & Piirainen, 2020; Cin

et al., 2022; Ennals et al., 2015). Only recently have qualitative meta-studies emerged that examine meso-level organizational phenomena related to recent transformations within the higher education sector. Two of these studies investigate academic identity transformations in response to new public management policies (Adler & Lalonde, 2020), respectively the neoliberal governance mode (Tülübaş & Göktürk, 2023). While Adler and Lalonde (2020) identified scholars' diverse yet challenging experiences with managerial control mechanisms across 19 universities and developed a classification of work identity and self-identity; Tülübaş and Göktürk (2023), drawing on 24 university cases, traced three identity trajectories among academics: the entrepreneurial academic, the ambivalent academic, and the authentic academic trajectory, reflecting the tension between neoliberal norms and academics' agency. A third study, conducted by Bronstein and Reihlen (2014), deepens the understanding of entrepreneurial universities utilizing a configurational perspective. They identified four distinct archetypes of entrepreneurial universities – driven by research, industry, service innovation or knowledge commercialization – that have emerged in response to a changing institutional paradigm, thus contributing to the understanding of organizational structure and strategic change. These studies demonstrate the significant but still underexploited potential of qualitative meta-studies for higher education research.

4.3 Building the Sample for the Qualitative Meta-Study

The qualitative meta-study draws on a purposively selected set of empirical case studies examining universities' responses to multiple competitions. Relevant studies were identified and selected in accordance with the ENTREQ statement (Tong et al., 2012) and documented through a transparent audit trail (see Figure 4).

Data collection was based on searches in seven databases: three scholarly online databases – Web of Science, EBSCO, and ProQuest – as well as four national databases, namely the Library of Congress, the British Library, the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, and the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.

4.3.1 The Boolean Search String

To identify relevant case studies within these databases, a Boolean search string was developed to capture rich empirical case studies related to competition and university governance. This search string integrates key terms that delimit the higher education context, capture intra-organizational phenomena related to strategic and structural elements, and identify qualitative, empirical case-based research.

Boolean search string:

TS = (“higher education*” OR hochschul* OR universit* OR academ* OR akadem* OR colleg* OR “business school*”) AND (*account* OR *administrat* OR *allocat* OR *allokat* OR *authorit* OR *autorit* OR *autonom* OR *budget* OR *bureaucra* OR *bürokrat* OR *chang* OR *wandel* OR *collaborat* OR *kollaborat* OR *competit* OR *wettbewerb* OR *control* OR *kontroll* OR *deci* OR *entscheid* OR *empower* OR *entrepr* OR *evalu* OR *govern* OR *hierarch* OR *lead* OR *führ* OR *logic* OR *logik* OR *manag* OR *market* OR *markt* OR *negoti* OR *verhand* OR *organi* OR *output* OR *participat* OR *partizipat* OR *perform* OR *leistung* OR *power* OR *macht* OR *process* OR *prozess* OR *qualit* OR *self* OR *selbst* OR *steer* OR *steuer* OR *strateg* OR *structur* OR *struktur*) AND (“case stud*” OR fallstudie* OR empiri* OR “best practice*” OR “case of”)

These selected key terms were derived from an analysis of keywords found in higher education journal articles, recommendations from experts, and terms documented during the literature review. The comprehensive Boolean search string includes a total of 64 key terms in both English and their corresponding German translations, which were searched for in the publications’ titles, abstracts, and keywords. Although the length of the search string led to a larger pool of results to review, it was intentionally formulated in such an extensive way to ensure that no relevant publications would be overlooked in the qualitative meta-study.

In addition to searching databases, expert recommendations on suitable case studies were incorporated and a forward and backward citation search[3] was conducted among eligible case studies to identify relevant publications not captured by the database queries.

The resulting body of publications was subsequently assessed for eligibility using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Subsection 4.3.2), as documented in the transparent audit trail (see Subsection 4.3.3).

4.3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To determine the eligibility of publications identified through the search strategy for inclusion in the qualitative meta-study, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Meline, 2006), as outlined in Table 1, were applied.

With regard to content, included case studies were required to provide a comprehensive description of how the respective university responded to competitive pressures within the higher

[3] Backward searching refers to screening the reference lists of the included studies, whereas forward searching involves identifying newer publications that cite these studies.

education system. Moreover, the case studies needed to focus on the meso-organizational level of research-active universities and offer procedural insights into their strategic and structural transformations.

Methodologically, the publications had to be based on qualitative empirical case studies that captured the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and demonstrate a high standard of quality, with the peer-review publication process serving as a reliable indicator for research articles (Gibbert et al., 2008). Due to the absence of a peer-review process, monographs were subjected to more stringent quality assessments. These assessments required, in particular, a high degree of research transparency and data triangulation across diverse sources (Yin, 1994). As Tight (2012) cautions, documents authored by universities themselves – while valuable for understanding institutional self-presentation – frequently present uncritical and incomplete accounts of institutional development.

Furthermore, only written scientific publications from 1990 onward were included to ensure that universities have been impacted by proliferating competitive pressures and sufficient time has elapsed for them to respond. Lastly, the publications were restricted to those written in German or English, as these are the languages in which the analysis could be conducted reliably.

Importantly, no specific national higher education systems or universities with the legal status of private institutions were excluded. In line with Thoenig and Paradeise's (2016) argument that meaningful comparison in higher education research rests on organizational capabilities rather than legal status or national location, cases were selected according to the substantive, organization-centered criteria outlined above, thereby allowing the identification of overarching, cross-national patterns of organizational responses.

Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Case Study Selection

Category	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Content criteria	• Research-active university as the organization under study	• Organization is not a research-active university (e.g., teaching college, university hospital)
	• Focus on the meso-organizational level	• Exclusive focus on the micro level (e.g., individual or small group dynamics), the macro level (e.g., national policies) or isolated university units (e.g., libraries, university hospitals)
	• Description of competitive pressures	• No description of competitive pressures
	• Comprehensive examination of the university's procedural response to competitive pressures	• No comprehensive examination of the university's procedural response to competitive pressures
Methodological criteria	• Qualitative, empirical case study design	• Quantitative research design or exclusively quantitative methods
	• Inclusion of multiple stakeholder perspectives (e.g., leadership, academic staff, administrative staff)	• Single stakeholder perspective without perspectival breadth
	• High methodological rigor (e.g., peer review, transparency, data triangulation)	• Insufficient data quality (e.g., incomplete or unclear methodological descriptions)
Publication criteria	• Published in or after 1990	• Published before 1990
	• English or German language	• Languages other than English or German

4.3.3 The Transparent Audit Trail

Overall, the search yielded 35,267 results, which were refined to 27,648 by removing duplicates (see Figure 4). Subsequently, each publication was assessed for eligibility based on the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria described above (see Subsection 4.3.2).

At the first screening stage, 18,022 publications were excluded following title-based screening, as they addressed topics that fell outside the content-related inclusion criteria defined for this qualitative meta-study. These exclusions primarily concerned studies focusing on, among others, gender studies (e.g., Aiston et al., 2020; Yau & Cheng, 2014), health issues (e.g., Gigliotti et al., 2020; Larcombe et al., 2016), minority issues (e.g., Chen, 2017; Gonzales et al., 2021), and student experiences (e.g., Henri et al., 2018; McNally et al., 2017) within the broader higher education context or selected higher education institutions. The presence of clearly identifiable topic-related keywords in publication titles enabled efficient pre-sorting and substantially facilitated this content-related screening procedure.

From the remaining 9,626 publications, a further 8,692 were excluded after reviewing their titles, abstracts, keywords, or blurbs individually, as they likewise did not meet the inclusion criteria. Given the large number of publications screened, records that clearly met content-related exclusion criteria were not examined further for methodological eligibility.

In the final step, the full texts of the remaining 934 publications were examined. While content-related criteria continued to account for the majority of exclusions at this stage, they increasingly overlapped with methodological exclusion criteria, such as the absence of a qualitative case study design or insufficient methodological rigor, which often became apparent only through close reading of the full texts.

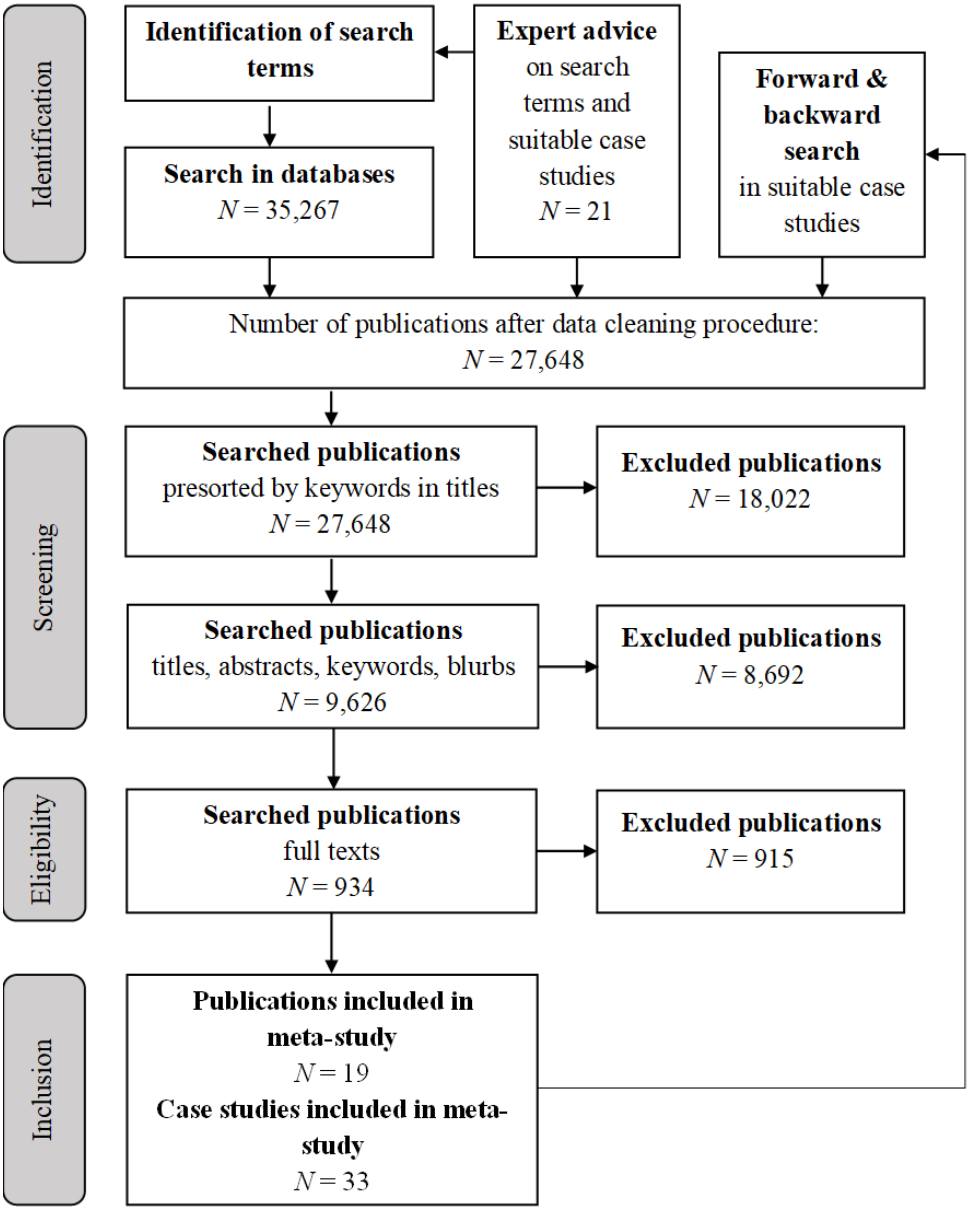
Across the stages of the audit trail, publication-related exclusion criteria applied to only a minority of publications (1,356 publications; approx. 5%), namely publication before 1990 (318 publications), languages other than English or German (1,044), or both (6 publications)[4].

Ultimately, 19 publications containing a total of 33 case studies were identified that fully met the inclusion criteria and constitute the empirical basis of the qualitative meta-study.

[4] A detailed quantification of the relative prevalence of individual content-related and methodological exclusion criteria was not feasible, as many publications met multiple exclusion criteria simultaneously and, given the large number of records, were not assessed against all remaining criteria once any exclusion criteria were met.

Figure 4

Flowchart of Sample Construction in the Qualitative Meta-Study



4.3.4 Context of the Studies

The resulting sample for the qualitative meta-study draws on 33 comprehensive university case studies (detailed descriptions of the individual cases are provided in Table 3 in Appendix B). The studies adopt a broad range of theoretical and analytical approaches to examine specific aspects of universities' organizational transition. Methodologically, of the 19 publications analyzed, the majority (12 studies) employ single case study designs, while others adopt multiple case (2 studies) or comparative (5 studies) designs. Substantively, the cases illustrate significant

variations in how universities utilize their room for maneuver to respond to multiple competitions as organizational actors.

All included universities are embedded in multiple competitions while having been granted increased formal organizational autonomy, the degree of which varies due to country-specific regulatory frameworks. These frameworks are generally discussed as the field level, referring to the national higher education system in which each university operates. This qualitative meta-study covers a total of 13 different higher education systems around the world: Brazil (1 case), Canada (2 cases), China (2 cases), England (6 cases), Finland (2 cases), Germany (1 case), Italy (1 case), Japan (1 case), New Zealand (1 case), Scotland (3 cases), Switzerland (3 cases), Thailand (1 case), and the USA (9 cases).

Beyond their geographical locations, the universities vary along several organizational characteristics[5]. With regard to size[6], the sample includes small (2 cases), medium-sized (5 cases), large (8 cases), and very large (15 cases) institutions, with a higher share of cases drawn from large and very large universities (23 cases). In terms of age, founding years range from 1583 to 1997, with most institutions established before the mid-twentieth century (24 cases), including a substantial number founded prior to 1900 (15 cases). Concerning discipline concentration, the sample predominantly comprises generalist universities (28 cases), alongside a smaller number of more specialized institutions (2 cases). With respect to reputation and budget, the cases include universities described as highly reputed or excellent, as well as institutions characterized as non-elite with more limited resource endowments. Finally, the sample consists of 30 public and 3 private universities, all receiving state funding to varying degrees under different national conditions.

By intentionally including universities with multifaceted contextual characteristics, overarching patterns across those institutions' diverse responses to varying manifestations of multiple competitions can be identified. The detailed case descriptions offer valuable insights into the underlying dynamics of organizational transitions from traditional loosely coupled systems toward new forms of organizing.

[5] Information on organizational characteristics such as size, age, disciplinary profile, reputation, and budget is based on the descriptions provided in the original case studies. A minority of the studies did not report all characteristics systematically; accordingly, these descriptions refer only to cases in which the respective information was available. As a result, the number of cases reported for size and disciplinary profile does not sum to the full sample 33 cases.

[6] University size was classified in accordance with the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, using student and staff numbers reported in the case studies. Where such information was unavailable, the size categorization provided by the respective case study authors was adopted.

4.4 Analyzing the Data to Identify Overarching Patterns

The data analysis followed an iterative and reflexive process (Habersang et al., 2019) guided by abductive reasoning (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). This process entailed the development of an extensive coding scheme and progressively elevating the empirical findings to higher levels of abstraction, thereby yielding theoretical insights into how universities enact organizational actorhood under multiple competitions (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Bloch, 2021).

4.4.1 Coding and Analytical Procedure

The data analysis followed an abductive approach (see Subsection 4.4.2), with inductive and deductive coding techniques applied iteratively (Habersang et al., 2019; Habersang & Reihlen, 2025), using MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021).

Inductive coding techniques were employed to capture the richness and diversity of the empirical material and to identify patterns in the data. Most inductive codes were generated during an open coding procedure, which involved systematically examining, comparing, and abstracting the case material. This procedure was applied to each case study line by line, allowing for in-depth engagement with the rich empirical material (Habersang et al., 2019).

Deductive coding was used to relate these insights to existing literature in higher education and organization research, thereby ensuring theoretical consistency while refining and structuring the interpretations and explanations derived from the data. Deductive codes were informed by key concepts from the literature on multiple competitions (Krücken, 2021; Musselin, 2018), universities' actorhood (Bloch, 2021; Huisman & Burgoa, 2023; Krücken & Meier, 2006), organizational configurations (Hinings, 2018; Meyer et al., 1993; Miller, 1996) and archetypes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993, 2018).

The interplay of both coding techniques in an abductive process allowed novel insights to emerge without losing alignment with established conceptual foundations. Overall, coding, interpretation, and discussion of the data continued until no substantial new analytical insights were generated from additional analysis. The entire process of data analysis was accompanied by regular textualizations of observed findings, paradoxes, tentative explanations, and links to existing literature.

The abductive coding procedure resulted in a comprehensive coding scheme (Appendix A) comprising a total of 190 coded attributes assigned to 38 elements. These elements, in turn, were clustered into seven dimensions that capture the manifestations of multiple competitions

within the case studies; contextual site information on the universities under study; their strategic and structural characteristics and transitions; procedural information on how these organizational transitions unfolded over time and in relation to competitive pressures; normative assessments of competition and universities' organizational responses to these pressures; and, finally, meta-level data on the publications themselves.

Corresponding to the analytical framework outlined in Chapter 3, the dimensions containing organizational elements related to strategy and structure, procedural dynamics, and normative assessments provided the empirical foundation for deriving configurations, response patterns, and interpretive schemes – the core components of archetypes of organizational actorhood.

Building on the extensive coding procedure, the analytical process unfolded in four major cycles: (1) identification of organizational configurations, (2) identification of response patterns, (3) identification of interpretive schemes, and (4) development of archetypes of organizational actorhood. These analytical steps are illustrated in Figure 5.

Throughout all four analytical steps, within-case and cross-case analyses were applied in alternation to capture both the contextual particularities of each university case and the broader patterns across cases (Bronstein & Reihlen, 2014; Hoon, 2013).

In the first step, the organizational configuration of each university case was identified and subsequently grouped into four overarching configurational patterns (Hinings, 2018; Miller, 1996; Meyer et al., 1993). Beginning with a within-case analysis, attention was directed toward how each university developed its strategies and arranged its structures in response to multiple competitions. In this process, coded attributes (e.g., committees) were condensed into higher-order elements (e.g., governing bodies) corresponding to the configurational dimensions of strategy (positioning and accountability) and structure (organizational design and decision-making), as defined in the analytical framework. Through subsequent cross-case synthesis, the 33 configurations were aggregated into four overarching configurational patterns. These patterns include one initial configuration – representing the starting point for most universities' transitions – and three subsequent configurations into which universities evolved while responding to multiple competitions.

In the second step, the procedural patterns of action taken by universities to address multiple competitions were analyzed. For each case, the specific response pattern (Doyle & Brady, 2018; Oliver, 1991; Pollock et al., 2018) was examined, with particular attention to how actions were organized over time in temporal relation to multiple competitions (temporal classification). Delving into the chronological order of events, this involved distinguishing between actions

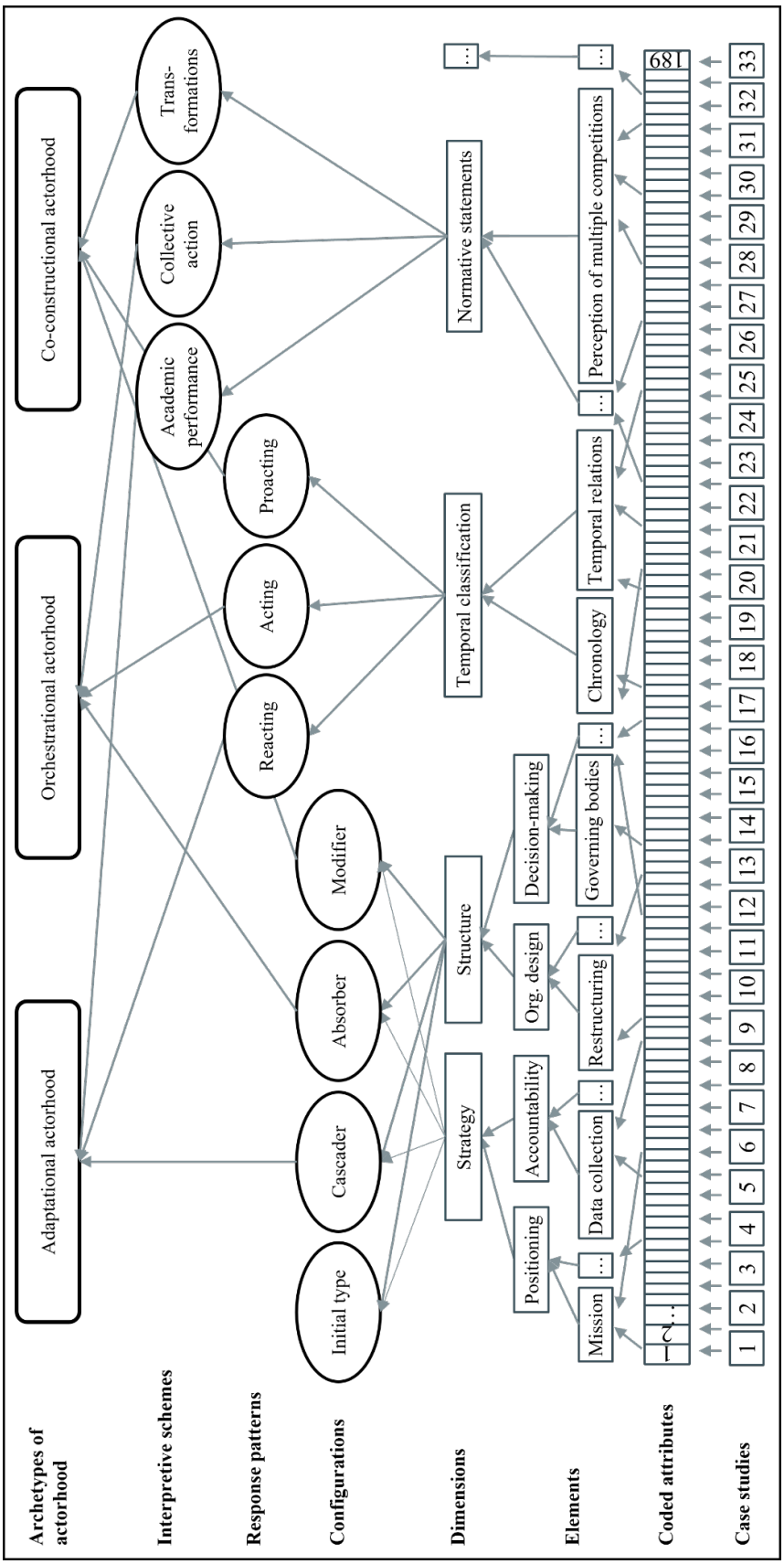
taken before multiple competitions intensified and those occurring during the still ongoing period of heightened competition (chronology), as well as assessing whether universities responded to competition in a reactive, active, or proactive manner (temporal relation). Following the identification of the temporality and direction of the case-specific responses, three overarching response patterns were derived through cross-case comparison.

In the third step, interpretive schemes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988, 1993) related to multiple competitions were identified. The case studies provided extensive normative statements reflecting dominant coalitions (March, 1962; Mithani & O'Brien, 2021) of staff perceptions and evaluations of competitive pressures (positive, neutral, or negative) and their institution's handling of these pressures (e.g., inefficiency). These statements were coded with an emphasis on organizational values and norms, as well as subjective perceptions and evaluations of multiple competitions. This procedure resulted in the identification of case-specific interpretive schemes, which were subsequently grouped into three dominant cross-case patterns of interpretive schemes.

In the fourth and final step, the preceding findings were elevated to a higher level of abstraction. Examination of cross-case patterns at a meta-level revealed a recurring structure across the previously identified configurations, response patterns, and interpretive schemes. Each configuration consistently co-occurred with a specific response pattern and interpretive scheme, forming three overarching meta-patterns of organizational actorhood. These meta-patterns were synthesized into three robust archetypes (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993, 2018) and recontextualized within the existing literature on universities' transitions prompted by environmental transformations. By linking these emergent meta-patterns to the concept of organizational actorhood, they were theorized as three distinct archetypes of actorhood, synthesizing insights into how universities evolve into organizational actors.

Figure 5

Analytical Process of the Qualitative Meta-Study



Note. Adopted from Bronstein and Reihlen (2014, p. 11).

4.4.2 Interpretation of the Data and Abductive Reasoning

This study adopted an interpretive approach in which the findings of existing case studies were re-interpreted rather than merely summarized (Habersang & Reihlen, 2025; Paterson et al., 2001). Through this interpretive engagement, an analytical understanding of how organizational actorhood unfolds in response to multiple competitions was developed. Informed by constructivist thought (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, 1994; Schwandt, 1997), this approach acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed and that multiple interpretations of the same phenomenon can coexist. Accordingly, the interpretations presented in this study represent one possible reading shaped by the researcher's – namely, my own – position and experiences within the higher education system, while other researchers might have arrived at different understandings (Schwandt, 1998).

The cognitive logic underpinning the data analysis followed abductive reasoning. Abduction constitutes a distinct mode of reasoning that combines creative imagination with systematic inquiry to generate new knowledge (Mingers, 2012; Peirce, 1955; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021), thereby bridging logical and empirical forms of reasoning (Mingers, 2012). In contrast to deduction, which derives conclusions from established general principles, and induction, which generalizes from empirical observations, abduction involves creatively identifying and elaborating patterns that have not yet been articulated in either existing theory or the empirical material (Mingers, 2012).

Through the generation and evaluation of plausible explanations for data anomalies, abduction enables theory building within a cyclical movement of sensemaking and disciplined imagination (Weick, 1989, 1995, as cited in Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). As emphasized by Sætre and Van de Ven (2021), abduction "is not a single flash of inspiration; instead, it involves four systematic steps that may re-occur to make sense of complex phenomena" (p. 30). The interrelated steps are:

1. Noticing patterns – identifying novel or unexpected phenomena in the data that challenge existing assumptions;
2. Confirming patterns – verifying that the phenomenon indeed represents a genuine deviation recurring across the empirical material;
3. Idea generation – developing multiple tentative explanations (i.e., hunches) that account for the identified patterns; and
4. Idea evaluation – critically assessing these alternative hunches, selecting the most plausible explanations, and testing them against the empirical material.

These iterative steps guided the analysis of this study. Patterns were identified in the case material that could not be sufficiently explained through existing theories, models, or frameworks in higher education or organization research. Through systematic within-case and cross-case comparison, the consistent recurrence of these patterns across the empirical material was examined and confirmed. On this basis, potential theoretical explanations were developed, assessing whether specific case characteristics produced others, constituted critical junctures, or tended to co-occur with particular constellations of organizational features. These relationships were refined through engagement with the relevant higher education, configuration, and organizational actorhood literature. Competing explanations were subsequently evaluated and narrowed down to the most plausible interpretations before being subjected to renewed empirical scrutiny against the data (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021).

4.5 Credibility and Validity of the Study

To ensure the credibility and validity of the study, understood in interpretive terms, discrepancies arising during the case selection and coding procedures were systematically documented and addressed. These issues were discussed regularly within the DFG-funded research project, specifically within the subproject to which this dissertation contributes, as well as with academic colleagues (Hoon, 2013), drawing on the debriefing technique proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Throughout the abductive reasoning process, close collaboration within the research subproject supported the examination of observed patterns, the sharing of interpretations, and the generation, testing, and refinement of theoretical explanations (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). Preliminary findings were additionally discussed with experts in higher education research and organization studies to ensure that neither existing theories nor alternative explanations were overlooked, and that the emerging theoretical explanations developed for empirical assessment were well-grounded. Feedback was also sought at conferences and within the broader research project at multiple stages of the study.

Rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure alignment with the research focus and to enhance analytical generalizability (Gibbert et al., 2008; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). These criteria encompassed stringent methodological requirements aimed at maintaining a high level of data quality, including transparency and data triangulation (Yin, 1994). Such requirements were particularly important for monographs, which, while not subject to peer review, offer valuable in-depth contextual insights.

By grounding the qualitative meta-study in a diverse set of case studies, this study captures a wide range of competitive pressures that universities face, including competition for funding,

reputation, staff, students, and organizational legitimacy. While these competitive dynamics are observable across all cases, the primary source of analytical leverage lies not in the presence of competition as such, but in the marked variation in how universities respond to it. Specifically, these cases differ in how universities mobilize organizational capabilities, coordinate collective action, and enact strategic agency when responding to multiple competitions, thus providing a strong comparative foundation (Habersang et al., 2019) for configurational theorizing on actorhood archetypes.

4.6 Summary

The methodology adopted in this study is a qualitative meta-study (Finfgeld, 2003; Habersang & Reihlen, 2025; Hoon, 2013; Paterson et al., 2001; Sandelowski et al., 1997; Thorne, 2022) designed to theorize universities' organizational actorhood in response to multiple competitions by systematically reinterpreting existing qualitative case studies. Building on the widespread use of in-depth case research in higher education scholarship, the study treats published qualitative cases as its empirical material and integrates them across national contexts to identify cross-case patterns that individual studies cannot reveal on their own. In line with the ENTREQ Statement (Tong et al., 2012) and a transparent audit trail, a broad database search was conducted using a comprehensive Boolean search string, followed by the application of a priori defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in the selection of 19 publications comprising 33 university cases across 13 higher education systems.

The analysis, supported by MAXQDA 2022, combined inductive and deductive coding techniques within an abductive reasoning logic (Mingers, 2012; Peirce, 1955; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021): open coding and constant comparison were used to capture the richness of the material, while concepts from research on multiple competitions, organizational actorhood, configurations, and archetypes guided the progressive abstraction of the data. Through iterative within- and cross-case analysis, organizational configurations, response patterns, and interpretive schemes were identified and subsequently synthesized into overarching archetypes of organizational actorhood. Credibility and validity, understood in interpretive terms, were strengthened by rigorous case selection, careful attention to methodological quality, systematic documentation of analytical decisions, and continuous peer debriefing and expert feedback throughout the research process.

5 Results: Three Archetypes of Organizational Actorhood

This qualitative meta-study synthesizes and reinterprets empirical evidence on how universities enact their organizational actorhood in response to multiple competitions. Rather than assuming universities to be strategic actors a priori (Bloch, 2021), the findings of this study reveal how three distinct archetypes of actorhood emerge through patterned repertoires of organizational responses by which universities navigate competition both within and upon their institutional environment.

Across the 33 university case studies analyzed, multiple competitions emerge as a pervasive and increasingly global feature of higher education (see also Naidoo, 2018). Universities face intensifying competitive pressures over financial, human, and symbolic resources. These pressures manifest across diverse contexts, including performance-based funding schemes in Finland, Italy, and New Zealand; fiscal constraints and expanded accountability demands in Canada, England, and the United States; and declining government subsidies in Japan and China (see Table 3 in Appendix B). While these dynamics unfold unevenly across regions, variation concerns not only *how* competition is configured within national higher education systems, but also *when* competition becomes institutionalized as a governance mechanism. Anglophone systems such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States illustrate comparatively advanced stages of these developments, foreshadowing trajectories that are increasingly observable elsewhere (see also Marginson & Considine, 2000).

Despite national variation, all examined cases consistently position universities as turning into collective actors with room for maneuver expected to secure resources and define institutional profiles under competitive conditions. However, the findings demonstrate that universities make use of this scope for action in markedly different ways.

The analysis identifies three archetypes of organizational actorhood. Across the cases, these archetypes can be traced back to a common initial organizational type, which serves as the empirical point of departure. Each emerging archetype comprises (1) an interpretive scheme that captures how multiple competitions are perceived and evaluated by the organization, (2) a response pattern that reflects how the university organizes its actions in response, and (3) a configuration that integrates the strategic and structural manifestations of these patterns across the elements of positioning, accountability, organizational design, and decision-making.

The chapter proceeds by first outlining the initial type as a point of departure for universities' transition into organizational actors under multiple competitions. It then details the three archetypes of actorhood – adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional actorhood – before synthesizing their core characteristics and providing a systematic analysis of their empirical distributions and transition pathways.

5.1 The Initial Type

The initial type corresponds to the traditional university model that predominated before multiple competitions intensified within higher education systems. It serves as the empirical point of departure for universities' subsequent transition into organizational actors. Consistent with classical organizational accounts, this initial type resembles Weick's (1976) loosely coupled systems, Cohen et al.'s (1972) organized anarchies, and Mintzberg's (1979) professional bureaucracies. In this type, organizational identity, hierarchy, and rationality remain limited, such that the university cannot yet be described as a complete organization (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

5.1.1 The Absence of Organizational Actorhood

In terms of the analytical framework introduced in Chapter 3, organizational actorhood entails an interrelated interpretive scheme, response pattern, and configuration. Empirically, the initial type does not perform organizational actorhood in this sense. Rather, the evidence primarily points to a configuration shaped by historically strong state steering and stable public funding, which constrained organizational room for maneuver and reduced incentives for deliberate strategic actions (de Boer et al., 2007; Krücken & Meier, 2006).

The case studies repeatedly described extensive state influence over universities' resource allocation and decision-making, limiting opportunities for strategic planning and coordinated organizational action. For example, one case notes:

> *The New Zealand government has long controlled education through resource allocation and law enactment.* (Case 11, p. 929)

A further illustration from Italy emphasizes the breadth of centralized control by the state:

> *Previously, the Italian university system was 'centric'; the Ministry of University had a significant power in deciding the allocation of financial resources, defining the distribution among universities but even determining, within each university the apportioning of resources within subject areas. Further, similar powers governed*

> *human resources policy: recruitment and upgrading needed to be decided and negotiated with central government.* (Case 8, p. 553)

The same study explicitly relates this situation to developments observed elsewhere:

> *The reform of the academic system started in Italy with some delay compared to 'pace setters' such as the UK, New Zealand and the USA [...] This kind of context [in which the state executes extensive control over universities' decision-making] had been experienced elsewhere with a similar outcome: it had constrained university top management for years, reducing the scope of their actions and the opportunity for strategic planning […]* (Case 8, p. 553)

Although the initial type did not face intense competitive pressure at the organizational level, the findings suggest that competitive dynamics existed at the level of individual scholars and disciplinary communities. Such rivalries functioned as a driver of scientific activity and professional reputation (Musselin, 2018). In contrast, contemporary forms of multiple competitions – including formally organized and well-equipped forms of competition between universities as organizations (Musselin, 2018) – are largely absent from this initial type. As a result, competition does not yet operate as a coordinating mechanism for organizational action, nor does it trigger development of integrated strategic responses at the institutional level.

5.1.2 The Initial Configuration

A closer examination of the initial configuration shows that neither strategy nor structure is elaborated at the organizational level. Due to strong state control and stable public funding, universities of the initial type were able to accommodate loosely coupled disciplinary units without the need to develop strategic priorities or coordinated structural arrangements. Organizational coherence remained limited, as neither competitive pressure nor internal incentives necessitated systematic alignment across units.

5.1.2.1 Positioning

The initial type is characterized by a pronounced inward-looking orientation and strong disciplinary embeddedness. Universities offer a traditional and broadly comprehensive spectrum of disciplines in which scholars enjoy a high level of academic freedom in teaching and research. While this disciplinary breadth is often perceived as an institutional strength, it simultaneously reflects the absence of an explicit organizational positioning strategy that differentiates the university from others. As one interviewee succinctly expressed:

'We suffer from a profile problem.' (Case 9, p. 74)

University-wide strategic alignment is largely absent. External developments and internal conditions are interpreted directly by individual members of the university, bypassing any consistent interpretation by a superior hierarchical level, let alone an organizational alignment. Strategic objectives are hardly developed within the university, and resource allocation is not systematically linked to cross-organizational priorities. Instead, the organization accommodates a plurality of partially disconnected orientations and interests.

> *'At one time, there was available 'slippage' in the loosely coupled management of an institution which allowed individuals, colleges and departments, to go their own way in the interpretation of the institutional mission and the pursuit of self-interest.'* (Case 23, pp. 43–44)

Consequently, organizational strategy consists of fragmented and often implicit sub-strategies pursued by individual actors, primarily oriented toward personal benefits rather than collective institutional advantage. This empirical pattern corresponds to classic descriptions as 'professional bureaucracies', in which the indeterminate nature of outputs and pluralistic goals impede the formulation of a unified organizational strategy (Mintzberg, 1979).

> *Interviewees saw constituent groups as placing their own interest well above those of the University.* (Case 9, p. 77)

Taken together, the absence of a coherent organizational positioning implies that strategic priorities are neither collectively defined nor institutionally enforced. As a consequence, accountability remains weakly developed at the organizational level, as neither resource allocation nor performance expectations are systematically linked to shared institutional goals.

5.1.2.2 Accountability

Accountability in the initial type is primarily upward-oriented toward the state and is weakly developed within the organization itself. Universities receive stable, predominantly public funding, often based on line-item budgets and incremental adjustments from previous years. These arrangements are closely coupled with strong governmental regulation in financial and personnel matters, leaving little room for internal prioritization or strategic resource allocation.

> *[…] at the beginning of each year the university was given an itemized budget based on the unitary state plan […]. The amount of funding […] was determined by an 'incremental approach' […] account[ing] for over 90% of the university's total revenue. […] there was not much freedom for the university to decide on how to*

> *spend its budget […]. Everything that was left over from the previous year had to be returned back to the state government.* (Case 14, pp. 173–174)

Such funding arrangements restrict the university's room for maneuver and provide few incentives for cost awareness, efficiency considerations, or long-term financial planning. Accountability mechanisms aimed at efficiency, performance comparison, or strategic steering are largely absent at the organizational level. Instead, accountability is predominantly process-oriented, as organizational legitimacy is secured through conformity to established formal and informal rules of the academic profession. As a result, resources tend to follow historical patterns rather than organizational priorities.

> *Several respondents questioned how well the resources of the University were being managed. […] Limited resources are not being used to full potential.* (Case 9, p. 82)

Within this configuration, awareness of competition for scarce resources remains limited. Responsibility for financial constraints is often externalized, and expectations of continued public provision prevail.

> *Under the faculty system, people had no sense of accountability and responsibility at all. […] They had no idea about resources.* (Case 12, p. 127)

The absence of internal accountability structures is further reflected in low levels of resources pooling and coordination across units, reinforcing fragmentation rather than collective organizational action.

> *[…] resources could not be shared and utilized efficiently between academic units.* (Case 14, p. 171)

This externally oriented and weakly developed accountability arrangement has direct structural implications. As resources are allocated according to historically grown arrangements rather than organization-wide strategic priorities, there is little incentive to develop integrative organizational structures or coordination mechanisms across units, reinforcing a fragmented and loosely coupled organizational design.

5.1.2.3 Organizational Design

The organizational design of the initial type reflects its limited strategic integration and strong disciplinary autonomy. Universities are structured around faculties and departments representing distinct academic disciplines – covering classic domains such as law, medicine, and philosophy – typically organized in small, relatively self-contained units. These units exhibit a high degree of autonomy and weak interdependencies.

> *Traditionally, universities were conceived as loosely coupled professional bureaucracies [...]* (Case 17, p. 205)

Horizontally, coordination takes place within academic communities, yet rarely across disciplinary boundaries. Units largely operate in isolation, resulting in silo-like structures with limited collaboration beyond disciplinary boundaries.

> *[…] departments are divided and operate in silos […]* (Case 30, p. 80)

Vertically, hierarchical structures are flat and weakly developed. Central leadership bodies, such as rectorates or executive boards, primarily fulfill representative functions rather than exercising directive authority. Coordination through hierarchical mechanisms is limited, and organization-wide integration remains underdeveloped.

The small overall size of universities and their units – reflecting elite rather than mass higher education – further reduce coordination requirements. As a result, organizational complexity is managed through decentralization rather than through formal integration.

Within such loosely coupled structures, decision-making authority remains dispersed and weakly centralized, reinforcing a collegial governance arrangement and limiting the scope for coordinated organizational steering at the institutional level.

5.1.2.4 Decision-Making

Decision-making in the initial configuration follows principles of shared governance and academic self-governance (de Boer et al., 2007). Authority is dispersed, and decisions are typically made through collegial, bottom-up processes grounded in disciplinary expertise and principles of democratic participation.

> *[...] the University [...] prided itself on an extensive shared governance structure that was deeply-rooted [...]* (Case 33, p. 106)

Central governing bodies – such as academic senates and central executive bodies (e.g., rectorates or executive boards) – derive legitimacy primarily from representation rather than executive authority. Leadership positions are typically filled by academics with limited tenure, reinforcing the understanding of leaders as *primus inter pares* rather than as strategic decision-makers.

> *Traditionally, universities [...] had weak institutional leadership [...]* (Case 17, p. 205)

Major organizational decisions require broad consensus and approval from the academic senate, allowing various status groups to influence outcomes and ensuring that critical decisions are grounded in a robust academic foundation. While this ensures strong academic legitimacy, it also renders decision-making processes time-consuming and procedurally complex. The broad involvement of various stakeholders with pluralistic goal systems is evident, for example, in the historically strong shared governance of a case university:

> *There was a widespread feeling in the university that the old structure and processes were too slow and inflexible to respond to changes.* (Case 12, p. 120)

Within these structures, professors occupy a particular influential position, reflecting their disciplinary authority and professional status. However, the dominance of consensual procedures limits the organization's capacity to respond swiftly to external changes or to pursue coordinated strategic action.

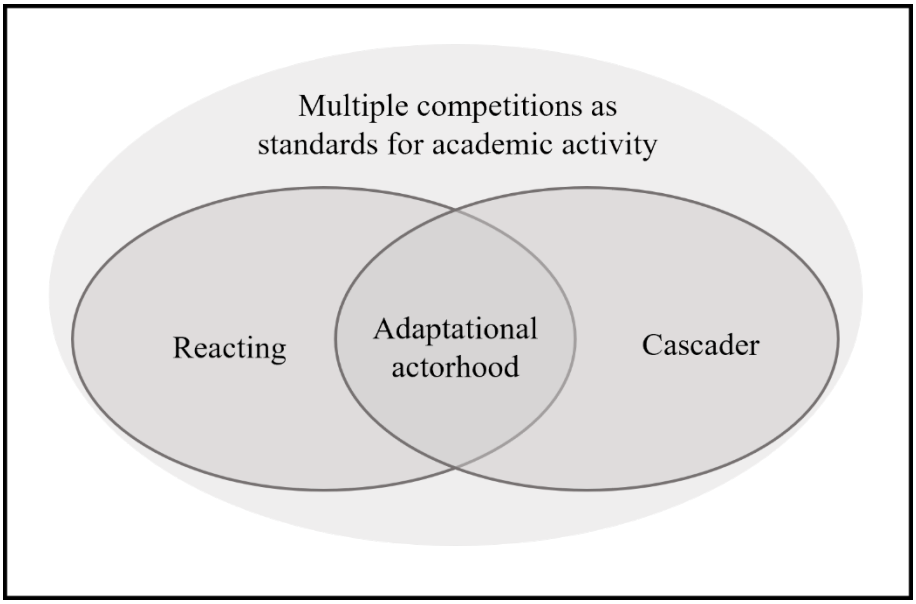
In sum, decision-making in the initial type prioritizes collegial and disciplinary autonomy over organizational steering. While effective under conditions of stable funding and limited competition, these arrangements do not support integrated and strategic organizational action at the institutional level. However, with the advent of extensive higher education reforms, which catalyzed the intensification of competition between universities, the initial type evolved, giving rise to new organizational forms.

5.2 Adaptational Actorhood: The Reactive Response of the Cascader

Adaptational actorhood represents the archetype in which universities make limited use of their organizational scope for action, responding reactively to multiple competitions. It comprises a performance-centric interpretive scheme, a reactive response pattern, and a corresponding Cascader configuration. Together, these interrelated elements describe how external performance demands are internalized and translated into organizational arrangements that prioritize measurable outputs, monitoring, and hierarchical coordination. Figure 6 illustrates how these elements – the interpretive scheme, response pattern, and configuration – jointly constitute the adaptational archetype of organizational actorhood.

Figure 6

Adaptational Archetype of Organizational Actorhood



5.2.1 The Interpretation of Multiple Competitions

Within this archetype, universities interpret multiple competitions primarily as standards for academic performance. Competition is understood as a defining feature of the contemporary higher education environment, setting standards in the form of externally defined benchmarks for academic activity that must be met rather than strategically shaped in order to secure organizational legitimacy and resources. This interpretation reflects the diffusion of managerial logics associated with NPM, in which accountability, efficiency, and value for money increasingly structure higher education systems (Deem, 1998).

Empirically, this interpretive scheme becomes visible in the widespread introduction of predominantly quantified quality standards for research and teaching (see also ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012), whose fulfillment is closely linked to the competitive allocation of resources. External performance requirements are not selectively interpreted or strategically reframed, but internalized as minimum standards that guide organizational expectations and behavior:

> *[...] external measures of performance are translated internally as minimum acceptable standards […]* (Case 3, p. 270)

> *[…] the resources and funding of universities are largely determined by their research output and the proportion of graduates entering employment.* (Case 14, p. 186)

Universities accept competition as "rules of the game" and reproduce these rules internally through performance-oriented governance arrangements. Rather than constituting arenas for strategic positioning, competitive criteria function as reference points that thereby structure what counts as legitimate academic activity. Accordingly, competitive values increasingly guide recruitment, evaluation, and promotion, favoring those actors who are able to secure externally rewarded outputs such as third-party funding or publications.

> *The slogan 'Professors are ready to compete' describes the internalised competitive orientation that is present in the minds of professors.* (Case 24, p. 334)

> *Due to strong performance and competition orientation, new external values – rather than academic values – guide recruiting, favouring those who can bring competition-based external money.* (Case 24, p. 335)

Competition permeates all organizational levels. At the level of everyday academic practice, individual academics experience intensified pressures to perform, competing not only with peers of the same academic community but also with colleagues across disciplinary boundaries. At the same time, faculties and departments are increasingly compared and evaluated against one another, while entire universities compete with other institutions for scarce resources.

> *The biggest complaint from the academic staff members was what one respondent called 'Grant or go.'* (Case 9, p. 101)

> *Upon the annual assessment, each unit will either get rewarded or punished.* (Case 15, p. 216)

This interpretation of competition as a performance regime is ambivalent. While competitive mechanisms are associated with increases in measurable performance output (see also Aghion et al., 2010), they are also perceived as a potential threat to those who fail to meet required academic standards, thereby exerting sustained pressure on academic work and professional identities. Yet, interpreting competitive pressures as a non-negotiable external standard legitimizes immediate organizational change by foregrounding the risk associated with failing to comply with externally defined expectations.

> *The productivity of published articles, patents, has significantly increased since PBRF was introduced. […] Its total number of research outputs produced during 2006 was 50% higher than in 2003.* (Case 11, pp. 938–939)

> *Respondents worried about negative repercussions from competition for research grants: 'We operate in a competitive model. Every professor is pitted against every other. This destroys a lot of creativity.'* (Case 9, p. 101)

Taken together, the interpretive scheme underlying adaptational actorhood constructs competition as an external performance regime that prescribes legitimate organizational behavior and significantly narrows the scope for strategic reinterpretation.

5.2.2 The Reactive Response

Guided by this interpretive scheme, universities respond to multiple competitions in a reactive, accommodative manner, accepting competitive pressures as given conditions rather than as arenas for strategic choice or reinterpretation. Organizational transition is typically initiated in response to externally imposed demands, such as funding reforms, accountability requirements, or evaluative exercises, which often impose tight timelines and prompt rapid organizational adjustments. Rather than actively selecting or reshaping competitive arenas, universities adapt their internal structures and processes to align with externally defined expectations (see also Whitley & Gläser, 2014; van Vught & Huisman, 2013).

Empirically, this response pattern follows a sequential logic in which performance-oriented demands arise in the environment and are subsequently implemented within the organization, as illustrated by the following case evidence:

> *The common view was that the restructure was necessary to adapt to a changing environment […].* (Case 11, p. 933)

> *Causes of change initiated externally from the organization, including the changing higher education landscape and economics […].* (Case 30, p. 81)

The reactive response is facilitated by universities' strong focus on budgetary constraints and their high dependence on state funding and external evaluation regimes, which narrows their perceived room for maneuver and renders the acceptance of externally defined demands the predominant organizational response. Under these conditions, organizational adjustments are frequently oriented toward short-term compliance with external requirements rather than toward long-term strategic reorientation. As a result, strategic planning is often subordinated to these constraints, and organizational priorities are adjusted in accordance with externally defined performance targets rather than internally developed goals.

> *[…] instead of letting the strategic plan drive the budget reduction process, the reverse happened.* (Case 27, p. 96)

While reactively adapting to competitive requirements in order to secure legitimacy and continued access to resources may stabilize the organization in the short term, it also reinforces the perception of competition as an external constraint rather than as a condition that can be actively shaped through strategic agency.

> *[…] the university saw its leeway getting increasingly smaller and its capability to respond in terms of available resources and timing more and more constrained […]* (Case 19, p. 171)

However, across case studies corresponding to the adaptational actor, financial uncertainty and persistent underfunding are observed to gradually intensify internal pressures. Over time, this situation constrains organizational viability to an extent that renders continued reactive adaptation insufficient. As a result, universities are observed to seek alternative modes of responding to multiple competitions, giving rise to subsequent shifts toward more active or proactive forms of organizational actorhood (see Table 2).

5.2.3 The Cascader Configuration

The reactive response pattern gives rise to the Cascader configuration, in which external competitive pressures cascade into and through the organization. This configuration is characterized by a strong performance orientation aligned with externally defined indicators, centralized coordination supported by an elaborated administration apparatus, and hierarchical control.

5.2.3.1 Positioning

In terms of positioning, the Cascader aligns closely with externally rewarded performance indicators, presenting itself as a reliable and accountable provider of academic services to society. Universities emphasize the delivery of research and teaching outputs that are legible to external stakeholders and public authorities, such as publication counts, graduation rates, or student numbers. Academic performance is thus framed in functional terms, reflecting expectations regarding the university's contribution to societal needs and public accountability.

The Cascader promotes multidisciplinary scholarship, encompassing a broad range of disciplines in research and teaching. Rather than integrating disciplines into a distinctive interdisciplinary profile, this multidisciplinarity remains additive, with academic domains coexisting side by side and contributing independently to overall performance outputs. Accordingly, universities refrain from developing a differentiated academic profile and instead reinforce those activities that are recognized and rewarded by external funding and evaluation systems. Case evidence links such positioning directly to external performance requirements:

> *[…] promoting the importance of research as a university output was in step with revised government thinking. A key influence in developing this focus has been the external factor of the performance-based research funding (PBRF) […]* (Case 11, p. 937)

> *[…] the first strategy […] was devoted to national legitimacy and was centered on educational attainments – as in Switzerland block grants are primarily based on the number of students […]* (Case 15, p. 167)

Competitive pressures from outside the university are cascaded into and within it, resulting in the configuration's label "Cascader". External expectations are adopted without strategic reinterpretation and translated directly into internal performance targets. Governmental requirements are broken down into manageable components for faculties, departments, and individual academics, disseminating competitive indicators downward from one hierarchical layer to the next.

> *The targets in the performance agreements repeat those in the agreement made between the Ministry and the University.* (Case 31, p. 617)

Taken together, the Cascader's positioning is oriented toward maximizing academic performance as the aggregate of individual and unit-level outputs, while placing limited emphasis on strategic differentiation and the generation of cross-unit synergies beyond this additive accumulation of contributions.

5.2.3.2 Accountability

Accountability constitutes a core element of the Cascader configuration and mirrors the top-down logic of NPM reforms (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). Governmental accountability requirements are institutionalized within the organization through resource allocation and reporting systems:

> *[the case university] adopted the national funding model formula in its internal financial resource allocations* (Case 24, p. 334)

Organizational behavior is coordinated through centralized guidelines, incentive systems, and control mechanisms. Processes are systematized and standardized to increase the quantity and demonstrable quality of organizational achievements. The university implements pronounced administrative systems to systematically monitor organizational performance and efficiency. Academic units and individual members are held accountable for meeting predefined perfor-

mance targets. Performance data are collected, compared across units, and used to justify resource allocation decisions – often privileging research over teaching and operationalizing academic quality through quantification (see also ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012; Vican et al., 2020) – thereby expanding internal bureaucracy and intensifying internal competition.

> *[...] the university launched a statistical yearbook, collecting and publishing all information related to infrastructure, inputs and outputs of each unit.* (Case 25, p. 337)

> *The resource allocation system takes into account the relative strengths of departments through their research ratings, and accordingly departments produce a statistical summary of research output and output orientation, measured against publications, grants, postgraduate degrees supervised, departmental visitors, and presentations done both home and abroad.* (Case 3, p. 272)

Within this arrangement, leaders typically avoid modifying or reinterpreting externally defined performance indicators. Instead, they negotiate and contract target quantities with subordinate units and individuals while maintaining the original metrics. Units and individuals that fail to deliver the targeted performance face negative consequences, as illustrated by a middle manager:

> *'[...] Now we have a more transparent system. And I tell people their problems. I tell people what will happen if we don't meet our targets ... [...]'* (Case 12, pp. 127–128)

> *[...] institutes with modest research output were reorganized or even closed*. (Case 18, p. 170)

To support performance delivery under conditions of financial constraint, universities centralize selected resources within shared infrastructures. These centralized common goods include support service centers and graduate schools, designed to assist scholars in achieving high levels of performance. Crucially, such resource pooling requires centralized coordination rather than voluntary horizontal collaboration, as decentralized units – competing for performance-based rewards – have limited incentives to share resources whose benefits may advantage rival units.

5.2.3.3 Organizational Design

The Cascader's organizational design features a pronounced hierarchy and a high degree of centralization. Universities structure themselves into hierarchically nested organizational units

– typically comprising faculties and departments – that maintain traditional disciplinary orientations and are deliberately designed to be similar in size in order to facilitate managerial oversight and performance comparison across units. Reorganization through mergers of units is described as creating units large enough to enable operational and strategic planning:

> *[...] by merging different faculties and departments. The new internal structure aim[s] to create units big enough to provide management tools to make future operational and strategic plans possible inside the university.* (Case 24, p. 333)

Horizontally, the units remain loosely coupled and lack collaboration. Low interdependencies are underpinned by horizontal competition between units at the same hierarchical level for performance-based resources and recognition, reinforcing internal boundaries and contributing to a silo structure.

> *There were six departments that didn't talk to each other effectively. There was no collegial interaction supported by the structure.* (Case 30, p. 80)

> *Also there was little cooperation between academic units and the old structure was considered rather rigid and segmented, and was not thought of as effective for communication among units or sharing resources.* (Case 13, p. 144)

Vertically, coupling between centralized leadership and subordinate units is tightened through intensified top-down directed managerial coordination. Within this pronounced hierarchical structure, a dean's function is that of an intermediary actor or a broker primarily responsible for transmitting centrally defined targets downward rather than coordinating horizontal collaboration.

The creation of additional management positions with administrative responsibilities further strengthens the hierarchy of the organization. At the same time, the expansion of administrative functions – particularly in performance monitoring and quality assurance – constitutes a central element of the Cascader's organizational design. These functions are increasingly organized as centralized administrative units and shared service structures that support and standardize performance-oriented coordination across the organization:

> *Various external forces contributed to the growth of administrative functions to satisfy compliance requirements. For example, in line with contemporary thinking about accreditation, quality control and benchmarking systems, a Quality Assurance Committee of the Senate was established.* (Case 11, p. 935)

> *[...] ten years ago, the office was a quarter of the current size. That has been partly due to the increased pressure and requirement of the university to produce PBRF outputs.* (Case 11, p. 939)

Taken together, the Cascader's pronounced hierarchy, highly elaborated central administration, and consolidated shared services enable centralized oversight, performance monitoring, and compliance, while maintaining structurally limited horizontal integration between academic units.

5.2.3.4 Decision-Making

The Cascader acknowledges the increased coordination demands imposed by multiple competitions and responds by recalibrating decision-making processes accordingly (see also Lind, 2020). This adaptation is typically initiated by a new, business-oriented leadership that enforces a top-down managerial approach, heavily relying on numerical data, thereby expanding the decision-making authority of the leadership (see also Wilkesmann, 2016).

> *'One of my [the new vice president] first tasks was to create […] a new management structure for the University. One which will place it in a stronger position to deal with the new and increasing organisational demands placed on it. [...]'* (Case 11, p. 934)

The consolidation of power within university leadership results in centralized decision-making, particularly on issues that impact the entire institution. Leaders serve as professional administrators, with responsibilities that have evolved significantly beyond traditional academic duties. They are now tasked with negotiating performance agreements and setting goals with higher authorities, faculties, departments, and individual scholars. They manage and control their budgets and strive to enhance performance within their affiliated units by employing incentive systems.

> *In the administration structure, the Principal sits at the top and makes the ultimate decisions regarding the development of the university. At the senior management level these various responsibilities are delegated to Vice Principals who then report directly to the Principal at the top of the management structure.* (Case 15, p. 202)

> *'This is all about rewards and incentives and punishments*.' (Case 1, p. 250)

The increased scope and complexity of administrative responsibilities necessitate a higher level of qualification and expertise. As a result, case material documents shifts in leadership profiles and styles, depicting top leaders as business-oriented and corporate style managers.

> *The work of enterprise managers often overlaps with research advisors.* (Case 11, p. 938)

> *[The newly appointed VC] was also an academic, but with a very different style and personality to that of his predecessor. He was considered to be less of a diplomat and more like a corporate style CEO.* (Case 11, p. 934)

The Cascader's centralized management generates efficiencies and tensions. On the one hand, it enables accelerated, organization-wide aligned decision-making and greater control over policies and standards, thereby fostering consistency across units. On the other hand, the centralization of power also raises concerns about the "erosion of shared governance" (see also Eckel & Kezar, 2006) and collegiality among faculty:

> *Collegiality, in the form of possibilities for academics to participate in institutional or unit-level decision making and development, has decreased.* (Case 24, pp. 334–335)

The top-down managerial approach to decision-making is particularly evident in decisions that affect the entire organization but lack consensual support. In such cases, leadership may employ various strategies to undermine the involvement of university members in order to push through significant decisions.

> *[…] the things that the faculty would like to politisize, and to take into the agenda for politicking, are not there. The University management defines what themes are taken to the social space of the negotiations, and what is excluded.* (Case 31, p. 618)

Despite these tensions, the Cascader does not abandon competition; rather, it institutionalizes competition through performance-centered control and compliance-oriented steering. Over time, however, this mode of governance reveals its limits: while it may increase measurable outputs, it tends to impede cross-unit synergy beyond siloed performance delivery. Against this backdrop, subsequent cases show the emergence of a more active form of actorhood in which universities treat selected competitive arenas – especially research excellence competitions – not merely as external constraints but as opportunities for coordinated collective action, paving the way for orchestrational actorhood.

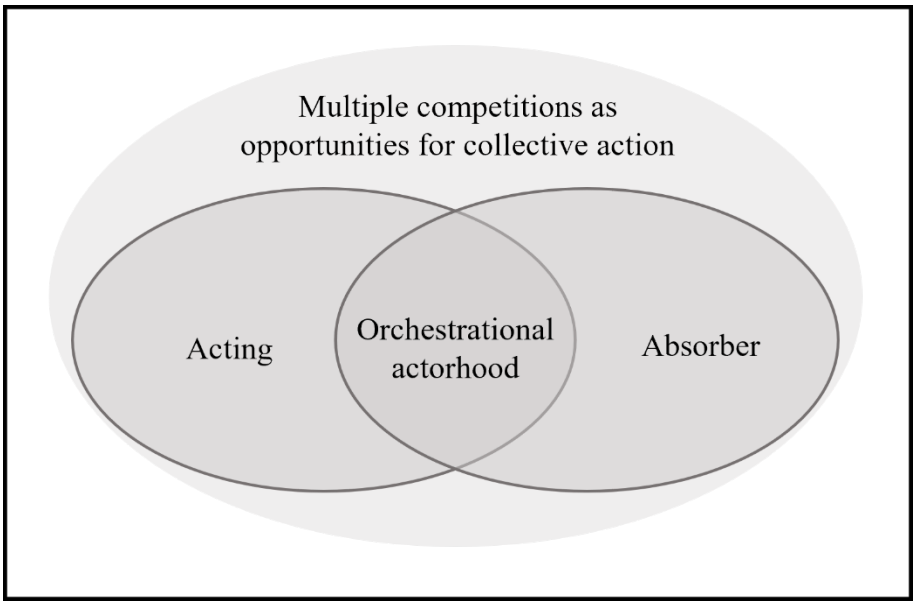
5.3 Orchestrational Actorhood: The Active Response of the Absorber

Orchestrational actorhood represents the archetype in which universities perform strategic agency to a moderate extent by actively navigating competition and collaboration. It comprises

an active response pattern characterized by the coordination of collective action within selected competitive arenas, alongside an interrelated Absorber configuration in which strategic, interdisciplinary profiling is structurally embedded in cross-faculty arrangements. Both patterns are guided by an underlying interpretive scheme that frames multiple competitions as opportunities for collective action. Figure 7 illustrates how the interpretive scheme, response pattern, and configuration jointly constitute the orchestrational archetype of organizational actorhood.

Figure 7

Orchestrational Archetype of Organizational Actorhood



5.3.1 The Interpretation of Multiple Competitions

Within orchestrational actorhood, universities interpret multiple competitions as opportunities for collective action primarily organized at the organizational level (see also Maassen et al., 2023). Accordingly, competition is perceived positively as a mechanism that fosters synergies within and across interdisciplinary networks, rather than as a threat to academic professionalism.

This interpretation is reflected in how internal relations are described in the case studies:

> *With regards to internal competition, the general perception of the relationship between colleges and schools is that they are more collaborative rather than competitive, even though competition exists to some extent both at school and college levels.* (Case 12, p. 135)

Universities strategically leverage research competitions, recognizing them as means to secure substantial funding for research projects that would not be feasible without these competitive

contexts (see also Hellström et al., 2018). They acknowledge that these highly funded competitions are designed to enhance the reputation and position of selected institutions within the competitive landscape, thus providing successful universities with a competitive advantage (see also Hellström, 2018).

The German Excellence Initiative illustrates this logic, demonstrating that success in such competitions is interpreted as legitimizing the notion that universities must act strategically as collective actors:

> *The Excellence Initiative is a governmental policy instrument aimed at advancing research excellence and the institutional visibility […] by promoting institutional strategies […]* (Case 17, p. 201)

> *The realization that succeeding in the Excellence Initiative was necessary in order to maintain the reputation of excellence […]* (Case 17, p. 217)

Taken together, these interpretations legitimize the expectation that universities must act strategically as collective organizational actors, rather than relying on fragmented or purely disciplinary forms of agency.

Importantly, the interpretation of multiple competitions as opportunities for collective action extends beyond participation in collaborative research projects; it also promotes cross-unit collaboration that bridges academia and administration with the aim of developing and affirming a shared organizational identity and common institutional goals.

> *One response to the external and internal pressures facing higher education institutions today has been to take a more collaborative approach in its many operations.* (Case 23, p. 12)

This perspective is reinforced by a shared ethos and collaborative culture among university members, who recognize that competitions cannot be won by isolated individual achievements but only through collective action. Consequently, participation in competitions requires and reinforces collective alignment with and support for common goals (see also Harris, 2010).

> *Participants shared the belief that in order for institutions to be successful at achieving initiatives that require cross-campus collaboration, there must be a unifying goal under which everyone can rally. Participant A stated that sharing a 'common goal, doing what's right for the institution ... is important.' Participant D described the idea of having a 'shared ethos' as the guiding principle that gets 'everybody aligned.' This shared ethos should be more than objectives of what will*

> *be done, but rather an in-depth understanding of 'why you are doing it.'* (Case 23, p. 102)
>
> *In general, a sense of competitiveness seemed to be triggered in the heads of university members, as well as a willingness to invest more time in tasks that were not only beneficial to them as individuals, but also to the institution as a whole.* (Case 17, p. 217)

Taken together, this interpretive scheme reframes competition from an external constraint into a shared organizational endeavor that calls for coordinated collective action. In doing so, it establishes the cognitive foundation for an active response in which universities selectively engage with and organize collective efforts around strategically meaningful competitions.

5.3.2 The Active Response

Guided by the interpretive scheme, universities exhibit an active response to multiple competitions. They intentionally utilize their organizational room for maneuver to position themselves within the competitive landscape of higher education by selectively engaging with suitable competitions and coordinating collaborative efforts to succeed in them. Thus, universities strengthen their own competitiveness by absorbing externally generated competitive pressures and transforming them into internally coordinated collaborative efforts.

> *As [...] [the case university] has engaged in strategic responses to the Excellence Initiative to a certain extent, this study supports the idea that universities can be considered organizational actors […]* (Case 17, p. 214)

Rather than avoiding competitions or reactively responding to external demands by pursuing required performance targets, universities strategically select grand societal challenges to investigate with an interdisciplinary approach. Accordingly, they identify, prioritize, and support key research areas in order to develop distinctive research profiles and to establish the associated research infrastructure. Their intentional response is driven not only by significant financial incentives provided by third party funding, which encourages excellence-oriented behavior, but also by the opportunity to develop a shared organizational identity and to mobilize collective action around common institutional goals. In doing so, their response extends beyond competing for substantial research funding from external sources; it also reinforces the university's organizational legitimacy by demonstrating academic strengths and a distinctive institutional profile.

> *[…] in all three cases there are concrete attempts at creating organizational coherence through strategy and consistent patterns emerge across time; moreover, these patterns go beyond the simple continuation of past trends, but represent true endeavors to actively steer organizational behavior*. (Cases 18, 19, and 20, p. 176)
>
> *Being aware of and intentionally responding to external environment changes affected organizational change at Villanova.* (Case 22, p. 176)

Importantly, the active organization of action unfolds over time rather than occurring instantaneously. Coordinating interdisciplinary collaboration requires substantial investments in resource mobilization and commitment-building across organizational units. Across the empirical cases, initial attempts to mobilize collective action do not necessarily result in direct competitive gains. However, even where early applications for selected competitions remain unsuccessful, persistent efforts to organize collaboration foster collective learning and critical reflection on institutional strengths, thereby progressively sharpening the university's research profile and enhancing organizational coherence and strategic clarity.

> *[…] failing to generate a compelling proposal after approximately five months of concerted collaborative effort […] [the case university] […] ultimately facilitated the creation of a competitive grant proposal and successful grant acquisition.* (Case 23, pp. 70–71)
>
> *[…] [the case university] only received funding for its institutional strategy in the third round of the Excellence Initiative after being rejected in the first two rounds.* (Case 17, p. 202)

As these coordinated responses stabilize over time, they do not remain confined to episodic project-based action. Instead, they become institutionalized in a distinct organizational configuration that embeds interdisciplinary coordination and collective agency within the university's strategic and structural arrangements.

5.3.3 The Absorber Configuration

The active response pattern is interrelated with the Absorber configuration, in which external competitive pressures are absorbed and strategically reconfigured into internally coordinated collaborative action. This configuration emphasizes strategic interdisciplinary positioning through targeted resource endowment, blurs internal boundaries by establishing semi-autonomous research centers that cut across faculties, and combines managerial coordination with collegial forms of decision-making.

5.3.3.1 Positioning

Seeking to strengthen its international reputation, the Absorber addresses contemporary, predominantly global challenges of society. As these challenges – such as global peace or climate change – are characterized by a high degree of complexity, they cannot be solved by one single discipline. Therefore, universities coordinate collective action beyond disciplinary boundaries and position themselves through their unique and hard-to-imitate research profiles (see also Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013).

> *In the contemporary world, problems are not solved by only a single discipline. In many cases, we have to solve the problem with interdisciplinary approaches.* (Case 29, p. 7)

> *[…] the second strategy (2004-2008) aimed at constructing international reputation by strengthening research activities."* (Case 18, p. 167)

The Absorber intentionally directs resources toward selected research areas and related projects to strengthen its expertise and build a reputation as a flagship university in these particular fields (see also Sá, 2008). Typically, universities first identify existing research areas with interdisciplinary potential and then concentrate resources on a limited number of strategic initiatives, often organized in project-based formats that combine flexibility with sustained cross-unit collaboration (see also Kosmützky & Wöhlert, 2021).

> *[the case university] has used its institutional strategy to sharpen its research profile. […] The active channeling of resources into certain research domains demonstrates the university's capacity for strategically positioning itself in an increasingly competitive field […]* (Case 17, p. 214)

> *[the case university] created four major research activities to achieve the status of World-Class National University […] project focused on how to pool researchers from different disciplines, which aimed to conduct multidisciplinary research. The anticipated contribution of research had to apply and create sustainable development for humans.* (Case 29, p. 14)

The university's interdisciplinary research profile is not limited to intra-organizational activities, as it also promotes the development of cross-institutional research networks. This includes establishing research associations and engaging in international clusters with high visibility (see also Hellström, 2018). The extensive research network in which the university is embedded constitutes a resource of particular importance, playing a crucial role in attracting and retaining renowned scholars.

> *[...] a research strategy was established [...] to coordinate the highly differentiated research activities and to promote cooperation between domains.* (Case 20, p. 172)

However, the integration of historically loosely coupled units with diverse cultures under a common framework presents a significant challenge for the Absorber.

> *So to take out all those people from various backgrounds and different traditions to try to make them more coherent into a single school ... to build up a sense of school identity, I think that's the biggest challenge.* (Case 12, p. 127)

Overall, the uniqueness of the Absorber's profile and its outstanding research contributions in selected areas strengthen the university's legitimacy in the eyes of society.

> *[the case university's] application to the Excellence Initiative was not only driven by financial benefits, but also by the fact that a successful application would provide the university with a firmer social standing.* (Case 17, p. 215)

Such interdisciplinary positioning generates specific demands for resource allocation and coordination, as sustaining selected research profiles requires targeted investments and ongoing organizational support. Consequently, accountability arrangements are reoriented toward enabling and stabilizing these strategically prioritized collaborative initiatives.

5.3.3.2 Accountability

Accountability in the Absorber is exercised less through direct hierarchical control and output monitoring than through indirect mechanisms of input steering, reputational signaling, and selective resource endowment. Rather than enforcing compliance with predefined performance targets, accountability operates by guiding organizational attention toward strategically valued activities and by sustaining legitimacy through visible investments in interdisciplinary excellence.

By acquiring substantial amounts of competitively secured third-party funding, the Absorber enhances its organizational resources and is able to integrate selected strategic topics across the organization, transcending disciplinary boundaries. Internally, resources are strategically pooled in favor of flagship collaborative projects, thereby fostering inter-unit cooperation rather than increasing internal competition.

> *[...] the model designed by the university to allocate budget is activity-based, it does not directly promote competition. Instead, many schools have been engaged in cross-disciplinary cooperation with each other, which is considered to be beneficial for them.* (Case 12, p. 135)

The budgeting process is highly activity-based and input-oriented as resources are allocated to promising initiatives. Strategic projects are typically backed by seed funding for turning them into applications for large-scale and long-term research grants (see also Kosmützky & Krücken, 2024), which, in turn, provide the funding necessary for implementing the respective structures and recruiting additional personnel with specific qualifications. While academic units without involvement in collaborative and highly funded research projects maintain decentralized administration of assigned budgets, management reserves funds to facilitate the coordination of interdisciplinary research projects across units.

> *The delegation of competences to departments produced a multiplication of responsibilities […]. This model was conducive to stronger bottom-up dynamics, while the board took the responsibility for keeping strategic coherence at the organizational level, especially through the management of the budget, the logistic, and the interfaces between departments.* (Case 20, p. 174)

While all units have to contribute to overhead costs to some extent, a portion of acquired third-party funds is also designated to cover overhead costs. However, over time, these collaborative project structures receive an increasing share of overall resources. The organizational commitment to allocate resources for collaborative research initiatives is explicitly articulated in the mission statements of several universities, as illustrated by the following excerpt from one such university's mission:

> *A high level of research funding from a balanced portfolio of sources, supporting major research groupings across all Departments.* (Case 6, p. 293)

> *The University also allocates a considerable amount of overheads on research grants and contracts, with the rationale that if a department receives a grant, it will bear part of the financial burden and receive some of the overheads as well.* (Case 6, p. 297)

Performance-related data on university members are collected to assess and ensure efficiency. However, care is taken when utilizing performance data to ensure that talented researchers do not feel subjected to excessive pressure. The overarching goal is to retain talented researchers within the university's strategic research areas and to bind them to the institution, recognizing their vital contribution to institutional excellence.

> *Universities are gradually working to try to have better ways of performance measurement, but we do have to be very, very careful not to oppress our most talented staff.* (Case 12, p. 132)

Taken together, accountability in the Absorber follows a proposition-based logic of input legitimacy, with resources strategically endowed to support the development of interdisciplinary academic profiles. These accountability arrangements have direct structural implications, as the pooling and strategic allocation of resources necessitate organizational forms capable of coordinating collaboration across disciplinary and administrative boundaries. As a result, organizational design evolves toward boundary-spinning units and semi-autonomous structures that support interdisciplinary work.

5.3.3.3 Organizational Design

The Absorber responds to competitive pressures by developing a unique interdisciplinary scientific profile, which is prominently integrated into the university's structure. Interdisciplinary, collaborative projects are closely linked to a high level of internal interdependencies and are also reflected in the curriculum.

> *[...] many interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary schemes go across departments […]* (Case 4, p. 280)

> *At the undergraduate level, interdisciplinary programs were launched [...]* (Case 22, p. 139)

The collaborative arrangements generate high levels of internal interdependence, which are reflected in an organizational design characterized by blurred boundaries between disciplinary units and between academic and administrative functions. This blurring of internal boundaries is observable in the emergence of intermediary positions, which are now shared across multiple units rather than assigned to a single one. As a result, units are tightly connected and interfaces are extended.

The Absorber aligns its structure to meet the requirements for obtaining and managing highly funded research projects of a prestigious and collaborative nature. The university establishes units that support and coordinate project-oriented initiatives, for example, transdisciplinary offices.

> *In 2004, a new structure called Interdisciplinary Centers (IC) was introduced in an attempt to counteract the rigid internal division of faculties and to enhance the visibility of the university's profile. After a positive evaluation in 2009, a decision was made to keep the concept of ICs and to integrate them into the newly emerging structure of Integrative Research Centers (IRI).* (Case 17, p. 214)

Additional organizational units of the Absorber include collaboration centers and research centers, where scholars from various disciplines convene to explore specific topics of investigation (see also Boardman & Bozeman, 2007; Boardman & Corley, 2008; Stahler & Tash, 1994). These centers are often affiliated with the organizational structure as quasi-autonomous entities.

> *[... the university] has a Collaboration Center that serves as a versatile meeting space, which boasts the latest technology and movable furniture, for faculty and research teams to engage in collaborative working groups.* (Case 23, p. 76)

> *[...] new research centers were created - four of them being recognized as research institutes [...]* (Case 20, p. 172)

> *The second centre is an ESRC Research Centre called the 'British Household Panel Survey for Social Change' which also has a quasi-autonomous existence.* (Case 4, p. 278)

When the university secures extensive, long-term funding for research projects, these projects are structurally integrated by cutting across and bridging involved academic units. However, academic units without involvement in such collaborative projects often remain isolated and are organized in a decentralized manner.

Taken together, the emergence of boundary-spanning structures and semi-autonomous research units also reshapes decision-making processes. Governing interdisciplinary collaboration requires a mode of decision-making that combines managerial coordination with collegial involvement and academic facilitation.

5.3.3.4 Decision-Making

The Absorber's decision-making process is defined by an integration of both centralized and decentralized approaches, blending managerialism and collegiality. This selective blend of bottom-up and top-down decision-making enhances the university's capacity to effectively navigate complex challenges while remaining aligned with its fundamental principles of collegial engagement.

Decision-making occurs in a more centralized or decentralized manner, depending on the specific area being addressed, with responsibilities divided between the executive board and individual departments. Decentralized decision-making dominates within relatively autonomous academic units that are not engaged in prestigious, interdisciplinary research projects, thereby maintaining traditional governance practices that emphasize collegiality.

> *[...] While keeping central control on organizational strategy, this reorganization provided departments with more autonomy concerning educational and research activities and thus promoted stronger bottom-up dynamics [...]* (Case 20, p. 172)

A stronger managerial and top-down approach is applied in strategic decisions that affect the entire organization, ensuring a cohesive direction of collective action. However, rather than relying on hierarchical authority, leadership legitimizes such top-down decisions by incorporating bottom-up insights from the expertise and knowledge of professionals in various disciplines, recognizing the necessity of garnering the Senate's support to effectively implement decisions.

> *The Senate is fully consulted about plans and developments of the University which have financial implications, so although formally there is a separation of Council which is concerned with finance and resources, and Senate which is concerned with academic matters, on an informal level […].* (Case 4, p. 277)

> *[...] the capacity of the leadership to make top-down decisions is limited by the dominance of the University Senate in the decision-making process. For this reason, the university leadership operates rather like a portfolio manager; it decides to make strategic investments in particular project teams, which then become relatively autonomous and develop their own goals and ways of reaching […]* (Case 17, pp. 214–215)

The university leadership actively promotes the establishment of a shared goal for the entire organization, fostering a sense of unity and encouraging engagement in collective action to support overarching organizational goals (see also Harris, 2010). Leaders act primarily as academic facilitators: they enable interdisciplinary research initiatives by establishing supportive structures and conditions (see also Kezar & Lester, 2009), such as pooling resources in interdisciplinary research centers, recruiting professionalized support staff, creating positions in promising research areas, and providing teaching buyouts, thereby enabling university members to pursue risky third-party funding opportunities aligned with the institutional profile.

> *This study found that the commitment of senior level administrators, to include the university president and vice president, is necessary for cross-campus collaborative efforts to be successful.* (Case 23, p. 71)

Taken together, decision-making in the Absorber is geared toward enabling outstanding interdisciplinary research endeavors by combining strategic coordination with collegial legitimation, thereby sustaining collective agency within selected competitive arenas. Yet this archetype

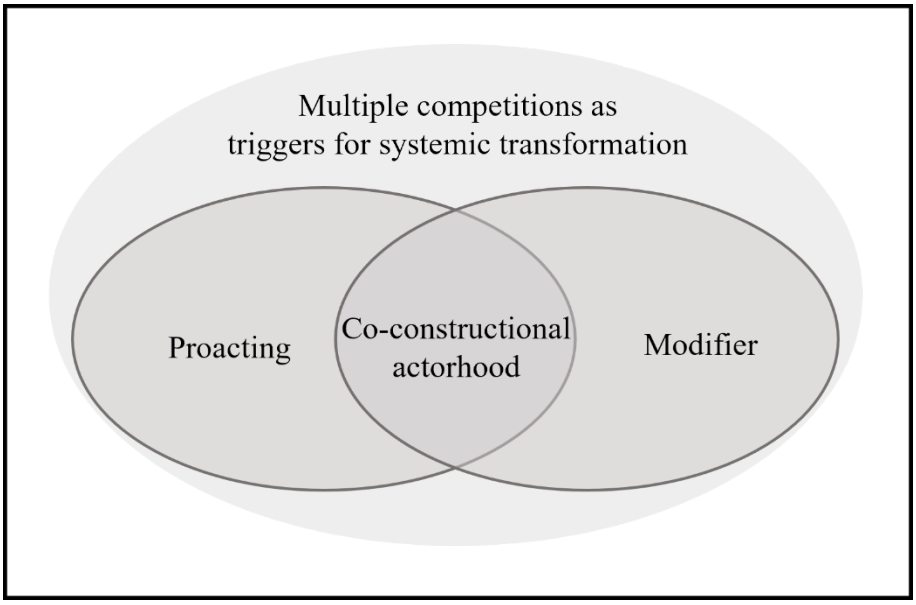
still operates within competitive conditions defined by external authorities. Case evidence, however, points to a further archetype – co-constructional actorhood – in which universities go one step further by proactively shaping the rules of competition themselves and expanding their own scope for action.

5.4 Co-Constructional Actorhood: The Proactive Response of the Modifier

Co-constructional actorhood represents the archetype in which universities make the fullest use of their organizational room for maneuver by not only leveraging it, but proactively shaping and expanding it. It comprises a proactive response to multiple competitions, in which competitive arenas are deliberately co-constructed, as well as a corresponding Modifier configuration that integrates an impact-focused strategy with entrepreneurial structures that foster knowledge transfer. Both patterns are guided by an underlying interpretive scheme that captures multiple competitions as triggers for systemic transformation. Figure 8 depicts how the interpretive scheme, response pattern, and configuration together form the co-constructional archetype of organizational actorhood.

Figure 8

Co-Constructional Archetype of Organizational Actorhood



5.4.1 The Interpretation of Multiple Competitions

The interpretive scheme underlying co-constructional actorhood captures multiple competitions as catalysts for systemic transformation, prompting universities to redefine their role within their institutional environment.

This interpretation does not emerge abruptly but develops over time, driven by persistent declines in public funding and limited returns from compliance-oriented adaptation to external expectations, both of which contribute to universities' financial deterioration. In this context, universities perceive themselves as operating under intense existential pressure, assessing their existing organizational model as no longer viable. Against this shared perception, a fundamental transition is considered not only legitimate but necessary, encouraging university members to explore new organizational trajectories (see also Clark, 1998).

> *[…] the collaboration between the two chancellors, the two institutions, and our community and business partners […] the stakes are pretty high – everybody sees that as an economic driver. That's new, but we're certainly looking at what kinds of opportunities that will bring, including industry that might be interested in conducting research or business side-by-side with faculty and students.* (Case 27, p. 123)

Case evidence indicates that this shift in interpretation is accompanied by the emergence of a business-like and entrepreneurial spirit within the organization, reflected in a willingness to depart from established routines, experiment with novel arrangements, and reconsider the university's societal role. This entrepreneurial reorientation entails taking ownership of the competitive situation. Universities no longer perceive competition as something to be accepted or selectively engaged with, but as a context that can be proactively shaped through strategic agency.

> *Our determination to get out into the market place and 'sell' the university has produced a new spirit of enterprise and initiative.* (Case 11, p. 932)

> *This respondent felt that the dynamic renewal would lead to creative linkages with industry, government, and society as a whole.* (Case 9, p. 129)

> *'[...] it's very important for the university [...] competing as strongly as possible and being as influential as possible with our main research funder ... [...]'* (Case 1, p. 128)

While this interpretive scheme remains grounded in acute awareness of environmental pressures, it is marked by a forward-looking orientation that emphasizes opportunity, agency, and self-determination rather than compliance. Consequently, the interpretation of multiple competitions cultivates a positive view of the university's capacity to shape its future, replacing earlier experiences of constraint and decline with a sense of organizational possibility.

> *[…] a senior manager argues […] '... the ability to maintain your business and grow your business as time goes forward and that means responding to change in a positive way.'* (Case 1, p. 128)
>
> *A positive mood of anticipation had replaced the negativity of 1991.* (Case 9, p. 192)

This shift in interpretation is consequential: once competition is framed as a catalyst for systemic transformation and a space for self-determination, it fosters proactive interventions into the university's environment rather than continued compliance or selective engagement. Accordingly, this interpretive scheme translates into a proactive response pattern in which universities intentionally build networks, mobilize partners, and reshape competitive conditions in their own favor.

5.4.2 The Proactive Response

The university's response is proactive, as it involves the co-construction of competitive arenas in ways favorable to the university. Multiple competitions do not paralyze organizational actions; instead, universities leverage their organizational room for maneuver to reshape the conditions under which competition takes place.

This proactive response entails maintaining a strategic lead over competing higher education institutions: the university establishes an influential network with its regional environment prior to other institutions. It redefines itself as a center of innovation within its ecosystem and seeks to become an essential, indispensable part of the regional community. This organizational transition is not externally mandated through formal governance mechanisms but is initiated by the university itself.

> *Reforms were autonomous in both cases by the institutions themselves […], rather than obligatory orders from the government. (Cases 12 and 13, p. 226)*
>
> *[the case university] sought out key members of the business community in order to secure partnerships with companies and business leaders. This interaction was not a requirement of the Ministry of Education, but was an attempt to build support for the school.* (Case 16, p. 203)

The university's engagement with its surroundings enables it to gather crucial information regarding upcoming and ongoing trends, including economic and political developments. These insights allow the university to anticipate shifts in their institutional environmental and strate-

gically align its organizational orientation and structure accordingly in advance. However, organizational action extends beyond early anticipation of such transformations – it likewise involves proactively setting and shaping trends through pioneering behavior (see also King et al., 2010).

> *Curricula were rapidly developed with a high degree of innovation [...] a pioneering behavior with respect to environmental changes […]* (Case 18, p. 168)

> *Loughborough is continually seeking to advance its academic departments through flexible learning techniques […] are viewed as the way of the future […]* (Case 6, p. 296)

Through reciprocal relationships with external stakeholders, the university strengthens its organizational autonomy (see also King et al., 2010). It seeks to partially overcome its dependence on the state by diversifying its funding sources. Leveraging context-specific legal, social, and geographical conditions, it strategically generates additional income through collaborations, donations, commercialization, trusts, and lobbying efforts.

> *[The vice chancellor] was reported in the local press as lobbying the government vigorously for more funds.* (Case 11, p. 935)

> *[The president] was able to sell the idea [of his vision] to the Ministry of Education, the faculty and external interest groups.* (Case 16, p. 208)

Successful revenue generation increases financial slack, which in turn enhance the university's financial flexibility and enable strategic investment in promising projects. This investment logic follows a risk-taking orientation, prioritizing potential socio-economic impact over short-term performance outputs and thereby further strengthening the university's competitive position when successful.

> *Another interviewee advocated a continuing strategic assessment of problems and opportunities, and flexibility and imagination in addressing emerging needs. It appeared from interview comments that a very high level of strategic questioning, an important precursor to strategic planning, was occurring, and that there was a new attitude of confidence that identified issues would be addressed.* (Case 9, p. 151)

Overall, the proactive response demonstrates how universities utilize their organizational resources to reshape their institutional environment rather than merely reproducing it, thereby enacting a high degree of organizational actorhood (see also Garud et al., 2008; Pollock et al., 2018).

5.4.3 The Modifier Configuration

The proactive response pattern, in which external competitive arenas are shaped from within the organization, finds expression in the Modifier configuration. This configuration positions the university as an indispensable actor within its environment by fostering societal and economic impact through a transfer-oriented network that blurs organizational boundaries vis-à-vis external actors and relies on entrepreneurial forms of decision-making that sustain a high degree of organizational flexibility.

5.4.3.1 Positioning

The Modifier adopts an outward-looking and transfer-oriented positioning strategy that explicitly frames the university as a generator of societally relevant transdisciplinary innovation. Rather than positioning itself primarily through academic reputation or disciplinary excellence, the university seeks to become an indispensable actor within its environment by embedding its activities in reciprocal relationships with societal, economic, and political actors beyond academia. These relationships are based on mutual benefit and oriented toward the co-production of knowledge, innovation, and practical solutions to societal challenges.

The empirical material illustrates this positioning logic as one that links academic work directly to societal needs and economic applications:

> *The University will contribute to scholarship, understanding, invention and knowledge transfer. It will produce graduates of high academic caliber who have skills relevant to employment. It will also promote economic collaboration and links with public and private sector corporations.* (Case 5, p. 285)

In doing so, the Modifier positions itself as an innovation hub whose relevance derives from its capacity to translate academic knowledge into tangible societal and economic outcomes. Knowledge transfer, workforce development, and applied research are not treated as ancillary activities, but as central components of the university's strategic identity. This outward orientation is communicated and reinforced through targeted marketing and networking efforts aimed at mobilizing support from external stakeholders, including government and local authorities:

> *[the president] embraced this strategic priority and made it a cornerstone of his vision for [the case university]. In fact, it became the basis for a new marketing campaign in 2013 around the slogan, 'Limitless Innovation.'* (Case 26, p. 533)

The Modifier's positioning strategy is also strongly anchored in addressing regionally salient conditions – identified through systematic environmental scanning – thereby reinforcing its legitimacy as a socially embedded institution. Strategic activities are aligned with concrete local challenges – such as public health or regional development – whose complexity necessitates transdisciplinary approaches that integrate multiple academic fields with non-academic expertise:

> *At the same time, the institution's strategic plan focused on efforts to 'improve health, wellness, and quality of life' for the community and region.* (Case 27, p. 102)

The strategic prioritization of such domains further signals the university's value for society, a role that is reciprocated by political and societal actors who recognize the university's contribution beyond academic functions:

> *[the case university] chose to make health sciences a priority and the legislature eventually followed. Even in a year where [the case university] and many other universities in the state received significant budget cuts, the legislature made a special appropriation […] to support the new health sciences program […] – a clear indication that this priority mattered enough to the university and the region […].* (Case 28, p. 165)

Finally, the Modifier's positioning reflects a willingness to take strategic risks and venture into novel research and teaching domains that lack strong disciplinary traditions. By deliberately combining disciplines and aligning internal structures more closely with external partners – such as industry or public organizations – the university enhances the transdisciplinary relevance of its research and innovation activities and establishes a distinct strategic position:

> *[...] introduced elements of novelty, for example in a distinctive mix of disciplines, in developing new domains of research with limited tradition in Switzerland and in an internal organization nearer to private companies than to traditional Swiss universities.* (Case 18, p. 175)

Overall, the university emphasizes societal relevance through knowledge transfer. Its outward-oriented positioning not only strengthens organizational distinctiveness but also redefines accountability, as legitimacy becomes increasingly tied to demonstrable societal impact and value creation.

5.4.3.2 Accountability

Accountability in the Modifier configuration is primarily grounded in outcome-based legitimacy and the university's demonstrable impact on its surrounding ecosystem. Rather than emphasizing compliance with externally mandated performance indicators, the Modifier demonstrates accountability through commitment to the local community, which is manifested in tangible societal, economic, and regional outcomes generated via knowledge transfer, research innovation, and entrepreneurial activity.

Empirically, case studies emphasize a shift away from process- or output-oriented accountability toward an impact-based logic, in which legitimacy derives from visible benefits for the local economy and community:

> *Greater emphasis on outcomes rather than process has been addressed in both cases.* (Cases 12 and 13, p. 233)

> *External accountability was seen as important for relations with both government and the public. 'We need to educate the public to the fact that their tax dollars are being well spent.'* (Case 9, p. 92)

This outcome-oriented accountability is closely intertwined with the university's approach to revenue generation. Recognizing the growing uncertainty and insufficiency of public, performance-based funding, universities actively seek to diversify their income sources by mobilizing resources from their ecosystem. Accountability thus becomes reciprocal: the university demonstrates its societal value, while external stakeholders are encouraged to invest financially in return.

> *The promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship at [the case university] often required funding that was not plentiful in a time of declining state appropriations and tuition freezes. Courting donors and raising funds were two roles assumed by executive and managerial administrators to advance innovation and entrepreneurship initiatives.* (Case 26, p. 532)

In this context, universities explicitly frame investments in innovation and entrepreneurship as mutually beneficial, linking institutional development to regional economic growth:

> *In addition to courting private donors, executive and managerial administrators secured state funding by arguing that investment in innovation and entrepreneurship at [the case university] would ignite regional economic development.* (Case 26, p. 533)

As a result, accountability extends beyond justifying the use of public funds but extends to actively generating revenues through the ecosystem. The Modifier expands its funding portfolio to include private donors, industry partners, foundations, and targeted political grants, thereby strengthening both organizational competitiveness and regional innovation capacity. Hybrid arrangements may emerge in which academic and industrial interests and frameworks become intertwined.

> *Most HEIs now have this kind of colleges/schools affiliated to the university. These units are sponsored by enterprises and are operated by them, whilst the university supports it with teachers and shares a certain percentage of its income.* (Case 15, p. 206)

Internally, accountability mechanisms are designed to support this entrepreneurial and impact-oriented strategy. Financial authority is devolved to a reduced number of structurally consolidated units, which are held accountable for prudent resource use while being incentivized to pursue additional income-generating activities. At the same time, central administration provides data, coordination, and buffering mechanisms that allow for risk-taking and cross-subsidization between more and less successful units:

> *Under the new structure, the Heads of Colleges are the main budget holders, operating with budgets devolved to them as block grants. [...] The Heads of Schools operate within the budget that has been devolved from their Heads of College and are responsible for the strategic planning, leadership, and delivery of teaching and research within their school. [...] Financial authority has thus been devolved from university central to school level.* (Case 12, pp. 123–124)

In sum, accountability in the Modifier is characterized by an outcome-based logic of legitimacy and a revenue model rooted in the university's ecosystem. By demonstrating societal impact and mobilizing financial support from external partners, the university both legitimizes its strategic direction and secures the resources necessary for continued organizational transformation.

5.4.3.3 Organizational Design

The organizational design of the Modifier is characterized by a strengthened mid-level administration, externally blurred organizational boundaries, and the institutionalization of transfer-oriented infrastructures that connect the university to its surrounding ecosystem.

Internally, the traditional faculty-based structure, composed of numerous largely autonomous departments, is progressively replaced. Universities consolidate previous fragmented units into

a reduced number of larger, semi-autonomous organizational entities – often framed as colleges encompassing specialized schools. This restructuring combines decentralization of operational responsibilities with the benefits of centralized resource pooling, thereby enhancing flexibility while maintaining synergies.

> *[...] all existing departments have either been re-established as individual schools or amalgamated with other schools. [...] Departments no longer operated as individual units under the new structure and are replaced by schools instead.* (Case 14, p. 171)

> *[the case university] adopted an extensively revised organizational structure in 1992, with the number of its departments reduced remarkably by creating schools or divisions with a variety of sub-structures within them.* (Case 12, p. 119)

This design simplifies internal coordination by concentrating administrative capacities within these enlarged units. Centralization thus increases at the level of schools and colleges, while coordination demands across the organization as a whole are reduced.

> *One of the aims of the restructuring is to increase efficiency by reducing the time spent on administrative tasks that could be more appropriately and effectively handled by management at local (college/school) level.* (Case 12, p. 135)

Crucially, the Modifier's organizational design extends beyond internal restructuring. Organizational boundaries toward the external environment become deliberately porous, as universities establish hybrid structures at the interface between academia, industry, and society. These transfer-oriented infrastructures include innovation hubs, research parks, incubators, and support services for spin-offs, which are structurally embedded within the university while simultaneously operating in close interaction with external actors (see also O'Shea et al., 2008; Siegel et al., 2007).

> *[...] several executive and managerial administrators at the university began to emphasize entrepreneurship in the form of incubating start-up companies.* (Case 26, p. 530)

> *Through construction of research parks, creation of international business incubators, and initiating a collaborative venture accelerator, executive and managerial administrators played a significant role in building infrastructure for innovation and entrepreneurship.* (Case 26, p. 351)

These boundary-spanning structures enable the translation of academic knowledge into societal and economic impact while anchoring external activities within the university's organizational framework. As such, these structures are not peripheral outcomes but become integral components of the Modifier's organizational architecture.

Boundary blurring is further reinforced through individuals occupying positions both inside the university and in external organizations, facilitating continuous reciprocal exchange. University leaders actively engage in networking and lobbying activities with governmental bodies, industry partners, and alumni, thereby strengthening the university's embeddedness within its environment.

> *[The president] was presented as very effective in establishing links with government, private industry, municipalities, and such institutions as the Alberta Research Council.* (Case 9, p. 131)

> *[…] a faculty member's outside contacts in the government and business world can become valuable assets to the university […]* (Case 16, p. 138)

> *[the president] has worked to engage many alumni who had not been contacted in the past, resulting in an improved response rate to the most recent capital campaign.* (Case 22, p. 146)

Taken together, the Modifier's organizational design institutionalizes externally blurred boundaries through dedicated transfer infrastructures and hybrid organizational forms, enabling the university to operate as an open system that systematically integrates innovation, entrepreneurship, and societal engagement into its core organizational structure.

5.4.3.4 Decision-Making

Decision-making within the Modifier follows an entrepreneurial logic that combines centralized strategic orientation with decentrally distributed operational authority. Rather than concentrating decision-making power at the top, leadership establishes overarching policies and strategic frameworks that deliberately enable entrepreneurial action at lower organizational levels.

> *The goal was to have centralized policies but decentralized administration.* (Case 10, p. 91)

Empirically, this governance logic is reflected in a gradual shift away from highly centralized governance toward decision-making authority located closer to implementation. Responsibilities for personnel, budgeting, and strategic initiatives are increasingly devolved to faculties, schools, and their leadership.

> *[...] a change from centralized to decentralized decision-making.* (Case 10, p. 90)

> *[...] there are currently discussions about the need to devolve some of the central functions of the University down to faculties [...]* (Case 2, p. 266)

> *The decision making authority on staff appointment has been delegated to the Deans of Faculties and Heads of Schools.* (Case 13, p. 147)

Within this governance arrangement, centralized guidelines provide a coherent strategic direction for the entire university, while individual units receive a significant degree of operational autonomy, empowering them to act entrepreneurially. Top-down and bottom-up decision-making are intentionally integrated, with leadership defining priorities and allocating strategic resources, and decentralized actors exploring opportunities and experimenting with new initiatives. The legitimacy of each decision is established by its explicit orientation toward the collective benefit of the university. Strategic choices are justified not through formal authority alone, but by their contribution to institutional development, societal impact, and long-term organizational viability.

> *Diffusion of power by empowerment* (Case 12, p. 140)

> *[...] the strategic plan [...] had actually strengthened the University as a whole in its ability to make decisions. 'I think that processes have been streamlined, and because of that, it's allowed more of the decentralized decision making to faculties and departments that has been helpful, and the strategic plan has held it all together.'* (Case 9, p. 130)

In this context, leaders act as agents of change. Presidents and senior managers articulate visions, promote an entrepreneurial culture, and actively encourage risk-taking aligned with the university's strategic orientation (see also Teece, 2018). Their role is not to dictate outcomes and control processes, but to mobilize organizational capacities, translate internal ideas into societal solutions, and position these solutions within political and economic environments.

> *[The president] was responsible for bringing a vision to the institution, [...]* (Case 21, p. 136)

> *[The president's] vision, and ability to effectively articulate and communicate this vision [...]. [The president] was also recognized as a leader who empowered his team while holding them accountable for their areas of responsibility […]* (Case 22, pp. 136–137)

Decision-making authority is further distributed through strengthened mid-level leadership. Deans and heads of schools operate as key organizational nodes, connecting strategic leadership with academic units while also fostering horizontal collaboration by engaging with leaders from other units.

> *This strengthening at the dean level was seen to be especially important given their central role in management of the University.* (Case 9, p. 129)

Simultaneously, strategic deliberation is broadened through the systematic inclusion of external stakeholders (see also Pinheiro & Stensaker, 2014). Representatives from industry, government, and civil society are incorporated into executive boards, advisory councils, or similar governing bodies, allowing external perspectives to be directly considered in strategic deliberations. This institutionalized involvement strengthens the university's capacity to align organizational decisions with societal needs while reinforcing the legitimacy of entrepreneurial initiatives.

Given the university's strong external orientation and engagement with dynamic environments, decision-making processes are designed for speed and flexibility. Urgent strategic decisions are often taken by management before formal consultation processes are completed, while governance structures are streamlined to reduce procedural delays.

> *[…] a number of changes to the governance structure […] were perceived to have improved the University's ability to make appropriate and timely decisions. [...] 'They've tried to eliminate some [General Faculties Council] committees by putting them together [...]'. [...] Overall, the committee structure was seen to be operating much more efficiently than had been the case in the past.* (Case 9, pp. 132–133)

At the same time, accountability is preserved through clearly assigned responsibilities. Leaders are authorized to delegate decisions within their units, while day-to-day decision-making occurs at the point of implementation, where relevant knowledge is directly available. Crucially, this approach improves decision-making efficiency by minimizing coordination efforts associated with centralized data collection and processes.

> *As such, Heads are responsible primarily for managing their departments and if they wish to delegate authority they may do so at their discretion.* (Case 5, p. 290)
>
> *Heads of Schools can also devolve the day-to-day line management tasks to individuals in the schools.* (Case 12, p. 124)

Taken together, decision-making in the Modifier combines an entrepreneurial distribution of authority with leadership-driven change agency, enabling the university to act flexibly and continuously realign organizational action with evolving societal and economic opportunities.

Overall, co-constructional actorhood marks the most far-reaching expression of organizational agency observed in the cases. Through transdisciplinary positioning, impact-based accountability, transfer-oriented structures, and entrepreneurial yet distributed forms of decision-making, universities move beyond responding to competition toward proactively reshaping their institutional environment.

5.5 Consolidating Universities' Empirically Grounded Archetypes of Organizational Actorhood

The findings reveal three distinct archetypes of organizational actorhood. Each archetype is composed of a specific interpretive scheme that frames how universities make sense of multiple competitions, a response pattern that captures how they organize their actions, and a configuration that reflects the alignment of strategy and structure emerging from these response patterns (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993). Taken together, these interrelated components portray how universities perform strategic agency in competitive institutional environments (Bleiklie et al., 2017b; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013). Table 2 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the archetypes of actorhood identified in this study.

Adaptational actorhood represents a compliance-oriented mode of organizing in which universities predominantly align with externally defined standards. Competitions are perceived as regulatory frameworks that prescribe legitimate forms of performance and accountability (Drori et al., 2009; Ramirez, 2006). The interpretive scheme underlying this archetype rests on the belief that competition has become the new modus operandi of academia and must be accommodated rather than contested. Consequently, organizational attention is directed toward enhancing administrative support functions and measurable outputs (Vican et al., 2020) rather than renewing the academic core. This response pattern is reactive in nature, reflecting the university's effort to conform to externally defined requirements and social expectations (Whitley & Gläser, 2014). The corresponding Cascader configuration translates external performance

metrics into internal monitoring and incentive systems that cascade down to faculties and individual academics. These systems are legitimized through an emphasis on transparency, cost-efficiency, and output orientation (ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012) – features often associated with "governance by numbers" (Osterloh, 2010) and the managerial rationalization of higher education (Deem, 1998; Shepherd, 2018). The establishment of centralized shared service centers exemplifies this orientation, as they aim to streamline administrative procedures and improve operational efficiency. Leadership in this archetype is exercised primarily through administrative control and procedural standardization, aiming to ensure compliance and maintain institutional legitimacy within predefined frameworks (Waugh, 2003).

Orchestrational actorhood captures a more deliberate and integrative mode of organizing. Universities operating in this mode interpret multiple competitions not solely as constraints but as opportunities for strategic differentiation and collective action (Maassen et al., 2023). The interpretive scheme emphasizes the university's capacity to shape its competitive profile through the selective concentration of resources and expertise (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Fumasoli et al., 2020). Typical responses include the identification of grand societal challenges as organizing principles for interdisciplinary collaboration, leading to the establishment of cross-faculty research centers or areas of excellence (Boardman & Bozeman, 2007; Boardman & Corley, 2008; Stahler & Tash, 1994). This requires the mobilization of substantial external funding and the alignment of diverse academic units toward shared strategic objectives (Hellström et al., 2018). The associated Absorber configuration strengthens organizational coordination capacity through semi-autonomous centers that integrate academic and administrative functions to facilitate research performance. Leadership is characterized by facilitation and orchestration, as senior managers and deans act as brokers who create enabling conditions (Harris, 2010; Kezar & Lester, 2009) – such as internal seed funding, teaching buy-outs, or targeted recruitment – to stimulate collaboration across disciplinary and organizational boundaries (Maassen et al., 2023). Orchestrational actorhood thus reflects an internal integration of strategic and operational logics, balancing managerial coordination with academic initiative and autonomy.

Co-constructional actorhood embodies a transformative mode of organizing in which universities go beyond adaptation or orchestration by proactively engaging in reshaping their institutional environments (Pollock et al., 2018). The interpretive scheme is rooted in the perception that competition is not a fixed external condition but a socially constructed phenomenon that can be modified by universities themselves (Krücken, 2021). Universities adopting this archetype seek to position themselves as innovation hubs and societal partners, pursuing strategies

of societal impact orientation and ecosystem engagement (Etzkowitz, 2003). In doing so, they diversify their resource base by cultivating collaborations, endowment funding, commercialization activities, and regional partnerships (Armbruster, 2008; Siegel et al., 2007). The Modifier configuration associated with this archetype transcends traditional organizational boundaries by integrating hybrid structures such as incubators, technology transfer offices, and spin-offs that link academic work with economic and civic actors (O'Shea et al., 2008; Siegel et al., 2007). These transformations are often systemic in nature, encompassing both strategy and structure, and typically rely on strong stakeholder support and entrepreneurial leadership. Leaders act as change agents who actively foster experimentation, risk-taking, and adaptive governance across institutional interfaces (Teece, 2018). Co-constructional actorhood thus illustrates the redefinition of the university's role in its environment, emphasizing organizational evolution rather than compliance.

Table 2

Key Characteristics of Organizational Actorhood Archetypes

		Archetype of actorhood		
		Adaptational	Orchestrational	Co-constructional
Interpretive scheme: multiple competitions as …		• … standards for academic activity	• … opportunities for collective action	• … triggers for systemic transformation
Response pattern		• Reactive: accepting competitions	• Active: selecting competitions	• Proactive: creating competitions
Configuration		Cascader:	Absorber:	Modifier:
Strategy	Positioning	• Providing academic services to society • Multidisciplinary scholarship	• Addressing grand societal challenges • Interdisciplinary excellence	• Generating innovations for society • Transdisciplinary relevance
	Accountability	• Output legitimacy, accounting-based • Funds for performance targets	• Input legitimacy, proposition-based • Endowments for academic profiles	• Outcome legitimacy, impact-based • Revenues through the ecosystem
Structure	Organizational design	• Internally reinforced boundaries • Centralized administrative and shared services	• Internally blurred boundaries • Semi-autonomous cross-faculty research centers	• Externally blurred boundaries • Incubators, transfer offices, and spin-offs
	Decision-making	• Managerial: top-down • Leaders as professional administrators	• Managerial: collaborative • Leaders as academic facilitators	• Entrepreneurial: distributed • Leaders as agents of change

5.6 Empirical Distributions and Transition Pathways Between Archetypes of Organizational Actorhood

Across the 33 university cases, adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional archetypes of organizational actorhood are empirically identifiable, yet they vary considerably in their degree of manifestation and developmental trajectories. The cases show that archetypes are unevenly distributed and partially weakly pronounced or appear in combination with elements of another archetype. Moreover, actorhood does not necessarily emerge through a direct progression from the initial type toward one of the three actorhood archetypes. Instead, universities may transition from one archetype to another over the course of their organizational evolution.

In terms of empirical distribution, adaptational and co-constructional actorhood are the most frequently observed archetypes, whereas orchestrational actorhood occurs considerably less often. Adaptational actorhood is identified in 17 universities[7], while co-constructional actorhood appears in 18 universities[8]. By contrast, orchestrational actorhood is observed in only 5 universities[9]. Importantly, the total number of archetype occurrences exceeds the number of cases, as several universities exhibit characteristics of more than one archetype within the temporal scope of the respective studies.

Figure 9 illustrates the dominant transition pathways empirically observed across the case studies. The most frequently observed direct transition leads from the initial type to adaptational actorhood (17 cases). Direct transitions from the initial type to orchestrational actorhood are comparatively rare (4 cases), which is consistent with the overall lower prevalence of orchestrational actorhood across the sample. Direct transitions from the initial type to co-constructional actorhood are also observable relatively frequently (11 cases); however, an alternative transition pathway is particularly salient. In slightly more than one third of the cases, co-constructional actorhood does not emerge directly from the initial type but develops through an intermediate phase of adaptational actorhood (7 cases). Notably, while transitions from adaptational to co-constructional actorhood are common and a transition from adaptational to orches-

[7] Adaptational actorhood is identified in 17 cases: seven cases display clearly pronounced characteristics, six exhibit less pronounced characteristics, one combines adaptational characteristics with elements of orchestrational actorhood, one with elements of co-constructional actorhood, and one case documents an unsuccessful attempt to develop adaptational actorhood.

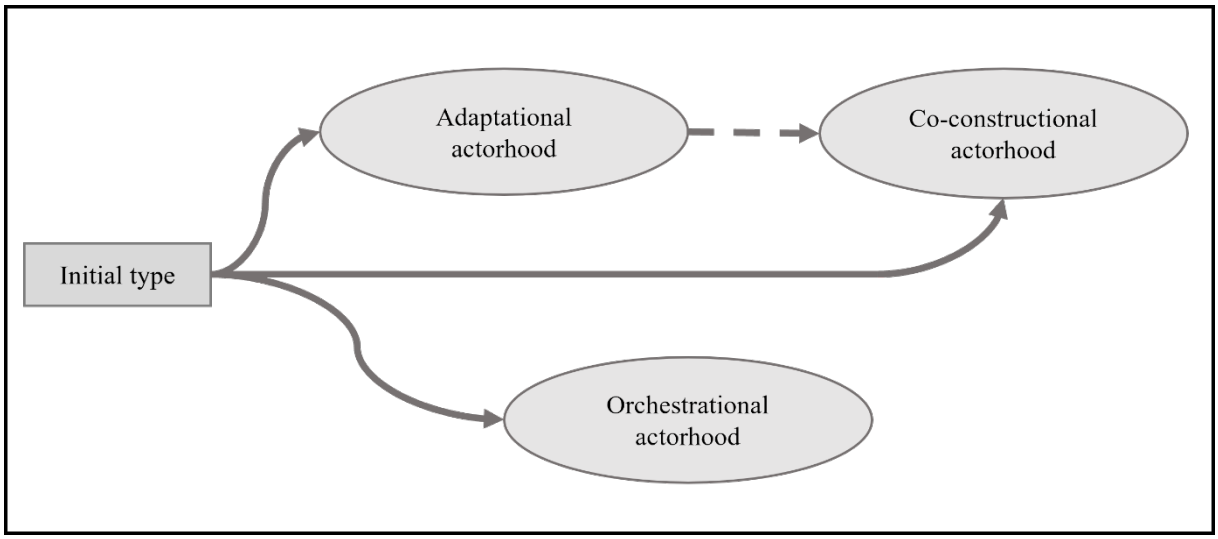
[8] Co-constructional actorhood is identified in 18 cases: eight cases display clearly pronounced characteristics, six exhibit less pronounced characteristics, three combine elements of orchestrational actorhood, and one case documents elements of both adaptational and co-constructional actorhood.

[9] Orchestrational actorhood is identified in five cases: three cases display clearly pronounced characteristics, one case exhibits less pronounced characteristics, and one case documents elements of co-constructional actorhood.

trational actorhood is observed in one case, no transitions from co-constructional or orchestrational actorhood to adaptational actorhood are documented within the temporal scope of the case studies.

Figure 9

Transition Pathways of Organizational Actorhood Archetypes



The empirical material shows that national higher education systems are not associated with a uniform archetype of organizational actorhood. Universities operating within the same national context are observed to develop different actorhood archetypes and to do so in distinct ways (e.g., Cases 18-20 in Switzerland; Cases 2-7, 12, and 13 in the United Kingdom). What can be observed instead is a temporal sequencing of organizational transitions across regions. Organizational transitions are documented to begin earlier in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand – primarily during the 1980s and 1990s – followed by Canada, Japan, Brazil, Finland, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, China, and, ultimately, Thailand, mainly from the late 1990s onward into the 2010s. Importantly, while the onset of organizational transitions differs across national contexts, the transitions themselves typically unfold over prolonged periods, often spanning several years or decades, as evidenced by case studies covering longer observation windows (e.g., Cases 11, 17, 18-22). In addition, the empirical material documents subsequent transition episodes in countries where organizational transitions began earlier. This pattern is illustrated by several U.S. cases (Cases 23, 27, 28, and 30), in which renewed organizational transitions are associated with financial pressures following the Great Recession in the late 2000s, coinciding with intensified competitive pressures and shifts in organizational transition pathways.

Besides national context, the empirical material does not reveal deterministic relationships between specific organizational characteristics – such as size, age, budget, prestige, and discipline concentration – and specific actorhood archetypes (see also Seeber et al., 2014). This absence of clear patterns coincides with the composition of the sample, which predominantly consists of large or very large institutions founded in the early twentieth century or earlier with generalist discipline concentration (see Table 3 in Appendix B). However, some tendencies can be observed. Adaptational actorhood frequently emerges as a short-term organizational response in universities facing acute financial pressure and characterized by low levels of horizontal coordination across academic units (e.g., Cases 21, 24, and 31). Orchestrational actorhood, by contrast, tends to develop over extended periods in older, more prestigious universities with an established research reputation and comparatively strong resource bases (e.g., Cases 17 and 23). Co-constructional actorhood has become increasingly prominent in more recent publications and is more often observed in universities with a stronger orientation toward applied disciplines and in contexts of prolonged financial strain (e.g., Cases 8, 9, and 27). These tendencies, however, remain probabilistic rather than deterministic and do not constitute fixed pathways.

Across archetypes, nevertheless, one pattern consistently stands out: leadership plays a central role in shaping organizational actorhood (see also Kezar, 2009; Stensaker et al., 2014). Leadership is explicitly emphasized as an influential factor in approximately two-thirds of the cases, while leadership change is identified as a critical trigger for organizational transition in about one-third of the cases (e.g., Cases 11, 26, and 27). In these instances, newly constituted leadership teams are described as first articulating strategic visions and redefining institutional priorities, which are then translated into organizational restructuring, often accompanied by adjustments to decision-making procedures and accountability mechanisms. Together, these changes are associated with broader shifts in organizational culture that influence actorhood trajectories.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that organizational actorhood neither emerges along a uniform pathway nor converges toward a dominant archetype across the empirical sample. Despite being exposed to a shared competitive logic, the globally distributed universities enact actorhood in qualitatively different ways, giving rise to the coexistence of adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional archetypes. The archetypes originate from a common initial organizational type but develop through heterogeneous, often blurred, and sometimes sequential transition pathways. Such pathways are shaped less by national context or fixed organizational attributes than by universities' internal capacities to interpret competitive pressures, mobilize collective action, and enact strategic transformation – capacities that are often catalyzed by leadership and leadership change.

6 Discussion: Advancing the Understanding of Universities' Organizational Actorhood in Multiple Competitions

The aim of this study is to advance the understanding of how archetypes of organizational actorhood emerge in response to multiple competitions. By adopting an archetype-of-actorhood framework grounded in configurational theory, the study examined how universities make sense of multiple competitions, mobilize their strategic capabilities through collective action, and integrate strategy and structure into coherent patterns. Based on a qualitative meta-study of 33 universities across 13 countries, three empirically grounded archetypes of actorhood were identified – adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional actorhood – each emerging from a common initial type and illustrating a distinct mode of enacting actorhood within institutionalized environments.

Taken together, these findings provide an analytical basis for discussing how universities' responses to multiple competitions reconfigure modes of governance and contribute to theorizing the dynamics of organizational actorhood in higher education. The study suggests that long-held notions of universities as loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976) or organized anarchies (Cohen et al., 1972) no longer adequately capture their internal governance. Instead, universities today possess an expanded room for maneuver, which they intentionally leverage to navigate increasingly complex competitive environments. They mobilize their strategic capabilities in diverse ways, rather than conforming to a uniform global template or standardized model (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013).

These findings further invite reflection on the broader implications of multiple competitions in higher education. Competition in higher education is not an end in itself but a mechanism for allocating scarce resources and enhancing organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Yet, whether competition has in fact achieved this goal cannot be answered unequivocally. The empirical evidence from this study paints a nuanced picture: on the one hand, competition has indeed enhanced universities' efficiency and effectiveness – by stimulating profile building, fostering collaboration, and encouraging the pooling of resources to generate synergies. On the other hand, these gains are often offset by unintended consequences such as administrative overload due to growing bureaucratization, internal tensions, and the diversion of resources toward secondary activities like internationalization and digitalization – areas that are valuable in their own right but risk drawing attention away from universities' core academic missions.

Despite the unintended effects of competition, a return to a pre-competitive era is neither possible nor desirable. Rather, universities must develop a clear and shared strategic vision that

provides competitive advantage, align collective action toward this goal, and maintain sufficient flexibility to counterbalance bureaucratic constraints and seize emerging opportunities. As the findings indicate, such effectiveness and efficiency do not result from centralization or compliance alone, but from universities' capacity to use their room for maneuver creatively and strategically by combining resources in unique and hard-to-imitate ways – to build competitive advantage and to sustain their functioning and legitimacy within an institutionalized field characterized by multiple competitions.

6.1 Shifting Regulatory Influence: From State-Centrism to Transnational Patterns

Much of the higher education literature has conceptualized universities' organizational transformations primarily within national frameworks. As Ferlie et al. (2008) note, research has often concentrated on the relationship between the state and the university, while comparative studies have typically examined how macro-level regulatory arrangements translate into meso-level organizational responses (e.g., Bleiklie, 2014; Bleiklie et al., 2017c; Moodie, 2015). From this perspective, higher education systems are commonly understood as comprising the set of institutions located within a single country (Teichler, 2020), with the regulatory state assumed to play a decisive role in shaping how universities enact actorhood. Against this backdrop, scholars such as Ramirez and Tiplic (2014; see also Ramirez & Christensen, 2013) have called for greater attention to cross-national patterns in order to better capture the global diffusion of competitive dynamics and their organizational consequences.

This study responds to that call. By synthesizing 33 in-depth case studies from 13 different countries, this study integrates national contextual insights with a cross-national lens. The qualitative meta-study approach foregrounds the meso-level – universities as organizations that enact actorhood from within – while embedding them in changing national and global environments shaped by the proliferation of multiple competitions. The method thereby bridges analytical levels: it captures universities' internal organizational processes, their embeddedness within national higher-education systems, and the influence of global trends. This approach enables the identification of organizational patterns that transcend national boundaries without neglecting the institutional contexts in which universities operate.

The empirical findings reveal that competitive pressures are now a global feature of higher education (Krücken, 2021; Naidoo, 2018). Across the worldwide localized case studies, a pervasive awareness of competition is evident, supporting the notion that competition for financial, human, and symbolic resources has become a defining characteristic of the sector. While the

manifestations of competition differ across national higher education systems, the cases consistently reveal that base funding rarely suffices to cover operational costs, forcing universities to compete for additional external resources to secure their legitimacy and survival. The synthesized case studies highlight the interdependence of competitive arenas: success in securing one type of resources (e.g., funding) often, but not always, enhances competitiveness in others (e.g., reputation or talent) – a phenomenon that has been described as the Matthew effect (Merton, 1988). Yet, the findings suggest that meaningful engagement with multiple competitions requires more than merely improving efficiency or cutting costs; it calls for strategic and structural transformation that enhance universities' long-term capacity to act. As a result, distinct archetypes of actorhood emerge – adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional – that can coexist within the same national higher education system while also appearing across different systems.

These findings challenge the explanatory sufficiency of both the global convergence and the national divergence perspectives. The former assumes that universities worldwide are becoming isomorphic by adopting a single, globally legitimate model of organizing; the latter views national frameworks as a dominant determinant of organizational differentiation. In contrast, this study shows that neither global scripts nor national regulatory contexts alone account for the diversity of organizational actorhood observed. Even within similar legal and funding regimes, universities develop different organizational configurations, driven by divergent internal interpretive schemes and strategic responses. At the same time, similar actorhood archetypes appear across countries with divergent regulatory traditions, indicating that universities may respond to multiple competitions in a limited number of comparable ways.

Overall, these findings thus suggest that the influence of national regulatory frameworks on universities' organizational development is diminishing. The proliferation of multiple competitions has led to partial convergence among national higher education systems, as competitive mechanisms and performance-oriented governance have spread globally. Yet environmental convergence towards competition does not equate to organizational homogeneity: universities retain agency in how they translate competitive pressures and exercise their agency. They exploit their room for maneuver, organize collective action, and strategically position themselves on their own behalf within the academic landscape (Barbato et al., 2021; Bloch, 2021; Frølich et al., 2019).

In sum, the findings indicate that the emergence of archetypes of actorhood cannot be reduced either to the isomorphic adoption of a globally dominant model or to the idiosyncrasies of national higher education systems. Instead, they result from the dynamic interplay between external competitive pressures and universities' internal capacities for strategic organization and sensemaking. Universities thus act not merely as recipients of regulations but as active participants in co-producing the evolving institutional order of higher education.

6.2 Scopes of Organizational Actorhood in Navigating Multiple Competitions

The empirical findings contribute to the ongoing debate on whether, how, and to what extent universities perform actorhood in response to multiple competitions (Bloch, 2021). The archetypes identified in this study demonstrate that actorhood is not a static attribute externally conferred by autonomy but a dynamic capacity enacted by the organization itself. Although multiple competitions are evident in all case studies, the external logic of competition is internalized in markedly different ways within universities, giving rise to three archetypes of actorhood.

Universities differ considerably in how they mobilize their organizational capacity when performing actorhood in response to multiple competitions. In line with Fumasoli and Huisman's (2013) claim that higher education institutions engage with their environment in qualitatively different ways, exercising varying degrees of organizational agency when navigating external pressures, opportunities, and risks, this study delineates a continuum of organizational responses to multiple competitions ranging from reactive adaptation to active orchestration to proactive co-construction.

This continuum illuminates not only how universities interpret and make sense of their institutional environments, but also how they organize and coordinate collective action over time and develop coherent strategy-structure patterns. The findings resonate with Doyle and Brady's (2018) view that strategizing in higher education is not merely a matter of responding to demands but involves the construction of institutional identity and legitimacy through continuous interaction with external stakeholders. They further align with Oliver's (1991) assertion that the institutional framework permits a range of strategic responses, on the condition that organizations' scope for choice and their level of active engagement in dealing with institutional constraints and expectations are treated as variable rather than taken for granted as fixed. How universities translate external competitive pressures into intra-organizational practices thus generates diverse intended and unintended consequences of competition and, in turn, shapes each archetype's perceived legitimacy within the academic discourse.

6.2.1 The Adaptational Actor's Limited Agency in Cascading Competition

The adaptational archetype of organizational actorhood depicts a limited level of agency, marked by a primarily reactive use of the organizational room for maneuver. Universities belonging to this archetype primarily respond to multiple competitions through compliance with environmental requirements and expectations. Their strategic capacity is narrowly directed toward alignment with externally imposed performance indicators, such as funding metrics or accreditation standards. Therefore, this archetype resonates with the view that organizations adapt reactively to their external environments (Whitley & Gläser, 2014), and are in this sense determined by them (van Vught & Huisman, 2013).

The adaptational actor aligns simultaneously with global institutional scripts and national regulatory frameworks: it partly supports the global-convergence perspective by conforming to worldwide rationality expectations that define what constitutes an organizational actor (Drori et al., 2006; Ramirez, 2010), while also substantiating the national-divergence perspective, as universities implement country-specific policy frameworks and emphasize national performance indicators that determine the allocation of competitive public funding (Kogan et al., 2006; Paradeise et al., 2009; Whitley & Gläser, 2014).

Despite its reactive nature, the adaptational actor challenges the notion of organizational passivity. Contradicting the portrayal of organizations as mere cultural dopes (Lawrence et al., 2009) bound by institutional scripts, as suggested by classical neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), reactive alignment itself presupposes collective decision-making and the coordination of organizational efforts, thus reflecting a limited yet genuine degree of organizational actorhood. This interpretation aligns with Fumasoli's (2011) argument that conforming to environmental demands can involve strategic agency when adaptation is grounded in deliberate organizational action and informed analysis. Adaptational actorhood should therefore not be equated with organizational failure. Rather, adaptation can constitute a viable and effective mode of responding to competitive pressures and, as demonstrated by Miller and Friesen (1977), may result in organizational success under conditions of environmental change.

In the academic discourse, the adaptational actor is often portrayed critically as embodying the internalization of competition within the university. By cascading external pressures into and through organizational structures, this archetype reinforces hierarchical control and performance-based governance. Scholars have problematized these developments as eroding traditional forms of collegiality and shared governance (Eckel & Kezar, 2006), giving rise to a "managerial ideal type" (Shepherd, 2018, p. 1668) and the "McDonaldization" of academia

(Parker & Jary, 1995, p. 319; Prichard & Willmott, 1997, p. 287), raising doubts about whether "governance by numbers" (Osterloh, 2010, p. 267) genuinely serves the purpose of academic research (Vernon et al., 2018) and teaching (Hattke & Frost, 2020). The resulting bureaucratization of the adaptational actor is understood to impose an administrative burden on both administrative and academic staff (Krücken, 2021), diverting time and energy away from universities' core tasks of research and teaching. Moreover, the intensification of performance pressures and metric-driven evaluation is associated with rising stress levels and a decline in creativity (Krücken, 2021), job satisfaction and motivation (Kallio & Kallio, 2014; Mohammed et al., 2019; Watt & Richardson, 2020), thus reflecting the unintended consequences of competition in higher education.

At the same time, the predominantly critical tone of this literature warrants reflection. Much of the scholarship on adaptational actorhood is produced by academics who are themselves embedded in precisely those organizational settings characterized by performance measurement, managerial oversight, and competitive pressures. As such, critical evaluations may not only reflect analytical assessments of organizational transition but also experiential responses to conditions that scholars personally encounter in their everyday academic work. This positional embeddedness does not invalidate critical accounts, but it suggests that evaluations of the adaptational actor are shaped by a perspective in which description and normative judgment are closely intertwined.

Among the case studies analyzed, adaptational actorhood emerges as one of the two most frequently observed archetypes. This empirical prominence points to the strong influence of regulatory and funding frameworks that shape universities' strategic responses and often privilege compliance and short-term adjustment over proactive initiative. At the same time, the findings suggest that adaptational actorhood typically represents an immediate organizational response to external pressures that, as financial constraints intensify, may prompt further structural and strategic adjustments. One explanation for why adaptational actorhood often constitutes an intermediate rather than final stage of organizational transition lies in the tensions it generates within organizations: while it may secure short-term stability, its emphasis on compliance, performance monitoring, and hierarchical control often encounters limited acceptance among academic staff. As a result, internal dissatisfaction and tensions may catalyze gradual organizational transitions toward orchestrational, or more frequently, co-constructional actorhood.

6.2.2 The Orchestrational Actor's Moderate Agency in Transforming Competition

Orchestrational actorhood illustrates a moderate level of agency, in which universities purposefully employ their organizational capacities to position themselves strategically in competitive settings (Barbato et al., 2021; Fumasoli et al., 2020). In line with the strand of literature on higher education institutions' strategic practices (Bloch, 2021; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013), universities of this archetype deliberately mobilize internal resources and align structural elements to achieve strategic differentiation. This supports the argument that intensified competition within higher education, combined with universities' active use of their enhanced room for maneuver, fosters increasing organizational heterogeneity and stratification across the sector (Bloch et al., 2018).

This archetype reinforces the notion that competition is not an end in itself. In line with the intended purpose of competition, universities of this type address twenty-first-century grand challenges that require interdisciplinary collaboration and collective engagement (Sá, 2008). In other words, the orchestrational actor views competition as an opportunity to mobilize resources for collective action. It selectively engages in certain competitions, absorbing external pressures and translating them into opportunities for collaboration (Maassen et al., 2023).

While evidence of how strongly this active response pattern improves research performance remains mixed (Bornmann, 2016; Leahey & Barringer, 2020), it is nonetheless positively associated and widely linked to ideals of "frontier research", "academic excellence", "flagship institutions", and "lighthouse universities" (Hellström et al., 2018). As such, this orientation reflects an aspirational understanding of competition as a means to advance scientific progress and institutional visibility. However, this emphasis often privileges research over teaching (Lynch, 2015), potentially shifting scarce institutional resources from the latter to the former and thereby reinforcing tensions between academic core missions. This imbalance may be explained and further reinforced at the level of academic discourse. Research-active academics play a central role in articulating and disseminating ideals of research excellence through scholarly publications, thereby shaping dominant narratives of academic value. By contrast, academics with strong teaching commitments tend to be less visible in these discursive arenas. As a result, research-oriented ideals may acquire disproportionate normative prominence, which can translate not only into perceptions but also into concrete organizational priorities and resource allocations that favor research over teaching within universities. At the same time, the prominence of these research-centered ideals invites reflexive consideration, as research-active academics play a central role in defining ideals of excellence, thereby privileging frontier research over teaching-centered perspectives in academic discourse. In this sense, the prominence of

research-focused ideals reflects not only organizational strategies but also the positional interests and normative orientations of those who contribute most visibly to defining what universities should aspire to be.

Among the cases analyzed, the orchestrational archetype appeared as the rarest form, despite its prominent status in the academic discourse. Its emergence requires a considerable degree of organizational slack that can be invested in collaborative initiatives long before tangible returns materialize. Moreover, this organizational slack enables these universities to absorb the effects of gradually declining base funding for a certain period, allowing them to postpone strategic transition and thereby fostering initial resistance to change. This observation contrasts with Moses' (1992) finding that organizational slack facilitates risk-taking decisions (see also Pinheiro & Young, 2017). Instead, the observed organizational inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1984) may be attributed to the character of these universities. Typically, orchestrational actors are long-established and prestigious institutions with deeply embedded collegial structures that view organizational transition with skepticism and, at times, initially resist it. In such universities, a pronounced organizational identity not only serves as an instrument for framing strategic change but also reinforces stability and legitimizes the continuity of established values and practices (Fumasoli et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the qualitative meta-study indicates that even prestigious universities with a historically anchored identity risk losing symbolic, financial, and human resources if they fail to engage continuously in strategic renewal.

6.2.3 The Co-Constructional Actor's Extensive Agency in Co-Producing Competition

Finally, the co-constructional archetype embodies the fullest expression of actorhood, surpassing the adaptational and orchestrational forms. Actorhood here is not simply enacted – it is expanded. These universities do not only respond to or navigate competitions but proactively reshape them (Pollock et al., 2018), and in doing so, enhance their room for maneuver. Through institutional entrepreneurship (Garud et al., 2007) and strategic engagement with their ecosystems, they become architects of their own institutional environment (Maguire et al., 2004) – often in collaboration with industry and government – thus exemplifying the entrepreneurial (Bronstein & Reihlen, 2014; Clark, 2001) or triple-helix (Etzkowitz, 2003) university. This corresponds to what Oliver (1991) defines as manipulation – the most active strategic response, aimed at co-opting or influencing institutional expectations and their sources. The archetype puts into practice the argument advanced by King et al. (2010) that, once organizations achieve sovereignty, they can begin to modify their environments, including reshaping their competitive fields.

By co-constructing their institutional environment, the co-constructional actor illustrates how competitions are actively produced within higher education. In line with Krücken's (2021) conceptualizations of multiple competitions as socially constructed through the dynamic interplay among three social systems – the science system, the nation state, and the university – the co-constructional actor reveals how the latter proactively shapes competitions itself. Moreover, the co-constructional university transforms the nature of competition: it derives its competitive advantage from strong alliances with powerful external stakeholders – a network that is often cultivated through both formal and informal channels (Hoffmann et al., 2018; van Rijnsoever et al., 2008). In this setting, competition is effectively pre-empted, as success within the competitive landscape depends less on formalized competitions and more on pre-existing relational capital. Consequently, competition becomes increasingly informal and temporally displaced – occurring before the formal competitions even begin.

In the academic literature, co-constructional actorhood is discussed controversially. On the one hand, it is praised for strengthening universities' societal contributions through collaboration with industry, government, and civil society in addressing real-world challenges (Audretsch, 2014), thereby positioning universities as central actors in the knowledge economy (Olssen & Peters, 2005). On the other hand, it is criticized for accelerating the commercialization of academia (Armbruster, 2008), potentially subordinating academic values to market logics and blurring the boundaries between public service and economic interest. These critiques of commercialization are largely articulated from within academia and reflect professional norms that prioritize academic autonomy and distance from market logics. From this vantage point, co-constructional actorhood may be perceived as undermining academic values, whereas actors outside academia may view the opening of universities toward societal and economic partners as a welcome departure from the "ivory tower" and a means of enhancing societal relevance. Taken together, these perspectives underline the ambivalence of the co-constructional archetype, which simultaneously expands universities' strategic agency and exposes them to the tensions of market-oriented governance.

Within the qualitative meta-study, alongside adaptational actorhood, the co-constructional archetype emerges as one of the most frequently observed archetypes of organizational actorhood. Its increasing presence in more recent studies suggests that this type of organizational actorhood has gained prominence over time. Furthermore, its high prevalence can be explained by the fact that it may emerge from two distinct trajectories: either as a development from the initial type or following a phase of adaptational actorhood. In the latter case, critiques of excessive centralization, hierarchical control, and rigid bureaucratic formalization are not simply rejected but

redirected into alternative organizational solutions. Rather than further strengthening managerial control, universities move toward more flexible and entrepreneurial modes of organizing, emphasizing the empowerment of decentralized units through the delegation of authority within centrally defined strategic frameworks. Notably, no transitions in the other direction from co-constructional to adaptational actorhood were observed. The absence of reversed transitions can be explained by the imbalance inherent in the adaptational archetype, where centralization outweighs decentralization and bureaucratic formalization prevails over organizational flexibility. From the perspective of co-constructional actors, such an imbalance is normatively and strategically unattractive and therefore actively avoided, as it would undermine the decentralized authority structures and flexible coordination mechanisms on which co-constructional actorhood relies.

6.3 Revisiting the Archetype Approach in Institutionalized Fields

Building on the empirical analysis of emerging archetypes of organizational actorhood in higher education, this subchapter situates the findings within the literature on organizational archetypes in institutionalized fields. It illuminates the role of organizations in the emergence and transformation of archetypes, their capacity to shape institutional environments, and the theoretical implications arising from the coexistence of adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional actorhood archetypes within the field of higher education.

6.3.1 Organizations as Strategic Agents in Constructing Organizational Archetypes

This study demonstrates that organizational archetypes emerge endogenously through organizations' strategic agency. Archetypes do not unfold as field-imposed templates of organizing; rather, they are constructed by organizations themselves as universities interpret their institutional environments and translate these interpretations into strategic courses of action (Oliver, 1991; Thoenig & Paradeise, 2016). This conclusion resonates with Brock et al.'s (2007) argument that archetypal change is driven by organizational agency, as organizations actively challenge established archetypes and contribute to the emergence of alternative ones. In their account, archetypal change is rooted in organizations' purposive efforts to secure, modify, or replace resource flows under conditions of environmental uncertainty (see also Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Scott, 1987).

Drawing on Greenwood and Hinings (1993), the archetype-of-actorhood framework applied in this study proves a fruitful analytical lens for explaining the emergence of organizational archetypes in institutionalized fields. By integrating interpretive schemes, response patterns, and

organizational configurations, this framework illuminates the endogenous dynamics of how organizations themselves construct archetypes by strategically responding to institutional pressures.

Interpretive schemes are particularly relevant for uncovering how organizations exercise strategic agency in archetypal change as they explain variance in emerging organizational archetypes (Brock et al., 2007) even under similar external conditions (Greenwood & Hinings, 1988). The empirical evidence shows that organizations interpret institutional pressures in distinct ways. Adaptational actors perceive multiple competitions primarily as threats, interpreting them as academic standards that must be met to secure organizational legitimacy. Orchestrational actors, in contrast, perceive multiple competitions more positively, framing them as opportunities for collective action. Co-constructional actors, finally, perceive multiple competitions as enabling, interpreting them as triggers for systemic transformation. These interpretive schemes are not scripted externally but unfold through intra-organizational sensemaking processes (Brock, 2006; Brock et al., 2007; Weick, 1995), underscoring organizations' decisive role in shaping how archetypes take form.

While interpretive schemes give direction to organizations' strategic responses to institutional pressures, the interrelated response patterns and configurations capture how organizations actively engage with their institutional environments and anchor their strategies within organizational arrangements. Response patterns trace how organizations translate interpretive schemes into coordinated courses of action, thereby foregrounding the dynamics of organizational change along a reactive-proactive spectrum (Huisman & Burgoa, 2023; Oliver, 1991; Pollock et al., 2018). Configurations, in turn, render complex organizational characteristics analytically accessible (Miller, 1996) by revealing how organizations align strategy and structure in practice.

Taken together, these constitutive elements of actorhood archetypes illuminate organizations' agentic role in dynamically constructing archetypes from within and bringing them to life through strategic collective action. The empirical findings thus substantiate Brock et al.'s (2007) claim that the archetype approach must explicitly account for the active role of organizations in challenging dominant archetypes and driving processes of archetypal change.

6.3.2 Organizational Agency in Transforming Institutional Environments

Organizations' strategic agency does not stop at organizational boundaries. The findings of this study show that organizations do not merely adapt to institutional environments but actively

participate in shaping them. In line with Greenwood and Suddaby's (2006) argument on institutional change in mature fields, Oliver's (1991) notion of manipulation, and Pollock et al.'s (2018) emphasis on reflexive transformation, organizational responses to field pressures range from acceptance and selective engagement to the proactive redefinition of institutional norms and values. This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the co-constructional archetype, whose proactive response to multiple competitions extends beyond compliance and encompasses deliberate attempts by universities to modify their institutional environment through strategic engagement with external stakeholders.

Organizations' efforts to modify the field in which they are embedded resonate with research on institutional entrepreneurship (Garud et al., 2007; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2004; Maguire et al., 2004; Tiberius et al., 2020; Weik, 2011). Institutional entrepreneurship conceptualizes organizations as purposive agents that pursue specific interests and strategically mobilize resources to create or transform institutional arrangements (Maguire et al., 2004; Weik, 2011). From this perspective, the co-constructional archetype exemplifies how organizations exercise strategic agency not only to secure advantageous positions within the higher education field but also to co-produce the competitive arenas that define it.

At the same time, the findings also reveal constraints and limited manifestations of organizational agency, lending empirical evidence to Suddaby's (2010) caution against portraying organizations as "hypermuscular" (p. 15) institutional entrepreneurs. Even among co-constructional actors, attempts to shape the institutional environment were at times marked by initial failures, particularly where reciprocal engagement with key external actors did not materialize on equal footing. Moreover, the orchestrational archetype – focused on strategic positioning within existing field structures – and the adaptational archetype – characterized by reactive alignment rather than field shaping – demonstrate that not all organizational responses translate into field-level transformation. Together, these patterns highlight that while organizations may act as agents of institutional transformation, their strategic responses can also contribute to the entrenchment and reinforcement of existing institutional pressures.

6.3.3 Coexisting Organizational Archetypes in Institutionalized Fields

The three archetypes identified in this study demonstrate that multiple archetypes can coexist within the same institutional field, each legitimized by a distinct interpretive scheme. This coexistence challenges Greenwood and Hinings' (1993) classical assumption that a single archetype dominates a given field. Three theoretical implications arise from this finding (Brock, 2006), each supported to varying degrees by the empirical observations of this study.

First, in line with Greenwood and Hinings' (1993) notion of archetypal incoherence as a transitional phase, the coexistence of archetypes may represent an intermediate state preceding a future consolidation in which one archetype – or a hybrid form (Brock et al., 2007) – emerges as dominant. The findings provide partial support for this interpretation. Elements of different archetypes frequently coexist within individual universities, resulting in hybrid configurations, at least temporarily during phases of organizational transition. Complementary evidence from Bruckmann and Carvalho's (2018) study of Portuguese public universities further supports this consolidation-through-hybridization interpretation. Moreover, the co-constructional archetype appears to gain prominence over time, both through its increasing occurrence in more recent publications and through observable transitions from adaptational actorhood. At the same time, the persistence of adaptational and orchestrational archetypes complicates a straightforward interpretation of archetypal consolidation. In particular, the orchestrational archetype tends to persist alongside co-constructional actorhood, supporting the view that different archetypes may coexist simultaneously, at least in the short run.

Second, the coexistence of the actorhood archetypes may indicate pluralism within institutional fields, allowing multiple organizing templates to remain legitimate (Brock, 2006; Brock et al., 2007). Rather than converging toward a single dominant archetype, the higher education field may be characterized by the sustained coexistence of multiple archetypes that differ fundamentally in their interpretive schemes, response patterns, and configurations. Brock's (2006) typology of professional service firm archetypes offers a relevant parallel, demonstrating how multiple archetypes can persist as legitimate organizational forms within the same field. A comparable pattern may emerge in higher education, where adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional archetypes are observed consistently across case studies. At the same time, claims of stable and lasting archetypal coexistence warrants caution, as some cases exhibit transitions from adaptational toward co-constructional actorhood.

Third, the coexistence of archetypes may signal an ongoing process of field differentiation, in which distinct archetypes increasingly demarcate separate subfields. From this perspective, each archetype would function as a dominant and legitimate organizational template within a relatively stable subfield. Hüther and Krücken's (2016) notion of nested organizational fields provides a complementary and conceptually rich analytical lens for approaching this form of differentiation. Rather than emphasizing horizontal differentiation, their approach conceptualizes higher education as a vertically stratified organizational field composed of nested global, European, national, and regional levels. From this perspective, the adaptational archetype may be more closely associated with the national field level, where regulatory compliance with

country-specific performance-based funding schemes is particularly salient. The orchestrational archetype, by contrast, may be more strongly aligned with universities embedded at the global field level, in which strategic positioning through lighthouse research and international visibility assumes greater relevance. The co-constructional archetype, finally, may be associated with the regional field level, given its pronounced orientation toward value creation within regional ecosystems. Although the empirical material does not allow for a definitive mapping of archetypes onto clearly bounded subfields, the nested organizational fields approach highlights how archetypal pluralism may be structurally embedded across field levels in the higher education sector.

Taken together, this study provides empirically grounded evidence that, at least for a period of time, multiple archetypes can emerge and coexist within the highly institutionalized field of higher education. At the same time, the findings do not support a single, unequivocal interpretation of this coexistence but instead leave analytical room for alternative interpretations, as reflected in the three interpretive implications discussed above. This interpretive openness raises further theoretical and empirical questions, which are addressed in the avenues for future research.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. By definition, the qualitative meta-study draws on empirical case studies that were designed, executed, and subsequently published by other researchers (Finfgeld, 2003; Hoon, 2013; Paterson et al., 2009). Consequently, the re-interpretation of these studies is necessarily restricted to the material made available in the original publications, which introduces issues related to data completeness, interpretive clarity, and contextual depth. As direct access to raw data or participants from the individual case studies was not possible, ambiguities identified in a few studies could not be clarified or triangulated through follow-up inquiry, thereby heightening the risk of analytical misclassification.

Moreover, several characteristics of the underlying case studies constrain the scope of interpretation. Observation periods covered by the analyzed cases vary considerably: while some document long-term organizational transitions spanning several decades, others capture only short episodes of change lasting a few years. The latter limit the ability to trace complete transition trajectories or to assess their sustainability, given that archetypal change is generally understood as a long-term process (Brock, 2006; Dent et al., 2004). Although the cases vary in several

organizational characteristics, the sample largely consists of large, long-established universities, thereby likely confining findings on size- and age-related effects to indicative patterns. Methodologically, the evidentiary base is further shaped by the data sources utilized across the studies. Most cases rely primarily on interviews and organizational documents, while ethnographic observation – valuable for revealing hidden intra-organizational processes – was only occasionally applied. Moreover, the perspectives of students, a central stakeholder group in university governance, are largely absent, restricting the insights into how strategic reorientations are experienced within the university community.

In addition, the case coverage should be critically reflected upon. Following strict inclusion and exclusion criteria (Meline, 2006), only research-intensive universities were included in the sample, limiting the generalizability of the findings to those institutions. This focus may also help explain why the identified archetypes – most notably the orchestrational and adaptational archetypes – are associated with a de-prioritization of teaching relative to research.

Moreover, the geographic coverage remains uneven in favor of OECD countries. Most cases stem from European and North American contexts, with comparatively few studies examining Asian or South American universities. Universities localized in African countries are absent in this study, reflecting blind spots in higher education research beyond OECD contexts (Kosmützky & Nokkala, 2014). Consequently, global diversity is only partially captured, although not due to purposeful exclusion but due to the lack of case studies in these regions that met the inclusion criteria.

Importantly, a sample bias cannot be ruled out. Although several academic databases were searched using a comprehensive Boolean search string to identify all eligible cases for this study, the sample likely overrepresents cases in which significant organizational change has occurred, thereby neglecting universities that have remained resistant to transition. Such a bias may already be embedded in the academic literature, as universities where no significant transition takes place might be considered less interesting for study, potentially resulting in certain archetypes of actorhood being completely overlooked.

Furthermore, the identification of archetypes was based on interpretive coding and theoretical abstraction. Although the data analysis followed systematic procedures and engaged multiple reviewers, the classification of cases inevitably entails subjective judgment. Such subjectivity may be particularly pronounced in higher education research, where the roles of observer and participant often overlap. This also applies to the authors of the studies analyzed in this meta-study and to myself – thereby challenging critical distance from the field of investigation. This

dual positionality may subtly influence the interpretation of data towards the normatively polarized scholarly discourse on competition in higher education and its intended and unintended consequences (Frank & Meyer, 2024).

Finally, the identified archetypes serve as heuristic constructs that accentuate characteristic features of organizational forms while downplaying idiosyncratic deviations. These idealized representations of organizations are often "bias[ed] toward dramatization" (p. 281) in order to present configurations in a deliberately focused and accessible way, as Miller and Friesen (1980) self-critically note with regard to their study of organizational archetypes. As idealized models, they do not represent empirically "pure" types; rather, actual universities may exhibit hybrid configurations or evolve across archetypical boundaries (Matei & Britt, 2017; McPhee & Poole, 2001). This simplification, while analytically useful, must be recognized as a theoretical abstraction rather than a literal representation of empirical reality.

While these constraints do not undermine the validity of the findings, they delineate the boundaries within which the results should be interpreted and point to potential directions for future research.

6.5 Avenues for Future Research

Building on the analytical and empirical insights of this study, several directions emerge for advancing research on universities' archetypes of organizational actorhood and the dynamics of multiple competitions in higher education. Specifically, these avenues address (first and second) intra-organizational mechanisms and conditions shaping actorhood, (third) methodological and conceptual recommendations for future qualitative research, (fourth) the intended and unintended consequences of competitive governance, and (fifth to seventh) the broader application and further evolution of archetype research in institutionalized fields.

First, the findings underscore the importance of intra-organizational factors in shaping how universities enact actorhood, with leadership emerging as a pivotal mechanism mediating organizational responses to multiple competitions. Across the analyzed case studies, leadership change frequently precedes broader organizational transitions. Building on the existing literature on university leadership (e.g., Marshall, 2012; Newton, 2002; Randall & Coakley, 2007), future research could conduct qualitative meta-studies examining how different leadership styles shape organizational transitions. In particular, such studies could explore how leaders balance participatory governance with decision-making capacity, manage resistance to change, and mobilize resources to generate university commons (Frost & Hattke, 2018).

Second, future research could explicitly explore whether and how organizational characteristics such as age, size, and prestige condition universities' archetypal trajectories, given that this study finds no robust or systematic association between these attributes and specific archetypes of actorhood – a finding that resonates with Seeber et al. (2014). Addressing this issue would require larger and more diverse samples, particularly with greater variation in institutional size and age.

Third, future qualitative research on intra-organizational phenomena within universities offers considerable potential for methodological and conceptual refinement. Given that archetypes of organizational actorhood recur across different national contexts, future meso-level research would benefit from treating national higher education systems less as rigid inclusion or exclusion criteria and more as contextual reference points shaping organizational action (see also Thoenig & Paradeise, 2016). Moreover, while competitive pressures are frequently acknowledged in empirical case studies, future research could further enhance analytical precision by explicitly specifying how competition concretely affects the focal organization. With regard to data sources, existing studies have generated valuable insights based on formalized and publicly available materials, such as mission statements and strategic plans. These approaches should be productively complemented by deeper engagement with both formal and informal documents and processes in order to capture operative strategic priorities and practices more fully. In this regard, incorporating multiple organizational perspectives has proven particularly fruitful, especially in light of the pronounced information asymmetries between status groups observed in this study. Notably, the perspective of students – who typically constitute the largest group of university members – remains comparatively underrepresented in existing studies and thus represent a promising avenue for future research. Finally, continued efforts to articulate theoretical lenses explicitly and to use terminology with greater precision would further enhance analytical clarity. In particular, clearly distinguishing between governance *within* universities (meso-level) and governance *of* universities (macro-level) would facilitate systematic screening in future literature reviews and meta-studies. Where feasible, the provision of supplementary materials offers valuable opportunities to strengthen transparency in how empirical material is processed and theorized.

Fourth, further inquiry is needed into how the intended effects of competition can be strengthened while mitigating its unintended consequences. While competition aims to enhance efficiency and quality within academia, the proliferation of multiple competitions often results in bureaucratization and symbolic compliance. In response, the Leopoldina (2025) – Germany's National Academy of Sciences and an independent scientific advisory body to policymakers

and the public – has formulated concrete proposals for recalibrating competitive governance in higher education, outlining recommendations across five interrelated domains: (1) better use of existing organizational autonomy; (2) resistance to creeping restrictions of academic freedom; (3) reduction of reporting and control obligations; (4) reordering of third-party funding competition; and (5) renewed focus on universities' core missions. Provided that these recommendations are implemented in practice, future research should empirically assess whether such adjustments achieve their intended effects and at what cost, including the emergence or reinforcement of unintended consequences associated with competitive governance.

Fifth, the findings invite a broader application of the archetype-of-actorhood framework across institutional fields. Future research could examine whether the actorhood archetypes identified in this study also emerge in other sectors, particularly in other public sector or professional organizations. Hospitals constitute a particularly promising first avenue for such cross-sectoral inquiry, as they resemble universities in being publicly funded and highly professionalized organizations exposed to competition-driven governance reforms. Relevant empirical reference points are provided by Dent et al. (2004), who analyze archetype transitions in a public-sector hospital group, and by Scott et al. (2000), who identify five distinct types of healthcare organizations. Overall, exploring cross-sectoral similarities and differences of emerging archetypes in institutionalized fields would allow future research to assess the transferability and analytical reach of the findings, thereby contributing to a more general theory of organizational actorhood in professionalized and competitive public-sector settings.

Sixth, further research could investigate whether some universities have remained resistant to change, persisting as initial types, or whether other archetypes – so far overlooked – exist beyond those identified here. Notably, universities that display long-term resistance to organizational transition despite competitive pressures deserve closer analytical attention, as they challenge the assumption that organizational change is a necessary condition for universities' survival under multiple competitions (Chandler, 2010; Gornitzka, 1999). This raises the question of whether such resistant universities still exist, and if so, how they have managed to survive despite deviating from the dominant change-oriented expectations. Examining this issue would require research designs that deliberately include cases of very limited or absent organizational transition and systematically investigate mechanisms and consequences of organizational stability in higher education.

Finally, future research would benefit from systematically addressing the long-term evolution of organizational archetypes in higher education. It remains to be seen how archetypes of actorhood will further evolve within the higher education field. Future studies could therefore address whether the prevalence of specific archetypes will shift over time; whether new archetypes will emerge; whether certain archetypes will persist or gradually diminish; whether the higher education field will differentiate into multiple subfields, each dominated by its own archetype; or whether coexisting archetypes will instead converge toward a single dominant archetype, as suggested by Greenwood and Hinings (1993). Addressing these questions requires large sample sizes and longitudinal research designs capable of capturing slow-moving organizational change. Doing so would substantially advance the understanding of archetypal change within the institutionalized field of higher education.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

This study advances the understanding of organizational actorhood and multiple competitions in higher education in three key ways.

First, the study contributes to the broader application of the configurational approach in higher education research. The qualitative meta-study identifies organizational configurations of the university as an object of inquiry. As conceptualized in the analytical framework, the findings empirically support that universities differ from one another in their patters of response and configuration, shaped by distinct interpretive schemes that explain how multiple competitions are understood and addressed internally. Building on a configuration-oriented analysis, the study suggests – through a differentiated examination of organizational actorhood – that universities do not merely respond reactively or actively to multiple competitions. Rather, certain configurational patterns are associated with a proactive response, in which the organization itself takes an agentic role in shaping competitive arenas.

Moreover, the study extends configurational research by introducing a procedural perspective (Hinings, 2018). The qualitative meta-study draws on case studies that provide detailed descriptions of how universities make sense of multiple competitions and shape their responses accordingly. By explicitly using configurations as analytical devices to trace strategic organizational transitions over time, this study integrates interrelated interpretive schemes, response patterns, and configurations into an organization-centered archetype-of-actorhood framework. This dynamic extension of the configurational approach directly responds to Hinings' (2018) call to move beyond theorizing stable patterns and toward understanding how and why new organizational forms emerge and evolve within institutionalized fields.

Second, the study helps to establish the qualitative meta-study as a methodological approach in higher education research. While qualitative meta-studies are widely applied and recognized in other disciplines (Habersang & Reihlen, 2025), they have rarely been used in higher education research, with few exceptions (Adler & Lalonde, 2020; Bronstein & Reihlen, 2014; Tülübaş & Göktürk, 2023). The academic discourse on university governance remains dominated by empirical case studies (Bronstein & Reihlen, 2014; Wilkesmann, 2019). Conducting a systematic analysis of multiple empirical investigations centered on a shared phenomenon makes it possible to leverage existing data by identifying overarching patterns. Hinings (2018) emphasized the relevance of configurational research for theory development at the organizational level and highlighted the need for analyses based on larger sample sizes – something the qualitative meta-study design allows. As demonstrated by the findings of this study, the qualitative meta-study method is well suited for generating insights into patterns and interactions of governance practices in universities, thereby contributing to refining the construct of organizational actorhood.

Third, this study contributes to a refined understanding of how regulatory influence operates in contemporary higher education by demonstrating that organizational actorhood is increasingly shaped beyond strictly national frames of reference (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013; Ramirez & Tiplic, 2014). While national higher education systems continue to structure universities' formal conditions of action, the findings show that competitive pressures have become a transnational feature of the field, generating comparable organizational challenges across countries. In this context, universities do not simply reproduce country-specific governance logics, nor do they converge toward a single global template. Instead, they enact a limited set of organizational responses that recur across different regulatory environments. This pattern suggests a shift in the locus of differentiation from national policy regimes to intra-organizational capabilities for interpretation, coordination, and strategic organization. Universities thus emerge as active agents that translate globally diffusing competitive pressures into context-specific organizational arrangements, thereby co-producing the evolving institutional environment of higher education rather than merely adapting to it (Oliver, 1991; Pollock et al., 2018). These insights open up new avenues for comparative research on how organizational actorhood is enacted across institutional contexts under conditions of transnational multiple competitions.

Taken together, this study addresses the guiding research question of how archetypes of organizational actorhood emerge when universities organize their responses to multiple competitions. The findings demonstrate that archetypes of actorhood do not arise as uniform or externally imposed responses to competitive pressures. Instead, they emerge through universities' organization-specific interpretations of multiple competitions and the strategic translation of these

interpretations into coordinated response patterns and configurations. Depending on how competition is understood and acted upon, universities enact organizational actorhood to varying degrees and in qualitatively distinct ways, resulting in adaptational, orchestrational, and co-constructional archetypes. In this sense, the emergence of archetypes of organizational actorhood is best understood as an endogenous dynamic that unfolds when universities actively interpret, enact, and, in some cases, reshape the competitive environments in which they are embedded.

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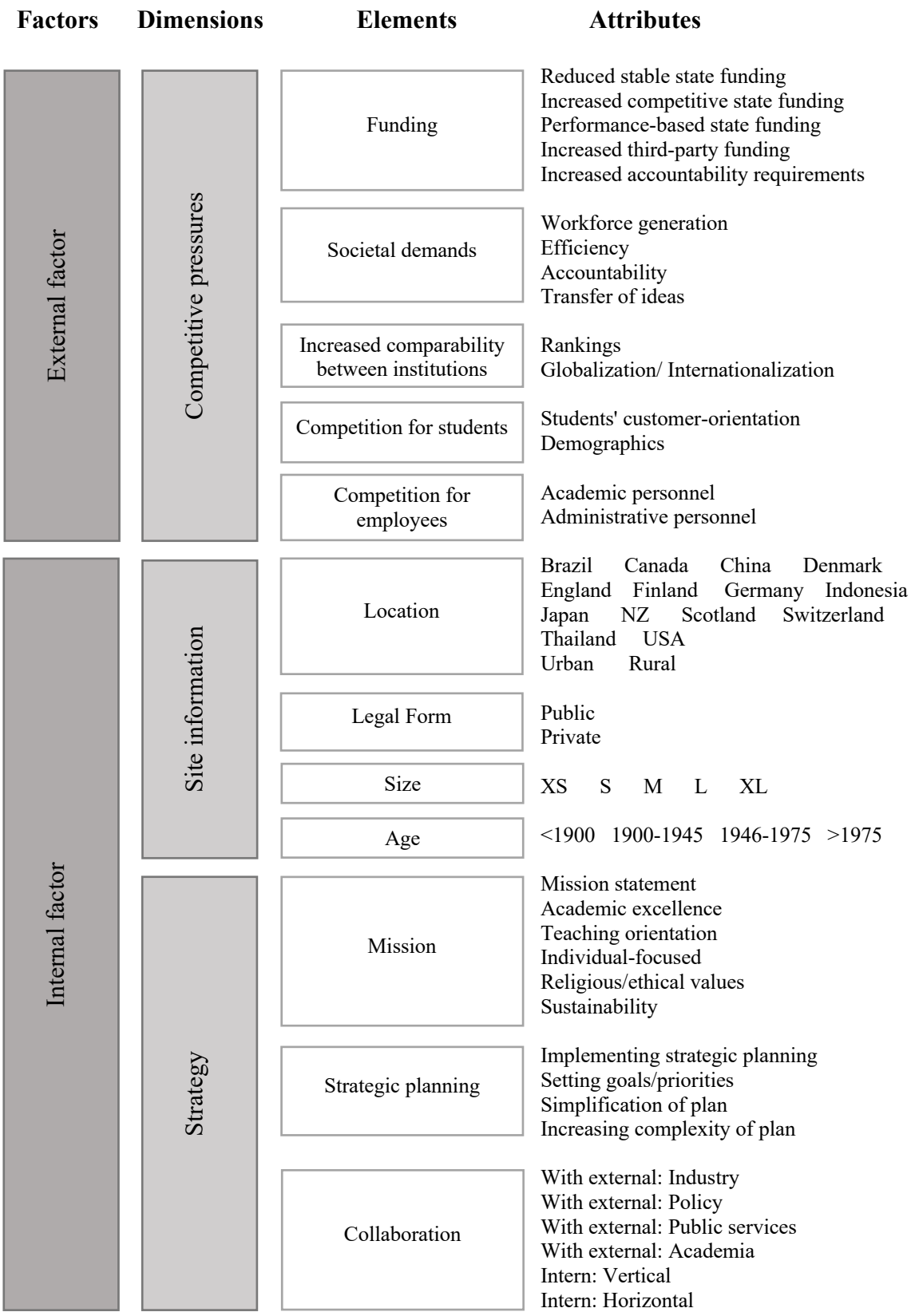
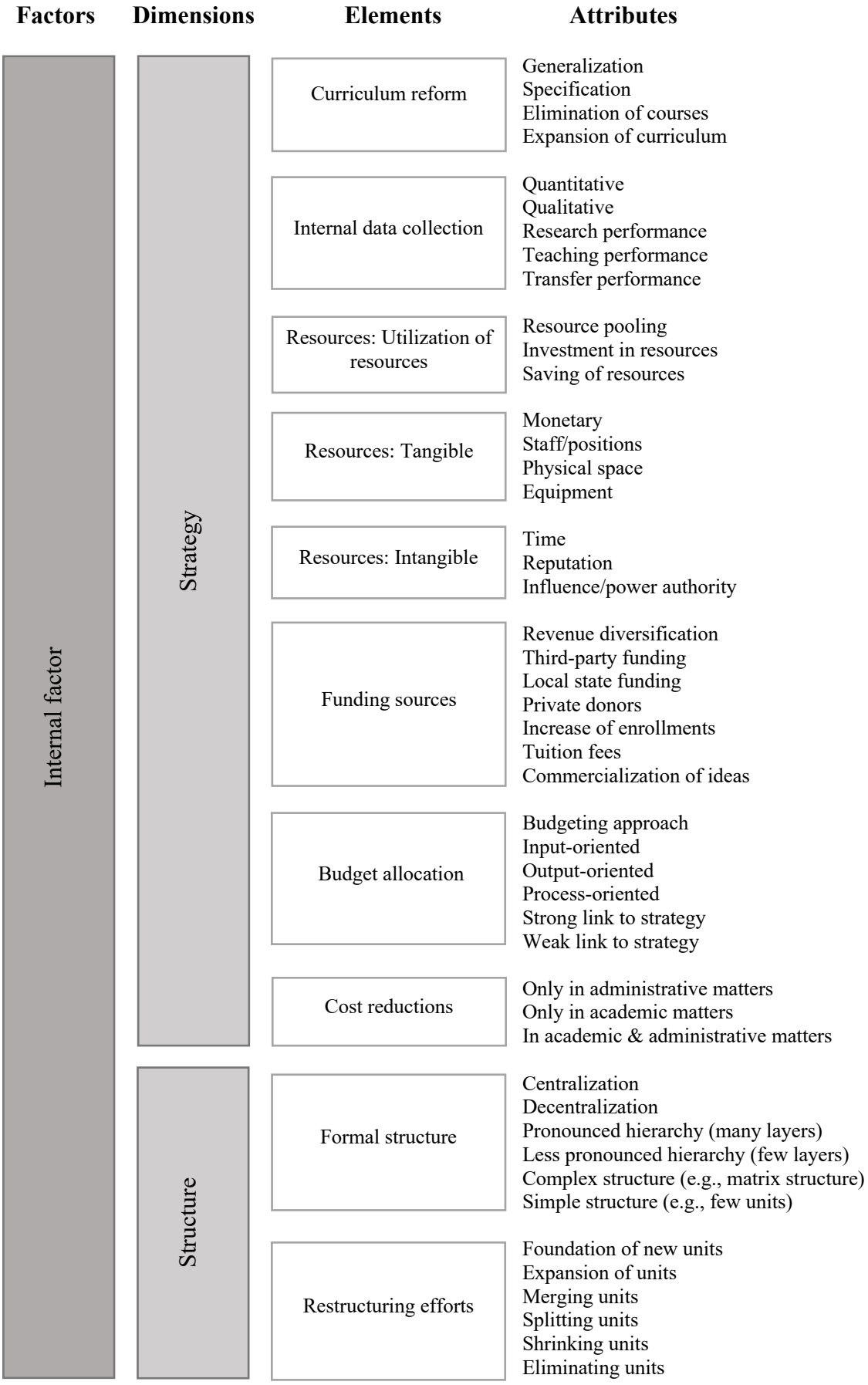
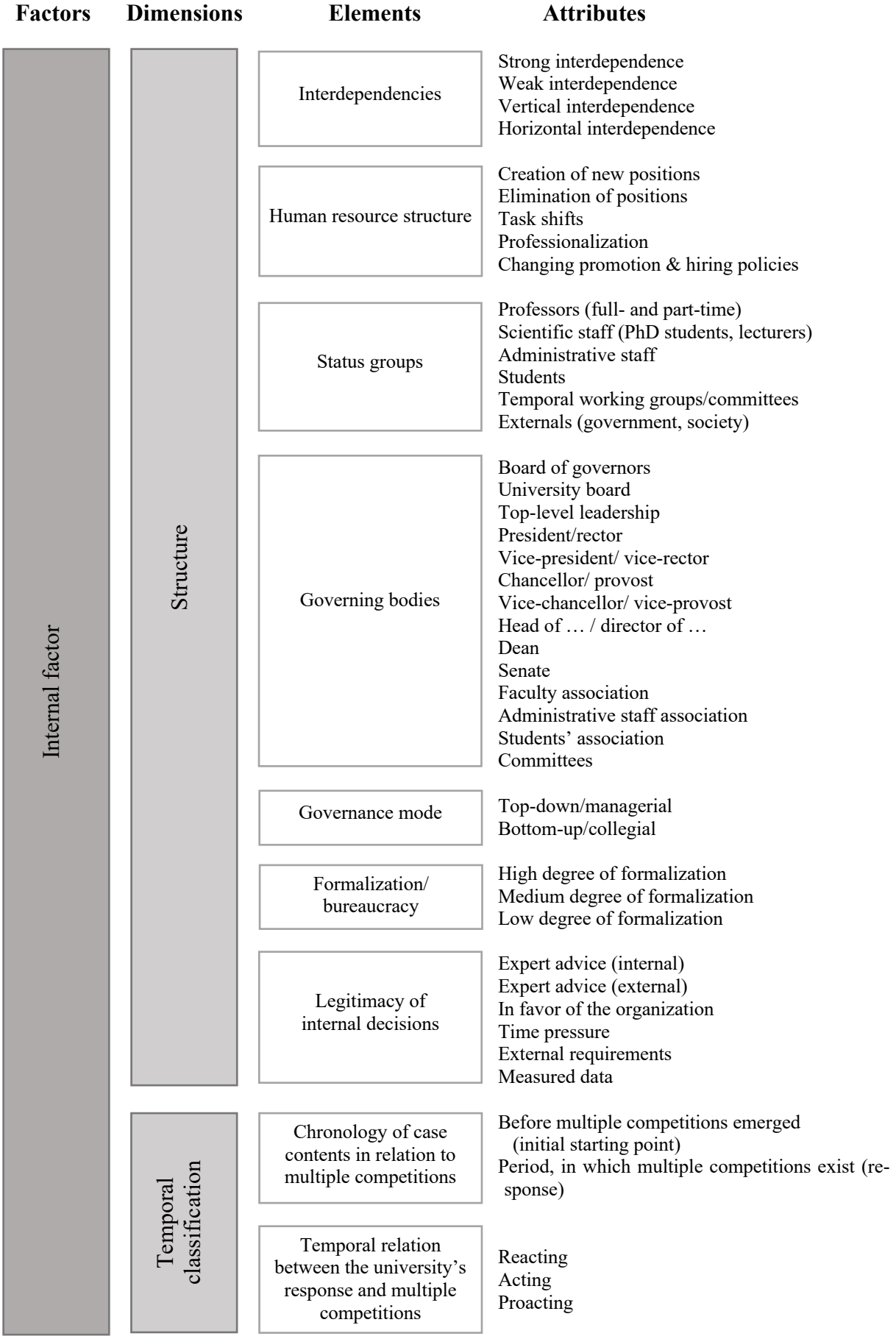
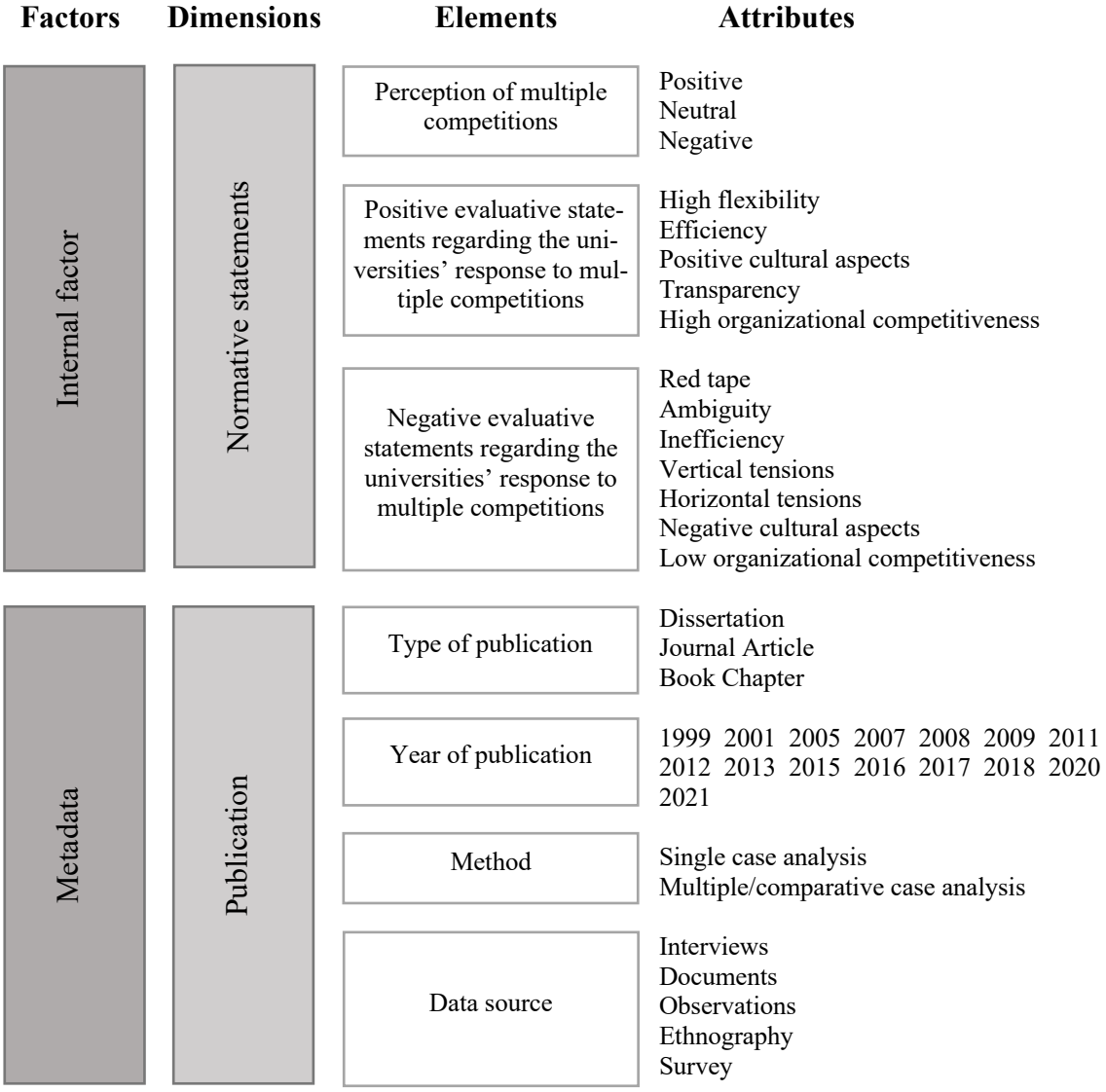
Appendix A: Coding Scheme




Factors
Dimensions
Elements
Attributes
Internal factor
Strategy
Curriculum reform
Generalization
Specification
Elimination of courses
Expansion of curriculum
Internal data collection
Quantitative
Qualitative
Research performance
Teaching performance
Transfer performance
Resources: Utilization of resources
Resource pooling
Investment in resources
Saving of resources
Resources: Tangible
Monetary
Staff/positions
Physical space
Equipment
Resources: Intangible
Time
Reputation
Influence/power authority
Funding sources
Revenue diversification
Third-party funding
Local state funding
Private donors
Increase of enrollments
Tuition fees
Commercialization of ideas
Budget allocation
Budgeting approach
Input-oriented
Output-oriented
Process-oriented
Strong link to strategy
Weak link to strategy
Cost reductions
Only in administrative matters
Only in academic matters
In academic & administrative matters
Structure
Formal structure
Centralization
Decentralization
Pronounced hierarchy (many layers)
Less pronounced hierarchy (few layers)
Complex structure (e.g., matrix structure)
Simple structure (e.g., few units)
Restructuring efforts
Foundation of new units
Expansion of units
Merging units
Splitting units
Shrinking units
Eliminating units


Factors
Dimensions
Elements
Attributes
Internal factor
Structure
Interdependencies
Strong interdependence
Weak interdependence
Vertical interdependence
Horizontal interdependence
Human resource structure
Creation of new positions
Elimination of positions
Task shifts
Professionalization
Changing promotion & hiring policies
Status groups
Professors (full- and part-time)
Scientific staff (PhD students, lecturers)
Administrative staff
Students
Temporal working groups/committees
Externals (government, society)
Governing bodies
Board of governors
University board
Top-level leadership
President/rector
Vice-president/ vice-rector
Chancellor/ provost
Vice-chancellor/ vice-provost
Head of … / director of …
Dean
Senate
Faculty association
Administrative staff association
Students' association
Committees
Governance mode
Top-down/managerial
Bottom-up/collegial
Formalization/ bureaucracy
High degree of formalization
Medium degree of formalization
Low degree of formalization
Legitimacy of internal decisions
Expert advice (internal)
Expert advice (external)
In favor of the organization
Time pressure
External requirements
Measured data
Temporal classification
Chronology of case contents in relation to multiple competitions
Before multiple competitions emerged (initial starting point)
Period, in which multiple competitions exist (response)
Temporal relation between the university's response and multiple competitions
Reacting
Acting
Proacting


Factors
Dimensions
Elements
Attributes
Internal factor
Normative statements
Perception of multiple competitions
Positive
Neutral
Negative
Positive evaluative statements regarding the universities' response to multiple competitions
High flexibility
Efficiency
Positive cultural aspects
Transparency
High organizational competitiveness
Negative evaluative statements regarding the universities' response to multiple competitions
Red tape
Ambiguity
Inefficiency
Vertical tensions
Horizontal tensions
Negative cultural aspects
Low organizational competitiveness
Metadata
Publication
Type of publication
Dissertation
Journal Article
Book Chapter
Year of publication
1999 2001 2005 2007 2008 2009 2011 2012 2013 2015 2016 2017 2018 2020 2021
Method
Single case analysis
Multiple/comparative case analysis
Data source
Interviews
Documents
Observations
Ethnography
Survey

Appendix B: Case Study Overview

Table 3

Case Study Overview

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; legal status; discipline concentration	Additional case characteristics	Competitive pressures reported in the study	Observed archetype(s) of actorhood
Abdaless (2017)	Case 1; Magnolia University (pseudonym)	Budgeting evolution in times of strategic change at a university	England; large; early 1900s; public; generalist	Founded by a Royal Charter "with a charitable status" (p. 2), "regulated by the Higher Education Funding Council" (p. 2); five campuses "in England and abroad" (p. 2); four faculties (business, science, life science arts humanities and social science); "partnerships across the globe" (p. 2)	Economic downturn; New Public Management reforms; agenda of corporatization for universities; shift from state funding to funding by students' tuitions, replacing "student grants by student loans" (p. 30)	Co-constructional actorhood
Ahmed (1997)	Case 2; University College London	Changes in the management control systems following the publication of the 1985 Jarratt Re-port, and the consequences of these changes on academic staff	England; large; 1826; public; generalist	Largest college of the University of London; third university founded in England; renowned as a center of excellence; multi-faculty university with 8 faculties and over 70 departments	Jarratt Report on the efficiency of UK universities; decreased stable state funding; funding uncertainties	Co-constructional actorhood
	Case 3; University of Edinburgh	As above (Case 2)	Scotland; large; 1583; public; generalist	Member of the British Russell Group; elite; academic excellence; worldwide reputation; wide range of disciplines; one of the largest universities in Britain	Jarratt Report on the efficiency of UK universities; decreased stable state funding; funding uncertainties	Adaptational actorhood with elements of orchestrational actorhood
	Case 4; University of Essex	As above (Case 2)	England; medium; 1964; public; generalist	Research-led university; seen as a regional center of excellence for postgraduate teaching and research; inter-national reputation for its social sciences and arts; attractive and historic parkland campus	As above (Case 2)	Less pronounced orchestrational actorhood

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; legal status; discipline concentration	Additional case characteristics	Competitive pressures reported in the study	Observed archetype(s) of actorhood
Ahmed (1997)	Case 5; University of Nottingham	Changes in the management control systems following the publication of the 1985 Jarratt Re-port, and the consequences of these changes on academic staff	England; large; 1881; public; generalist	Claims to be one of the leading research universities in the UK; financially sol-vent and asset rich institution	Jarratt Report on the efficiency of UK universities; decreased stable state funding; funding uncertainties	Less pronounced co-constructional actorhood
As above (Case 5)	Case 6; Loughborough University	As above (Case 5)	England; large; 1909; public; generalist	Gained university status in 1966; leading in scientific and technological in-novation, strong sporting and business influence	As above (Case 5)	Not clear at the time of the study, slight indications for both co-constructional actorhood and orchestrational actorhood
As above (Case 5)	Case 7; University of Sheffield	As above (Case 5)	England; very large; 1905; public; generalist	Founded in 1905 by merging three institutions, a medical school founded in 1828, a college founded in 1879, and a technical school	As above (Case 5)	Less pronounced co-constructional actorhood
Arnaboldi & Azzone (2005)	Case 8; Beta University (pseudonym)	Role of managers, accounting techniques, and the experiences of subunits in a university's incremental transformation	Italy; very large; unknown; public; specialist	Science and technology-oriented institution	Higher education reforms granting institutions additional organizational autonomy	Co-constructional actorhood
Arnal (1999)	Case 9; University of Alberta	Perceptions of change, issues and challenges in addressing a major financial crisis	Canada; very large; 1908; public; generalist	Financial crisis in 1991; major institutional turnaround until 1997, which turned the institution into a well-performing, financially recovered university	Financial pressures due to reduced state funding and increasing accountability requirements by the state and the community	Less pronounced adaptational actorhood → co-constructional actorhood
Cekic (2008)	Case 10; Indiana University Bloomington	"Organizational frames used by faculty and administrators" (p. vi) involved in the implementation and use of responsibility center management (RCM)	USA; very large; 1820; public; generalist	Multi-campus university; four-year public research university; first public higher education institution to implement RCM	Declining state funding; market forces; changing student body; changes in the job market	Adaptational actorhood → less pronounced co-constructional actorhood

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; legal status; discipline concentration	Additional case characteristics	Competitive pressures reported in the study	Observed archetype(s) of actorhood
Chong, Geare & Willett (2018)	Case 11; University of New Zealand (pseudonym)	Conceptualization of managerialism and collegiality in times of institutional change by university staff	New Zealand; unknown; unknown; public; un-known	International reputation for teaching and research activity; very basic financial management, "accounts and control functions in the early 1980s" (p. 931); improving the financial situation and achieving "a financially sound state" (p. 939) in the 2000s, having three different vice chancellors between 1985-2010	New Public Management reforms replaced a system in which the government strongly controlled education; shift from bulk funding system to funding based on equivalent full-time students, legislation enacted in late 1980s monitoring universities' performance and allowing universities to earn income; legislation enact-ed in the late 1990s reduced the autonomy of universities; shift to performance-based funding	Adaptational actorhood with elements of co-constructional actorhood
Du (2007)	Case 12; B1 University (pseudonym)	Application of New Public Management reforms at four universities in comparison between two different countries	Scotland; very large; 1583; public; generalist	Elite; known for academic excellence; member of the British Russell Group; originally founded as a civic institution; since 1990s, reform changes have taken place in B1	New Public Management Reforms; Restructuring reform	Adaptational actorhood → co-constructional actorhood with elements of orchestrational actorhood
As above (Case 12)	Case 13; B2 University (pseudonym)	As above (Case 12)	Scotland; medium; 1875; public; generalist	Non-elite; post-1991 new university; "not as well-resourced as traditional universities" (p. 166); historically founded "as a local cookery school" (p. 142); "designated as a Scottish Central Institution" (p. 142) at the beginning of the 19th century; "validated by the CNAA" (p. 143) (instead of legal independence) until 1992; in 1998, "granted research degree awarding powers" (p. 143) and renamed into a university in 1999	As above (Case 12)	Less pronounced adaptational actorhood → in transition to co-constructional actorhood

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; legal status; discipline concentration	Additional case characteristics	Competitive pressures reported in the study	Observed archetype(s) of actorhood
Du (2007)	Case 14; C1 University (pseudonym)	Application of New Public Management reforms at four universities in comparison between two different countries	China; very large; 1896; public; generalist	Elite; member of the Chinese 211 project; "located in Shaanxi Province in the North West China" (p. 168); roots back in the late 18th century "as one of the first public higher education institutions in China" (p. 168); in 1956, the main part moved to the inland Province Shaanxi and was controlled by the Ministry of Education	Governmental 211 project that facilitates cross-institutional collaborations; government decides on merging institutions; increasingly financial transparency due to online accounting system; New Public Management reforms	Adaptational actorhood with elements of co-constructional actorhood but also with remaining elements of the initial type
As above (Case 14)	Case 15; C2 University (pseudonym)	As above (Case 14)	China; very large; 1912; public; generalist	Non-elite; "adjacent to the east border of Shaanxi Province is Henan Province" (p. 198); founded "as a Preparatory School for Further Study in Europe and America" (p. 198). Under the supervision of Henan provincial government in 1930; specialist university until graduate change into comprehensive university in 1984; merger with two universities in 2000 "into new comprehensive university" (p. 199)	Government decides on merging institutions to pool resources; policy adjustments; decentralization and higher education system realignment; New Public Management reforms	Adaptational actorhood with remaining elements of the initial type
Egnor (2001)	Case 16; Toshi University (pseudonym)	Change in governance patterns due to the 1998 University Council reforms	Japan; medium; 1952; private; generalist	More attractive than the average higher education institution around; known to be highly competitive; tuition fee slightly higher than average	The 1998 reforms, "endorsing the concept of university autonomy" (p. 18); competition for students; growing dependence on student fees due to decreasing governmental subsidies for private institutions	Co-constructional actorhood
Esterhazy (2018)	Case 17; Humboldt University of Berlin	Organizational change after a university's ap-plication for the newly introduced German excellence initiative	Germany; very large; 1810; public; generalist	Founded as a Humboldtian university; urban; increasing expenditure of third-party funding; having room for maneuver and to develop strategic behavior; rejected in the first two rounds of the German Excellence Initiative, but received funding in the third round of the German Excellence Initiative	German Excellence Initiative (competitive research funding); reduced stable state funding, increasing accountability requirements; need to position in competition for excellence and to showcasing its relevance to the national and international research community	Orchestrational actorhood

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; legal status; discipline concentration	Additional case characteristics	Competitive pressures reported in the study	Observed archetype(s) of actorhood
Fumasoli & Lepori (2011)	Case 18; Università della Svizzera italiana	Organizational strategy patterns and positioning after higher education reforms	Switzerland; small; 1996; public; specialist	Cantonal university; not financially powerful; "first Swiss university to introduce the Bologna model" (p. 167); four faculties/departments (communication science, economics, architecture, informatics); mission includes teaching, research with focus on basic research, and some services	Federal University Act; Bologna reform; New Public Management reforms; competitive project funding between institutions; additional institutional autonomy	Less pronounced adaptational actorhood → co-constructional actorhood with minor elements of both adaptational actorhood and orchestrational actorhood
As above (Case 18)	Case 19; Université de Neuchâtel	As above (Case 18)	Switzerland; medium; 1909; public; generalist	Cantonal university; not financially powerful; four faculties/departments (social science and humanities, economics, law, natural and technical sciences); mission focuses on teaching and basic research	University Acts reinforcing the rectorate and fostering "strategic capability by means of block grant" (p. 170); increasing competition for students due to newly created ap-plied science institutions; performance-based state funding; financial uncertainty	Unsuccessful attempts of adaptational actorhood
As above (Case 18)	Case 20; Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana	As above (Case 18)	Switzerland; small; 1997; public; generalist	University of applied science; not financially powerful; eight faculties/departments (technical disciplines, healthcare, social work and economics, innovation technologies, teacher education, music, theater, distance education); mission included professional and continuous education, applied research, services	Federal University Act; need for accreditation which are linked to strict federal requirements; competition with similar institutions for research funding	Less pronounced adaptational actorhood → orchestrational actorhood

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; legal status; discipline concentration	Additional case characteristics	Competitive pressures reported in the study	Observed archetype(s) of actorhood
Haller (2021)	Case 21; St. Joseph University	Characteristics of organizational change in a com-parison of two universities and how these changes influenced the respective market position differentiation	USA; unknown; 1851; private; generalist	Religious (Catholic); "located at the outskirts of Philadelphia" (p. 106); "classified by the Carnegie Commission Classification as Master's level" (p. 106) in the 1980s; decreasing competitiveness observed in the study	Declining enrollment in Catholic institutions; increased competition for students	Adaptational actorhood → less pronounced co-constructional actorhood
As above (Case 21)	Case 22; Villanova University	As above (Case 21)	USA; unknown; 1842; private; generalist	Religious (Catholic); "located at the outskirts of Philadelphia" (p. 106); "classified by the Carnegie Commission Classification as Master's level" (p. 106) in the 1980s; increasing competitive observed in the study	As above (Case 21)	Less pronounced co-constructional actorhood with elements of orchestrational actorhood
Hodges (2016)	Case 23; Palm State University (pseudonym)	Collaboration process between university members to achieve the institutional-wide goal of grant acquisition	USA; very large; 1700s; public; un-known	Flagship university; excellence; "oldest public institution in the state" (p. 47); "among the largest private foundations in the USA" (p. 47)	New Public Management reforms; increased transparency and account-ability requirements; financial pressure due to reduced stable state funding, in particular after the Great recession in 2008; competition for grants between higher education institutions	Orchestrational actorhood
Kohtamäki & Balbachevsky (2019)	Case 24; University of Tampere	Institutional changes through expanded organizational autonomy in comparison between two policy frame-works	Finland; very large; 1925; public; generalist	Dependent on public funding to 65%; retaining strong organizational policy making autonomy; "full autonomy to acquire external funding" (p. 332); 18% of students enrolled at the doctoral level	The Ministry of Education and Culture promoted the establishment of larger "and more efficient organizational structures" (p. 333) in nation-al structural development reforms for higher education	Adaptational actorhood

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; legal status; discipline concentration	Additional case characteristics	Competitive pressures reported in the study	Observed archetype(s) of actorhood
Kohtamäki & Balbachevsky (2019)	Case 25; University of Sao Paulo	Institutional changes through expanded organizational autonomy in comparison between two policy frame-works	Brazil; very large; 1932; public; generalist	"Strongly dependent on public resources" (p. 322); allowed to keep surpluses; retaining strong organizational policy making autonomy; 7.9% of students enrolled at the doctoral level	Conflicts between the government and universities, leading to financial in-dependence in 1987; scarcity of re-sources within the system	Elements of adaptational actor-hood
McClure (2016)	Case 26; Garfield State University	Processes and role of administrators in prioritizing innovation and entrepreneurship as a strategic goal for the university	USA; large; 1856; public; generalist	Organizational "strategic prioritization of innovation and entrepreneurship" (p. 528) since the appointment of a new president in 2010	Higher education reforms facilitating academic capitalism and pushing for more "accountability and regulatory schemes" (p. 520), budget cuts by the state; academic capitalism	Co-constructional actorhood
Rogers (2013)	Case 27; Heel University	Management and strategies of senior leaders at publicly funded universities to solve an institutional fiscal crisis	USA; large; 1897; public; generalist	Regional; urban; "significant contributor to the sustainability of the region" (p. 82)	Financial pressure after the Great Recession; budget cuts by the state	Adaptational actorhood → co-constructional actorhood
As above (Case 27)	Case 28; North State University	As above (Case 27)	USA; large; 1899; public; generalist	Rural; "the region's largest employer" (p. 133); being financially secure	As above (Case 27)	Co-constructional actorhood
Rungfamai (2017)	Case 29; Chulalongkorn University	Governance arrangements and associated perceptions of university stakeholders as the institution trans-formed into a research-oriented university	Thailand; very large; 1908; public; generalist	High reputation; "considered as one of the country's premier universities" (p. 6); oldest university in Bangkok; "first established university in Thailand" (p. 6); comprehensive university; "funded by the government" (p. 4); allowed to self-generate incomes; became autonomous in 2007	Asian financial crisis; reduced university funding and shift towards revenue diversification, National Re-search University project to improve competitiveness	Orchestrational actorhood with elements of co-constructional actorhood

Reference	Case number; university name	Focus of the study	Location; size; founding year; legal status; discipline concentration	Additional case characteristics	Competitive pressures reported in the study	Observed archetype(s) of actorhood
Smith & Martinez (2015)	Case 30; Western University	Reorganization process after the elimination of departments in response to a financial crisis	Canada; very large; "relatively short history"; public; un-known	Urban; university grew rapidly; offers 220 degrees in 13 colleges/departments; being "a resource for the surrounding community" (p. 77); experienced a financial crisis after the Great Recession	Financial pressure after the Great Recession, budget cuts by the state; uncertainties	Less pronounced adaptational actorhood
Treuthardt & Välimaa (2008)	Case 31; Campus University (pseudonym)	Social interactions within the university in response to New Public Management reforms	Finland; medium; 1860s (reached university status in the 1960s); public; generalist	"Established as a 2-year Teacher Training Seminar in the 1860s" (p. 610), became "a 3-year Teacher training College in the 1930s" (p. 610) and developed into "a multi-disciplinary university in the 1960s" (p. 610); 64 % of its budget comes from the Ministry "and 36 % from external sources" (p. 610)	Finland becoming "a mass higher education system" (p. 609); New Public Management reforms; management by results	Adaptational actorhood
Weinblatt (2012)	Case 32; University of Toledo	Decision-making processes "during the preliminary stages of two" (p. 140) university mergers	USA; very large; 1872; public; generalist	Metropolitan; university formed by a merger of the University of Toledo and the Medical University of Ohio ("formerly the Medical College of Ohio" (p. 11)) in 2006	Declining state funding; higher education reforms that increase the power of the governor; pressure for collab-oration and synergies	Co-constructional actorhood with elements of orchestrational actorhood
As above (Case 32)	Case 33; University of Colorado Denver	As above (Case 32)	USA; very large; 1973; public; generalist	Metropolitan; university formed by a "consolidation of the University of Colorado at Denver and the University of Colorado Health Science Center" (p. 10) in 2004	Declining state funding; pressure for collaboration and synergies	Less pronounced co-constructional actorhood with remaining elements of the initial type

Appendix of Dissertation

Eidesstattliche Versicherung

Ich, _____, versichere an Eides statt, dass ich die Dissertation mit dem Titel:

„ARCHETYPES OF ORGANIZATIONAL ACTORHOOD.
A QUALITATIVE META-STUDY OF UNIVERSITIES' RESPONSES
TO MULTIPLE COMPETITIONS"

selbst und bei einer Zusammenarbeit mit anderen Wissenschaftlerinnen oder Wissenschaftlern gemäß den beigefügten Darlegungen nach § 6 Abs. 3 der Promotionsordnung der Fakultät für Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaften vom 18. Januar 2017 in der Fassung vom 07. Dezember 2022 verfasst habe. Andere als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel habe ich nicht benutzt.

_____ _____

Ort/Datum Unterschrift Doktorand/in

Erklärung zur kommerziellen Promotionsberatung und früheren Einreichung der Dissertation

Hiermit erkläre ich, _____, dass ich keine kommerzielle Promotionsberatung in Anspruch genommen habe. Die Dissertation wurde nicht schon einmal in einem früheren Promotionsverfahren angenommen oder als ungenügend beurteilt.

_____ _____

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Eigenständigkeitserklärung zur Nutzung von gKI (generative Künstliche Intelligenz)

Ich versichere, dass ich KI-Tools lediglich als Hilfsmittel genutzt habe und ich bin mir bewusst, dass die Nutzung maschinell generierter Texte keine Garantie für die Qualität von Inhalten und Text gewährleistet.
Ich verantworte die Übernahme jeglicher von mir verwendeter maschinell generierter Textpassagen vollumfänglich selbst und dokumentiere im Folgenden, für welche Aufgaben ich KI-Tools genutzt habe.
Ich versichere, dass ich die erlaubten KI-Tools nur im mit der Betreuungskommission vereinbarten Umfang verwendet habe.
In der hier vorliegenden Arbeit habe ich gKI-Systeme wie folgt genutzt:

☐ gar nicht

☐ bei der Ideenfindung

☐ bei der Erstellung der Gliederung

☐ zum Erstellen einzelner Passagen, insgesamt im Umfang von … % am gesamten Text

☐ zur Entwicklung von Software-Quelltexten/Programm-Code

☐ zur Optimierung oder Umstrukturierung von Software-Quelltexten

☒ zum Korrekturlesen oder Optimieren

☒ bei Übersetzungen

☐ zum Erstellen von Graphiken

☐ Weiteres, nämlich:

Ich versichere, alle Nutzungen vollständig angegeben zu haben. Mir ist bekannt, dass fehlende oder fehlerhafte Angaben als Täuschungsversuch gewertet werden können. Zudem bin ich bereit, auf Nachfrage meine Vorgehensweise (z.B. durch Arbeitsnotizen, Prompts oder mündliche Erläuterungen u.ä.) offen zu legen.
Mir ist bekannt, dass ein Verstoß gegen die genannten Punkte prüfungsrechtliche Konsequenzen hat und insbesondere dazu führen kann, dass die Dissertation abgelehnt wird.

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