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University as the producer of knowledge, and economic and societal value: the 20th and twenty-first century transformations of the UK higher education system

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century, the UK higher education went through significant changes. We identify three epochs, through which the institutional logic and purpose of university were redefined: an elite reconfiguration before the 1950s; a democratic reconfiguration from the 1960s on; and an economic and societal reconfiguration in the context of globalization since the late 1990s. Each epoch carried certain tensions in them, which have shaped the current contours of the UK higher education field. Particularly since the 1990s however UK higher education is exposed to increasingly elaborate, and at times contradictory, rules and expectations which are shaped not only nationally and transnationally. In order to analyse how these pressures play themselves out in the purpose and mandate of universities, we apply topic modelling analysis and textual interpretation to the university webpages. Our analysis shows that the UK higher education embeds three institutional logics, knowledge production, economic value, and global actorhood, which are linked with the broader transformations of the university toward proactive and societally engaged rational organization.

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Throughout the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century, the UK higher education went through significant changes, in which the institutional logic and purpose of university were redefined. We identify three epochs: an elite reconfiguration before the 1950s; a democratic reconfiguration from the 1960s on; and an ongoing economic and societal reconfiguration in the context of globalization since the late 1990s. Each epoch carried certain tensions in them, which have shaped the current contours of the UK higher education field. Particularly since the 1990s, a number of cultural and structural changes put simultaneous pressures on isomorphism and differentiation across the field. We set ourselves to uncover these patterns as they are represented in the broader institutional logics¹ that underline the UK higher education system.

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In line with the neo-institutionalist approaches (Krücken and Meier 2006; Ramirez 2013; Frank and Meyer 2020), we see universities anchored in the broader institutional environments that legitimize their material and symbolic practices and give meaning and purpose to such practices. As our brief historical review shows the university gained a crucial place in British society and its functioning in relation to the state's own transformations from a colonial power to a welfare state and to a globally oriented knowledge-based economy. Since the new millennium, institutional environments are not only shaped nationally but also transnationally. UK higher education is exposed to increasingly elaborate, and at times contradictory, rules and expectations. Universities are pulled between producing stellar research and providing mass education, being global producers of knowledge and contributing to the advancement of national and regional economy. How do these pressures play themselves out in the purpose and mandate of universities and institutional logics that prevail in higher education?

To answer this question, we apply topic modelling analysis and textual interpretation to a nationally representative cross-section of university webpages. Webpages are increasingly used as data sources for social science analyses of organizations in general and higher education institutions in particular (Powell, Horvath, and Brandtner 2016). Our analysis shows that the UK higher education in the early twenty-first century simultaneously embeds three institutional logics, knowledge production, economic value, and global actorhood. These logics are linked with the broader transformations of the university toward proactive and societally engaged rational organization, shaped by the global parameters but also carry the imprints of the historical legacies.

Elite reconfiguration

Unlike the US, where the university provided one of the intellectual and organizational infrastructures of the local and national polity formation since the Civil War (Stevens and Gebre-Medhin 2016), British university staunchly remained an 'elite' institution until well into the second half of the twentieth century. Early on, religion underlined this elite status: until the mid-nineteenth century, the medieval institutions, Oxford and Cambridge, did not accept students outside the Church of England. The University of London and the University of Durham in the north, founded on secular basis in the 1830s, were the exceptions.

A phase of opening and reform happened with the rise of civic universities (e.g. Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Exeter, Nottingham), particularly in the industrial north and midlands, in the first half of the twentieth century. Embracing the secularized model of science and scholarship, the new institutions admitted students without reference to religion and supported scientific, professional, and applied curriculum (e.g. engineering and medicine) (Sanderson 1972). Civic universities opened higher education to the middle-class, and with the creation of the University Grants Committee in the aftermath of the WWI the idea of public university emerged for the first time (Taylor 2018).² The reliance of the industry and university on each other deepened between the two world wars, with continuing effect afterwards on university research and graduate employment in the widening new industries. University, still an elite operation in the main, became more closely linked with the national development, constituting the leaders of the polity and producers of the economy.

During this period the elite logic of the British university was also maintained through the (settler and other) colonial networks, which mapped an expansive but exclusionary academic world along the routes of the empire. Long-distance academic connections expanded and developed, privileging the raced and gendered form of institutional practices (Pietsch 2013). The networks of imperialism internationalized British university and imprinted its influence widely on the global scale.

Democratic reconfiguration

The immediate post-WWII era saw education as part of the efforts to ‘re-cast British society’. Social citizenship *a la* TH Marshall was the order of the day and educational expansion along with healthcare and housing provision underlined the unfolding of the British welfare state. Framed within the ideology of meritocracy and the equality of opportunity, the 1944 Education Act, providing free secondary education for all, passed with support across the political spectrum. The idea of ‘more schooling for more children’ gained over the elite preservationist perspective (Morgan 2018, 35). Two key phases of expansion at the tertiary level followed in the 1960s and 1990s. In 1950, only 3 percent of the relevant age cohort in the UK entered higher education. By 1970 this figure reached 8 percent; but by 2000 the participation was 40 percent – already a massified system. This development is similar to the other western higher education systems, where significant expansion of tertiary education took place in the context of strong welfare states and public funding (Carpentier 2018).

Although universities are not usually considered as part of the welfare state, in the context of the postwar culture of social democracy and high public expenditure higher education came to be seen as an individual right on the basis of merit, ‘deriving from common citizenship, for all qualified to benefit from it’ (Anderson 2016). The WWII and the subsequent Cold War heightened the importance of science and education and gave further impetus to their national planning and democratization. In the second part of the twentieth century, university gradually moved from its relatively closed origins to an open mass institution. The expansion started early in the US driven by the 1944 GI Bill which guaranteed war veterans access and funding to higher education, and the gap (in higher education participation) with European countries remained throughout.

It is worth noting that while universities were central to the post-WWII US geopolitical and cultural dominance worldwide, democratic reconfiguration of the universities in the UK coincided with the country’s shrinking back to herself. With decolonization the international momentum of British higher education weakened, that is until the new millennium when a new form of ‘internationalization’ became the order of the day. The democratic reconfiguration was based on a bounded model of nation-state society, built on a functional and integrated citizenry. With the increasing emphasis on the individual and global integration, this model of society was already under transformation from the 1980s on (Soysal 2012). The university expansion continued relentlessly, however under radically different premises.

1960s and 1970s

The first expansion of the UK higher education system was realized through a dual system. On the one hand, public support for existing universities was increased and

many new universities were founded. Universities of Essex and Warwick, our own professional homes, were two of the ‘new’ universities; they both positioned themselves as the future of higher education vis-à-vis the ‘old guard’ with their modern architectural design and expanded curriculum. The Oxbridge itself changed from its elitist, liberal arts origins into a state university catering to a middle-class constituency with a broader science curriculum and meritocratic ethos (Soares 1999). On the other, a growing sector of ‘polytechnics’, governed and administered at the national level, emerged.³ Similar to Germany’s *Fachhochschulen*, polytechnics were envisioned to provide professional training, especially in engineering and STEM subjects. Differently, however from the outset they offered full academic, undergraduate and graduate degree programmes (Schimank and Winnes 2000).

Organizationally, this period, which lasted until the late 1980s, is often longed for as the golden age of British University, characterized by universal entitlement, generous state funds and student provisions across the sector, small-group tutoring, and academic autonomy (Morgan 2018). The polytechnics carried a large portion of tertiary teaching (they made up about a quarter of the higher education institutions in the UK). However, teaching and research became increasingly integrated as the infrastructure and capacity were supported and developed in the newer universities beyond their traditional concentration in Oxbridge (Shattock 1994).

1980s and 1990s

In the next two decades, the UK higher education continued to expand, however, the expansion happened under significantly different institutional context. In the early 1990s, higher education went through a systemic de-differentiation both organizationally and in terms of the degrees and courses offered. The push for academic qualifications saw the polytechnics granted the autonomous university status and integrated within the same system. At the same time, the funding structure went through significant changes. UK government’s response to the economic crises of 1973 and the early 1980s was cutbacks on state expenditures in line with the competitive market policies it introduced at the time (Graf 2008). For higher education, the most consequential development was the replacement of the government block grants to the universities with a system that eventually separated the funding of teaching and research (Williams 1997; Schimank and Winnes 2000). Teaching funds, based on the number of students enrolled, continued to comprise the main component of the block grants. Support for research became tied to demonstrable research performance and quality assessment, carried out centrally and periodically.

Introduced in 1986 as a pilot, Research Assessment Exercise (Research Excellence Framework, REF, since 2014) was a precursor to the research excellence programmes introduced globally in the 2000s (Marques et al. 2017; Zapp, Marques, and Powell 2018). Differently from the excellence schemes, however, RAE/REF is a comprehensive, highly formalized and sector-wide research evaluation and resource allocation system.⁴ Its impact on UK higher education has been considerable. Importantly, as the research assessment set the frame for a competitive higher education environment, it brought universities under nominal comparability and equality. The introduction of a uniform framework of standards created much strategic behaviour and modelling with isomorphic

effects, not only on organizational structures but also the organization of academic fields (Pardo Guerra 2020). On the other hand, new lines of stratification in the system emerged along the spectrum of those institutions who could concentrate research resources and thus prestige and those who carry the main bulk of non-selective tertiary education.⁵

While the unity of research and teaching remained the underlying ideal of the university, the competitive logic and environment introduced in this period impelled UK universities to broaden their goals and reach while their resources came under increasing pressure – a trend that was intensified with the globalization of higher education.

Global reconfiguration

In the 2000s, UK universities found themselves in a very different world. The shift in the welfare state from direct provision to regulation (Taylor-Gooby 2008) that started in the previous decades saw the shrinking of the share of public funding in higher education from 90 percent in the mid-1970s to 30 percent in 2010 (Morgan 2018). University research has continued to be funded in the main competitively from public sources (two-thirds of the total research income), complemented by third-sector funding and commercial activities such as research and consultancy contracts (Universities UK 2016). Regarding teaching, a cost-sharing policy (student fees and loans) was gradually introduced starting from 1998. By 2015, domestic and international fees constituted 77 percent of the total teaching income (Universities UK 2016).⁶ Despite the introduction of student fees, higher education participation rates nevertheless increased, reaching to 50 percent by 2010.

These developments have been discussed extensively as the consumerization of higher education and erosion of the public mission of the university, both in the context of the UK and broadly (Wright and Shore 2018). Yet, a confluence of broader transformations since 2000 signals a more complex re-configuration of the university, its expanded organization and relevance, and the institutional logics that underline its expansion (Frank and Meyer 2020).

Firstly, in the last two decades, universities have become part of a highly transnationalized higher education field. The global race towards excellence in higher education, widely perceived and promoted to be the driver of economic growth and competitiveness, has intensified (European Commission 2003; OECD 2008). The excellence race has been partly driven and sustained by the global university rankings. Although university rankings had been around in the US and UK for a while, and the UK already had its own national research rating system, the globalization of rankings has created new dynamics and purpose.⁷ On the one hand, they have become tools for signalling nation-states' positioning in the world and their prestige and competitiveness (Ramirez 2013; Brankovic, Ringel, and Werron 2018; Soysal, Baltaru, and Cebolla Boado 2020). On the other, by standardizing a transnational comparative framework, rankings have facilitated an ideal model of university and much policy and organizational development around it (Sauder and Espeland 2009; Baltaru and Soysal 2018). National systems are intently attuned with a world of rankings; not only universities but the governments pay attention and aspire for 'world-class' research and education.⁸

Secondly, university's link with economy and society has deepened further, even as its organizational and financial viability has come under duress. Despite its religious medieval origins and its nineteenth century Humboldtian incarnation, university has long been considered as a source of human capital and economic growth (e.g. the rise of UK civic universities in the first half of the twentieth century in connection with the growing industrial economy) and basis for democratic citizenship (e.g. the expansion of UK tertiary education beyond its exclusive and elite Oxbridge hold in the second half of the twentieth century). Yet, the dawn of the twenty-first century, characterized as knowledge-based economy and society, has amplified the university's role even further (Frank and Meyer 2020). Not only knowledge, research, and degrees are measured as economic and societal value (Schofer, Ramirez, and Meyer 2020), but more broadly academic sciences have become 'economic engines', on which both market and state act upon (Berman 2012).

Thirdly, the highly globalized context requires universities to provide expertise and knowledge beyond their local and national remit. Knowledge claims are no longer made solely by universities; knowledge production is increasingly built in companies, non-governmental organizations, the so-called third sector, and involves local, inter- and supranational actors. Accordingly, universities are expected to be less inward-looking, be more proactive, engaged and entrepreneurial organizational actors (Clark 1998; Krücken 2011; Baltaru and Soysal 2018). Accessibility, utility, and accountability become part of university organizational parlance, as vehiculated by the new public management rhetoric (Christensen and Laegreid 2001).

In order to discern how these global normative and structural trends have reshaped the institutional logics that underlie the UK higher education system, we now turn to an explanatory analysis of university webpages. The online presentation of universities provides a mirror into what the university *ought* to be at a particular moment in time and its desired reflection to the publics (Christensen, Gornitzka, and Ramirez 2019; Baltaru 2020). This is precisely what we are interested in. Our analysis aims at identifying both the homogenizing and differentiating elements in the UK higher education field as they have been shaped by its historical trajectory.

On our data and analytical method

We focus our analysis on the universities' international-oriented webpages. An international-oriented webpage refers to a section within a university website, which is typically labelled as 'international' or 'global'. Such dedicated section is widely present in the official websites of the UK universities, old and new, and large and small. In an international-oriented webpage a university re-articulates various information (from institutional values and standing to admission protocols and available services) to the widest publics (international, but also local and national, stakeholders; students, academics, government agencies and businesses) who are expected to be interested in the university's international outlook. This expectation follows a consolidated internationalization agenda, which underpinned the global reconfiguration of the UK higher education institutions over the last two decades. Although it is often narrowly associated with international student recruitment, internationalization agenda goes beyond: more globally recognized research, more international curriculum, more international exchange, more international partnerships, more

global engagement – an agenda linked with ranking and excellence aspirations. In the last 10 years, almost half of all UK universities introduced the position of Pro-Vice Chancellor for Internationalization, and a large majority of them have Communications and External Partnership Offices. Today internationalization is an explicit goal and strategy of the UK universities, which puts into perspective the remarkable spread of international-oriented webpages. Internationalization not only locates UK universities in the global higher education field, but it also shapes their orientation in all aspects of their mandate.

The narrations in the international-oriented webpages may contain formulaic statements to communicate organizational goals and strategies but cannot be reduced to ‘mission statements’ alone.⁹ They provide a more comprehensive corpse of data. Along with mission-like statements and definitions of institutional qualities (e.g. global excellence), they also include descriptive information about resources and competences (e.g. student services and facilities and universities’ links to the global markets). By choosing international webpages as our data source, we posit our analysis unveils the broad rationales, that is institutional logics, that shape institutional identity and purposes.

We utilized topic modelling, which is a useful tool of analysis for identifying discursive contexts and cultural meanings that underline social institutions (DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei 2013). To this end, we processed textual information scraped from the universities’ international-oriented webpages and all relevant links that could be accessed from these webpages.¹⁰ The scraper was provided a list of landing pages to the websites of all 130 UK higher education institutions with university status and instructed to discover international-oriented pages based on a set of rules, which were refined repeatedly by manually checking the URLs returned, over the period of time 2017–2018. We ensured that the identified URLs point towards universities’ webpages which address their ‘constituencies’, students, academics, and the broader societal groups, but not teaching specific content.¹¹ As an example, a valid URL would display at least one indicative word of international-orientation such as ‘international’, ‘global’, and ‘world’ but not words such as ‘course’, ‘module’, ‘degree’, and ‘subject-area’.

We were able to scrape textual information successfully from the 80 percent of universities from the original population frame. We obtained a refined dataset of 105 universities and approximately 300 keywords, amounting to over 30,000 observations.¹²

We applied computational text analysis, the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003), to process the corpus of keywords extracted from the universities’ webpages. LDA helps us identify general topics which are characterized by specific configurations of keywords. The allocation of informative keywords to topics follows a probabilistic pattern based on word frequencies and word co-occurrences. As the dataset of keywords has been extracted specifically from the international-oriented pages of university websites, topic modelling enables us to identify discursive patterns in the way in which universities understand and present themselves in the context of globalization.¹³ We applied LDA from the Python-based module Gensim (2020). Gensim’s LDA model produced nine clusters (topics) of keywords.^{14,15}

Our findings

Since topic modelling does not specify the conceptual structure of the text from outset, researcher’s discretion is required to interpret and process the topics; not all topics may

be clearly differentiated from each other or coherent. In Table 1 we illustrate our systematic approach to topic interpretation.

First, we identify all (31) keywords appearing in the LDA output regardless of their distribution across topics. Table 1/A presents our informed interpretations of how each LDA-returned keyword taps into distinct dimensions of institutional logics on the basis of existing studies. Specifically, we interpret the keyword ‘research’ as tapping into the dimension *research orientation* (Menand, Reitter, and Wellmon 2017); the keywords ‘business’, ‘enterprise’, ‘innovation’, ‘excellence’ as tapping into *entrepreneurial orientation* (Clark 1998); the keywords ‘support’, ‘service’, ‘provide’, ‘prospectus’, ‘facilities’, ‘office’, ‘professional’ as indicative of *organizational rationalization* (Ramirez 2006; Bromley and Meyer 2014); the keywords ‘connect’, ‘partnership’, ‘network’, ‘placement’, ‘exchange’, ‘opportunity’, ‘public’ as indicative of *societal engagement* (Ramirez and Tiplic 2014); the keywords ‘abroad’, ‘immigration’, ‘policy’, ‘overseas’, ‘global’, ‘world’ as indicative of *internationalization* (Seeber et al. 2016; Buckner 2019); the keywords ‘learn’, ‘teach’, ‘knowledge’ as tapping into *academic orientation* (Cortes-Sanchez 2017); and finally, the keywords ‘job’, ‘career’, ‘employ’ as tapping into *labour-market orientation* (Arum and Roksa 2011).

Second, we indicate whether any of the above dimensions are represented across the 9 LDA-identified topics by one or more associated keywords (Table 1/B). For example,

Table 1. Systematic overview of topic interpretation and labelling.

A: Theory-informed dimensions						
<i>Research Orientation</i>	<i>Entrepreneurial Orientation</i>	<i>Organizational rationalization</i>	<i>Societal engagement</i>	<i>Internationalization</i>	<i>Academic orientation</i>	<i>Job Market orientation</i>
Research	Business Enterprise Innovative Excellence	Support Service Provide Prospect Facilities Office Professional	Connect Partnership Network Placement Exchange Opportunity Public	Abroad Immigration Policy Overseas Global World	Learn Teach Knowledge	Job Career Employ

B: Occurrence of one or more keywords from each dimension across LDA topics								
Topic	<i>Research Orientation</i>	<i>Entrepreneurial Orientation</i>	<i>Organizational rationalization</i>	<i>Societal engagement</i>	<i>Internationalization</i>	<i>Academic orientation</i>	<i>Job Market orientation</i>	Label
1	x	x,x	x,x,x	x,x		x,x		Knowledge production
2	x	x,x	x,x	x	x,x,x	x		Global actorhood
3	x	x,x,x	x,x	x			x,x,x	Economic value
4	x	x	x,x,x,x	x,x		x	x	Knowledge production & Economic value
5	x	x,x	x,x	x,x,x	x,x			Global actorhood
6	x	x	x,x	x	x,x,x	x	x,x	Global actorhood
7	x	x	x,x,x	x,x		x,x	x	Knowledge production
8	x		x,x,x,x	x	x,x,x,x			Global actorhood
9	x	x	x,x,x	x,x,x	x,x	x		Global actorhood

Notes:

¹Occurrence of one keyword from a specific dimension (marked ‘x’); occurrence of two keywords (2*‘x’) etc.

²The diagonal patterns indicate the dimensions that appear across virtually all topics: ‘the common discursive base’.

Notes: Occurrence of one keyword from a specific dimension (marked ‘x’); occurrence of two keywords (2*‘x’) etc. The diagonal patterns indicate the dimensions that appear across virtually all topics: ‘the common discursive base’.

Topic 1 contains the word ‘research’ which we mark as ‘x’ under the ‘research orientation’ dimension; the words ‘enterprise’ and ‘business’ which we mark as ‘x,x’ under ‘entrepreneurial orientation’ dimension, etc. Knowing which theory-informed dimensions are represented in a given topic help us interpret and label that topic.

Table 1 illustrates the 9 topics identified by LDA, after exploring the text displayed on the international-oriented webpages of over 100 universities in the UK. LDA strategy approaches the textual configuration on a university webpage as a mixture of a small number of topics that underpin the webpages of all universities. Thus, the topics shown in Table 1 should be interpreted at the aggregate level of the UK higher education sector. Upon interpretation, we attribute these topics to specific institutional logics, depending on what theory-informed dimensions are present in each topic.

Similarities across topics: the common discursive base

It is expected that some keywords may be present across several LDA-generated topics. This could indicate commonalities that are not substantively relevant; if we had *not* processed the text, for example, prepositions such as ‘and’ would have occurred across most topics. However, it can also reveal a common discursive pattern; e.g. if the keyword ‘research’ occurs across most topics this shows research matters across all narratives of internationalization in the higher education sector.

We can see that virtually all 9 topics returned by LDA exhibit the presence of one or more keywords associated with the following dimensions: research, entrepreneurialism, organizational rationalization, and societal engagement – these constitute a common discursive base. We interpret this as a remarkable display of homogeneity in the articulation of institutional mandates. UK universities present themselves as proactive agents (as reflected in the display of entrepreneurialism and organizational rationalization) who are committed to expanding their mission (societal engagement) in addition to their core academic commitments (research).

Differentiation between topics: distinct institutional logics

We also find differentiation across the 9 topics based on the presence of keywords associated with: internationalization, academic orientation, and labour-market orientation (the last three columns in Table 1). For example, we can see that just like all other topics, Topic 1 exhibits elements of research, entrepreneurialism, organizational rationalization and societal engagement, but unlike other topics, it places a higher emphasis on academic orientation (the topic exhibits 2 out of 3 keywords we associate with academic orientation). The presence of keywords attributable to one or more of these dimensions across topics enables us to differentiate between institutional logics as follows.

Knowledge production: We label Topics 1 and 7 as underpinning the institutional logic of knowledge production. In each of these topics, 2 out of 3 keywords associated with academic orientation (teaching, learning, knowledge – the original mandate of the university) are present, in addition to the other four dimensions that make up the common discursive base. Thus here knowledge moves from its Humboldtian origins (the ideal of a community of scholars and students in the common pursuit of truth) to its twenty-first-

century incarnation of the knowledge society. Within this logic, the university expands beyond its confines and articulates itself as a rational, research and excellence-driven organizational actor, who plays a role in advancing knowledge, based on universalized principles and locally transcended truths, *in* and *for* society (Frank and Meyer 2007). This is a distinct logic than the more common interpretations of knowledge society in which university is seen as a producer of practical and specialized skills as demanded by the needs of the globalized economy – the keywords associated with jobs and employment do not appear in this topic.

Economic Value: We label Topics 3 and 4 as underpinning an institutional logic of economic value.¹⁶ The distinguishing dimension in this topic is labour-market orientation. Especially in topic 3, all 3 keywords associated with labour-market orientation are present. Higher education has long been assigned the role of constructing productive and engaged citizens for the workforce and public good. The emphasis on skills and employability shifts the focus onto the individual and building individual's potential and human capital, which is criticized as self-centred careerism and credentialism on which contemporary university narrowly focuses (Arum and Roksa 2011). Interpreted against the backdrop of the common discursive base, this topic connotes a logic where university accommodates the role of producing economic value not only at the individual level but also more broadly (*vis-à-vis* the state and market) through scientific and innovative research and entrepreneurial activity. Universities and their utility are implicated in both individuals' and nations' economic competitiveness and advancement.

Global Actorhood: We label Topics 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9 as underpinning the institutional logic of global actorhood. This label considers the emphasis on internationalization which is highlighted across these topics (in each of these topics, between 2 and 4 of the 6 keywords associated with the internationalization dimension are present). As textual information was scraped from universities international-oriented webpages, it is not surprising that international/global emerges as a dominant theme. Yet as we have seen before, some universities emphasize knowledge production or economic value instead. Reading the emphasis on internationalization in conjunction with the common discursive base suggests a proactive global outlook and agenda, and not a narrow internationalization perspective that is merely focused on international student recruitment.

From historical reconfigurations to the twenty-first century institutional logics

Our analysis of international-oriented webpages unveils a common discursive base as well as sources of differentiation in the institutional logics on which UK universities draw as they position themselves in the global higher education field. The common base exhibits elements of organizational rationalization, entrepreneurialism, societal engagement as well as a research orientation. These institutionalized elements have their roots already in the earlier reconfigurations. The post-WWII period saw education gaining a significant role in driving national economic progress and the construction of democratic citizen. The subsequent decades witnessed this vision applied to higher education with the widening participation reforms (in the 1960s and 1970s) and waves of re-

regulation and funding cuts amid challenges of maintaining the mass higher education system (in the 1980s and 1990s). In the context of structural pressures and a competitive environment, but also an emerging global normative frame of knowledge society and new public management rhetoric (Musselin et al. 2007), UK universities started carrying themselves as organizations that proactively engage with wider society and explicitly articulate their contributions, for both resources and legitimacy. Interestingly, we find that the common discursive base also involves a clear emphasis on research (as opposed to teaching). We suggest that this is attributable to the abolition of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics in the early 1990s, as higher education institutions that were more teaching- and professional degree-oriented had to articulate their research mandate to a greater extent in line with their new university status. The introduction of obligatory and centralized national research assessment framework as early as the mid-1980s and later university rankings that prioritize research success further reinforced UK universities' discursive emphasis on research as part of their common identity and purpose.

We also found sources of differentiation in institutional logics along knowledge-orientation, economic value and global actorhood. These logics can also be traced to the distinct higher education eras, but in the context of significant transformations of higher education since the 1990s, they have gained different and at times contradictory meanings. Knowledge orientation, for example, echoes the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Humboldtian university ideal, even though it has morphed into a broader pursuit in the widely adopted concept of global knowledge society. This contrasts with the logic of economic value, also identified in our analysis, which posits that universities generate value in the form of skilled and employable individuals and competitive economies. Although the UK universities were linked with industrial and economic development as early as the 1920s, a narrower and utilitarian view emerged since the 1990s, whereby universities are expected to deliver value to students, the state and the businesses as their 'clients' (Christensen and Laegreid 2001). Finally, global actorhood (in contrast to the early twentieth-century international presence through colonial networks) puts the UK higher education more directly at the centre of the global trends in the last two decades. The logic reveals active engagement of universities with international markets of students and international research, as well as efforts to build or consolidate their reputation for excellence. In a globalized higher education field with shrinking funding from national governments, economic rationale and reputation building are not self-exclusive positions.

Altogether our analysis points to a higher education field where universities are projected as rational organizations that proactively engage with wider society, not only local but also global (the reimagined 'public') and explicitly articulate their contribution to individual's advancement, economic development and value (the redefined 'collective good') through their core activities of teaching and research. The very population frame we use in this analysis, that is universities' international-oriented webpages, would not exist in the absence of internationalization agenda that has shaped UK universities' mandate since the turn of the twenty-first century. The virtual spaces where universities address an international audience of students and scholars, as well as an imagined globally invested national audience, stand proof of the expanded and diversified university missions in the contemporary UK higher education.

Further reflections

UK universities in the early twenty-first century are highly embedded within the global frameworks of higher education. The centrality of English as the academic *lingua franca*, the relative success of British universities in world rankings, and an earlier (albeit different) experience with international influence and networks make UK higher education sector receptive to global legitimating and competitive processes.¹⁷ Furthermore, UK universities were already (and earlier than their European counterparts) exposed to normative and competitive pressures through the reorganization of the higher education sector and the introduction of national frames of assessment and excellence in the 1990s. In relation to both these contexts (national and global) UK universities expanded their core mandate beyond teaching and research, and rationalized organizationally to provide the interface between knowledge, market and society. As such UK universities' transformation carry the blueprint of their historical conditions, while also conforming to the ideal of the entrepreneurial and societally engaged university, a model that is regionally and globally promoted (European Commission 2003; OECD 2008). This is what our empirical analysis confirms.

There are reasons to expect that this widely endorsed model, and the institutional logics that purport it, is loosely coupled with the specific university practices. This may be partly to do with the loosely coupled nature of the university itself, despite pressures for a more tightly managed organization (Musselin et al. 2007). But it is also to do with the uneven distribution of resources. The strong public funding and meritocratic ideologies of the 1960s and 1970s set the UK higher education to a course of organizational expansion and mass enrolment. In the decades following, the system went through further expansion under conditions of resource scarcity and increased regulation. These conditions foster simultaneous dynamics of homogenization and decoupling in the system, a duality that is widely theorized by sociological institutionalists (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Ramirez and Tiplic 2014). It is likely that these dynamics and trends, which find their starting point in the 1980s but amplified since the 2000s with a global drive, will continue.

In particular, the financial implications of Brexit and the global pandemic may interfere differentially with UK universities ability to deliver on the internationalization agenda, in terms of diversifying the student body, strengthening global research connection, and building reputation. Further changes in the regulatory and funding structure of teaching and research may introduce systemic differentiation. Since 2018, for example, higher education teaching and research became further separated with the newly created public bodies of the Office for Students and Research England. At the same time a new excellence assessment and framework has been introduced (Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework TEF) for undergraduate teaching in universities, which is likely to mainstream teaching as a core function across universities.

More broadly, the global script of higher education itself, which emerged in a highly connected and dense environment of organizations and markets, might come under pressure by the resurgence of anti-science and anti-education populism and nationalist politics (Frank and Meyer 2020). UK higher education has been both a contributor and beneficiary of the global script and its regional exercise in the context of the

European Union. As the twenty-first century unfolds, the global contours of higher education and the UK's place in it might look very different.

Notes

1. Following Friedland and Alford (1991), by institutional logic we understand the organizing principles and symbolic meanings and practices that underline an institutionalized field.
2. The Committee was created in 1919 but only as an advisory body and it did not have a strategic role in the development of the university sector. The free and public university can be effectively dated much later from the 1960s (Anderson 2016).
3. This was in contrast to the universities which were founded as autonomous bodies, legally independent of the state and self-managed. UK universities kept their autonomous status even after they came to be regulated by the state and received public funding for both teaching and research functions.
4. Unlike the German Excellence Initiative, for example, participation in RAE/REF is not voluntary. All publicly funded universities in the UK, regardless of their research goals and intentions, are required to take part and their research outcomes are evaluated and rated through a centralized peer-review system.
5. However, unlike some other European countries (e.g. Sweden, Borjesson and Talberg 2021, in this issue), the clustering of 'research' versus 'teaching' universities is not as clear-cut in the UK. Although a divide persists between 'old' and 'new' universities regarding prestige, strong research universities are not always hyper-selective institutions regarding student academic and socio-economic backgrounds and may rely on local and regional intake (Boliver 2015; Blackman 2017).
6. In 2020, at the time of writing, tuition fees for domestic undergraduate degrees were capped at £9250 per year in England, at £9000 in Wales, and at £4000 in Northern Ireland. Following the devolution of power in 1999, Scottish government abolished university fees. International student fees, which constitute 23 percent of sector-wide teaching income, vary depending on the institution, and the level and type of degree. They range between £12,000 and £20,000 for the majority of subjects (Complete University Guide 2020).
7. The first global university rankings, *Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Rankings of World Universities (ARWU)*, was launched in 2003. They were developed by academics in China, with government backing, to impact on the strategic building of Chinese universities (Liu 2009). Since then rankings of all sorts, national and international, have rapidly proliferated and become a standard feature of the higher education field.
8. The website of UK's 2021 Research Excellence Framework makes explicit reference to world-class research in stating REF's policy aim: 'to secure the continuation of a world-class, dynamic and responsive research base across the full academic spectrum within UK higher education' (<https://www.ref.ac.uk/about/what-is-the-ref/>).
9. On the use of mission statements as data sources, see Kosmützky and Krücken 2015; Cortes-Sanchez 2017.
10. We followed a 'three clicks away' rule from the main 'international' landing page.
11. This was essential to distinguish international-oriented webpages from webpages that merely advertised courses and modules (e.g. an MA in International Migration).
12. The textual information was processed by excluding (a) variations of the same word, e.g. 'access', 'accessibility', 'accessible', and 'accessed' indicate four counts of the same word ('access') for university 'X' rather than four distinct words; (b) prepositions, articles and conjunctions, e.g. 'and', 'of', 'the'; (c) words with ambiguous meaning, e.g. the word 'link' could signify connectivity as in 'linking institutional practices across sectors' but it could also refer to a digital link one is invited to click on; and (d) infrequent words that we did not consider substantively relevant, e.g. 'address'.

13. LDA can also be applied directly on the sources of text (the webpages of universities). In this case, we already had a dataset of extracted keyword frequencies from the UK universities' webpages, thus we performed LDA directly on the keywords as opposed to embedding it into the data mining algorithm.
14. This equation illustrates one example of topic:
Topic 1 \in {research; prospect; support; business; facilities; opportunity; teach; learning; public; enterprise}
15. The generation of keywords indicative for each topic was based on a standardized rule of 10 keywords per topic i.e. the 10 keywords with the highest probability to appear in that topic. When presenting and interpreting the results we use the expression 'presence/absence of X keyword' to indicate whether X keyword is present among the highest probability keywords for that specific topic.
16. Topic 4 blends knowledge production and economic value (this topic displays an equal share of keywords from both dimensions).
17. Relatedly, Buckner (2019) finds that higher education institutions in English-speaking contexts are more likely to conceive international higher education as a tradeable commodity and invest in global markets for credentials.

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