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Competitive knowledge-economies driving new logics in higher education – reflections from a Finnish university merger

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ABSTRACT

Policymakers have called on higher education institutions to respond more directly to the new demands of competitiveness of knowledge economies. This includes instilling competitive logics in higher education policy and management of universities. The knowledge economy paradigm is reflected in higher education reforms, such as university mergers in Finland. Competitive logics are filtered down from the level of national higher education policy to the institutional level through policy-based reforms, leading to university mergers seeking economies of scale. This logic is then finally filtered down to academics, who try to make sense of their own attitude toward it. Applying critical discourse analysis to interview data from the merger of two Finnish universities – the Tampere University of Technology (TUT) and the University of Tampere (UTA) into Tampere University (2019) – academics offer legitimizing and delegitimizing responses to competitiveness claims.

KEYWORDS

Finland; higher education policy; knowledge economies; competitiveness; critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction: new paradigm for higher education

Policy trends in higher education (HE) have globally embraced a new paradigm of knowledge(-based) economies to emphasize the significance of higher education and knowledge production to economic competitiveness as a hegemonic discursive construct (Jessop 2017; Sum and Jessop 2013a, 2013b; Sum 2009). Calls for increased competitiveness have intertwined with calls for reforming HE to support economic interests (Jessop, Fairclough, and Wodak 2008; Olssen and Peters 2005). While a degree of meritocratic competition has always been present in academia, the global competition of knowledge economies equates universities with most other nationally competitive organizations (Münch 2020, 170–171). This development, known as academic capitalism by some (Münch 2020; Cantwell and Kauppinen 2014; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004) or as the neoliberalization of academia by others (Brandist 2017; Brown 2011), reconceptualized academic competition as economic competitiveness. Academics are called to become both the subject and object of competitiveness, which Naidoo (2018) calls a discursive ‘competition fetish’.

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Higher education policy serves as a driver of competitiveness external to the university and academics themselves. In the discourse of knowledge economies in global competition, competition in academia takes the same meaning as market competition, meaning the survival of the fittest. HE policy reflects transnational policy recommendations, such as those of the OECD, which emphasize market competitiveness (Lynch and Ivancheva 2015; Hunter 2013). The discourse of competitiveness of and in higher education institutions (HEIs¹) is legitimized by a perceived need for urgent reform or risk losing out in global competition. But to what extent are these priorities shared by academics?

Nordic HE systems have been recast from examples of HE success into systems in dire need of reform (Pettersson, Prøitz, and Forsberg 2017). Under knowledge economies, universities are important strategic resources, that states must carefully manage. The state can be expected to hold considerable power over public universities to realize the adoption of competitive logics. Gradual changes in the operational logics in welfare regimes in Finland have led to an emphasis of competitiveness (Hellman, Monni, and Alanko 2017; Antikainen 2010; Moisio and Leppänen 2007) and a managerialist restructuring of the higher education system (Poutanen et al. 2022; Pinheiro et al. 2019) to respond to global competition of knowledge economies. Prior research suggests that Finnish academics have reacted negatively to the relatively rapid expansion of competitive pressures and academic capitalism guiding their work (Kauppinen and Kaidesoja 2014; Rinne, Jauhiainen, and Kankaanpää 2014).

We argue that competitive logic and discourse, calling on higher education policy and HEIs to better serve the interests of business and industry – and thus indirectly those of the state (Etzkowitz 2008), comes across as a motivating element of a Finnish university merger. In its analysis we look from the bottom up: how academics make sense of their own lived experiences within their institutions and make sense of the merger and the competitiveness claims by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) that motivated it: what were the reasons behind the merger and how were those reasons contested? Does Finland's policy context as a Nordic welfare state offer academics opportunities to effectively contest competitiveness discourse, or is it accepted as a way of legitimizing the merger? Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough and Wodak 2008; Krejsler 2006) of interview data collected from Tampere University, merged in 2019, shows competitiveness as a salient but conflicted concept among Finnish academics. Academics directly impacted by a policy-driven merger at once make sense of and give sense to the competitive pressures that inform the merger and its goals.

2. Knowledge economies and academic capitalism

Fairclough and Wodak (2008) argue that knowledge economies and competitiveness cannot be meaningfully disentangled. Universities as producers of knowledge become discursively linked to the knowledge economy, which is constructed around a neoliberal orientation of the capitalist political economy (Jessop 2017; Sum and Jessop 2013a, 2013b; Sum 2009). Washburn's (2005, 196) summary, that 'a nation's ability to sustain its competitive edge in science and technology so that its industries will be well positioned to exploit the next big commercial breakthrough', illustrates the core part of this discursive logic. The global knowledge economy represents 'not only the highest form of social organization but also the most effective system of wealth accumulation' (Moisio

and Kangas 2016). The discourse of global knowledge economies suggests the necessity of out-competing others. States need to leverage all their competitive advantages, and for this end the competitive logic needs to be instilled in public institutions – to ‘become competitive, entrepreneurial and work-market oriented’ to enable catch-up competitiveness (Sum 2009, 197). As a result, competitiveness is mostly dealt in the negative: competitiveness is lost and there is a need to catch up.

HE policy is reconceptualized in support of the ‘triple helix’ of state, university, and society (Etzkowitz 2008). Corporate and academic competitiveness become blurred as they are filtered through state interests (e.g. the competitiveness of the knowledge-intensive export-industry). This is where academic capitalism, which seeks to facilitate the ‘global economic competitiveness of corporations’ (Kauppinen and Kaidesoja 2014, 25) becomes a meaningful context in how competitiveness claims are reconceptualized for HE (Münch 2020; Jessop 2018; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Naidoo (2018, 606) refers to a ‘competition fetish’, which takes the form of ‘magical thinking which results in the belief that competition will provide the solution to all the unsolved problems of HE’ (see also: Jauhiainen and Alho-Malmelin 2004).

HE policy reforms are also actively promoted by transnational actors, like the OECD (Kallo 2020; Hunter 2013; Sellar and Lingard 2012) and the European Union (Wedlin 2020, 2008; Fairclough and Wodak 2008). Having established that there is a global competition of knowledge economies, the goal of the EU’s higher education policy is to make Europe ‘the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world’ (Kauppinen and Kaidesoja 2014, 32; see also Wedlin 2020; Välimaa and Hoffman 2008). In other words, competing most effectively also means staying on the top of the global university market, where the core global institutions determining competitiveness are university rankings (Brankovic, Ringel, and Werron 2018; Marginson 2014; Hazelkorn 2015). University rankings ; can also be reflected in performance-based funding or administrative structures, for example when determining ‘excellence’ (Münch 2020).

Indeed, as university markets qualify at best as ‘quasi-markets’ due to heavy state involvement (Wedlin 2020, 180), academic accountability systems, operating ostensibly on the side of accountability and transparency, become important vehicles for market value determination: ‘Rankings have become visible measures of “success” in this competition and are prominently used to advance and advertise university brands, profiles and positions’ in the university market (Wedlin 2008, 149). Thus, the focus of HE policy shifts more and more to national competitiveness as a major policy goal (Brandist 2017, 590). This has also been noted in research on the demands to reform Nordic HE system (Pettersson, Prøitz, and Forsberg 2017; Carney 2006; Krejsler 2006).

In terms of competitiveness impacting academics, various quality assurance regimes similarly also rank academics within their equally ranked institutions (Watermeyer 2019; O’Meara 2011). Academics become both the subject and object of competitiveness as the productive force of academic capitalism. Competitiveness becomes subjectively internalized and reproduced at each level – according to Välimaa and Hoffman (2008, 279) – not necessarily as ‘something any group does to us as much as it is something we do to ourselves’. Academic competition under conditions of academic capitalism is seen to promote atomized individuality, the fracturing of the academic community, and bureaucratic conformity (Fleming 2021, 42–43; see also Docherty 2015). If HEIs have

internalized the paradigm of competitiveness of knowledge economies, they have a vested interest to ensure the academics working under them are productive – competitive. This arrangement is often linked to systems of centralized, administrative control (McCann et al. 2020; Lorenz 2012) and susceptible to precarity and casualization (Lynch and Ivancheva 2015; Olssen and Peters 2005). Recent Finnish HE research shows signs of this development as well (Nikkola and Tervasmäki 2020, 14; Brunila and Hannukainen 2017).

4. The knowledge economy paradigm in Finnish higher education

The concept of knowledge-economies had already established itself in Finland well before the 2009 Universities Act: globalizing Finnish technology industry sparked the conversation and the socio-political need to address competitiveness.² The discursive logic of knowledge economies stated that without constant adaptation the future of the Finnish state would be at risk (Ahlqvist and Moision 2014, 29). The welfare state was to be supplemented by policies supporting national competitiveness (Moision and Leppäinen 2007). A small, export-oriented knowledge economy was vulnerable in an uncertain world economy (Moision and Kangas 2016, 273; Kangas and Moision 2012, 212; see also Nokkala 2008), even though in the late-1990s-to-early-2000s Finland was seen as a model story of a successful transition to knowledge economies (Kauppinen and Kaidesoja 2014). The transition from ‘managed capitalism towards market capitalism’ enjoyed both popular support and broad political consensus and support (Antikainen 2010, 540).

Calls for reforming Finnish HE increased in the early 2000s, especially focusing on reforming the universities as a part of national strategy on the level of HE policy (VNK 2004). Given the dominant discourse of Finland being a small export-oriented country, the ‘strategic renewal’, reforms and profiling of Finnish universities gained powerful traction in HE policy. The policy goal was to reduce the number of universities to pool resources to stronger HEIs, being more capable of international competition (VNK 2004, 2005; OPM 2008 see Poutanen et al. 2022 for a review). This was also the outspoken goal of the most significant legislative change, the Universities Act reform of 2009 (HE 7/2009). Ensuring the competitiveness of Finnish universities took on a distinctly corporate approach (Välilä 2011). The legislative reform introduced new administrative models and decoupled the public universities from the state, although increased performance-based funding made this less substantive in material practice: in Finland 75% of public (state) funding is performance-based, which makes the ‘Finnish university funding system one of the most performance-driven systems in the world’ (Hansen et al. 2019, 563).³

Performance-based funding systems act as an extension of political, bureaucratic and managerial accountability, particularly in Finland (Kuusela et al. 2021; Kohtamäki 2019). Documents from the Finnish Ministry of Education, for example, determined that the system of collegial, democratic representation was too slow, self-interested and cumbersome to respond to the dynamic needs of knowledge economies – it lacked ‘the capacity for strategic renewal’ (OPM 2007, 43). Instead, the university leadership had to be endowed with sufficient authority to strategically manage the university. State financing of higher education was interpreted in the context of ensuring a return on investment (Aarrevaara et al. 2009, 12).

For the state, the logic of competitiveness dictated, that it would be ‘dangerous for Finland to lag behind with a university as a representative democracy and neither competitive nor accountable to Finnish interests’, and that reformed universities would be better suited to build upon ‘market economics to succeed in global competition’ (Tjeldvoll 2008, 106). As consequence, Finnish universities would have to adapt to more managerialist modes of leadership and management, that had already been implemented earlier elsewhere (Clarke and Newman 1997). In this Finland is following the current trends of HE reforms in Europe: ‘the dominant European higher education discourse utilizes the idea of autonomy for lending support to arguments that advance managerial reforms’ (Piironen 2013, 138; see also Lynch and Ivancheva 2015). The knowledge-economy has forced academia toward homogenous production goals, rather than any vision of pluralist, democratic community (Brown 2011, 2015). This has been reflected in the decreased capacity of Finnish academics to influence institutional and organizational reforms (especially in the case of the new foundation universities: Poutanen et al. 2022).

It speaks volumes of the power of the knowledge economy paradigm, that practically none of the major political parties in Finland disagreed on the need to urgently reform higher education to suit the needs of global competitiveness (Björn, Saari, and Pöllänen 2017; Tirronen and Nokkala 2009).⁴ There was relative consensus across party lines, that as a small, export-oriented country Finland could only succeed in global competition by pooling and concentrating its resources in knowledge capital production (Nokkala 2008).

5. University merger as university profiling in Tampere

University mergers have become the policy-tools of choice to restructure HEIs to meet the goals laid out by the Finnish Ministry of Education (MEC): reducing the number of individual institutions to combine resources for larger HEIs, which allows profiling them for competitive advantage and economies of scale (Välimaa, Aittola, and Ursin 2014; Nokkala and Välimaa 2017; Aarrevaara and Dobson 2016). Following this, the MEC’s overall objective has been a more streamlined university system, with emphasis on quality, effectiveness and international competitiveness (Välimaa, Aittola, and Ursin 2014; Ylijoki 2014, 58; Tirronen and Nokkala 2009). In 2009 there were 20 universities in Finland, but in 2019 the number was down to 13. Previous research has found that in Finnish academia managers and administrative staff are generally more positive than rank-and-file researchers, who anticipated more challenges and threats resulting from structural reforms and profiling (Ursin, Aittola, and Välimaa 2010).

The strategy of mergers as a tool to reform HE is drawn out of international competitiveness discourses, where global competitiveness is often, if not always, the legitimating and motivating context for university mergers (Harman and Harman 2008). In this context university mergers have often been seen as a universal problem-solving tool, even if positive outcomes of mergers are difficult to verify and savings are often overestimated (Locke 2007). Furthermore, mergers in HE tend to be involuntary and top-down led processes (Skodvin 1999).

Mergers also offer an opportunity to ‘play along’ with competitiveness discourse: it is hoped that new, strongly profiled universities could be (plausibly) designated as ‘world-class’; this was the MEC’s stated rationale behind founding the first foundation university

in Finland, Aalto University (OPM 2007; Aula and Tienari 2011). In discursive bids to be perceived as competitive, Finnish HEIs would engage grandiose discourse of excellence (Alvesson 2014) with the Aalto University merger branded as creating a ‘Nordic MIT’ (Tienari, Aula, and Aarrevaara 2016): ranking systems stack US universities as the most important points of comparison (Kivistö et al. 2019, 59). Also the Technical University of Tampere (TUT), changed to a foundation university administrative model in 2010 with the explicit idea of becoming more competitive and attractive to external funding.

The logic seems very similar to what Münch (2020) describes as attributing ‘excellence’ in the German HE system as basis for public funding flows. Successful profiling easily becomes a question of economies of scale delivering the expected benefits in terms of resources. As discussed at length by Münch (2020), profiling runs a risk of justifying an increasingly fixed unequal distribution of public resources. Resourcing based on performance and profiling can form an ‘institutionalized Matthew effect’ (Schulze-Cleven et al. 2017, 802) of further accumulating resources to those who are already well-resourced. Combined with a high degree of performance-based funding, the circumstances are conducive to competitive logics.

The university merger of the University of Tampere (UTA) and TUT was initiated with creating a nationally and internationally more competitive HEI in mind, rather than having to local HEIs engage in competition between each other.⁵ This also reflected the overarching higher education policy goal of the MEC, which was to build a ‘single, uniformly managed strategic whole’ out of the two universities (OKM 2016a). Although the merger process was contested, it was successful in the sense that the new Tampere University (TAU) became operational in 2019.⁶ In 2018 UTA had some 2200 staff, received nearly 114 million euros from the Finnish state and was running a deficit of 2,8 million euros (Tampereen yliopisto 2019), whereas TUT had some 1667 total staff, received 76,8 million euros from the Finnish state and was running a deficit of 7,6 million euros (TTY-Säätiö 2019).⁷ TUT, already a foundation university since 2010, was also more oriented toward triple-helix -style co-operation, especially with industry and business actors. UTA, arguably, with its emphasis on social science research, was not. As such, the merger included two institutions with very different internal attitudes toward competitiveness. From this perspective, the merger could be interpreted, based on the adoption of the foundation model as its administrative system, as a move to integrate UTA more closely with the knowledge economies paradigm.

Furthermore, the MEC also made a part of the universities’ ‘strategic’ funding contingent on a successful merger (OKM 2016b). In other words, the merger into a larger, more competitive university was directly juxtaposed with economic scarcity. In 2021 TAU began consolidating the merger by announcing reductions in support staff and university buildings.

5. Data and method

The data consists of 53 interviews of research and teaching staff (18 professors and 35 teachers and researchers) conducted from late spring to early autumn of 2019, during the first year of operation of the newly merged Tampere University. It was assumed that during the first year the dominant discourse of the merger was still very salient in the minds of the respondents. The interviews were conducted as part of a research project

that evaluated the attitudes of university staff toward university democracy in a survey. Given the focus on university democracy among university staff, students were excluded from the survey and the subsequent interviews. The interviewees had been selected based on survey data to equally represent all the faculties of the new university (and from both former universities), various career stages and years they had worked in academia. Additionally, respondents selected for the interviews were purposefully selected to have diverse views on university democracy, which had become a key dimension of merger contestations (i.e. who wanted more democratic structures, less democratic structures, or had no definite opinion).

The respondents were selected, and the interviews were conducted by a research assistant and transliterated externally, fully anonymous. The anonymity of respondents was considered a necessity, given the uncertainty surrounding the merger, to allow the respondents to speak openly. Each numbered interview was identified with an initial: ‘P’ signifying professor and ‘T’ signifying other members of staff (teachers, researchers, support staff). Faculty identifiers were added to show which of the old universities the respondent had worked in before the merger and their current faculty (see Table 1). Thus, T23/UTA/SOC would mean a researcher (interview #23) at the Faculty of Social Sciences, who had previously worked at the University of Tampere.

The semi-structured interviews included open questions, which asked why, in their mind, the merger happened, how they felt about it and how they felt about the future of the new university. While it could be argued, that finding dissatisfaction among the staff after a university merger is almost a given, the responses were carefully unpacked for more insights. Indeed, competitiveness, which was not explicitly referred to by the interviewer, emerged as a salient but conflicted theme many respondents referred to spontaneously. This in itself suggests competitiveness in the context of knowledge economies is a readily recognizable, if not dominant, discourse among Finnish academics going through an organizational change.

The analysis proceeded to establish two rough categories based on the data, one of which supported competitiveness claims, while the other contested them. These were established as the macro-level categories. As macro-level policies are accompanied by micro-level discourses, it offers opportunities to trace instances of interdiscursivity – the movement of discourse from policy documents to the use by individual academics

Table 1. Tampere University Faculty structure

Faculty	Contains (previous university)
Built Environment (BEN)	Architecture (TUT), Civil engineering (TUT)
Education and Culture (EDU)	Education sciences (UTA), Teacher training school (UTA), Language center (UTA & TUT)
Engineering and Natural Sciences (ENS)	Automation technology and mechanical engineering (TUT), Physics (TUT), Materials science and environmental engineering (TUT)
Information Technology and Communication Sciences (ITC)	Communication sciences (UTA), Computing sciences (UTA & TUT), Electrical engineering, Language studies (UTA)
Management and Business (MAB)	Administrative studies (UTA), Business studies (UTA), Industrial engineering and management (TUT), Information and Knowledge Management (TUT), Politics (UTA)
Faculty of Medicine and Health Technology (MET)	
Social Sciences (SOC)	Health sciences (UTA & TUT), History, philosophy and literary Studies (UTA), Social research (UTA), Welfare sciences (UTA)

(Wodak and Fairclough 2010). As a methodology, critical discourse analysis has been previously fruitfully operationalized in the context of knowledge economies and competitiveness (Sum 2009; Fairclough and Wodak 2008) and in the context of Finland specifically (Nokkala 2008). The interview data was encoded on Atlas.ti to mark passages where respondents reacted to or reproduced competitiveness claims. Rather than looking for specific keywords, the interviews were read and encoded as a whole. Individual quotes were established as the micro-level of discourse in a strategic merger (Ylijoki 2014), but then encoded and grouped together with those from other respondents under more general meso-level categories. The meso-level of analysis bridges micro level discourse – translated quotes – with the macro-level categories (see Table 2 below). Since the merger was predominantly legitimized through claims of competitiveness (economies of scale, profiling), the merger's legitimacy was intertwined with the power of competitiveness discourse.

The analysis followed an abductive methodology, meaning an interplay between theory, empirical material and analysis in order to gain insights into how academics themselves make sense of the university merger and their own role in it – how competitiveness claims are passed down from the level of HE policy (MEC) to legitimize an organizational change of a specific Finnish HEI. In the following sections, the interview data is explored further under the main macro-level categories of analysis by first discussing the ways competitiveness was seen as a legitimate logic to push the merger through and then moving on how other academics sought – in part or fully – delegitimize competitiveness claims.

6. Legitimizing competitiveness

Based on the interview data, discourse legitimating competitiveness and the merger was roughly divided into three categories: 1) change is inevitable due to globalized competition, 2) the merger brings economic benefits – typically economies of scale and a stronger profile to apply for more funding – and 3) a simple issue of surviving in competition. Most interviewees expressed that they clearly understood the circumstances in which the merger took place; several noted that the competitiveness of a university in the Tampere region in Finland required the merger of smaller HEIs into one, which would give more resources to compete not only nationally – against Aalto University specifically (T23/UTA/SOC) – but also internationally. Several interviewees repeated the accepted conventional wisdom that as a small nation Finland (Nokkala 2008) had to pool its HE resources to succeed in global competition. Hence, it made sense to consolidate universities into larger units to enable more efficient competition and for attaining greater visibility and a higher profile (P3/UTA/MAB; P13/TUT/BEN; P16/TUT/ENS; T2/UTA/MET; T8/TUT/MET; T20/TUT/BEN; T22/TUT/ENS; T25/TUT/ENS; T30/TUT/ENS).

This opinion was somewhat more often shared by staff with a background in TUT: without the merger, there wouldn't be a 'plausibly visible and competitive' new university (P13/TUT/BEN). Profiling oneself effectively was considered a competitive edge (T9/TUT/ENS; T17/UTA/EDU). For some respondents visibility meant being acknowledged in international metrics and rankings (P18/UTA/MAB; T9/TUT/ENS; see also Cronin 2016; Alvesson 2014). Proponents of the merger saw the creation of a national rival at Tampere to Aalto's 'flagship university' (Aula and Tienari 2011) as a good thing (T16/

Table 2. Discursive categories

Types of discourse		
Macro	Meso	Micro (translated quotes)
<i>Legitimizing the merger</i>	Inevitable change of globalized competition	'Let me put it like this: we can't afford to slacken the pace at all. It's this entire competing set-up we have, and that's just it.' (P11) 'The world is changing and everything has to change with it or fall behind.' (T22)
	Economic benefits	'The foundation has brought in money, and that's an important thing, because we can't run the university with good intentions alone. We actually need the economic resources to keep it afloat.' (T20) 'The competition is really tough even between [Finnish] universities, and there is only a limited amount of money available, so in that sense it makes sense to pool resources together.' (P17)
	Survivalism	'Let me put it like this: we can't afford to slacken the pace at all. It's this entire competing set-up we have, and that's just it.' (P11) 'As far as I can see we have to make some decisions to maintain our international competitiveness. It simply has to be done, it has to be made work quickly, or else we might lose something that we will have a really hard time to replace.' (T18)
	Mismatch of discourse and materiality	'So we have a vision to make our university into a "top university", like MIT, and we put out similar strategies, without understanding the realities of this or that university. [...] It's like we have visions completely divorced from understanding what happens on the grassroots level [...].' (P12) 'It is so intolerable that we get new people in who are not at all interested in what we've done before. They're only interested in their own visions. That is, you know, really hurtful. [...]' (T31)
<i>Delegitimizing the merger</i>	Changing the nature of academia	'At the same time we arrive at a crisis over the philosophy of science, as we are forcibly made to take part in innovation capitalism and competition ideology [...].' (P14) 'It feels like [they] have misunderstood the mission of the university wrong and that we're heading into a direction no longer guided by the internal logic of science [and replacing it with] something else, like maintaining economic competitiveness.' (T33)
	Outside authority (MEC)	'[...] intense international competition makes the MEC demand this and that from us, more outputs and the like.' (P9) '[...] we [the universities] were totally at odds, so the MEC had to come in and order us to merge despite any grievances.' (P7)
	Disengagement and fatalism	'This is pretty hard and I've tried to alienate myself for a long time from everything that happens at the university so I can observe it somehow outside of the university community too.' (P9) '[...] people adapt when there are no other choices.' (T34)

UTA/EDU; T20/TUT/BEN; T25/TUT/ENS). In a discursive move from local to national level, competitiveness was interpreted by some respondents to apply to the national economy and the public universities that it financed: quick and decisive actions were necessary to maintain Finland's international competitiveness (T17/UTA/EDU; T18/UTA/MAB).

Improving the competitiveness of Tampere University among HEIs necessitated taking advantage of economies of scale to increase the efficient use of resources (P13/TUT/BEN). The economies of scale -argument legitimized the merger by offering protection to the academics in the new university in conditions of economic scarcity (P7/TUT/ENS; P18/UTA/MAB).

Some interviewees also expressed confidence in competitiveness nationally and internationally having a positive effect on the quality of research (T9/TUT/ENS). This aspect was acknowledged as purposeful higher education policy formulated by the MEC (P7/

TUT/ENS). Competition took also an intra-institutional dimension, as some interviewees assumed as a given, that the faculties and even individual degree programs would lobby for their own interests (P11/TUT/ENS), trying to gain more resources for themselves within the new university. As such, for some the merger was an opportunity for collegial competition among academics, even if most others referred to the national or international levels of HEI competition.

Many interviewees, who accepted competitiveness as a valid argument, didn't seem to need additional legitimation. For example, one respondent readily reproduced established discourse of a small country like Finland (Nokkala 2008) needing larger HEIs instead of the current 'fragmented' field, which wasted resources: 'There is tough competition even between universities here and resources are limited so it makes sense to pool our resources' (P17/UTA/MET). The economic outlook of the Finnish state and of the universities expressed in the interviews was decidedly grim: it seemed more likely that (public) resources in HE would shrink, rather than grow. Academics argued that under the current circumstances they couldn't 'afford to cut any slack', but instead push harder; it was simply the way it was. (P11/TUT/ENS).

It would seem that in terms of discursive power, the necessity of competitiveness in the context of knowledge economies was generally accepted by most as a valid description of real circumstances: competitiveness discourse had a perceived material backing. This is reflected in some interviewees understanding the idea why the merger was necessary, but strongly criticized the way it had been conducted (P2/UTA/MAB; P16/TUT/ENS; T15/UTA/MAB). In other words, academics could recognize the legitimacy of global competitiveness discourse and within that context recognized the inevitable necessity of the merger (Alvesson and Spicer 2016), but still expressed disapproval over the material practicalities of the merger process – particularly over how the merger process had ridden roughshod over community opinion and previous collegial decision-making bodies.

7. Delegitimizing competitiveness

Four general categories of delegitimizing discourse were also categorized in the interview data: 1) a mismatch of competitiveness discourse and the material experience of the merger, 2) competition ideology changing the nature of academia and the mission of universities, 3) the merger was driven by an external authority (MEC) and was a threat to the autonomy of science, and 4) disengagement and fatalism. Reflecting the contested nature of the merger (see Poutanen et al. 2022), some academics actively pushed back on the legitimizing arguments, expressing doubts that the promised benefits of the merger could not be realized (P6/TUT/ENS; T27/UTA/ITC; T29/TUT/ITC). Critics pointed out that the promised benefits of the Aalto merger had failed to materialize, which also threw the promised benefits of the Tampere merger process into doubt (P12/TUT/ENS; P16/TUT/ENS; T23/UTA/SOC). Other interviewees pointed out that leveraging the economies of scale in exceptionally large HEIs create a need for more hierarchical administrative structures and crowds out more collegial or community democratic initiatives (T9/TUT/ENS; T7/UTA/SOC; T22/TUT/ENS), as suggested by McCann et al. (2020).

Critique was often directed at the obvious ways how the discourse of competitiveness clearly differs from lived experiences (P2/UTA/MAB; T23/UTA/SOC). The promise of

efficiency and synergy as outcomes of the merger expressed in managerial discourse was seen as either disingenuous or out of touch (P12/TUT/ENS; see also Alvesson 2014). Creating what was perceived as empty marketing discourse for an organization of critically minded academics was considered wasteful in both time and effort (T33/UTA/SOC). This discrepancy between discourse and materiality also led to intensive feelings of disengagement (P9/UTA/EDU; T27/UTA/ITC; T34/TAY/MAB; see also Poutanen 2022). One respondent described ‘losing all faith’ that the actions of the people involved in the merger process matched their actions (T4/UTA/ITC). This distrust, more accurately, was directed at the university’s managerial leadership. As consequence, many expressed concern over the mismatch between the discourse and materiality of the merger process. This view was expressed by staff of both former universities, though social and education scientists seemed more prone to offer criticism. Arguably these respondents could be more professionally aware of the debates and discourses related to HE policy.

Many academics also felt like there was a mismatch with what they saw as the mission of Finnish universities, and how that was being appropriated for other ends – competitiveness and academic capitalism (P9/UTA/EDU; P14/UTA/EDU; T33/UTA/SOC). One respondent remarked, how the mission of the university protected it from becoming a ‘promotional company for [Finnish] exports’ (T14/TUT/BEN). Respondents considered that although the merger had been initiated by local institutional interests, the MEC’s push for the merger was motivated by an internalized logic of competitiveness, leaving no other alternatives (P1/UTA/SOC; P14/UTA/EDU; T7/UTA/SOC). The MEC’s guidance of the merger had forced academics and universities into unhealthy and uncertain competition (P9/UTA/EDU). One respondent also made the connection between the merger and the EU’s Bologna process as a dimension of ‘competitive capitalism’ (P14/UTA/EDU). In the eyes of some respondents the MEC stressed economies of scale as a way for universities and academics to gain more funding (P12/TUT/ENS) and obsess over gaining positions in university rankings (T15/UTA/MAB; T33/UTA/SOC). Among the respondents the professors seemed more confident to criticize the MEC’s policy guidance, but it was not entirely absent in the ranks of the researchers and teachers either.

Finally, obsession over competitiveness was seen detrimental not only to the institutional mission of the universities, but to the subjectivities of academics (P14/UTA/EDU; T33/UTA/SOC). Faced with new priorities, one would either adapt or drop out (T3/UTA/EDU). Even if the respondents did not refer to direct competition among academics, they understood the troubling competitive circumstances. Some have actively sought to protect themselves by trying to distance themselves from the university (P9/UTA/EDU; see also Poutanen 2022). Some interviewees also acknowledged that the feverish competition for decreasing resources had started to turn on itself: there was growing concern that competition requires more and more resources (P11/TUT/ENS; T13/TUT/MET), which are spent in administrative work, rather than in research and teaching.

8. Discussion

As welfare states like Finland compete in the global market, competitiveness of public HEIs becomes of dire importance. Competitiveness is discursively constructed as evolution, as it is the key social imaginary of capitalist ideology (Jessop and Sum 2016). The findings here offer at least some confirmation to the argument that the competitive compulsion has turned the university on its head, setting the economic benefits of higher education as its highest priority (Lorenz 2012, 600). Policy-guided reforms of universities serves as a crucial step to re-articulate academic relations for the purpose of capital accumulation as per the knowledge economy paradigm (Jessop, Fairclough, and Wodak 2008; Sum and Jessop 2013a), which reaffirms the transnational potential of academic capitalism (Kauppinen and Kaidesoja 2014). Academic capitalism should not be confused with exclusively or purely economic competition; in academia, the competition often revolves around prestige and symbolic capital (Münch 2020; Cronin 2016). Going against the discourse of competitiveness in higher education would require entirely rethinking how knowledge economies are currently discursively constructed.

The university merger that resulted in the new Tampere University was couched in higher education policy and discourse drawn from the knowledge economies paradigm that emphasizes competitiveness. And yet, interestingly, the interviews showed that most academics attributed competitiveness claims to a structural level – policy and HEI – rather than between individual academics, somewhat counter to expectations (e.g. Münch 2020; but see also Poutanen 2022). Only a minority expressed expectations of academics opportunistically hoarding resources. This suggests that competitiveness logic has not fully permeated the minds of Finnish academics as a scramble for economic resources among peers.

It is worth mentioning, that despite the inclusion of corporate logics (Välimaa 2011), pursuant to transnational recommendations (Kallo 2020),⁸ Finland has not engaged in HE privatization reforms, as advocated by other transnational actors, such as the WTO and GATS (van der Wende 2003). Presumably this is because public universities give the state more strategic control over leveraging them through performance-based funding for competitiveness toward desired HE policy. Regardless, the Finnish MEC is mired deeply in the discourse of competitiveness, which is filtered through higher education policy to public HEIs, given the MEC holds ‘the power of the purse’ over Finland’s public universities.

In the Finnish case academic autonomy from the state is hamstrung by economic dependence and state economic interests under the paradigm of global knowledge-economies in competition. Through funding mechanisms and profiling efforts to improve international standing economic interests and academic interests are intertwined – on the level of policy the state’s economic interest is proposed as the overarching common interest of universities as public institutions. Nokkala and Bacevic (2014) posit that through its managerial elite the university becomes more in tune with corporate and societal elites, aligned with state or economic interests, rather than the academic interests that are the core body of the institution. The interviews showed some evidence of this, as respondents expressed distrust toward managerial discourse (of competitiveness) and its practical implications in a university merger.

9. Conclusion

In this article we have analyzed how Finnish academics make sense of their lived experiences under competitiveness pressures in the context of a specific university merger. Even in a university system couched in the Nordic welfare state, the prevalence of competitiveness discourse and logic was perhaps surprisingly strong. Many academics, even those who offered critique and argued for changes locally at the university or in national HE policy still felt the fundamental logic of the merger – competitiveness – was justified. The demand for competitiveness of knowledge economies is such a powerful discourse (Sum 2009), that critique is more typically directed at its consequences: the Tampere University merger was perceived as a fundamentally good, even necessary process, but it was implemented poorly as a managerialist top-down process.

The data seem to also reaffirm Wodak and Fairclough's (2010, 25) argument, that the discursive hegemony of knowledge economies relies on abstraction – problems arise more in practice. Abstraction allows all parties to draw on the same examples to bolster their own perspective, as was seen in the references to Aalto University, the previous Finnish university merger that followed the same logic (Granqvist and Gustafsson 2016), which served as a point of reference for both proponents and critics of the competitiveness claims used in the Tampere merger.

The analysis showed that while universities as institutions are forced to accept new missions as determined by HE policy, some academics are drawn into conflict with these new priorities. Other academics see no need for such conflict, accepting the stated logic of competitiveness discourse. Indeed, this difference in perception can instead create conflicts between academics (Poutanen et al. 2022). Pro-competitiveness discourse shows interdiscursivity between interviewee responses and higher education policy documents, suggesting that this discourse makes sense to many academics, who readily reproduce it, even when critiquing HE policy or the practicalities of institutional changes grounded in competitiveness discourse. Imaginaries of an urgent need to improve competitiveness, for fear of 'falling behind' (Tjeldvoll 2008, 106), shows a slow shift in priorities in favor of competitive goals: 'The competition fetish, with its imperative for universities to enhance the competitive edge of each country in the global marketplace, also threatens the capacity of HE to work towards global well-being' (Naidoo 2018, 613). This can be seen as a rather stark change from the spirit and mission of universities in the Finnish context.

Notes

1. Although 'higher education' encompasses a wider range of institutions than just universities, this article focuses on universities as the emblematic higher education institutions being reformed.
2. One can also attribute some of the prevalence of the paradigm to the rise and subsequent fall of the Finnish telecoms company Nokia (Ahlqvist and Moisio 2014, 23; Välimaa and Hoffman 2008, 274).
3. See also de Boer et al. (2015). Future funding models by the Finnish MEC look to further increase the emphasis on performance-based funding, despite protests from HE labor unions (OKM 2019).
4. While all universities were affected by the reforms (Kohtamäki 2019), the foundation-university as a new administrative model operationalized by the act was the clearest example

of market rationalities colliding with resistance from decades of collegial institutional governance tradition (Poutanen et al. 2022; Granqvist and Gustafsson 2016).

5. To clarify, any competition between UTA and TUT would have been minimal, given the limited overlap between their faculties and education profiles. Thus, the merger was more directly interested in forming a large university, which could later be profiled competitively.
6. The process and documentation of the first foundation university, Aalto, was used as a blueprint for the Tampere University merger (Kuusela et al. 2021) and the founding process of Tampere University is discussed in more detail in Poutanen et al. (2022).
7. These numbers, however, should not be given undue emphasis; Finnish universities routinely cover their deficits with business activities, fundraising or investment returns.
8. Wedlin (2008, 145) notes that the Lisbon agenda and the EU's Bologna process aim to make Europe the leading knowledge economy. See also: Fairclough and Wodak (2008).

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