Changing missions? How the strategic plans of research-intensive universities in Northern Europe and North America balance competing identities

Christopher C. Morphew, College of Education, University of Iowa, christopher-morphew@uiowa.edu

Tatiana Fumasoli and Bjørn Stensaker, Department of Education, University of Oslo, Norway

Abstract

This paper assesses the assumption that public research-intensive universities are conforming to external pressures and demands in similar ways. By analyzing the strategic plans of public research-intensive universities in Northern Europe and North America, we identify variations in how public and private dimensions of higher education are balanced. The study includes 19 North American and Northern European universities and finds that North American universities loosely couple strategic objectives addressing separate stakeholders linked to their public and private missions. Northern European universities tend to organize their strategic priorities more tightly within a narrative of "research excellence." The findings suggest the nature of change in contemporary higher education and the blurring boundaries between public and private missions.

Keywords: university strategic planning, planning, purposes of education, qualitative research, governance

Introduction

A recurring theme of higher education research is the blurring boundaries of functions, objectives, and scope of universities, due to the increased emphasis on relevance, service to society, and changes in the modes of knowledge production (Gumport 2000; Slaughter and Rhoades 2009). Whether such changes are influencing the entire higher education sector to the same extent is unknown. The institutions most likely to be exposed (and responsive) to such changes may be larger public research-intensive universities since they a) educate and train larger percentages of students; b) have the organizational, academic and economic capacity to respond to societal, economic and political challenges, and b) are relatively more exposed to new expectations and stakeholders pushing both public and private dimensions, particularly in North America where their public financing has winnowed, at least as a percentage of total budgets, over the past several decades. A similar trend of stagnating or shrinking public funding, of lesser magnitude, can be detected in Europe.

North American and Northern European universities have been granted greater autonomy via diversified revenues and governance reforms (File et al., 2006; Altbach 2011). To some extent, these changes have given public universities – historically recognized as important social and economic institutions – a 'quasi-public' or 'privatized' status (Couturier 2006; Morphew and Eckel 2009; Marginson 2011). These changes have further muddied differences between public and private universities and given public universities, particularly larger research-intensive universities, the power to "shape their own economic and social personalities through non-market activity" (Marginson 2007, 314). For example, in the U.S., there is evidence that public universities engage in academic capitalism and privatization strategies that disproportionately benefit areas of the universities most closely linked to private markets (Slaughter and Rhoades 2009; Morphew and Eckel 2009). Examples of such activities include technology transfer and licensing, as well as resource reallocation to activities and academic programs (e.g., business schools) more tightly coupled to external labor markets, and partnerships with the private sector. Greater emphasis on private rather than public goods and benefits can be found in the texts and images that public universities use to communicate about themselves (Morphew and Hartley 2006; Saichaie and Morphew 2014). In Europe, governance reforms have also occurred and existing research analyzing how universities have chosen to exercise their independence indicates that it is possible to identify a more ´managerial´ university emerging through stronger internal hierarchical governance and more time and energy devoted to handling external accountability claims and strengthen their external profile (File et al. 2006; Fumasoli and Lepori 2011; Frølich et al. 2013, Stensaker and Benner 2013; Stensaker et al. 2014; Fumasoli et al. 2015).

While it is evident that North American and European universities indeed are changing, it is less clear as to how one should interpret the ongoing changes. Two opposing

arguments are usually offered. Advocates of greater university autonomy claim that such changes will allow universities to become more responsive and nimble. Freed from the inefficient yoke of the state, universities will be better able to develop partnerships linking their scientific discoveries and products with corporate and societal benefit (Berdahl 1998; Breneman 2004; Slaughter and Rhoades 2009). In the U.S., university leaders promoting these reforms have reassured policy makers and alumni that their institutions – if granted greater autonomy – will not lose sight of historic missions and institutional legacies that include providing access to members of underrepresented groups, promoting democratic ideals in their students, and demonstrating educational excellence. Such reassurances have been buttressed by public universities formally agreeing to maintain standards of access and engagement (Couturier 2006). In Europe, reforms granting institutional autonomy relate to a general reorganization of the public sector: according to a New Public Management rationale, autonomous universities become more efficient, effective and economic, consequently capable of developing strategic profiles and compete in 'markets' (Verhoest et al. 2004; Fumasoli et al. 2014).

Critics of governance reforms are not as optimistic about the nature of the ambitions of public universities. They argue that universities seeking more market-oriented pathways and entrepreneurial trajectories are likely to drift away from missions linked to their public functions (Neave 2000; Clark 2004). These scholars argue that universities have historically been public institutions and played important roles in developing and developed countries (Altbach 2011; Hartley et al. 2013). Reforms resulting in less governmental control over the mission of public universities, they argue, will produce privatized universities paying less attention to access, equity, and democratic education and more attention to the quest for rankings and associated prestige (Gumport 2000).

With these arguments as point-of-departure, the current study analyzes key strategic documents and plans of nineteen North American and Northern European universities to determine how these institutions situate the public and private identities of their missions. The selected universities share similar characteristics: they are all public research universities, have a comprehensive educational profile and large numbers of student enrolments (in relation with country or state size), and conduct research-intensive activities measured according to number of PhD students and Shanghai ranking position (see Table 1). Our research question is:

How do the strategies used to balance the multiple (public and private) organizational identities of research-intensive public universities in Northern Europe and North America compare?

The outcome of this analysis will shed light on the referenced arguments about how privatization in higher education unfolds, and its possible consequences.

Theoretical Framework

While the public and private dichotomy can be said to offer a distinct focus on the changes higher education is undergoing, one could still question the validity of this dichotomy as a tool for analysis. As Marginson (2007; 2011) has suggested, it is sometimes quite difficult to distinguish between public and private goods in higher education, and there might be hybrid combinations that may blend the ideal-type categories. Scholars sometimes make the mistake of simplifying the blurred divide between public and private goals or products; this dualism ignores the new reality of higher education where public, state-owned universities can engage in strategies that embrace privatized missions and privately-funded universities produce goods that would be traditionally defined as public (e.g., with features that include non-rivalry and/or non-excludability). Many variations are possible in how universities may balance these dimensions. Such variation is not unusual in higher education, and public research-intensive universities have a long tradition for handling inconsistent societal expectations where the need for strategic change is balanced with the respect for institutional legacies (Clark 2004; Marginson, 2007).

Our analysis uses Pratt and Foreman's (2000) frames to assess whether the strategic plans of research-intensive universities in Northern Europe and North American provide evidence of similar ways of using compartmentalization, deletion, integration, or aggregation as organizational responses. Pratt and Foreman suggest many complex organizations must manage multiple identities, including those that overlap or compete with each other. In the process, organizations in competitive markets will try to find an optimal position inclusive of distinctive but credible strategies. The optimal position of a given organization is to balance differentiation and conformity, specifically 'be as different as legitimately possible' (Deephouse 1999, 148). This framework may be particularly relevant for public universities. As the higher education sector becomes more open for (global) competition for students, staff and resources, being perceived as something unique may be more important to improve a university's relative competitive position. At the same time, since higher education is a highly institutionalized sector in which public legitimacy is important (Neave, 2000), a given university might be exposed to high risk if its strategies are not seen as reflecting the core missions of the sector (Fumasoli and Lepori 2011). Hence, in principle, several options exist for universities, which we outline below and use as frames for our analysis of the sample of university strategic plans.

A first strategy is quite familiar to students of higher education institutions. *Compartmentalization* describes how multiple identities are managed in a non-coordinated way, with discrete subunits responsible for maintaining and serving the identities (Pratt and Foreman 2000). This is a strategy that potentially results in loose coupling between activities and different priorities (Weick 1976). Universities

4

compartmentalize different activities to expand their organizational periphery; for example when opening up for quasi-autonomous technology transfer offices and similar initiatives (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). These new structures may serve to shield traditional units of the university from more contemporary pressures and expectations.

Universities may choose a second strategy of *deletion* where, when confronted with new expectations and the need to adopt multiple organizational identities, they simply "divest" from or prune certain parts of their existing missions (Pratt and Foreman 2000). Deletion might allow the university to become more focused and less likely to be fragmented or confused in attempts to respond to competing pressures. An example of deletion might be a university choosing to eliminate degree programs with indirect links to workforce development in an attempt to focus on producing more "job-ready" graduates.

A third strategy is *integration*, where multiple organizational identities are matched or joined together to create new units (Pratt and Foreman 2000). Given the increasing need to focus on both public and private public dimensions, this strategy may not be so much a choice but a necessity due to increasing dependence of external and competitive funding sources (Clark 2004; Stensaker and Benner 2013). Universities pursuing this strategy might, for example, find ways to leverage outreach or public engagement activities to service both their public mission and generate additional revenues in a new unit that fuses public engagement and private entrepreneurship. This strategy may work well where the dichotomy between private and public good is exaggerated, so that these dimensions may live side by side and increase organizational coherence (Krücken and Meier 2006, Pinheiro and Stensaker 2014).

A fourth strategy is *aggregation*, where an organization "attempts to retain all of its identities while forging links between them" but without integrating them into new units (Pratt and Foreman 2000, 32). This final strategy, if successful, would allow a university to manage competing or discrete organizational identities without creating new units, or choosing which among them to ignore or delete. Examples of aggregation would find many or all units of an organization capable of responding to the demands of multiple identifies. This might necessitate cultural shifts where, for example, a university with a new or increased reliance on tuition revenues would work with academic programs to incorporate new, student-centered approaches focused on retention and completion.

Study design, data and methodology

Sample and characteristics of institutions

We might expect universities to balance their multiple organizational identities similarly if they share common characteristics, including the capacity and interest to be engaged in the development of a more global higher education sector. Our objective was to sample public research universities in Europe and in North America that share the following

characteristics (relative to their national or state higher education system): 1) large size as of students and staff; 2) historical universities by year of foundation; 3) comprehensive educational and research profile; 4) large budget; 4) research intensive activities according to number of doctoral students. For the European cases, we drew on the Flagship project, funded by the Research Council of Norway, which examined public research universities in eight European countries characterized by high performance in terms of higher education and research. With this in mind, we used the global Shanghai Rankings as a point of departure to identify our sample of institutions. University ranking lists are assumed to have an impact on the global orientation of higher education institutions, and research-intensive universities in particular, when it comes to their internal governance and strategic profiling (Hazelkorn 2007). Top-ranked universities, for example, might formulate astrategy to maintain their standing, while universities aspiring to the top might express strategic objectives more explicitly.

The final sample included 19 universities from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland (our Northern European sample) and eight different states within the US and one Canadian university (our North America sample). The eight American universities and University of Toronto are among the top 100 in the Shanghai ranking, while six European universities are in the top 100, two rank between 101 and 150, and two are in included in the 151-200 positions. Lower-ranked universities were found in smaller Northern European countries. While the two sub-samples are not identical in ranking, they are clearly comparable.

Key characteristics of the sampled institutions are found in Table 1. North American universities in the sample are generally larger in terms of students (30,000-83,000) than the Northern European sample institutions (with the notable exception of Vienna). North American universities are, not surprisingly, larger also in terms of revenues. However, there is an inverted relationship between student tuition and fee revenues and state block grant or appropriation. Northern European universities in our sample realize more than 50% of their revenues from block grants and appropriations while the North American universities receive no more than 30%, but Northern European universities receive far less in student fees revenue (from 0% to 10%) than their North American counterparts. It is important to note that this is not a new phenomenon for the U.S. universities in our sample. For example, appropriations from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania made up only 16.8% of budget of the University of Pittsburgh (one of our sample universities) in fiscal year 2000 (University of Pittsburgh 1999). Auxiliary revenues (e.g. patenting, licensing, merchandising) are a significant source of revenue for American universities (up to 18% of total revenues at the University of Pittsburgh), but are not even published for Northern European universities. Finally, North American universities have, on average, larger proportions of graduate students, ranging from 20% to 30% of total student population.

Key data sources

The most recent strategic plans and documents are the key data sources for identifying how multiple organizational identifies are balanced in our sample of universities. We obtained these documents from university websites. We did not contact universities directly to verify the documents. All of the documents were analyzed using qualitative content analysis techniques (Krippendorff 2004). These and similar methods have been used in previous research on changing higher education missions to identify rhetoric linked to institutional ideology (Morphew and Hartley 2006; Taylor and Morphew 2010; Saichaie and Morphew 2014).

The main argument for focusing on strategic plans and documents is that strategic planning has become a ubiquitous process in higher education, ostensibly linked to universities' unique characteristics, long-term goals, and resource allocation. Pratt and Foreman (2000) point out that "organization identity comprises…central, distinctive, and enduring" characteristics (20). Strategic plans represent an appropriate place to gauge these characteristics. These plans involve the entire university community, particularly academic staff and administrators, and also key external constituents. Contemporary university strategic plans typically provide explicit goals, as well as metrics to identify how to achieve these goals. As such, these documents are particularly appropriate vehicles to assess how universities describe their efforts to balance potentially competing parts of their mission.[1]

It is important to note that, in some cases, we utilized documents not specifically described as strategic plans, though they plainly served that purpose. The authors carefully considered all of these documents and agreed they had a shared purpose to communicate to external stakeholders the short-term strategies being employed by the university in question. For example, the University of Arizona document is titled "Never Settle: The Plan for the University of Arizona" and Aarhus University's plan is simply called "Strategy" (see Appendix A for more information).The strategic plans and documents analyzed are quite different with respect to length (from a few pages to one hundred), layout (some look like corporate leaflets, others resemble working documents), format (some refer to the university in general, others are divided according to faculties and/or campuses), and how specifically they articulate their objectives and goals. Some have pictures, others do not. Their accessibility also differs: some are available on the Internet. All except one were available in English. Where we could not find documents akin to strategic plans, we did not include the university as part of our analysis.

---

[1] We make no assumptions regarding how (or whether) strategic plans are operationalized. Our analysis is focused on how these plans communicate the balancing act universities engage in.

Working independently, each researcher analyzed several documents and then the group came together to discuss the examples that corresponded to each of the Pratt and Foreman's (2000) frames. This method ensured agreement and reliability across the researchers' analyses, as different views about the meaning and placement of a specific example were discussed and settled. Following this initial discussion, the remaining strategic plans were analyzed by at least one researcher and researchers came together to discuss examples about which they were unsure.

Indicators of public and private dimensions of higher education

We used the work of Labaree (1997) to characterize which parts of the strategic plans were linked to public or private dimensions. He identifies three competing goals for educational institutions: *democratic equality* or the goal of producing engaged citizens; *social efficiency,* which focuses on the production of suitable workers; and *social mobility*. The first two goals are linked to notions of public good. He describes social mobility as a private good, often linked to individual ends, such as increased earnings or social standing.

Labaree's (1997) work is consistent with the contemporary debates about the role and purpose of public universities discussed above (see, for example, Marginson, 2007). The introduction of market-based governance reforms, the addition of private monies, and the subtraction of public subsidies may require public universities to reconsider their ambitions and priorities. For example, if public subsidies are removed, social mobility may appear to be a more useful goal for universities bent on attracting more (paying) students and the best and brightest of researchers, with their ties to research grants and industry contracts. Our analysis of the strategic plans adjusts Labaree's (1997) conception of the competing public and private goals of education to fit research-intensive universities as our unit of analysis. Hence 'social mobility' becomes 'organizational mobility,' addressing how the university characterizes its ambitions in relations to other (similar) universities, e.g. ranking position. Relevant institutional policies would include the recruitment of excellent students and faculty, as well as acquisition of resources to enable such plans. Labaree's 'democratic equality' becomes 'service' or institutional attempts to create better citizens through the university experience. One example would be community service, or engagement with the local area, region, or country to apply research and knowledge in the goal of improving citizens' lives. Finally 'social efficiency' at the organizational level is related to labor markets, economic productivity, applied research and technology transfer, patents and licensing. Universities engaged in social efficiency demonstrate relevance by fulfilling societal needs and contributing to socio-economic growth.

Possible intervening factors explaining variation

Our expectation is that all universities in our sample, because of the changed environments in which they operate, will demonstrate a significant focus on the private dimensions of their mission. There may, however, be differences in how they profile themselves strategically, particularly in terms of how they balance public and private identities, as suggested in our theoretical framework.

For example, North American universities have traditionally relied more on private revenues, hence one would expect that their strategic plans highlight more significantly private rather than public identities. The North American universities in our sample are significantly more reliant on private sources of revenue than are European universities (see Table 1). As a result, we might expect more instances of organizational mobility and less focus on service and social efficiency in the North American strategic plans we analyze. Northern European universities, which are still funded substantially by public sources (see Table 1), might be expected to balance their stakeholders with greater attention paid to their public funding authorities. This means that these universities' public mission – as formulated by public authorities – should be privileged in comparison to private dimensions. The more universities rely on state authorities, the more integration and deletion of competing objectives may be detected in their strategic plans. Universities need to legitimize their strategy primarily in the eyes of funding authorities, with whom they may have negotiated the main goals.

The methods used to balance these public and private dimensions may be different as well. For example, North American universities are more dependent on private sources of funding than Northern European universities, which might result in balancing strategies that emphasize aggregation or even deletion, if the former group finds it more credible or functional to cast off traditional units without private revenue opportunities. Northern European universities may be more likely to compartmentalize than their North American counterparts because doing so may be a way of buffering their traditional core from the new pressures of an increasingly privatized environment.

Please insert here Table 1

Results

Below we present the results of our analysis, per the public and private goods described by Labaree (1997). After, we discuss the findings in the context of Pratt and Foreman's (2000) framework for assessing how organizations balance multiple identities.

Organizational mobility

9

In our sample of universities there is a strong tendency to emphasize organizational mobility, especially concerning the ambition to 'reach the top'. Within the plans, there are several references to self-assessments as being excellent and to the belonging among the best of universities domestically and globally. Typically, the university would cite its ranking and then its hope of improving on that ranking. The European universities were more likely than their North American peers to cite specific rankings goals.

Rankings are used in particular as a sign of social status and how close to the top an institution is in the global university hierarchy. For example, Aarhus University in Denmark states in its preface that:

> Aarhus University is already among the world´s 100 best universities, and in the top ten of the youngest of these. This gives the university a strong position from which to tackle the increasing competition for research funding, and the brightest young talents. (Aarhus University, 7)

Reflections on current position in rankings and strategic objectives in this regard appear to be at different stages of institutionalization. Hence, the University of Vienna describes strategic profiling as a process that has just started (University of Vienna, Development Plan 2015, 8), while the University of Copenhagen devotes the first chapter of its strategy to its position 'being challenged' (University of Copenhagen, 4-11).

The University of Helsinki's strategic plan is explicit in its goal to advance in rankings in order to better itself, the quality of its faculty and students.

> Our strategic objective is to be counted among the 50 leading universities in the world by directing resources to the development of a world-class teaching and research infrastructure [...] Thus, we can continue to attract top students and scholars both from Finland and abroad. (University of Helsinki, 7)

Rankings are used as a barometer of current success and, to some extent, an explicit goal. If there is a difference in how rankings are cited, it manifests in how the North American universities' tend to focus on their current status, rather than a specific ranking goal. For example, in an introduction to its strategic plan by the Chancellor at UC San Diego, it is stated that:

> UC San Diego is recognized as one of the top public research universities in the country and one of the top twenty universities in the world. (UC San Diego, x)

This statement reflects a type of satisfaction with current status while, in comparison, Northern European universities like Helsinki (see above) and Copenhagen seem eager to declare their aspirations to improve their relative position. It could be that those at the top of the rankings want to maintain their standing, while those somewhere below the top

aspire to climb further. However the universities professing a desire to improve their rankings position are those that have already a very good to excellent position (i.e. in the top 100 of the Shanghai ranking). Instead, the universities in the sample that are lower ranked (like Gothenburg and Vienna, both 151-200 in the Shanghai ranking) were less prone to make specific statements and express clear objectives.

How top positions in the university hierarchy are to be secured is also quite frequently described. One common denominator is universities' plans to invest in academic excellence – both students and staff. As stated by UCLA:

> Academic excellence begins with recruiting and retaining the most outstanding students and faculty…[The university must] maintain competitive levels of faculty, administrative, and staff salaries. [and] Aggressively counter outside recruitment of outstanding faculty. (UCLA, 4)

In Europe, where there is less history for the recruitment and selection of students, one can find many examples of statements underlining the need to be perceived as an attractive and competitive place to study. In several strategic plans, attention is given to recruiting and keeping excellent and 'star' academics. As an example, the strategic plan of the University of Amsterdam is titled '*An Eye for Talent*' and focuses on the university's aim to enroll the best students.

> But a university is never better than its best students. Alongside programmes that offer sufficient challenges for all students, top students must have the extra scope they need to succeed. (University of Amsterdam, 11)

The University of Vienna's strategic plan also notes the importance of enrolling the best students. Its plan mentions the option of regulating student access in order to enhance economic sustainability and compete with benchmark universities on indicators such as students per professor and budget per student (University of Vienna, 13-19).

Signs of organizational mobility can also be found in other dimensions in the strategic plans. Maximizing budgets and improving revenue is a strong trend among all the universities. North American universities have a longer tradition of focusing on these aspects (fundraising in particular), and Northern European universities historically have had a much larger share of their funding from public non-competitive or result-based sources. Nonetheless, the Northern European universities in our sample are clear on their agenda along this dimension. For example, the University of Oslo documents its goal of becoming more financially independent and accountable.

> The University of Oslo is expected to do more in the face of global and national challenges. At the same time, UiO is asked to be more

accountable for the use of its own resources in a situation where financial constraints are becoming tighter. (University of Oslo, 5)

There is a clear trend among the sampled universities that organizational mobility is key to the strategic plans of both North American and Northern European universities. Several competitive arenas are mentioned: while rankings are directly or indirectly mentioned, universities' ambitions may be national (Ohio State University as the Nation's leading public land-grant university), regional (University of Vienna's benchmark on German-speaking top universities: University of Zurich in Switzerland and Ludwig Maximilian University Munich in Germany), European (e.g. University of Copenhagen), global (University of Zurich among the 'world foremost universities' (University of Zurich, 14)).

Service to society

Many of the sampled universities have a long tradition for offering service to the society. The strategic plans offer much evidence tat such service ambitions are still visible and underline how important the students are for building future democratic societies and welfare states. Another typical service task is communicating the outcome of research and development projects to the public. A third trend is to emphasize inter- and multi-disciplinarity as the key ways forward to solve global challenges in health, environment or energy areas, or a multi-cultural society. In essence, this is – along with the aim of being excellent – one of the central characteristics of the strategic plans. One typical example among the universities analyzed is the mission statement from UC San Diego contained in its strategic plan:

> UC San Diego will transform California and a diverse global society by educating, generating and disseminating knowledge and creative works, and engaging in public service. (UC San Diego, 1)

Likewise, the University of Washington vision statement outlines the university's service mission to the world.

> We are compassionate and committed to the active pursuit of global engagement and connectedness. We assume leadership roles to make the world a better place through education and research. We embrace our role to foster engaged and responsible citizenship as part of the learning experience of our students, faculty and staff. (University of Washington, 2)

However, while generic missions can be identified throughout the plans, there are still some distinctive differences between North American and Northern European universities on this dimension. First, North American universities are much more

accountable than the ones from Europe, citing explicit numbers and indicators of achievement and progress. Examples are the strategic positioning plan of the University of Minnesota and Ohio State University, which are full of detailed measurements on progress and time lines scheduling how development can and should be made. Another example is the University of Washington, which operationalizes a vague statement about its commitment to society cited above with actionable items including developing new academic programs, and establishing new 'global learning goals' for students (5). In contrast, many of the Northern European universities include generic mission statements accompanied by more abstract narratives elaborating on key ideas and visions that lack easily-measured deliverables. An example can be taken from the strategic plan of the Aarhus University, which emphasizes that:

> Aarhus University is a signatory of the European universities´ Magna Carta. The university defends the research freedom of individuals and desires to maintain and develop a culture that promotes collaboration, critical dialogue, curiosity and the independent search for new knowledge and insight. (Aarhus University, 16)

A second difference between the Northern European and the North American universities in the sample is that the educational dimension, including an emphasis on the student experience and student diversity, is given a more prominent place and space in the North American plans than in the Northern European ones. An example here is UCLA, which underlines as one of its key aims:

> UCLA will be the exemplar for problem-based teaching and research through local and international engagement. (UCLA, 3)

Most of the other American universities include similar 'student-centered' or 'learner-centered' statements in their plans and vision statements, including the University of Washington, whose 'Goal 1' is 'Attract a diverse and excellent student body and provide a rich learning experience' and whose 'Goal 2' is 'Attract and retain an outstanding and diverse faculty and staff to enhance educational quality, research strength, and prominent leadership' (University of Washington, 4). Similarly, Ohio State University devotes eight of its fourteen strategic objectives to education and students, while the University of Toronto declares that 'Enhancing the student experience is [..] number one priority' (University of Toronto, 9). The prominence of student learning could also be the result of the paradigm shift from teaching to learning (Barr & Tagg 1995). This change has started earlier in North America and could have been further institutionalized by accreditors' distinctive requirements focused on learners and assessments[2].

Northern European and North American universities outline strategies to foster diversity in the student body, in particular when it comes to minorities. UCLA, UCSD, Washington, and Pittsburgh feature diversity frequently in their plans. Among the

---

[2] 'We thank Reviewer 1 for pointing to this issue.

European institutions, the Catholic University of Leuven stands out with its principles of solidarity, care of vulnerable members of society, and with its pursuit of a 'proactive diversity policy' addressing both students and staff (University of Leuven, 1). The University of Amsterdam describes 'diversity as a driver of performance' (26), making the claim that it cannot become a top-ranked university unless it embraces the cosmopolitan and diverse nature of its host city. Ohio State University argues that diversity strategies are central in a country where 'By 2050, Caucasian population will drop to around 50%' in order to prepare students to a 'more global economy' (Ohio State University, 8).

Social efficiency

We see social efficiency as a concept covering the economic and instrumental sides of how a university may relate to the society. Indicators of social efficiency are statements that speak to the importance of technology transfer units and activities, patenting, and other forms of activities with an economic potential. Where sample universities connected their ambitions and notions of excellence to contributions to local or state economies, we also coded their statements as related to social efficiency.

Unexpectedly, North American universities in the sample do not appear to place more emphasis on social efficiency than their European peers. For example, while UCLA has a plan for 'transforming UCLA,' it is hard to find in it any particular ambitions concerning improving what we label as social efficiency. The University of Amsterdam, on the other hand, goes so far as to describe its 'excellent academic staff' as 'human capital' while Stockholm University states that its research mission is based on scientific discovery leading to economic development and applied solutions to propel Sweden forward.

> Modern society is characterised by the explosive development of science. Science has given us today's advanced technology. Via the ideological heritage of the Enlightenment, it has led to our democratic society. But it has also led to the problems that now threaten our very existence – problems that can only be solved by science. (Stockholm University, 1)

There is some evidence that North American universities see their role as producing 'human capital' for the economy. UCSD, for instance, lists as its first strategy the provision of career advising 'across all colleges, departments, and units' (3). Ohio State University also stands out in this regard with its mission as a public land-grant university including economic development in Ohio.

> We will become the catalyst for the development of Ohio's technology-based community. Increase collaborations with the private sector to enhance research, successfully transfer University technology, and provide experiential learning and career opportunities for students. We

will aggressively support activities that can 'leapfrog' Ohio State into a position of national prominence in technology partnerships, particularly broad-scale involvement with companies that enhances research and experiential learning opportunities for students. (Ohio State University, 15)

Here, Ohio State University blends social efficiency with student experience, thus integrating its diverse missions.

The University of Toronto presents a concise strategy on 'Commercialization and sponsored contract research' by outlining its excellent performance in licensing inventions in the Canadian higher education system, while at the same time discussing drivers of success, or balancing intellectual property between institution and faculty, and organizing the structure for technology transfer (University of Toronto, 30-31)

In European universities, the social efficiency dimension is more explicit about activities and ambitions, as exemplified in the strategic plan of the University of Gothenburg:

…the University of Gothenburg is to continue to develop its platform for courses in entrepreneurship, research, CIP (Centre for Intellectual Property), administrative research and innovation support, as well as the University´s holding company. (University of Gothenburg, 27)

Still, while specific initiatives are mentioned, it is rare to find any attempts of setting targets and milestones. In some cases, innovation strategies, patenting and technology transfer appear to be disconnected from the rest of the strategic plan. The section on Innovation strategy of University of Vienna outlines a generic willingness to cooperate with the private sector, while affirming that

…[the University of Vienna] strives to take the inventors' interests into account and create a climate which is beneficial for the appreciation of invention achievements as a special form of scientific excellence.' (University of Vienna, 23)

In this respect, there is significant similarity between the North American and Northern European approaches to how the service to society dimension is handled: many visions, an emphasis on processes, and few measurable or bold objectives.

Discussion

We have noticed key similarities and distinct features in how public and/or private dimensions are balanced in the strategic plans of European and North American universities. These differences may be a function of several factors, including unique histories, recent policy changes, and issues related to governance, including very different accreditation traditions. We found that all the universities pay significant attention to

organizational mobility, but that they also clearly – if with different nuances – underline the service to society function, while the social efficiency dimension is more often highlighted by the Northern European universities in the sample. How universities' strategic plans are articulated around these three dimensions suggests evidence of a common global race for excellence that incorporates public and private organizational identities. These findings also suggest a blurring of the boundaries between public and private dimensions consistent with the work of other scholars (Labaree 1997; Marginson 2007; 2011).

Conceptually, our interest has been how strategic plans articulate distinctive balances between differentiation and legitimacy (Deephouse 2000), and how the framework of Pratt and Foreman (2000) can explain the patterns we see in our sample strategic plans. For example, can this framework help us understand the surprising finding that the social efficiency dimension is less visible in the North American strategic plans? Below we use Pratt and Foreman's frame to make better sense of our analysis and consider the implications.

Our analysis highlighted several *compartmentalization* strategies evident in sample universities' strategic plans, not least related to how the typical university strategy is broken down into sub-strategies and activities. The strategic plans we analyzed are consistent in that research and education are mentioned separately while innovation activities, service to society and entrepreneurship can be found as stand-alone initiatives. Significantly, topics related to 'diversity' and 'sustainability,' that appear in most of the strategic plans, are woven into many parts of the documents.

Examples of *aggregation* are also present throughout the strategic plans. Many universities seem to deliberately attempt to merge public and private dimensions, and the strategic plans suggest that these two dimensions can be combined. This may be an attempt to "exploit synergies" (Pratt and Foreman 2000, 32) where universities see opportunity. The opportunity may be a function of the state's devolution of governance consistent with Marginson's (2007) declaration that "statist" perspectives are not helpful for researchers studying contemporary organizational behavior. Our finding that the plans were largely devoid of visible measures of social efficiency may be a function of the increasingly blurred boundary between public and private stakeholders. That is, strategies cued to social efficiency are tightly linked to other parts of university strategies addressing local and regional communities. These strategies highlight organizational mobility as well but often include a nod to the university's role in producing graduates with employable skills that will contribute to local and regional economies. As a result, the process of aggregation seems to diminish or even *delete* less important university goals.

Various types of balances come to the fore and we see several examples of *integration*, where all the current activities are perceived as fine, but where some sort of coordination

is needed, often between what might be seen as competing goals or identities. Other examples of integration were visible in attempts to merge private university identities with efforts to improve the university's financial conditions.

Study Implications

This explorative study both confirms and challenges existing beliefs about how public research-intensive universities are handling the expectations they currently face.

We began with several assumptions about the implications of an increasing focus on university private mission, given recent governance reforms granting institutional autonomy and funding diversification. We assumed that these reforms would have demonstrable implications for university strategic plans and that evolutionary differences in governance and finance between the North American and European universities in our sample would be evident. In fact, some of the differences we identified can be explained by the level of public funding. One could argue, for example, that the strong focus on organizational mobility in the strategic plans of European universities may be the result of recent political pressures towards 'research excellence' and global competition put forward by European and national agendas.

Second, our study does find a key difference between the Northern European and the North American universities in our sample. A significantly stronger emphasis on the educational provision – and students – is evident in the North American plans. There may be several reasons for this difference. It might be explained by a different tradition regarding the educational mission, but also because attracting (paying) students is directly connected to university sustainability. It also may be the result of a more competitive higher education marketplace in North America; a marketplace that means UCLA must compete with Minnesota for the best and brightest students. This marketplace has been analyzed in other research studies, with findings that suggest North American universities' catering to students may have negative consequences for student expectations (Hartley and Morphew 2008; Saichaie and Morphew 2014;). Finally, the difference might be a function of audience: strategic plans in Europe seem be written for a broader audience, while the North American plans are more executive in nature, and consequently more detailed when it comes to concrete tasks and activities.

Another major difference that emerged is the greater European attention to social efficiency. This was in contrast to our expectation that North American universities, with their longstanding tradition of corporate cooperation and skills-based education, would tackle social efficiency more substantially. This difference may be reflective of Northern European universities realizing that future revenue streams must include money from corporate partners and research products. At the other hand, it might echo broader political agendas, which have challenged European universities' legitimacy in relation with their societal relevance and their contribution to the socio-economic development of societies. An additional expectation that needs further investigation is that social

efficiency is articulated as part of the private mission, hence blending with organizational mobility. In other words, if climbing in rankings and similar activities becomes the key priority in these universities, one could contend that social efficiency – e.g. providing qualified workforce to the 'Knowledge Economy' – is instrumental to that end. Whatever the explanation, all of these possibilities reflect the need to balance multiple identities when "resource constraints are high" and the increasing necessity for greater integration of mission (Pratt & Foreman 2000).

Our expectations about how universities balance their public and private missions have proven to be only partially demonstrated in this study. As we expected, North American and Canadian universities compartmentalize and/or aggregate their competing objectives in order to reach their multiple constituencies, but they do so by focusing on diversified funding sources, on their excellent position in rankings, on service to society and on student experience. European universities tend to couple their goals more tightly, leveraging all three dimensions in order to present a trajectory of scientific excellence. This trajectory is signaled by their (desired) position in rankings and supported by their societal relevance in terms of service, efficiency and educational offer. These are different balancing acts and worth of greater exploration, to identify whether they might produce different results in how these universities make decisions about priorities.

Our last observation leads us to expect that the strategic plans of North American and continental European universities mirror different changing dynamics of university missions. The North American plans clearly separate public and private missions, allowing for loosely coupled objectives to coexist quite independently. The European plans build a hierarchy of dimensions, which on the one hand coexist more closely, on the other hand, seem to point to a primacy of organizational mobility.

This study raises a number of questions that are worthy of further exploration, if we are to understand more about the strategies of research universities and the impact that changing environments, including funding and governance reform, have on the decisions and priorities of these important institutions. Chief among these are questions about whether the priorities reflected in these plans are merely symbolic or substantive, and how they relate to the governmental policies such as accreditation or quality assurance. Our study was not focused on the cause of these differences, so research that investigates how strategic planning at research universities is affected by changing governance would be helpful, as would research that explored how strategic plans manifested changes in university behavior. We also need to know more about the relative weight of items in strategic plans; it seems likely that all priorities are not equal and that some goals linked to constructs like organizational mobility might get more or less attention than, say, goals linked to social efficiency. This relative weight may play out in how plans drive decision-making at universities; not all priorities may be equally easy to act upon. As we note in the beginning of this manuscript, strategic plans are increasingly ubiquitous and

potentially important documents: they reflect national and state higher education governance systems, as well as, more specifically, accreditation procedures, which might focus differently on the diverse activities linked to teaching, research, services. Strategic plans could tell us much more about how universities function; but more empirical work is needed if we are to understand their impact on function and form.

References

Altbach, P. G. 2011. "The complex roles of universities in the period of globalization" Higher Education in the World, 3: 5-14. https://upcommons.upc.edu/revistes/bitstream/2099/8111/1/altbach.pdf

Barr, R. B. and and Tagg, J. 1995 "From Teaching to Learning. A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education". *Change*, (November/December), 13-25.

Berdahl, R. O. 1998. „Balancing self-interest and accountability: St. Mary's College of Maryland" *Seeking excellence through independence*, 60(66), 61.

Breneman, D. W. 2004. *Are the states and public higher education striking a new bargain?* Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

Clark, B.R. 2004. *Sustaining Change in Universities: Continuities in Case Studies and Concepts.* Berkeley: University of California.

Couturier, L. K. 2006. *Checks and Balances at Work: The Restructuring of Virginia's Higher Education System*. San Jose: National Center for Higher Education Policy. http://www.highereducation.org/reports/checks_balances/virginia.pdf.

Deephouse, D.L. 1999. "To be different, or to be the same? It´s a question (and theory) of strategic balance" *Strategic Management Journal*, 20: 147-166.

Elo, S., and H. Kyngäs. 2008. "The qualitative content analysis process". *Journal of advanced nursing*, *62*(1): 107-115.

File, J.M., H. F. de Boer, I. M. Larsen, S. Nickel and B. Stensaker. 2006. *The extent and impact of higher education governance reform across Europe. Part three: Five case studies on governance reform*. Enschede (NL): CHEPS, University of Twente.

Frølich, N., J. Huisman, S. Slipersæter, B. Stensaker and P. Bótas. 2013. "A re-interpretation of institutional transformations in European higher education: Strategising pluralistic organisations in multiplex environments" *Higher Education*, 65: 79 – 93.

Fumasoli, T. and B. Lepori. 2011. "Patterns of strategies in Swiss Higher Education Institutions" *Higher Education,* 61:157–178.

Fumasoli, T. and B. Stensaker. 2013. "Organizational Studies in Higher Education: a reflection on historical themes and prospective trends" *Higher Education Policy,* 26: 479-496.

Fumasoli, T., Å. Gornitzka and P. Maassen. 2014. *Institutional autonomy and organizational change*. ARENA Working Paper 8, Oslo: University of Oslo.

Fumasoli, T., Pinheiro, R., Stensaker, B. (2015) Handling uncertainty of strategic ambitions. The use of organizational identity as a risk-reducing device. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 38 (13/14),1030-1040.

Gumport, P.J. 2000. "Academic restructuring: Organizational change and institutional imperatives" *Higher Education*, 39 (1): 67-91.

Hartley, J.M. and C. C. Morphew. 2008. "What's being sold and to what end? A content analysis of college viewbooks" *Journal of Higher Education,* 79(6): 671-691.

Hartley, M., V. Gadsden, I. Harkavy and R. Hodges. 2013. "Leading Institutional Change to Promote a Diverse Democracy" in *Leadership and Governance in Higher Education: Handbook for Decision-Makers and Administrators* edited by S. Bergan, E. Egron-Polak, J., Kohler and L. Purser, 2-18. Berlin: Raabe Academic Publishers.

Hazelkorn, E. (2007) The Impact of League Tables and Ranking Systems on Higher Education Decision Making, *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 19(2): 1-24.

Krippendorff, K. 2004. *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Krücken, G., and F. Meier. 2006. „Turning the university into an organizational actor" in *Globalization and organization: world society and organizational change* edited by G. S. Drori, J. W. Meyer and H. Hwang, 241–257. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Labaree, D. F. 1997. "Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals" *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(1): 39-81.

Marginson, S. (2007). "The public/private divide in higher education: a global revision. *Higher Education, 53*: 307-333.

Marginson, S. (2011). "Higher education and public good" *Higher Education Quarterly*, 65(4): 411-433.

Morphew, C.C. and P. D. Eckel, eds. 2009. *Diverse Perspectives on the Privatization of the Public Research University.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Morphew, C. C., and M. Hartley. 2006. "Mission statements: A thematic analysis of rhetoric across institutional type" *Journal of Higher Education*, 77(3): 456-471.

Neave, G. 2000. ed. *The Universities' Responsibilities to Society: International Perspectives.* Amsterdam: Elsevier Science.

Olsen, J. P. 2007. "The institutional dynamics of the European university" in *University dynamics and European integration* edited by P. Maassen and J. P. Olsen, 25-53, Dordrecht: Springer.

Pratt, M.G. and P. O. Foreman. 2000. "Classifying managerial responses to multiple organizational identities" *Academy of Management Review*, 25: 18-42.

Saichaie, K. and C. C. Morphew. 2014. "What college and university websites reveal about the purposes of higher education" *Journal of Higher Education,* 85(4): 499-530.

Slaughter, S. and G. Rhoades. 2004. *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*. Baltimore: JHU Press.

Stensaker, B. and M. Benner. 2013. "Doomed to be entrepreneurial? Institutional transformation or institutional lock-in of ´new´ universities" *Minerva*, 51(4): 399-416.

Stensaker, B. and A. Vabø. 2013. "Re-Inventing Shared Governance – implications for the academic leadership" *Higher Education Quarterly*, 56(3): 256-274.

Stensaker, B., N. Frølich, J. Huisman, E. Waagene, L. Scordato, L. and P. Botas. 2014. "Factors affecting the realization of Strategic change in Higher Education" *Journal of Strategy and Management*.

Taylor, B.J. and C. C. Morphew 2010. "An analysis of baccalaureate college mission statements" *Research in Higher Education*, 51(5): 483-503.

University of Pittsburgh 1999. *Fact Book.* Available at http://www.ir.pitt.edu/factbook/fbweb99/finances/distbudgt.htm.

Verhoest, K., B. G. Peters, G. Bouckaert and B. Verschuere. 2004. "The study of organisational autonomy: A conceptual review" *Public Administration and Development*, 24(2): 101-118.

Appendix A: Strategic documents by university*

	Title of strategic document	Year of publication
University of Arizona	*Never Settle. The Plan for the University of Arizona, 2013-2018*	n.d.
University of Minnesota	*Achieving Excellence. Academic Strategic Positioning 2005-2010*	2005
Ohio State University	*The Ohio State University Academic Plan 2000*	2012
University of Pittsburgh	*Self-Study Design*	2010
University of Toronto	*Towards 2030. Planning for a Third Century of Excellence at the University of Toronto*	2007
UCLA	*Transforming UCLA for the 21st Century*	2010
UCSD	*2014 Strategic Plan UC San Diego: Defining the future of the public research university*	2014
University of Utah	*Strategic Vision*	n.d.
University of Washington	*Strategic Plan*	2011
Aarhus University	*Strategy 2013-2030*	n.d.
University of Amsterdam	*An Eye for Talent 2011-2014*	n.d.
University of Copenhagen	*2016 Strategy for the University of Copenhagen*	2012
University of Gothenburg	*Change for Quality and renewal. Strategies for Research and Education 2009-2012*	n.d.
University of Helsinki	*The Best for the World. Strategic plan for the University of Helsinki 2013–2016*	2012
KU Leuven	*Identity and mission of KU Leuven*	2012
University of Oslo	*Strategy 2020*	2010
Stockholm	*2011-2015 Long-term Plan (in Swedish)*	2010

University		
University of Vienna	*2015 Development Plan 2015*	2012
University of Zurich	*Strategic Goals 2020*	2012

*All strategic documents are the latest available. They can be retrieved from the universities'   homepages   as   of   10.05.2016

Table 1: Characteristics of North American and Northern European universities.

(*Sources: university websites and reports, national ministries, national statistical offices.*

Figures 2014 if not specified. Change rate to EUR on xe.com 08.02.2016)

	Country	Students	Graduate Students	Revenue EUR (millions)	Student fees (% revenue)	Public revenue (%)	Auxiliary Revenue (% revenue)	Shanghai Ranking 2015
University of Arizona	U.S.	42,236	7,720 (2013)	1,848 (2013)	23.4 (2013)	29.6 (2013)	9.7	90
University of Minnesota	U.S.	68,418	18,045 (2013)	2,637 (2013)	23.9 (2013)	15.7 (2013)	7.3	30
Ohio State University	U.S.	64,868	13,413 (2013)	3,960 (2013)	18.1 (2013)	9.3 (2013)	7.0	67
University of Pittsburgh	U.S.	35,014	10,034 (2013)	1,507 (2013)	35,4 (2013)	9.5 (2013)	18.1	70
University of Toronto	CAN	84,556	15,884 (2013)	1,793 (2013)	30,4 (2013)	25,3 (2013)	n.a.	25
UCLA	U.S.	43,239	12,121 (2013)	4,477 (2013)	6,4 (2013)	6,6 (2013)	6.6	12
UCSD	U.S.	31,502	6,505 (2013)	2,732 (2013)	15,4 (2013)	7,7 (2013)	4.9	14
University of Utah	U.S.	31,515	7,548 (2013)	2,672 (2013)	8,6 (2013)	8,3 (2013)	3.2	93
University of Washington	U.S.	44'786	12,000	4,477 (2013)	8,8 (2013)	3,5 (2013)	11.2	15
Aarhus University	DK	38,120	1,827	826 (2013)	n.a.	65	n.a.	73
University of Amsterdam	NL	31,186	1,340	506	n.a.	81	n.a.	101-150
University of Copenhagen	DK	40,486	3,083	1,112	n.a.	63	n.a.	35

University of Gothenburg	SE	25,001 (FTE)	1,920	522 (2011)	n.a.	67 (2011)	n.a.	151-200
University of Helsinki	FI	34,833	4,682	715	n.a.	61	n.a.	67
KU Leuven	BE	41,255 (2012/2013)	11% (2011/2012)	933	n.a.	41	n.a.	90
University of Oslo	NO	27,227 (2015)	3,018 (2015)	740 (2015)	n.a.	73.0 (2015)	n.a.	58
Stockholm University	SE	69,723	1,788	491	n.a.	68.0	n.a.	77
University of Vienna	AT	88,480	8,945	533	n.a.	53,8 (2013)	n.a.	151-200
University of Zurich	CH	25,634	4,538 (2013)	1,213	n.a.	66	n.a.	54

27