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ORIGINAL PAPER

The determinants of university strategic positioning and the obscuring of institutional diversity: an Australian case study

Julian Zipparo[1]

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the recent body of research exploring strategic positioning, and the processes and factors which influence the development and content of university strategies and plans, with lessons then applied to open questions of institutional diversity and its determinants. Following a sector level analysis of the contents of university positioning documents, an in-depth case study is developed of a large Australian university, where the interaction of intra-institutional 'meso' layers is explored to show a confluence of factors contributing to positioning. The case demonstrates that institutional positioning involves the selective crafting of narratives for multiple purposes, including the seeking and portrayal of internal cohesion, identity enhancement, and resource seeking. Importantly, while cross-institutional comparison of positioning narratives portrays an undifferentiated and somewhat homogenous sector, positioning is found within the case institution to obscure what is significant internal diversity and complexity. The implications of these findings for research exploring institutional diversity, and policies seeking to stimulate it, are discussed.

Keywords Strategic positioning · Institutional diversity · University research · Australian higher education

Introduction

Institutional diversity has been the subject of scholarly interest traceable to a long history. Within the social sciences, it has been mapped from the works of Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons into the modern-day, as well as spanning a range of discipline areas from Darwinian biological origins through organisational studies (Van Vught 2007, 2008). Within higher education studies, the amount of empirical work exploring similarities and differences between and within institutions has accelerated in recent years since several prominent

✉ Julian Zipparo
julian.zipparo@uts.edu.au

[1] University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Table 1 Published institutional diversity research studies since 2012 by jurisdiction explored

Jurisdiction/higher education system(s) explored	*Author(s) (year)*
Australia	Coates et al., (2013); Croucher & Woelert (2015); Davis (2017); Diezmann (2018); Mahat (2014)
Canada	Piché (2015); Weingarten et al., (2013)
Europe	Huisman & Tight (2015); Nokkala & Diogo (2020); Uslu (2018)
Flanders (Belgium)	Mampaey (2016)
Germany	Erhardt & von Kotzebue (2016); Jungblut (2017); Kosmützky & Krücken (2015)
Italy	Catteneo et al. (2018)
Netherlands	Widiputera et al. (2017)
Poland	Antonowicz (2013)
Spain	Coello et al., (2018)
Switzerland	Lepori et al., (2013)
United Kingdom	Huisman & Mampaey (2018); O'Connell (2015); Purcell et al., (2015); Seeber et al., (2017)
United States of America	Harris & Ellis (2020)
Multiple systems	Bowl (2018) (New Zealand & England); Fumasoli et al., (2019) (England and Italy); Moodie (2015) (UK, USA & Australia); Morphew et al., (2016) (Northern Europe & North America); Paradeise & Thoenig (2013) (France, Italy, Switzerland & USA); Pinheiro et al., (2016) (Australia, Canada, Norway); Salini & Turri (2015) (Italy & UK)

researchers in the area pointed out that there had been a relative paucity of it (Goedegebuure et al., 2009; Huisman et al., 2007, 2015; Teichler, 2010; van Vught, 2008).

A review of the literature published in the most recent decade alone shows that institutional diversity has been explored across a wide array of jurisdictions (see Table 1). Correcting for what were observed as the shortcomings of relevant research of an earlier time (Codling & Meek, 2006), research designs overwhelmingly moved in recent decades to the use of quantitative methods amenable to distinguishing variation and trends. An associated tendency is evident for selecting variables of focus suited to these methods. When compared, the results of previous research demonstrate heterogenous and at times contradictory results, with the question of what determines institutional diversity in particular an ongoing challenge (Fumasoli et al., 2019; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Rossi, 2009).

Despite a contemporary milieu in which research has come to occupy a heightened reputational and strategic significance within higher education (Meek et al., 2000; Taylor, 2006), empirical works exploring diversity questions with an explicit focus upon university research functions are less prevalent than those utilising teaching or education indicators. Moreover, studies which have focussed upon research, have trended toward the application of quantitative approaches to objectively measurable proxies for research, such as: institutional finances (Salini & Turri, 2015); research metrics such as research income, publications and citations (Beerkens, 2012; Taylor, 2003; Weingarten et al., 2013); 'research

involvement' as indicated by the ratio of PhD students in a student cohort (Huisman 2015); and access to and success in obtaining competitively allocated research funds (Horta et al., 2008; Rossi, 2009; Taylor, 2003).

Strategic positioning and its application to the study of institutional diversity

Theoretical frameworks applied to institutional diversity research have been heavily influential and appear to have evolved through some broadly observable trends. In recent decades, a favouring of frameworks with environmental or structuralist emphases is noticeable (cf. Bowl, 2018; Croucher & Woelert, 2015; Frølich et al., 2013; Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Harris & Ellis, 2020; Huisman & Mampaey, 2018; Mahat, 2014; Morphew, 2009; Piché, 2015; Zha, 2009). Works utilising such frameworks, coupled with the aforementioned methodological approaches, have increased the field's understanding in many ways, in particular of the ways in which external or environmental factors can constrain diversity. At the same time, however, the field continues to grapple with developing explanatory insights for what is observed. Though continuing to emerge throughout the course of this research, a collection of works have sought to redress this balance through the prism of institutional strategic positioning (for which a comprehensive literature review of 106 published works can be found in Fumasoli, Barbato and Turri (2020)).

Strategic positioning perspectives build upon the idea that organisations, and those within them, are integrated and goal-oriented actors capable of deliberate choices (cf. Krücken & Meier, 2006). While external factors provide a framework around organisational action, institutions also play an active role, rather than solely being passive responders to external or environmental factors. *It is at the juncture of the creation of strategies and plans that an interplay is observed between organisational level dynamics (which include identity, historical and normative processes), and their environments* (Frølich et al., 2013; Fumasoli & Huisman 2013; Fumasoli et al., 2014a; Morphew 2009).

Drawing from institutional theory and population ecology perspectives, Fumasoli & Huisman (2013) define institutional positioning as the process through which higher education institutions locate themselves within specific niches in order to seek resources. They propose that benefits for institutional diversity research may be gained through a deeper understanding of how internal and external actors converge upon shared courses of action, and how inter-institutional dynamics play out in terms of positioning. Such a focus provides a gateway through which system level diversity can be explored at a level of enhanced granular detail, which may contribute to explaining contradictions in previous research where focus has tended toward macro and structural levels.

While substantial research explores university strategic positioning from the perspective of processes and outputs, including the use of these outputs as a variable through which institutional comparisons can be made for questions of diversity (Barbato & Turri, 2019; Erhardt & von Kotzebue, 2016; Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015; Jungblut, 2017; Morphew et al., 2016), Fumasoli, Barbato and Turri (2020) point out that *a gap remains in terms of exploring the determinants of institutional positioning*. Mirroring others before them (Antonowicz, 2013; Meek et al., 1996; Van Vught & Huisman 2013) they divide theoretical positions within existing research into two poles which approach the question of determi-

nants from either: (i) a predominantly internal perspective, where 'intentional design' or actions and decisions of the leadership of institutions are the primary determinant of strategic positioning; or (ii) an environmental determinism perspective where factors and forces deriving from outside of institutions constrain and determine strategic positioning. Importantly, their work posits that an additional intervening variable, an organisational layer, is missing which mediates between outside-in and inside-out forces:

> To advance our theoretical understanding of university positioning, we have argued that the organisational dimension needs to be considered as a meso-level intervening variable affecting both environmental and managerial hypotheses. Hence, the organisational dimension filters environmental forces within the university, as well as shapes the course of action of the university in the environment (Fumasoli, Barbato and Turri, 2020, p.328).

This paper offers a complement to existing institutional diversity research in the higher education studies field, by providing a qualitative study from a constructivist epistemological standpoint which is focussed upon the research function of universities. In addition, it builds upon recent developments in the area of institutional positioning, and provides an in-depth case-based exploration of intra-institutional approaches, processes and factors and how they interact with environmental imperatives to determine the strategic positioning – seen in articulation of university profile, achievements and goals and aspirations - of a large, high performing university in the contemporary Australian higher education setting. The insights drawn from the study are then applied to continued debates around the existence of institutional diversity in higher education and the determining factors which stimulate or hamper system diversity.

Australian higher education context: a homogenous university system

The Australian context provides a useful case through which to explore institutional diversity, as a particularly marketized higher education system (Pinheiro et al., 2016), where it has been a key principle underpinning national higher education policy for several decades. Successive national governments have sought to configure and resource the university sector in ways which meet varied needs and fit within resource constraints. Their approach to optimizing efficacy and efficiency has been through system level settings designed to encourage institutions with a diverse range of missions (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Dawkins, 1988; MCEETYA, 2007). Krause (2022) provides a historical account of institutional diversity in the Australian context and posits that in the post-COVID context which has significantly disrupted higher education, the concept has only enhanced in its policy importance.

Contrary to historic policy intentions, a relative consensus exists that convergence to similarities between institutions on various levels has been a feature of the sector since the reforms which instituted the current Unified National System configuration (one of the aims of which was to stimulate diverse institutions) during the 1980s (Codling & Meek, 2006; Croucher & Woelert, 2015; Davis, 2017; Huisman et al., 2007; Karmel, 1998; Meek, 1991; Meek & O'Neill, 1996; Pinheiro et al., 2016; Yielder & Codling, 2004). Government reports

related to higher education (Bradley, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, Coaldrake, 2019) have also suggested that there is relative uniformity of institutional types across the approximately 40[1] universities which comprise the sector:

> there is a surprising degree of homogeneity in the types and structures of Australian universities, with almost all institutions aspiring to and conforming to the norm of a comprehensive, research-intensive, campus-based university
> (Varieties of Excellence Report, Commonwealth of Australia, 2002 p.7)

Of the few examples providing a counter view, Marginson's (1999) secondary analysis of previous research and government data painted a less cohesive picture, demonstrating that trends to convergence in some areas (such as institutional model and size) exist alongside those toward increased diversity in others (for example, research activity – measured in terms of income). His work concluded that more fine-grained understandings were required and that qualitative analyses may contribute to providing them, something echoed also in research exploring other jurisdictions (Huisman & Mampaey, 2018; Huisman & Tight, 2015; Marginson, 1999).

Despite institutional diversity being the subject of intense policy and growing research interest, neither a common conceptualisation nor a theoretical consensus on determinants has yet to emerge (Piché, 2015; Salini & Turri, 2015). In studies of Australian higher education, isomorphic externally focussed explanations have featured prominently, with the competitive quasi market-based framework applied to higher education said to have produced paradoxical homogenising results. While institutional autonomy appears to have increased over time, competition mechanisms work imperfectly to produce imitative behaviours that - as explained by long-standing institutional theory perspectives - are counterproductive to producing diverse institutions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Codling & Meek, 2006; Marginson, 1998; Meek & Wood, 1998; Van Vught & Huisman 2013).

Research exploring the influence of endogenous factors in the observed trends are far more limited than works which focus at a broader system level. Marginson & Considine (2000) provide a prominent example concluding (through a case study of 17 Australian universities) that determinants are the product of an interplay between environmental and organisational factors. Their work linked isomorphism within executive decision making with external drivers, namely a 'one-size fits all' performance-based funding model and a setting of resource scarcity:

> The problem is not so much that individual universities choose the 'wrong model', as that the competitive dynamic, sustained by government system-setting and the Darwinian devices of induced funding scarcity and ever increasing pressures on managers, has locked them all into common modes of behaviour that their senior executives have all too willingly embraced. (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p.18).

[1] The number of universities in Australia ranges within literature between 39 and 42, depending on whether private universities (such as Bond, Torrens and Notre Dame) and specialist universities (such as the Melbourne College of Divinity at the time this research was undertaken) are included.

Such an example aside, and as concluded also by Croucher & Woelert (2015), there is both a lack of empirical work which tests the convergence consensus, and the field lacks sufficient understanding of the role of institution-level dynamics within such a scenario:

> we conclude that the Australian case lends clear empirical support to the isomorphism thesis and yet propose that further research is called for that more clearly distinguishes between the various dimensions of institutional isomorphic change, and which supplements the system-level analysis presented here through more close-up institutional case studies (p.3).

Despite having been suggested by Meek and O'Neill (1996), detailed empirical explorations of the (non-linear) interaction between structure and agency, which contributes to bridging the analytical divide between exogenous and endogenous factors is still emerging in this research area. Here again the gap within the Australian context is reflective of the field more broadly where "the continuing challenge for higher education research is to build and renew the analytical bridges between environmental changes and organisational dynamics" (Frølich et al., 2013, p. 80).

Research approach and methods

The conceptual framework applied for this research to explore institutional positioning as the link between organisational and environmental factors, was Marginson and Rhoades' (2002) g*lonacal agency heuristic.* The heuristic was developed to establish a framework for comparative higher education research in the context of globalisation. Beyond this original purpose however, it provides a framework through which environmental and more localised agency can be explored with the aim of less explicitly privileging either. The heuristic highlights a dynamic reciprocal relationship between global, national and local (glo-na-cal) dimensions and the simultaneous significance of each of them. The term 'agency' is utilised as a double entendre to signify both institutions (formal agencies, in an organisation sense, particularly relevant to the globalisation context in which the heuristic was initially based) and the ability of individuals and collectives to take action (or exercise agency).

The works of Vidovich (2004) and Portnoi & Bagley (2011) helped to inform the means by which the heuristic was used, being two studies which examined institutional strategies using the glonacal framework. Providing practical explanation of the effect of such a heuristic on approaches to analysis, they noted the importance of consideration being given to issues such as: (i) the simultaneity of influence and reciprocal flows between all levels, and (ii) the risk and limitations of overgeneralising the influence of particular dimensions, for example the treatment of environmental conditions as normative and universally deterministic, without consideration of localised and specific practices, responses, resistance, counter trends, and variations.

Vuori (2015) proposes that institutional positioning is a socially constructed process, with sense and meaning making an ongoing and 'dialogic process' between actors. Within an intra-institutional setting, actors are situated across and within what have been termed 'meso' layers (Frølich et al., 2013; Teichler, 2008), including faculties, centres, departments, and the other teams and portfolios which constitute modern universities. Making use

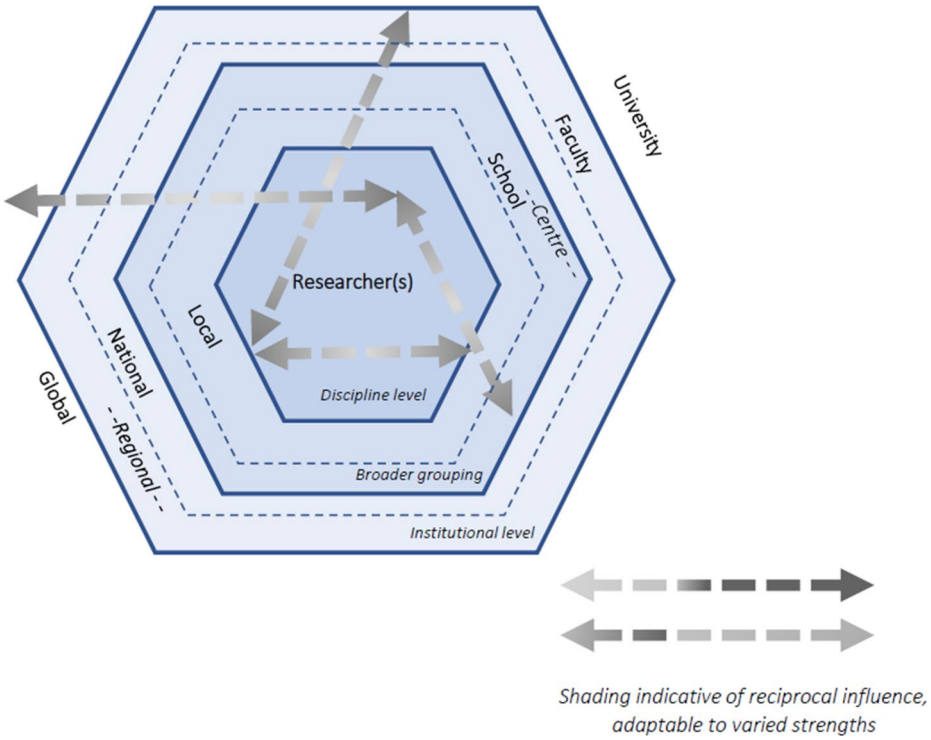

Fig. 1 The interaction of plural agencies using the glonacal construct

of the heuristic's flexibility and its conceptualisation of organisational agencies, the model provided a particularly useful tool for framing this intra-institutional university setting, where agency can also be exercised at the level of formal and informal organisational sub-structures. Commonly in the Australian context, these exist with their own configurations and decision-making processes, executives, management sub-groups, committees, advisory bodies, and other such collectives. The resulting components and a visualisation of reciprocal interaction between them is provided in Fig. 1.

Case study development through document analysis and interviews

The combination of interviews and document analysis are widely utilised as a complementary set of qualitative methods (Bowen, 2009; Owen, 2014). Together they are particularly useful for exploring deliberate or emergent actions leading to specific positions (Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013), with case studies able to add depth and concrete, context-dependent knowledge (Flyvberg, 2006). While documents are unlikely to provide a full picture of, for example, day to day activity within a large organisation, the information within them was beneficial to case and participant selection, as well as the development of themes to be explored in semi-structured interviews. In addition, the combination of document analysis,

case study building and interviews produced a rich array of materials which could be triangulated and explored for similarities and differences.

Case decision making involved the selection of the case from the universities which comprise the Australian higher education sector, and then the within-case boundaries. Given the observed need within the literature for more fine-grained understanding through the systematic production of context-dependent exemplars, a single case study design was decided as the most appropriate way forward through the unavoidable 'trade off' between breadth and depth described by Patton (2002). In addition, the choice was made to focus upon institutional positioning in relation to the research function of the institution, as both an underexamined area of focus within the field, and one to which the application of a qualitative approach could be particularly complementary, given it is an activity arguably less amenable to neat boundary drawing and quantification.

Prior to case selection, thematic analysis was undertaken of the mission-based compact agreements between every Australian university (41 in the period from 2014) and Commonwealth government. These are publicly available documents which, helpfully for research purposes, outline institutional aspirations and activity over uniformly defined periods. The University of Sydney was subsequently selected as representing a form of 'critical' case, albeit one which is comparatively large in scale and with a long history. In his description of the concept of path dependency as an important determinant of university activity in the Australian sector, Davis (2017) pointed to the University of Sydney as the 'original path' which has served as a model for all Australian universities which have followed it. Of additional benefit to the selection of this case, the University outlined its implementation of an internal management approach whereby inter-institutional compacts had been put in place to mirror the sector level Commonwealth approach. Internal compacts between the central university and each of the faculties, outlining activity and aspirations as well as resource allocation, provided an additional mechanism through which intra-institutional interaction and its influence upon strategic positioning could be explored.

The case study was commenced by thematic coding and content analysis of strategic planning documents at an institutional level. This enabled a comparison to mission-based compacts, and also informed the selection of interview participants with whom thematic areas emerging from the document analysis could be explored in greater detail. Purposive participant selection was utilised, aiming to interview those participants with roles related to strategic planning and research management, determined as a cohort with the greatest potential to provide insight into institutional positioning at multiple levels as the phenomena of interest (Jones et al., 2006; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2011). As interviews progressed, flexibility was kept and a snowball or chain approach was also followed with saturation an emergent decision based upon a point of diminishing returns.

The resulting sample for interviews totalled 14 participants, which included what was considered an appropriate split with coverage of: discipline areas (5 HASS; 5 STEM; 5 neither); academic and professional staff (7 of each); position types and varied levels of seniority (5 from senior leadership e.g. Deputy or Pro-Vice Chancellor; Dean; Director or senior executive; 9 from research management roles e.g. Associate Deans Research; research manager and supporting staff); and staff situated across each broad institutional layer - central university (4), faculty or centre (7), and school (3). Interviews averaged 37 min, totalling over 8 hours of material which was transcribed, de-identified, and coded and analysed.

Approach to coding and thematic analysis

NVIVO was utilised as both an organising and analytical tool. As well as facilitating the capture and analysis of mission-based compacts, strategic documents and transcriptions of semi-structured interviews, NVIVO allowed for the housing of additional data in the form of observations and reflections on the research experience captured as field notes within memos (as suggested by Bazeley & Richards, 2000). After each compact and document was coded, and each case institution interview undertaken, an analytical memo was prepared which documented reflections, new codes added, and notable features (which aided a constant comparative approach as the analysis progressed).The software became the central repository for all research data, which served a useful data management function, and provided the capacity to break up and reflect on particular components, codes, themes and in the case of the sector wide materials, universities.

The approach to coding and theme development utilised throughout this research was the thematic content analysis described by Clarke & Braun (2013). Only a very small number of predetermined codes were developed prior to coding, representing categories which were considered important to answering the questions at hand and utilising the theoretical framework. Predetermined codes for the mission-based compacts analysis were: Global; National; Local; and Institutional Diversity. Given the template-based structure and context of mission-based compacts, the generic government text within each compact was coded along with all of the tailored university response sections. This enabled an analysis of how parameters and expectations were reflected in university responses (or not).

Results

A sector of institutions claiming distinction and difference in similar ways

> Rhetoric about diversity is abundant, especially in university marketing departments of individual universities, which all claim that their institution is unique – while at the same time assuring prospective students that their institution can do everything that its competitors do, only better! (Marginson, 1998 pg. 12)

.The mission-based compacts of Australian universities show that, across the board, universities seek to position themselves as diverse and differentiated from their competitors. 40 of the 41 Australian university compact responses included explicit self-characterisations in terms of distinctiveness. A further feature of the institutional positioning found within compacts was the lack of references to other universities, indicative of competitive sector dynamics and institutions seeking to present themselves and their activities in positive and unique ways.

When compared across the sector, university differentiation statements were often observed to be either contradictory, difficult to assess the veracity of in tangible terms, or seemingly falsifiable by virtue of their extensive use across the sector. Even when exploring the way Australian universities sought to explicitly differentiate themselves, the areas and means by which they claimed distinctiveness were so similar across the board, that claims

of difference were themselves demonstrative of sameness. For example, the University of Adelaide sought to "become by 2024 no less than Australia's most distinctive university [via the] opportunity for at least one Australian university to become a model of the teaching/research union, to show how universities can recapture what was once the defining characteristic of the research university". The ideal of the research and teaching nexus, was at the same time found within 36 other university responses.

Melbourne College of Divinity provided an illustrative example of Skolnik's (1986) suggestion that diversity and convergence can exist side by side within and across institutions. Evident also in this example, was the straddling of compliance and normative expectations around strategic goals, with differentiation which serves branding or competitive functions (cf. Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Hartley & Morphew, 2008). As Australia's only private specialist institution of the time, the Divinity compact (as might be expected) demonstrated uniqueness both in focussed discipline terms, operating in one broad field (philosophy and religious studies), and by way of a collegiate partnership structure with funding to the institution provided predominantly by (religious) partner organisations. However, these differentiators existed alongside stated aspirations that mirrored those common across the entire sector, such as the pursuit of status and excellence, national and international engagement, increased research capacity, productivity, and financial viability.

The universal signalling of difference across the sector within compact responses directly mirrored the background and instructional content provided by the Commonwealth in all mission-based compacts, which spoke at several points of the distinctiveness of institutions. Statements such as "The compact recognises the University is an autonomous institution with a distinctive mission" ('The Purpose and Effect of this Compact' section of every mission-based compact, pg. 4) framed the expectations that university responses to compacts would demonstrate difference, albeit in largely undefined ways.

Despite alignment to such expectations, and widespread signalling of their uniqueness, Australian university positioning converged upon a common set of aspirations and approaches in relation to their research. Australian universities across the sector, regardless of age, size or type, proclaimed or described pursuit of: growth and improvement; funding and resources; and status and recognition, each expressed in terms of common benchmarks (often global and framed around excellence). Isomorphism was also visible in the strategic institutional approaches employed to seek such ends: selective concentration on research strengths (alongside a level of breadth that their circumstances allow); pursuit of multidisciplinary and collaborative research, often aimed at larger scale and complex problems; external engagement and partnerships; and notable discipline-level positioning and investment in the health and medical research space. In these ways, a sector-wide thematic analysis of Australian university research positioning, as articulated within mission-based compacts, aligns with the findings of much previous research suggestive of a sector lacking substantive diversity between institutions, as well as one which tends to isomorphism by virtue of responsiveness to environmental factors (seen in the compacts example here, in the form of government expectations and policy mechanisms).

Determinants of institutional positioning within the case institution stimulating convergence

The seeking of institutional cohesion through strategy development

While involvement in the putting together of mission-based compacts for the University of Sydney was observed through interviews to be very limited, the development of the 2016–2020 Strategic Plan involved a significant level of intra-institutional engagement, and thereby provided a fruitful avenue through which to explore the determinants of resulting institutional positions. The plan itself promoted that input included: over 5,000 responses from staff; open focus groups attended by over 600 staff and students; dedicated workshops with contributions from over 400 staff and students; and a series of Town Hall meetings, executive presentations, engagement with external partners, as well as discussion papers covering education, research, culture, and organisational design issues.

Engagement, however, was not consistent across the University, with acceptance among several interview participants that: (i) not all staff members, regardless of how inclusive the approach, would choose to engage with or be 'reached' during strategy development or implementation; and (ii) that by virtue of the size of the University and broad scope of roles and interests within it, levels of engagement would never be universal or uniform:

> we know that in certain faculties, we will get submissions, written submissions, we know that others are more likely to come to focus groups, we know that there are certain academics who won't leave their research lab because their work, a different kind of activity that takes them away from that, has to be far more valuable…and there is a set of people we won't reach
> (senior executive interview)

The development of the 2016–2020 Strategic Plan demonstrates the seeking of institution-level cohesion from a broad and differentiated set of internal communities. At the same time, the setting of engagement parameters, and the arrival at a set of final positions encapsulated within the strategy, were centralised decisions. An inclusive development approach thereby not necessarily reflecting a collectively determined outcome. One senior executive described a "process of consultation as opposed to consensus building" wherein stakeholder perspectives could be reflected back to the institutional community alongside decisions and the rationales behind them. The case reflects a setting where consensus is unlikely to be possible given the volume and variety of views, interests and priorities which are competing (Frølich et al., 2013). Moreover, it supports the ideas that enhanced institutional autonomy has been centralised into executive structures (Frølich et al., 2017; Fumasoli et al., 2014) and that strategies, even within participatory governance structures, are initiated at administrative levels and then shaped (though importantly not necessarily determined) by broader academic inputs (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011).

Steering activity through selective resourcing aligned to strategy

Interview participant perspectives reflected the idea that unifying and stimulating cohesion within an otherwise disconnected institution were a primary and deliberate focus of the insti-

tutional strategy, and indeed the Vice-Chancellor of the time ("what he's been all about"). Moreover, a view was commonly expressed that initiatives contained within the strategy had to some degree helped to stimulate a collective sense and increased collaboration:

> I mean I think there's a hell of a lot of work to do, but I think the place has genuinely really shifted in the last 5 years from being one that was heavily, heavily siloed to one that's much more open to collaboration across faculties
> (central university participant interview)

The means by which such results were being achieved was through resourcing, selectively distributed in ways designed to stimulate particular behaviours. As well as enhanced University spending which was called out as a key headline within the strategy, which spoke of tripling the University's investment for research, a changed distribution approach was implemented whereby investment would be focussed into large multidisciplinary and collaborative activities as opposed to historic approaches where "we gave a little to everyone essentially" (central university participant interview).

In addition, one of the mechanisms through which investment decisions were operationalised was through the internal compacts process where activity based agreements were developed between faculties and the University.

Similar to the conditional autonomy and steering approach of governments within Australian higher education (cf. Marginson, 1997) as well as international contexts (cf. Ferlie et al., 2008), a model was apparent within the University where autonomy in decision making was afforded to local areas, but institutional- level investment was used to incentivise decision making. Even where faculty-based participants described ideas developed at local school and faculty levels, for example, through an analysis of internal capacities and external environmental scanning, an overlay of institutional steering through the mechanism of selective investment was evident:

> Next year's funding is contingent on us demonstrating that we've got some cross-faculty initiatives happening, so, I think when you link these things to money it really does help people move forward and start playing together and talking to each other, and so I think what's happening is there is a lot more networking across faculties as a result
> (faculty level participant interview)

While appearing a successful institutional approach for stimulating strategically aligned behaviours, importantly, resources for research activity were actively sought from multiple sources. Below, one participant pointed out, for example, that while institutional investments into collaborative multidisciplinary initiatives may come at the expense of pure disciplinary research, the latter continued to occur, albeit funded through other means:

> So that's the challenging trade-off, because any money which is given to the large interdisciplinary activities is taken away from the pure disciplinary research, funded through teaching in many cases (faculty level participant interview)

While this example uses cross-subsidisation through teaching revenue, funding and resources are also obtained in the form of research grants distributed competitively by national research council's using (discipline-based) peer review, or other means. This idea again suggests that while institutional steering through resource allocation is influential, it is unable to fully capture and make uniform the assortment of decision making which occurs at more local levels.

Indicators of intra-institutional complexity and internal diversity

> The faculty itself is very much like working in a small university, and so it's almost like you are going to another institution when you are going to another faculty here (faculty level participant interview)

The University of Sydney 2016–2020 Strategic Plan and Commonwealth mission-based compact openly acknowledged challenges related to being a large and complex organisation. Such features were presented as barriers to strategic and institutional cohesion which the University was seeking to overcome: "Our overarching strategic priority is to rediscover what it means for so large and disparate an organisation to be one university, a federation of academic communities working closely together towards shared objectives" (2014–2016 mission-based compact, p.7).

The 2016–2020 Strategic Plan, while acknowledging the intent of its predecessor plan covering 2011–2015 to work through the issue of becoming "a less fragmented institution" noted the need for continued work to simplify a 'bewilderingly complex' structure, academic leadership, processes and governance. Echoing the loose coupling thesis prominent within higher education literature (Weick, 1976; Orton & Weick, 1990; Leslie, 1996) the plan inferred that such conditions were not unique to the University, but rather that "most contemporary institutions [are] a loose collocation of academic silos".

(2016–2020 Strategic Plan, p.10).

While institutional level positioning documents made reference to a limited number of broad research thematic areas for the University, Annual Reports and institutional webpages indicate the number of faculties, schools, centres, networks and research groupings at the University to be in the order of 240[2]. A lack of uniformity in the internal organisation of these groupings further adding to complexity, which interview participants demonstrated an acute awareness of as a continued challenge:

> The picture becomes even more complex when the internal organisation of our current faculties is taken into account; for example, there is very little consistency in the authority and responsibilities of similar roles across different faculties and schools (University of Sydney, 2016–2020 Strategic Plan, p.15)

[2] Within the University's mission-based compact, 19 of the 240 groupings were named (11 in relation to research), while within the 2016–2020 Strategic Plan, 20 of the 240 groupings were named (6 specifically in relation to research). Of those limited mentions, faculties and University level research centres constituted the majority named in both documents, with only a very small fraction of the other entities (schools, programs, clusters, non-university level research centres, groups, themes, research areas, labs, externally funded centres, and other flagship initiatives) overtly visible.

> One of the Vice Chancellor's priorities over the last five years has actually been to try and really reshape the University so that everyone is doing things the same way, but that is really challenging (research management participant interview)

Proclamations such as these are demonstrative of what was found to be significant *internal diversity*, which Fairweather (2000) explained as "variation in instructional and research practices within a single college or university, or even within a single program within an institution" (p.80). The extent to which internal diversity is obscured within institutional level representations is clearly in evidence within this case study. Such a finding might be expected, firstly given the highly institutionalized setting and normative expectations surrounding the content of institutional plans, but moreover as the extent of complexity and decentralisation of higher education institutions, Fumasoli & Lepori (2011) explain, limits the extent to which detail in planning is practically possible.

The interaction of localised imperatives with institutional direction setting

Reflecting Burton Clark's (1983) influential work, which spoke of the importance of researcher or discipline level drivers (or what he termed 'academic oligarchies'), a tension remains where highly varied discipline-based determinants act to confound efforts at institutional direction setting. This is particularly the case for research (Taylor, 2006), where academic activity and decision making are personal and remain heavily influenced by discipline-based norms and indicators of success:

> People think of themselves as you know either an orthopaedic surgeon first or a political scientist, or an English literature scholar, and in their community they know who the movers and shakers are, who are the leaders, and what the rewards are that would push them up into greater recognition and success (research management participant interview)

Interview participants described inevitable differences that remained between areas or individuals, which limited the reach and influence of institutional goals. Participants from an institutional standpoint appeared to continue seeking commonalities as well as localised buy-in, at the same time as recognising that it would not be possible in all cases:

> many of the layers of initiatives that sit within it [the 2016–2020 University Strategy] actually go directly to an individual, and yes it might be a set of individuals that show the potential to flourish, it's not everyone, so I don't think it's felt uniformly across the place, ever
> (central university participant interview)

Faculty perspectives offered more fine-grained detail of the ways in which research activity and behaviours would inevitably be guided by other more individualised imperatives, and that institutional citizenship was weak in the university setting: "the nature of the University is that people end up basically in their own domains, and so you have in essence cells of interrelated people" (research management participant interview). One participant characterised the academy itself as built upon the principles of autonomy and "enabled individual-

ism", a reason why effective and institution led priorities and change has difficulty taking root within the setting. Another characterised researchers as akin to franchisees, developing their own businesses, with the recipe for success of initiatives then resting in a balancing of drivers from both researcher and institutional directions.

Academic decision making related to research allows for the exercising of significant autonomy. However, such decisions appear to be guided *at the same time* by individualised values, purpose, discipline-based drivers *and* other mechanisms and incentives determined at any number of institutional or environmental levels. The obtaining of funds for research, as well as enabling research to be undertaken, acts as a highly influential proxy for status and success. The interaction between autonomous decision making and funding drivers, was both inferred within the University strategic plan and described widely by participants:

> I think pragmatically it's an interactive force we both influence each other, and much of it is in fact governed by funding sources. So as soon as there is money allocated for a specific thing then you've got all the experts coming out of the woodwork putting in grant applications and directing their research to that particular question. And once the funding for that particular question or theme evaporates, they shift (research management participant interview)
>
> this is the vision of an institution in which there is freedom for individual researchers to pursue their own lines of enquiry, but also an evidence based understanding of our research strengths and an institutional ability to invest strategically in research and education projects (particularly large scale, cross disciplinary projects) of national, regional and international importance (University of Sydney, 2016–2020 Strategic Plan, p.11)

The decision-making processes related to academic research occur at multiple levels within an institution such as the University of Sydney. As well as being filtered through multiple layers within an institution, with their own positioning, plans and approaches to investment, decisions devolve all the way to individual researchers whose own agency interacts not only with intra-institutional factors, but with environmental imperatives. This autonomy, as described above, appears to be influenced by factors such as selective institutional investment designed to stimulate particular behaviours, but at the same time, decision makers appear cognisant of the limitations they face in determining institutional positions and harnessing collective buy in to them.

Layers of planning as an ecosystem of reciprocal influence and 'alignment'

The domain in which interview participants described their agency and capacity to influence in the most active terms was in the development of plans at the more localised levels, which included the aforementioned internal compacts, as well as an array of faculty level and school level research plans. In some cases, these covered the broad overarching collective research goals and activities of a group, while in others they were created to focus upon specific activities or indicators.

Participant descriptions of the development of more localised levels of planning, notably differed from the institutional equivalent. Local level planning appeared to provide more flexible boundaries for input and less limiting parameters. The breadth of consultation and

capacity for provision of input was described by this participant and contrasted to the institutional equivalent:

> When we were developing the strategic plan for the Faculty, there were multiple consultations, so it was an iterative process, and it involved staff, all academic levels from A to E, as well as all our professional staff. So it took, I think it probably took over a year, to the point that everybody was like 'please' [laughs] can't do this anymore. So it was heavily consulted across all levels to try to get a sense of what the staff wanted, the University Strategic Plan I think has been a little bit more top-down
> (faculty level participant interview)

The concept of *alignment* featured prominently across all planning levels. The University-Commonwealth mission-based compact spoke in terms of alignment with government imperatives, at the same time that localised areas described their goals and priorities in terms of their alignment with the central University's goals or ideals. Interviews enabled deeper examination of what is otherwise an ambiguous term for determining the genesis of decision making and the nature, strength and direction of influence. Participant perspectives showed that there were differentiated functions between the strategies of the University's various levels with the faculty level effectively mediating between institutional objectives and school or disciplinary level concerns. Moreover, when particular plans were developed, in relation to other plans, was an important factor with implications for multiple plan alignment. In the case below, Faculty and central university plans were being formulated in tandem, with the Faculty plan then put on hold to await the institutional plan, in order that alignment could be maximised:

> the University one was being developed while the Faculty one was being developed, so eventually we got the Faculty one to a certain point and then we stopped and we waited for the University one to come out, and then we made sure that we aligned with it
> (faculty level participant interview)

A 'top-down' viewpoint, which emphasised the University plan's pre-eminence, was evident in some descriptions. In the view of one participant for example, the faculty strategy mirrored the institutional strategy for the purposes of leverage, with a variety of approaches put into place to 'enforce' alignment. While considering alignment a worthy goal, this participant expressed scepticism at its likely existence between the multiplicity of plans across organisational units, which may serve differing functions and therefore have varied emphases:

> So each school has its own strategy, then on top of that is the Faculty, then the Faculty has its own strategy in education and teaching, sorry teaching and learning, and research, and so on. And then on top of that is the University strategy. Now, ideally they should all be aligned, that's not always the case. There is an acknowledged emphasis where the schools are expected to place emphasis on maintaining research in the disciplines, whereas the faculty is perhaps responsible for multi-disciplinary efforts (faculty level participant interview)

Stensaker & Fumasoli (2017) have previously described universities as environments where 'multi-level strategies' exist at different institutional layers with varied relationships and purposes. While serving an organisational coordination and cohesion function, and allowing for localised adaptation, they introduce the possibility that the extent of such plans may even work to increase institutional complexity:

> although introduced as integrating instruments – multilevel strategies may actually increase the complexity within the university as different strategies provide different actors with leeway for opportunistic behavior (Stensaker & Fumasoli, 2017, p.1)

The University of Sydney case supports this finding with the highly pluralistic nature of agency across the institution quite clear, and the multiple layers of planning enabling highly devolved decision making, albeit steered through resource allocation and tactically framed in terms of alignment. However, and importantly as shall now be demonstrated, alignment of plans can be crafted at the same time as the maintenance of a plurality of activities driven by multiple actors and agencies furthering their own varied interests (Seeber et al. 2016).

Crafting of narratives for varied audiences and purposes

Participants described institutional positioning in its various documented forms as built upon the crafting of coherent narratives. The audiences for such stories or messages were varied, with nuance applied to tailor them accordingly. Narratives were crafted, for example, to improve the chances of success in requests for funding or resourcing, and to unify members of a large organisation to common purpose. Related to research, this commonly involved descriptions of areas of research focus and strength, and the bringing together of interdisciplinary groups around them.

The importance of crafting tailored narratives to influence research resource decision making applied to seeking funds within the institution from faculties, schools or the central University, and external organisations such as government, grant bodies or external partner organisations. It also spanned the scale of individual researcher projects through to substantial institutional scale investments:

> what's the best idea we've got at the time to put in an application to get some money from the Government? Low and behold it was a story about obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular research cause that collectively is a massive strength across research, and it seemed like that's a good strong broad area that we can make a story around…so we bid to the Government, we got $95 million bucks (interview participant)

The relationship of narratives to on-the-ground activity, however, was at times characterised as weak: "then we found ourselves in an invidious position of, well we told a story about what this thing was going to be to get the money, and we are having a really hard time in reality, making that story real" (interview participant).

Such a finding provides insights for open debates about whether articulations of strategy and identity are more symbolic than substantive (Morphew et al., 2016). As explained by both Huisman, Norgård, Rasmussen and Stensaker (2002) and Mampaey (2016), the symbolic role played by strategies (which has led to institutional convergence conclusions in

much research, given that institutions in articulating strategies often passively comply and respond to normative expectations to maintain legitimacy) means that their content may not necessarily accurately reflect institutional activities which are difficult in nature to predict and measure.

These ideas are important for mission-based compacts as broad-reaching agreements, which attempt to align diverse needs and cover a wide range of institutional functions and activities, divided in practical terms amongst multiple university portfolios. One participant described the deliberate efforts required to apply a consistent voice to what otherwise could become a "diabolical mess". The need for deliberate coordination and management reflects the diversity of inputs which can at times include contradictory positions, something perceived as particularly important where responding to external expectations: "we are going to try and present as one university, it's a federation, it's complex, but when it comes to government relations and policy we are going to present as one university" (central university participant interview).

Importantly, such descriptions did not speak of the changing of localised circumstances, priorities, or activities, but rather the selective packaging of them. While thematically and linguistically, institutional positioning may give the appearance of coherence and homogeneity across institutions (given the standardised set of expectations they may be responding to, well described by institutional theory), what is missing is the internal diversity that is deliberately obscured. Providing an example of this specific to research was one participant whose view of research strengths and focus areas was that they were: "more driven by just making research comprehensible and what the University and Faculty is doing and almost branding and what fits on a website […] it's next to impossible to really have specific research areas across a faculty let alone a university" (research support participant interview).

Conclusion

Australian higher education represents a marketized higher education system where government has grappled with approaches to facilitating specialisation and diversity of university missions which are perceived as being homogenous. Mission-based compact agreements were developed as a government program with the explicit aim of stimulating institutional diversity. Potentially inconsistent with such an aim, the exercise was rolled out as a regulatory requirement, with a standardised template which sought institutional alignment to Commonwealth Government goals. University positioning found within compacts showed that while seeking to differentiate, Australian universities converged upon a distinct set of common foci in relation to research. The observation of widespread differentiation language, often contradictory given their common usage, aligns with other works which have observed similarity and difference in institutional positioning instruments. Kosmützky & Krücken (2015) for example, explain such a scenario as an outcome of universities seeking to balance meeting institutionalised norms required for legitimacy with competitive differentiation. Such contradictory needs then result in an optimal option for institutions characterised nicely by Deephouse (1999) as being 'as different as legitimately possible', or by Hartley and Morphew (2008) as 'unique but not weird'. Institutional responses to instruments such as compacts occur within a highly institutionalised setting, where there

are commonly understood narratives and expectations through which institutions gain and maintain legitimacy, at the same time as seeking resources.

The addition of an in-depth case study uncovering the determinants of strategic positioning at a large Australian university shows that the homogeneity seen at the level of institutions, however, represents homogeneity of institutional level decisions on research positioning, not homogeneity in terms of the research enterprise itself within (and by extension across) institutions. The University of Sydney represents a case where significant intra-institutional complexity belies coherent positioning, in particular at an institutional level. Echoing previous work in the field (cf. Frølich et al., 2013), such pluralism and complexity help to explain 'ambiguous and vague' institutional positioning. Institutional-level positions reflect attempts to encourage and reach a degree of consensus within a contested environment with multiple differentiated actors and competing institutional logics. Indeed, a key goal of the case institution strategic plan and development processes for it was to unify a historically fragmented institution. Some success was being achieved for initiatives contained within the strategy, by virtue of funding which incentivised local area alignment to institutional positions. However, a highly plural ecosystem remained within the institution, with extensive sub-unit planning adding to the complexity and allowing for selective foregrounding of activities to demonstrate alignment.

This case suggests that within universities there is likely significant complexity and internal diversity not reflected in institutional representations, which are selective and crafted narratives occurring within a context of normative frameworks and practical constraints. Institutional positioning is restricted in its capacity to describe - and exert influence upon – activity and behaviour within a university. This has implications, for example, when applying it to much previous research which has concluded there has been convergence in Australian higher education (Codling & Meek, 2006; Croucher & Woelert, 2015; Davis, 2017; Huisman et al., 2007; Meek, 1991; Pinheiro et al., 2016; Yielder & Codling, 2004). It is suggested here that there are substantial limitations to exploring diversity exclusively at the level of institutions in the higher education field. In addition, explorations based on documents alone, are very unlikely to account adequately for what lies beneath and beyond editorialised constructions, something also noted by Bowl (2018).

Institutional level positioning appears to offer an inadequate level of granularity to genuinely capture the breadth and variety of on-the-ground activities. This is particularly the case, given the unique features of academic research, which transcends and problematises traditional institutional structures, organisation, and management, and makes up a significant aspect of university activities in the modern context (in Australia, even regulating access to the name, university). The deliberate crafting of narratives serves multiple purposes, not least, meeting regulatory expectations and obtaining funds for research, for which government remains a significant source. In a case such as the University of Sydney, the breadth and diversity of research activity enables a high degree of selectiveness, adaptable in myriad ways. Indeed, as the case of compacts at the University showed, deliberate tailoring and management of messaging is required to present the work of a large and complex federation as coordinated and coherent when in many ways it is not.

There were a variety of limitations for this research and its findings which must be acknowledged. Case study provides valid *context-dependent* knowledge (Flyvberg, 2006). Context in higher education is a significant factor when considering the utilisation of conclusions in settings outside of that which is being observed. While there are lessons to be

gained from the Australian setting for international higher education systems, the diversity in sector configurations around the world alone means transference from this setting to others is often not neat. The utilisation of the approach taken here to other international and institutional contexts could provide beneficial insights into other contexts. Fumasoli & Lepori (2011) put forward the hypothesis, worthy of testing through further case studies of varied institutional types and different jurisdictions, that positioning choices may vary depending upon institutional characteristics. In addition, the chosen scope of the case study could be expanded into deeper levels of granularity, for example, exploring these questions from the perspectives of different cohorts without strategy, research management or leadership roles. A longitudinal approach exploring the outcomes of positioning and the role it plays in effecting change within institution could also add to (or challenge) the picture created here of how internal diversity plays out in terms of micro or local level activities, and enable increasingly robust conclusions to be drawn.

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