

Strategic Focus of University Presidents Unpacked: A Global Study

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Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

Universities play a key role in knowledge societies, yet the professional role of university presidents remains underexplored. This study investigates the strategy focus of university presidents in positioning their institutions within the knowledge economies. A new conceptual model based on the Hedgehog-Fox dichotomy by Berlin, combined with an internal-external dichotomy based on work by Mintzberg resp. Christensen results in four strategy directions for university presidents. The study will include 18 in-depth interviews, conducted with presidents from multiple continents. Preliminary findings from seven interviews reveal initial findings on university presidents' strategy focus. The study addresses a longstanding gap in higher education research and contributes to understanding the strategic influence of university presidents.

Full paper

Introduction

Universities are expected to play a key role in today's dynamic global, regional, and local knowledge societies. Yet, the strategic role of university presidents in positioning their institutions remains poorly understood. This study explores how university presidents enact strategic agency within their institutional and societal contexts. Despite their central position, they remain an under-studied empirical group.

While presidents are assumed to have substantial power, their actual influence over strategy development and execution is often constrained. As Engwall, Levay, and Lidman (1999) argue, leadership is shaped by the open and permeable nature of universities, where external forces limit control. Despite the value of longitudinal and biographical studies, few explore how presidents themselves perceive and enact strategy in their daily roles—though these perspectives are crucial to understanding institutional direction (Dirks, 2023; Rosenberg, 2023).

Some previous research sheds light on presidential activities, particularly in budgeting, staffing, and policy (Bosetti & Walker, 2010; Techler, 2000), with less influence over teaching and research. Balancing strategic leadership with competing roles remains a key challenge (Techler, 2000), and presidents are increasingly positioned as cultural change agents (Bosetti & Walker, 2010). While Wolverton, Bower, and Evans-Hyle (2009) offer rich individual accounts of nine university female presidents, they also do not systematically address how presidential strategy is enacted.

In an era calling for transparency and accountability, there remains a lack of systematic, global insight into the professional and strategic behavior of university presidents. This study addresses that gap by examining how presidents from multiple continents perceive and enact their strategic roles in positioning their universities within knowledge societies (Badillo-Vega, Krucken, & Pineda, 2018).

This study

In the current study we focus on the strategic focus of university presidents through a conceptual framework that integrates the Hedgehog/Fox dichotomy by Berlin (2013), which represents single/multiple foci of interests, and an internal/external dichotomy, based on the combined work by Mintzberg et al. (2009) which is more internally oriented, and (Christensen, 2024), who focuses more on the external aspects of strategy. Combined, the two dichotomies result in four strategy foci for university presidents, ranging from an “Institutional Guardian” (hedgehog & internal) to a “Disruptive Innovator” (fox & external). For an overview of the four strategic foci, see Figure 1.



Figure 1.

Method

This paper presents the intermediate results of a study that will include 18 two-hour in-depth live, individual interviews with university presidents from multiple continents. The sample is pragmatically gathered across continents. The current paper presents the findings of a work-in-progress subset of the sample (N=7) and related to the strategy sections of the interviews which are based on a critical incident theory approach (Flanagan, 1954). The interviews are transcribed *ad verbatim* and thematically analysed along four strategic foci. As the four foci are essentially gliding scales with intermediate boundaries, the respondents will be positioned along the two axes.

Findings

Analyses will be conducted in the time towards the SRHE2025 conference. The preliminary findings already illustrate an initial variation in the strategy focus of university presidents. The methodological approach and the differences in university presidents' strategic foci found will be discussed with the audience.