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Institutional positioning in Finnish higher education (0021)

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Introduction

Higher education institutions' (HEIs) strategies are increasingly linked to their institutional positioning efforts. The terms 'profiles' and 'academic portfolios' or 'priority', 'focus', or 'core' areas of research and education are used to describe how HEIs are focusing, sharpening, and resourcing activities in selected areas to gain better competitive positions by carving out suitable 'niches' in national and international markets. Institutional positioning attempts are based on the presumption that in a similar way to business organisations HEIs will benefit from concentrating their efforts in areas that offer favourable opportunities to attract resources, are less crowded with competitors, and less burdened with other environmental constraints (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Hazelkorn, 2009; Martinez & Wolverton, 2009; van Vught, 2012).

The term 'profile' is commonly used to refer to the dimensions of an HEI's mission. Profiles indicate what HEIs do, want to do, and for which audience (van Vught et al., 2010). Further market differentiation is sought through activity portfolios in which the HEIs specify, for example which educational fields, programme types, or research areas will be prioritized (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011). The portfolio building activities are not only dependent on the strategic 'courage' (van Vught, 2012) of its management to put more explicit focus on some areas, but are also linked to the actions of competitors, funding opportunities, and governmental control.

Governments are increasingly encouraging HEIs in institutional positioning efforts (Bonaccorsi & Dario, 2007; Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Kitagawa & Oba, 2010) because institutional positioning is the 'linking pin' between the organisational level actions of an HEI and system level diversity (Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013). Previous studies have shown that market mechanism does not always increase diversity (Birnbaum, 1983; Morphew, 2009) and government steering, such as the establishment of binary systems, might actually preserve system diversity (Huisman, Meek, & Wood, 2007).

The Finnish higher education system has been characterized by having 'strong' institutions and 'strong' government steering (Aarrevaara, 2012). Recent developments in Finnish higher education offer a unique opportunity to examine the reciprocal relationship of these strong actors in the context of institutional positioning. This is not only because Finland has a clear binary higher education structure with the universities and universities of applied sciences (UASs) having distinct missions, but also because the development accelerating HEIs' institutional positioning efforts can so markedly be traced to the introduction of the structural development plan of Finnish higher education (Opetusministeriö, 2008; Tirronen & Nokkala, 2009; Valtioneuvosto, 2005).

The structural development plan has had wide-reaching effects. Firstly, it has led to reforms in both higher education sectors (Universities Act 448/2009; HE 9/2013). Secondly, it has resulted in multiple HEI mergers, thereby diminishing the number of HEIs from 49 in 2005 to 39 by 2013. Thirdly, in 2008 the Ministry of Education and Culture instructed that Finnish HEIs should add descriptions of their profile and focus areas in the documents they were to submit to the Ministry for performance agreement negotiations. While researchers have analysed the university reform (Aarrevaara, Dobson, & Elander, 2009; Kauko & Diogo, 2011; Piironen, 2013; Välimaa, 2012) and mergers (Kivistö & Tirronen, 2012; Puusa & Kekäle, 2013; Tirronen & Nokkala, 2009; Ursin, Aittola, Henderson, & Välimaa, 2010), less attention has been given to the institutional positioning.

Aiming at contributing not only to the Finnish discussion, but also to a growing body of empirical research on diversity and institutional positioning in different countries (e.g. Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2009; Huisman et al., 2007; Kitagawa & Oba, 2010; Morphew, 2009; Teixeira, Rocha, Biscaia, & Cardoso, 2012), this paper examines how the ideas of institutional profiles and focus areas have emerged and developed in the communications related to performance negotiation documents between Finnish HEIs and the Ministry in 2008-2103.

Methods

The data were collected from the Ministry's websites and consist of documents related to performance negotiations for the contract periods of 2010-2012 and 2013-2016. The definitions of profiles and focus areas were written by each institution one year before the contract period (i.e. in

2009 and 2012). The Ministry's instructions were given in 2008 and 2011 and feedback for each institution was submitted in 2010 and 2011.

The data were coded paying attention to the definitions of institutional profiles and focus areas made by the institutions and to all comments relating to them in the Ministry's responses. The content analysis aimed at analysing the data matrix both from the system level year by year and from the institutional level as a chain of events within a five-year time frame. The research setting and approach emphasise that meaning making of institutional positioning is an on-going activity that evolves over time in a social context. Not only do the institutional interpretations change during the five-year period, but they are also shaped by the actions of stakeholders, for example the Ministry and other HEIs.

Preliminary findings

When the institutions defined their profiles in 2009, the interpretation was more coherent in research universities than UASs whose statements revealed confusion about what should be included in the profile definition. The research universities' definitions for focus areas related only to research, whereas UASs covered both education and research and development in their statements. By 2013, the statements had become more specific and structurally more alike, but some focus area lists continue to include all possible research topics. The texts for the latest contract period reveal that the first institutions have fully adopted the idea of institutional positioning by linking their institutional evaluation systems to the focus areas, for example by giving targets for publications in the priority research area.

In its response, the Ministry has consistently requested clearer definitions from the institutions whose statements it regards as too broad. The Ministry has also given credit to institutions that have submitted specific statements referring to capabilities to prioritize and rewarded the institutions with strategic funds. The Ministry's comments on the institutional positioning statements of institutions that have recently merged tend to be positive. Moreover, the Ministry uses institutional positioning as an argument when encouraging further mergers.

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