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**Title** The Determinants of Institutional Positioning of Higher Education Institutions: a Reappraisal of the Organizational Dimension Barbato, G. (\*) Fumasoli, T. (\*\*) and Turri, M.(\*\*\*) (\*) Department of Social and Political Studies, Università degli Studi di Milano, Milan, Italy (\*\*) UCL Institute of Education, London, UK (\*\*\*) Department of Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods, Università degli Studi di Milano, Milan, Italy

**Submitter** Dr. Tatiana Fumasoli, Giovanni Barbato, Dr. Matteo Turri

## **The Determinants of Institutional Positioning of Higher Education Institutions: a Reappraisal of the Organizational Dimension**

### *1. Objectives*

This paper contributes in two ways to the emerging scholarly debate on institutional positioning in higher education. First, it presents a literature review and argues that, besides external forces and strategic intent, the organizational dimension is an important determinant of university institutional positioning. Second, the paper outlines a conceptual framework and a research agenda on the organizational dimension as an important determinant of institutional positioning in order to increase our understanding of regional, national and international dynamics of change in higher education.

### *2. Methodology*

We conducted a literature review to make sense of the increasing number of papers on institutional positioning in higher education according to three main determinants: 1) Environmental forces, or policy frameworks, market competitive pressures, macro-economic conditions; 2) Managerial intent, that is, the strategy designed within the university leadership to achieve objectives of efficiency, effectiveness and economy; 3) the organizational dimension, which includes the identities, history and traditions, routines and practices within a specific higher education institution (HEI). We define institutional positioning as the location on a niche of resources that enhance a university sustainability (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013).

We searched for ‘Institutional positioning’ and related concepts such as ‘strategic positioning’, ‘profiling’ and ‘niche-seeking’ in the databases of ‘Web of Science’, ‘Scopus’, and ‘Google Scholar’ over the last 30 years. The review produced an initial sample of almost 500 journal articles, books, book chapters and conference papers. From the titles, key words and abstracts of each contribution we selected those publications presenting research questions, theoretical framework and empirical research (where applicable) related to the determinants of HEI positioning. A final sample of 120 papers was considered for this paper.

### *3. Findings*

The HE literature has mainly pointed to a dualistic view of university organizational behaviour (Astley and Van de Ven, 1983). On the one hand, institutional positioning is conceived of as generated by the structural constraints of the environment as well as by the institutional forces that push HEIs to resemble each other in order to gain legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Powell and DiMaggio 1983, see the concept of academic drift by Riesman 19XX). Against this backdrop, the privileged level of analysis is either the organizational field or the population of universities (Toma, 2012). On the other hand, institutional positioning has been conceptualized as the product of proactive, rational and independent actors responding to external competition (Mahat and

Goedegebuure, 2016). In other words, institutional positioning is the outcome of strategic design. The focus of these papers is at a micro and/or individual level. We could also identify attempts to reevaluate the organizational level of analysis, focusing on the role of those social structures that are distinctive to each university (Fumasoli and Stensaker 2013, Fumasoli 2015). This perspective does not deny or diminish the influence of competitive forces or the power of university leadership, but rather highlights how HEIs construct their positions and their trajectories through internal identities, traditions and practices that are characterized by resilience (Fumasoli and Lepori 2011; Paradeise and Thoening, 2013; Vuori 2015, 2016).

The organizational dimension might help explain the mixed findings of empirical studies of institutional positioning, where the expectations formulated by deterministic approaches partially contradict the expectations by the strategic management school. Some studies reveal in fact that both emulation and distinctive behaviours occur simultaneously: in spite of their operating under the same pressures and incentives, HEIs can display unique combinations and outcomes of the same (Oliver 1991; Hasse and Krücken 2013; Kosmützky and Krücken 2015; Mampaey et al 2015; Silander and Haake 2016). Other scholars characterize the organizational dimension as those sets of historically constructed values, practices and capabilities, which filter the external pressures and re-direct managerial agency towards specific resource niches; leading, accordingly, to field differentiation (Czarniawska and Woelff 19; Paradeise and Thoening, 2013).

Organizational identity have been defined as bundles of core values and cultural norms that define both the membership of academic and professional staff to the specific institution and the ultimate purpose of the HEI as an organization (Gioia et al. 2000; Stensaker 200X, 2013). Along this line, the changing institutional positioning of universities reflects shifts of organizational identity over time (Pizarro Milian 2017). Other researchers have elaborated on the concept of organizational capabilities, i.e. the social, cultural and cognitive processes that play a relevant role in creating the local orders and abilities required to develop an actual strategic change and consequently to 'build distinctive positioning in complex and uncertain environments' (Paradeise and Thoening, 2016). These organizational capabilities thus 'fill the gap between intention and outcome' and support the organization in achieving its organizational goals (Cruz-Castro et al. 2016).

#### 4. *Outlining a conceptual framework and research agenda*

We argue that the organizational dimension of institutional positioning lacks a systematic theory-informed approach to understand change and stability in higher education. We briefly outline hereafter the main concepts of our analytical framework.

*Organizational structure*: characterizes the level of centralisation, formalisation, standardisation of decision making between teaching, research and services. This distinctive configuration filters and shapes how environmental pressures and managerial initiative are accommodated by the university, and determines the room for change(s) of institutional positioning.

*Organizational identity*: relates to staff composition and is shaped by entrance requirements, career structures, socialisation processes, and by shared understandings of local practices and routines.

*Centrality*: geographical, political, economic as well as cultural, can be observed over a centre-periphery continuum linking the university to those material and symbolic resources that are necessary to change in institutional positioning.

*Level of analysis*: the organizational dimension can be analysed at micro, meso and macro level. Hence, empirical research can focus on university leadership, on organizational decision-making and behaviour, in a population of universities.

*Comparative analysis*: our analytical framework allows for broader comparison of heterogeneous empirical cases by means of clear-cut concepts.

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### **Appendix: papers analysed in the literature review**

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