Universities as boundary-maintaining organisations

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Overview

- Intro: what is the issue: autonomy, actorhood, boundaries
- Two perspectives to look at organisational boundaries
- Questions for research

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Background

- Increasing institutional autonomy
- ... as the way in which HEIs are allowed to "organise themselves"
- ... despite considerable variety across Europe (see Estermann et al., 2011)
- ... also more strategic leeway to change, profile, etc.

But …

- Because of governmental (indirect) interferences, the actual scope for self-organisation may be limited
  - accountability – administrative apparatus
  - implicit expectation to fulfill a broad portfolio of activities: teaching AND research AND service to society (mission overload)
  - rankings imperatives: big, comprehensive

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Other impediments on organisations

Entry requirements for new players:

- Quality requirements, but also …
- Track record and size

Self-imposed? Iron cage?

- HEIs choose their structures from a limited set of options (legitimation!)
- … even in light of disruptive technologies

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Enter actorhood

- Actorhood, "complete" organisations => soon(ish) HEIs will take the reins

- ... but poor understanding of causal relationships in knowledge production, dissemination and transfer ... including lack of insight on how to judge performances and outcomes (Whitley, 2008) => hollow organisations with limited discretion, portfolio managers

Actorhood implies …

- Collective agency
- Strategic leeway
- Complete organisations ("having all elements on board to survive")

- But what does this mean for boundaries, if organisations are "goal-directed, boundary-maintaining socially-constructed systems of human agency"? (def. Aldrich)

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Boundaries

- Demarcations between the organization and its environment (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005)

- Interesting? ... Yes, it leads to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between internal and external world and arguably to insights in internal dynamics

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Novel?

In higher education studies, it goes back to
e.g. Parsons and Platt (1973)

In science studies: Gieryn (1983) on boundary
work between science and non-science

Organisation theory: Santos and Eisenhardt
(2005) => used as guidance to explore
contracting and expanding boundaries of HEIs

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Boundaries I: efficiency

- Revolves around authority and ownership, markets vs. organisations, transaction costs

- Suggests (in context of HE):
  + institutional autonomy
  + strong(er) leadership
  + actorhood (Krücken & Meier, 2006)

  - portfolio management (Whitley, 2008)
  - former outsiders now in governance structures

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Boundaries II: external relations and resources

- Revolves around handling uncertainty, power and control

- Suggests (in context of HE):
+ resource diversification

- multiple dependencies => networks
- dependencies at shop-floor level: small fiefdoms within the larger kingdom

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Boundaries III: core and boundary-spanning activities

- Revolves around protecting core activities and competencies

- Suggests (in context of HE):

+ emergence of boundary-spanning roles (alumni relations, technology transfer offices, etc.)

- Paradoxically: these new roles make boundaries porous (Hughes & Kitson, 2012)

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Boundaries IV: membership and identity

- Revolves around building coherence

- Suggests (in context of HE):
+ autonomy, positioning, identity

- membership diversity, hybrid professions
- contracts
- perimeter roles: in or out?

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Another perspective: university models

- Republic of scholars

- Professionals determine the boundaries of science

- Also determine who gets access (PhD as entry requirement)

- Socialisation (identity) through training

Another perspective: university models (Olsen, 2007)

- Universities as instruments of (national) governments

- Political agendas determine boundaries by focus on solving national economic problems
- Steering on input, regulation of supply
- National employment conditions, employment by state

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Another perspective: university models (Olsen, 2007)

- ❑ University as service entreprise in the market
- ❑ University as internal representative system (democratic vision)

- What would these models imply for the boundaries?

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Summarising

- Boundaries are continuously (re)defined and – at face value – both contracting and expanding

- In some areas more than others … IDENTITY!

- Boundaries are in some respect stronger than before, but also more porous and blurring: HEIs as amoebae, Swiss cheese … partly contradicting the idea of actorhood

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Reflective exercises

- Contemporary universities seem to make limited use of possible structures and boundaries .... Agree?

- If you think this made sense, what does this all imply for your research in and on higher education?

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Thank you!

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