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Leaving the Ivory Tower: Universities' Third Mission and the Search for Legitimacy

Abstract

In this paper, we investigate how third mission strategies relate to changing legitimacy of universities. The work is based on a literature review and a case study of the largest business university in the EU (WU Vienna). First, we describe relevant trends and pressures for higher education institutions towards responsibility, accountability, and third mission. Second, we introduce the case in order to substantiate these trends, driven also by Austrian politics and international networks, some of them also emerging with a more socially oriented mission. Finally, we discuss isomorphic trends in higher education.

Keywords

Third mission, legitimacy, isomorphism, accountability, responsibility

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1 Introduction

Universities around the globe are facing severe changes of their role in society. In the past, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been places of instruction and inquiry. Their graduates and research results were considered valuable contributions to society. This legitimized their funding, be it public or private. The dawn of new public management² caused by the increased need for funding of university expansion scrutinized this role worldwide. The shift of attention went from output to outcome, from performance to impact, from the ivory tower to social responsibility and relevance. Accordingly, legitimacy requires impact to society in general.

The reason for this shift can be dated around the late 1990s. In systems with public funding of universities, the pressure for accountability became apparent. No longer was it possible to finance higher education without a clear measure of performance. The rise of new public management (NPM) added to this pressure even further. Hereby universities were reinvented as autonomous entities which had to be managed, measured, and led according to systematic principles (FERLIE et al., 2008).³ With it came accountability, impact, sustainability and responsibility, and performance measurement (WELPE et al., 2015).

Today, the expectation of society at-large towards “their” universities is to deliver a new set of services which include employable and responsible graduates and relevant, impactful research. The institutional field changed accordingly as the top

² New Public Management emerged in the UK under PM Margaret Thatcher and has been characterized by the application of business management methods in public administration. In the 1990s, it became the dominant paradigm in public administration, characterized mainly by performance management, decentralization, output control, and contracting out of public services (e.g., HOOD, 1995)

³ Autonomy of universities has been widespread in the US and in the UK long before NPM. Even in Continental Europe, autonomy of universities was von invented by NPM (see, e.g., ZEH, 1973)

institutions in the field started to alter their strategy. For example, Harvard adapted their curricula to include more elements of social responsibility (CHRISTENSEN & EYRING, 2011). HEIs and their third mission became the focus of public policies and international associations.

2 Method

In our analysis, we differentiate between three levels: international trends, national public policies, and organizational strategizing. For the purpose of illustration, Austria and WU Vienna University of Economics and Business serve as examples. For this single case analysis, we content-analysed and interpreted (1) major strategy documents of WU, (2) a policy paper by the Austrian Ministry of Science, and (3) strategies published by international associations. We cannot avoid integrating our professional experience in WU's top management. We thus hope to provide a "thick narrative" of business universities in a changing environment searching for their impact on society. Methodologically, the empirical case rather serves as an illustration of the forces suggested by theory.

Our theoretical frame embraces isomorphism (DIMAGGIO & POWELL, 1983) and world polity (BOLI & THOMAS, 1997; RAMIREZ et al., 2003). These concepts explain that due to global institutional pressures HEIs are getting more and more similar. They are mimicking leading universities in order to be successful in their field (mimetic isomorphism). Accreditation agencies and their standards aggravate normative isomorphism. Governmental actors require universities to state their third mission strategies (coercive isomorphism).

Our overall assessment is differentiated. On the one hand, we appreciate that deliberate strategic decisions of universities tackle overall social challenges and integrate sustainability, accountability, and third mission. On the other hand, these developments result from institutional pressures that counteract universities' autonomy.

3 Trends and Pressures

Universities are facing multiple challenges in their external environment. Three trends and pressures are most relevant and explained in more detail: (1) responsibility (2) accountability; (3) the notion of “third mission”.

3.1 Responsibility

Responsibility has emerged with the financial and economic crises in late 2008. Even before that, HEIs started to be involved in multidisciplinary and issue-driven research and teaching, often described under the title “Mode 2”⁴ (NOWOTNY et al., 2003). The understanding has been that HEI are called to deliver answers to pressing problems of society. For this, different disciplines had to be combined. Responsibility in general has been a growing issue of educational reforms all over the globe. This translated into integration for ethics, social responsibility and environmental sustainability, which permeate all major activities of universities. Especially business schools have had to face a new challenge from major accreditation agencies and national ministries (STARKEY et al., 2004).

The European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD, www.efmd.org)⁵ requires for its EQUIS accreditation that all accredited schools be devoted to ESR (ethics, responsibility, sustainability). For the assessment, schools and universities are asked to report on their ethics standards in teaching and research, their sustainable management practices, and socially responsible activities of the institution in

⁴ Mode 2 research is a term from the sociology of science and refers to a new way of knowledge production. In contrast to disciplinary and basic Mode 1 research, Mode 2 focuses on interdisciplinary and real world problems.

⁵ EFMD is a non-profit organization based in Brussels and Geneva focused on management development globally. Their main activities include institutional and program accreditations (e.g. EQUIS, EPAS) as well as different conference formats for business schools and companies.

its local environment. These criteria are expected to be part of academic programs on all levels, and as a result, students should have a decent understanding of ethical academic behaviour as well as responsible leadership and sustainable practices. Beyond EQUIS, other quality assurance programs evolved. BSIS (Business School Impact System), e.g., is an assessment of sustainable practices of business schools (also offered by EFMD). Green campus certifications measure the level of responsible social and energy management. As a result, codes of conducts and ethics manuals are quite common these days. For AACSB, guiding principles lie at the heart of each accreditation and encompass ethics and responsibility: “The school must demonstrate a commitment to address, engage, and respond to current and emerging corporate social responsibility issues (e.g., diversity, sustainable development, environmental sustainability, and globalization of economic activity across cultures) through its policies, procedures, curricula, research, and/or outreach activities.”⁶

3.2 Accountability

The second trend that changed the role of HEI is the rise of accountability. The field has changed over the years from elite higher education for a few privileged students, to mass and even universal higher education for as many people as possible (TROW, 2007). This expansion took different forms in different countries. For private HEI in the US mostly, the rise of tuition fees and the fast growing market increased the pressure to develop relevant programs. In more publicly funded higher education systems in Europe, HEI have been scrutinized by public officials. And accountability developed in this process as a major stepping stone.

⁶ See <http://www.aacsb.edu/~media/AACSB/Docs/Accreditation/Standards/2013-bus-standards-update>. AACSB is a US-based accreditation agency with special emphasis on program quality, mission and strategy. 15 standards have to be fulfilled in order to be accredited.

Under the umbrella of NPM (BROUCKER & DE WIT, 2015), European universities have been restructured over the last decades. The expansion of higher education was mainly financed through tax income. In order to justify this, public policy granted institutional autonomy but required periodic accountability. A whole range of measures emerged and have been scrutinized by higher education researchers (BLEIKLIE et al., 2011).

As MARGINSON (2016) pointed out, accountability first led to an emphasis on output. HEIs were asked to provide “value for money” or to “produce” a certain level of output with a given (financial) input. This forces HEIs to develop measures for research productivity and graduation rate. The drift to research income, A+ publications and high yield programs became prevalent. In combination with NPM, management by objectives and contract management have been implemented (BROUCKER et al., 2015). In the German-speaking countries, performance contracts or calls have been developed. This way, high amounts of public spending should be justified.

This has also resulted in incentives (HÉNARD & MITTERLE, 2010). Performance management suggested incentivizing and changing the governance (WELPE et al., 2015). Accordingly, universities – which have been driven by peer evaluation – have been introducing incentive systems ranging from monetary (e.g., excellence initiative in Germany) and institutional (e.g., international accreditations and rankings) to symbolic and individual (e.g., acknowledgement and rewards). Many authors warned because of jeopardizing the interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (FREY & OSTERLOH 2002; OSTERLOH & KIESER, 2015; SPECK-BACHER, 2013).

The formalization of evaluation and performance monitoring nurtured administrative capacity (FERLIE et al., 2008), which had to be built up in order to go through evaluation standards and reporting systems. A vivid example is the research assessment exercise (RAE) in the UK. Adverse effects include a hiring boom before the exercise and paying too little attention on impact. The government responded

by changing to the research evaluation framework (REF) with much more focus on impact.

3.3 Third Mission

The most recent trend that embraces responsibility and accountability is the “Third Mission”. As the public is increasingly criticizing HEIs, this aims at changing the social contract with universities and moving to an evaluative state (NEAVE, 1998). Impact of research refers not only to the scientific community but also to the relevance for business and society. For example, the introduction of open access for the distribution of intellectual capital has caused a substantial debate on standards for faculty work appraisal. As MARGINSON (2016) pointed out recently, the notion of third mission depends on the definition of education and research as a public or merit good. A public good will be translated into a local benefit for society whereas merit goods are individualized depending on performance. Third mission is therefore especially relevant in publically funded HEIs.

Business universities and schools have been especially asked to consider their connection to different local stakeholders (companies, NGOs, government, society at large, etc.) after the financial crisis. New services include centres for entrepreneurship and innovation, services for the local community, applied research projects with regional organizations, etc. The push has been to move the universities closer to the needs of stakeholders while at the same time being an international player (ENDERS, 2004). This tension does of course cause some major challenges.

The impact of business schools has been taken up by international accreditation agencies like EFMD. Under the label BSIS⁷ a scheme has been developed to assess impact from a holistic point of view. Indicators include budget, incubators, internationalization, regional image, social responsibility, graduation and employment,

⁷ For details, see www.efmdglobal.org/bsis. EFMD offers “Business School Impact System” (BSIS) as a tool for measuring impact of business schools.

intellectual contribution and faculty participation, public relations and communications. It can be expected that soon the pressure for impact-measurement will reach a large community of (accredited) business schools.

Some authors have warned of the consequences (JONGBLOED et al., 2008). They describe the situation as a move to a stakeholder approach accompanied by decentralization, marketization, and deregulation. “Increasingly universities are asked to prove their contribution to the knowledge society and to have their teaching and research play a more visible role in strengthening the innovative capacities of the economy.” (JONGBLOED et al., 2008, 318) Universities are forced to leave their ivory tower in order to help solving societal problems.

4 The Case of WU Vienna

WU Vienna University of Economics and Business serves as an example to illustrate these trends for three reasons. First, over the years WU has changed to a university with a very strong commitment to “third mission”. Second, higher education policy in Austria demonstrates the shift from output to outcome. Third, international associations as normative players in an isomorphic process are highly influential for WU.

4.1 Strategy formation

Major characteristics of WU include its size (>20.000 students), its international orientation (triple accredited by EQUIS, AACSB, AMBA), its comprehensive disciplinary offering (economics and business, mathematics, sociology, history, law, languages), and its public financing (about 90%). In 2004, a major legal reform was implemented turning all Austrian universities in autonomous institutions (UOG 2002). The philosophy behind that shift was NPM, i.e., the introduction of performance contracts, three-year lump-sum budgets, autonomy in all major areas including finances, programs, research, organization, and personnel. All universities needed to develop an organization chart, HR plans, and strategic plans for their

key decisions (e.g., senior faculty positions; academic programs, new ventures). The ministry for science negotiates performance contracts with universities every three years.

Hence, in 2002 WU started a process that is still ongoing. The university redesigned the whole organization. WU defined a strategy, goals and tools in order to reach them, and a new identity. It became clear that historically WU had two key distinct characteristics that served for profile development. First, WU has been proud to be “more than a business school”, i.e., combining different disciplines that inform business and economics. Second, WU has been internationally oriented from its foundation.

In 2004, WU decided to seek international accreditation for WU by three established agencies: EQUIS, AACSB, and AMBA.⁸ In late 2015, these objectives have been completely achieved and WU is now part of group of only 1% universities in this field that with a triple accreditation. With it came the requirement to adhere to principles such as responsibility, impact to business and society together with excellence in teaching and research. In 2013, WU opened a new campus as one of the largest single university construction projects in the world (some 100.000 m²).

WU’s strategy and structure today includes the following key elements as a response to the new autonomy, the need to internationalize further, and to develop a unique position in the higher education market: mission statement with a focus on responsibility, a strategic plan, membership in key international networks promoting “third mission”. The mission statement convincingly summarizes the situation (see figure 1).

⁸ EQUIS, AACSB and AMBA are accreditations for business schools. EQUIS emphasizes internationalization and business contacts, AACSB program management, and AMBA accredits MBA programs.

Mission Statement

As a research-intensive public university with a keen awareness of its obligations to society, WU prepares its students to take on responsibility in business and society. At WU, young people learn the business and economics skills they need to contribute productively to facing today's and tomorrow's economic, social, legal, and ecological challenges using future-oriented expertise and responsible business behavior.

WU sees itself as an international university, as an important hub for global exchange, and as a place where students and teachers work together. Open-mindedness and diversity were already among the university's key values at WU's founding in 1898. WU is committed to the principles of fairness and equal opportunities, scientific integrity, academic freedom, and especially plurality in topics and methodology.

WU is a responsible university.* This means that WU not only accepts responsibility for the quality of its performance in research, teaching, and third mission activities, but also that it acts in a socially responsible manner in all that it does.

**As based on the six Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME)*

Figure 1: WU's Mission Statement 2018

(Source: <https://www.wu.ac.at/en/the-university/about-wu/strategy/>)

4.2 Public Policy

NPM has inspired the governance of Austrian universities. Hence, contracts and policy documents play a key role. Two aspects have caused coercive isomorphic

adaptation at Austrian universities: performance contracts and a national higher education plan.

Performance contracts were implemented in 2002, and three rounds of three-year contracts were completed by 2016. Based on the experiences of negotiating these contracts, the ministry started to stress the role of universities in society and to require a clear statement of third mission-activities. Many initiatives have been created ranging from entrepreneurship centres, public communication and lectures, and partnerships with nonprofits to address social issues. Altogether WU expanded its activities and added them to its agenda.

The ministry also issued a national strategy for the university sector. Published for the first time in December 2015, this document defines a development trajectory for the higher education sector. Based on the recommendations of the Austrian Scientific Council, the Council for Science and Technology and the Austrian Court of Audit, the ministry defined eight overarching goals. This plan has become relevant for the public governance model for universities in Austria. It forms the basis for the strategy of individual institutions, and their performance contracts with the ministry.

The eight goals are complemented by a basic goal of financing higher education and by the understanding that universities should become more outcome and impact-oriented. The claim is to further develop a differentiated higher education system, increase funding per student, develop a policy for qualified student access, and support junior faculty. In this sense, we can see a further move towards third mission issues together with the notion of international connectedness. In summary, these eight goals define areas of investment and have been stated again in the newly published version for 2019-24.⁹

⁹ https://bmbwf.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/wissenschaft/publikationen/guep/2019-2024_GUEP_Langversion.pdf

Three goals directly address the topic of third mission. Meanwhile, the ministry has launched a platform called “responsible science”¹⁰, reacting to EU’s “responsible science and research” (RRI) initiative which recommends the integration of civil society into processes of research and innovation. This platform consists of 13 public institutions, three civil society organizations, and more than 20 HEIs. The major objective is to integrate social challenges into research strategies of universities. The ministry exerts considerable informal pressure on HEIs to participate and to become more ‘socially embedded’.

4.3 International associations

Since 2012, WU has joined relevant networks in the area of responsible management education to be able to learn from other business schools how to best integrate sustainability and responsibility in all its activities.

Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME)

In 2014, WU decided to become a signatory of PRME, understanding this membership as a visible sign for establishing multifold activities in the area of responsible management education. Launched at the 2007 UN Global Compact Leaders Summit in Geneva, the PRME initiative is the first formal link between the UN and business schools. The main intention is to bridge the gap between theory and practice in management education. The signatory members adhere to six PRME Principles, embracing purpose, values, method, research, partnership, and dialogue. The main purpose is to “develop the capabilities of students to be future generators of sustainable value for business and society at large and to work for an inclusive and sustainable global economy.”¹¹ The values relate to the UN Global Compact.

¹⁰ For details see www.responsible-science.at.

¹¹ <http://www.unprme.org/about-prme/the-six-principles.php>

50+20 Innovation Cohort

WU is a founding member of this initiative that was created on Rio+20, the UN conference on sustainable development held in 2012. WU took part as a pioneer in its first innovation cohort 2013/14 contributing to pilot projects aimed at transforming management education in the service of society. The 50+20 Agenda describes a vision for the transformation of management education, in which the common tenet of being the best in the world is revised in favour of creating businesses that are designed and led to achieve the best for the world.

A series of consultative workshops developed the mission over the course of 18 months, integrating contributions from more than 100 leaders and academics, with many more participating in online stakeholder surveys. It also displays a number of “Emerging Benchmarks”, i.e. examples of organizations setting new and relevant standards indicative of a collaborative rather than competitive business.

Global Business Schools Network (GBSN)

In 2015, WU became a member of the Global Business School network. GBSN gives member schools the opportunity to exchange expertise and experience and to share innovative approaches, trends, and best practices. The members contribute their specific strengths to GBSN’s programs, promoting international cooperation and exchange. In the recent years, WU has taken several steps towards developing integrative and practice-oriented business education with a strong international focus. The main idea of this approach is to prepare students to tackle the challenges of business in a globalized world by keeping the three dimensions of sustainability in mind: society, environment, and the economy.

Global Responsible Leadership Initiative (GRLI)

The GRLI group – of which WU is part since early 2016 – promotes that “global responsibility is embedded in leadership and practice of organizations and societies worldwide.” The GRLI’s mission is to catalyse the development of globally responsible leadership and practice in organizations and society worldwide. Through

visible advocacy, thought-and-action leadership, and hands-on prototyping and experimentation the GRLI community works towards a set of goals.¹²

As these four examples show, international associations join forces to promote third mission activities among business schools. The pressure to change the traditional model of business schools and universities is increasing steadily and many are responding in innovative and new ways. WU is one such example.

5 Reconnecting with Theory

The case of WU Vienna shows how a European university has adopted responsibility, accountability, and third mission into its strategy. Driving forces have been located at different levels: public policy, international associations, but last not least university leadership. Institutional theory applies a core concept to explain such developments: legitimacy (DIMAGGIO & POWELL, 1983; SUCHMAN, 1995). Relational embeddedness, “referring to the extent to which a practice or rule is in use within an organizational field, and how such diffusion generates interdependence and self-reinforcement” (COLYVAS & POWELL, 2006) contributes to the process, in which responsibility, sustainability and accountability are imperative to be a socially embedded, legitimate university (RAMIREZ, 2016).

Not long ago, universities were not actors but rather arenas of scholars and students. Yet institutional arrangements have changed completely. Universities have become competitive (MARGINSON, 2006; PORTNOI et al., 2010), and the notion of ‘world-class-universities’ has entered and intensified competition. The expansion of higher education itself has become one of the major drivers of world polity (RAMIREZ et al., 2003; SCHOFFER & MEYER, 2005). In this process, universities have developed from arenas to actors, and strategic planning has become mandatory to gain legitimacy.

¹² <https://grli.org/about/global-responsibility>

Hereby, the US research university has become the role-model, irrespective of the distinctive history of American Higher Education, characterized by much less influence of state bureaucracies and senior professors (BEN-DAVID & ZLOCZOWER, 1962; RAMIREZ, 2016; FLEXNER, 1930; CLARK, 1978). US universities developed alongside a strong scepticism towards the state, favouring civil society over public authorities, and believing that societal progress is detached from the authority of the state. Thus the socially embedded university “was less canonical and more influenced by the engagement of universities with multiple groups in society, what today is called ‘stakeholders’” (RAMIREZ, 2016, p. 4). Therefore, changes in society became much more relevant and were not buffered by neither the civil servant status of professors neither by state-bureaucratic barriers. Both the commercialization of knowledge and the relations with the corporate world reached US universities much earlier. Due to decentralization and the lack of state support, US universities were early induced to seek resources and legitimacy from multiple sources in a competitive environment (RAMIREZ, 2016, p. 5).

In Europe, institutional pressures hit a different field, but jointly force HEIs towards social embeddedness, sustainability, accountability and third mission. Though universities have achieved autonomy, the state’s influence on strategy is still prevalent. In the case of Austria, the ministry still exerts considerable pressures by means of performance contracts and funding. Recommendations and guidelines concerning performance contracts serve as transmission. Universities in Austria are largely dependent on the public funding. Besides, the processes of performance contracting between the ministry and the universities require specific structural preconditions, such as units for strategic planning, management control, accounting, and legal offices. When the ministry puts a new agenda onto its wish list, universities regularly react with new posts and new departments (e.g. for gender equality, sustainability). The concept of social responsibility has undergone a weird translation on its journey from the US to Europe. Originally meant as an answer to the lack of state support by US universities, it is now enforced by the state itself in Europe.

Whenever uncertainty increases, organizations tend to react with established and standardized decisions (DIMAGGIO & POWELL, 1983, p. 151). As universities see themselves in a global competition, those conceived as the most successful competitors that have the best answers to the global challenges serve as shining role models. Thus many European universities imitate the top ranked US universities and establish units like alumni associations and career centres.

A third source of isomorphic organizational change stems primarily from professionalization. Leadership positions at universities in Europe have been mostly honorary and representative posts until the late 1980s. Meanwhile these positions have turned into executive positions, and governance systems mirror a corporate logic. As a corollary of the professionalization of university management, international professional associations have emerged. Accreditation agencies contribute to the worldwide diffusion of criteria and standards. New organizational professions emerge also beneath the top level (EVETTTS, 2003): fundraising officers, gender equality officers, career counsellors, etc. These new professions again build their professional associations and again disseminate rules and standards.

As we only provide a single case study in a specific national context, the limitations of our study are manifold, as are suggestions for further research. Based on the theory outlined in this paper, research should focus on the specific practices of HEIs in different countries to reveal how global institutional pressures seep down into national and organizational practices. The way that we have identified in our case, membership in international networks and accreditations – is only one possible channel. Furthermore, we assume that HEIs' resource dependency matters. For instance, HEIs with a higher financial autonomy and a stronger reputation might act more autonomously, as might be the case for HEIs in a niche. Likewise, we should learn more about how HEIs decouple their practices from strategy and structure, thus managing their external image according to institutional expectations but acting differently in their operations.

In summary, we present the emergence of third mission and the changing legitimacy of universities in Europe. Because of the economic crisis, institutional pressures

for HEIs have aggravated. Publicly funded universities are especially vulnerable to these pressures as society has a specific interest in their performance. Hence, each university has to comply with these new expectations in one form or the other in order to assure resources and legitimacy. On top of that, world polity and isomorphism in the form of international professional associations and accreditation agencies, sharpened professional standards, and empowered agency of and within universities have built and shaped a globalized field of higher education. Some HEIs may find niches with more freedom in this globalized field. Others might be overwhelmed with this additional task and experience “having to do more with less”. In any case, there is no way back into the ivory tower.

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