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## Professional higher education institutions as organizational actors

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Organizational actorhood is a term that has gained prominence in literature about higher education as a way to describe some of the key global change processes with emphasis on organizational accountability, formalization of structure, focus on goal definition and managerialism. At the same time, there is less knowledge about how organizational actorhood is constructed in professional higher education institutions. Based on over 100 interviews and document studies of two case institutions, this article argues that professional higher education institutions show many characteristics of aiming to construct organizational actorhood, while their understanding of accountability is broader than would be in traditional comprehensive universities.

**Keywords:** organizational actors; Norway; professional higher education; organizational change; organizational structure

### Introduction

In recent years, the concept of organizational actorhood has gained attention as a means to describe the change processes taking place in universities (Krücken & Meier, 2006; Whitley, 2008, 2012). The term describes changes towards integrated, goal-oriented and competitive institutions in which management and leadership play an ever more important role (Krücken, 2011). At the same time, the pressures of globalization, marketization and new forms of accountability do not only affect universities, they affect a variety of higher education organizations operating in this environment (Drori, Meyer, & Hwang, 2006), including professional higher education institutions. However, studies that explicitly examine professional higher education from this perspective remain few (see, e.g. Vuori, 2016).

In many countries, professional higher education is provided in a separate sector, different from comprehensive research universities. This sector has a number of different names in different countries, including universities of applied sciences, (university) colleges, polytechnics and higher professional education. In general, these institutions are to a larger extent oriented towards national labor markets, and they also do not always have the same capacity to engage in the global higher education market as the top ranked prestigious comprehensive research universities. At the same time, organization wise they are nevertheless embedded in a context of these global trends. Following this argument, the article will examine *how professional higher education institutions have adjusted to the spread of global university models that emphasize organizational actorhood*.

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While the organization of professional higher education varies across Europe (Kyvik, 2009), this is a sector with arguably less institutional weight and organizational complexity, and that is more flexible and responsive to societal needs than the conventional universities. Having this in mind, one can make two competing arguments regarding their engagement with the notion of organizational actorhood. These institutions can be seen as particularly susceptible to the spread of global models and engagement in the process of constructing organizational actorhood, due to institutional factors. At the same time, one could argue that, due to their profession-oriented profile, this is a sector that is less autonomous than universities, is often less prestigious and thus has less strategic capacity to position themselves. From this perspective, one could pose a competing argument and claim that professional higher education would be an unlikely case for strengthening organizational actorhood, due to weak organizational capacity to construct an efficient organization. These two competing propositions will in this article be illustrated by exploring the notion of organizational actorhood using examples from two case institutions in Norway to illustrate how these processes play out in these types of organizational settings.

### Constructing organizational actorhood

Higher education institutions are usually described as tradition-heavy. Universities were for centuries a very persistent type of social institution, a form that has only been challenged in the recent 150 years when the universities increasingly became embedded in industrial and bureaucratic societies (Barnett, 1992). More recently, one can identify that the traditional pact between higher education and society has been challenged (Gornitzka, Maassen, Olsen, & Stensaker, 2007), and initiatives for change in the sector appear to be speeding up. Recent attempts to transform universities into 'complete' organizations are closely linked to the modernization processes that emphasize autonomy, accountability and competition (Seeber et al., 2015). The concept of organizational actorhood should be seen in the light of these wider changes, where higher education institutions are expected to become more complete, coherent, rational and modern organizations. Viewing the global transformation process, Krücken and Meier (2006) have highlighted four closely related dimensions that 'document the transformation' of higher education institutions becoming organizational actors: *organizational accountability*, *formalization of structure*, focus on *goal definition* and *emphasis on managerialism*. These four dimensions can be seen as the basic elements of a global model for modernized higher education institutions.

Emphasis on *accountability* has been closely linked to the widespread autonomy related reforms across Europe. Concerns for accountability have also led to the spread of external quality assurance practices in recent decades (Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007), as these practises mean that the value of higher education should, as well as could, be documented. Having obtained more regulatory autonomy, this form of autonomy emphasizes performance (Enders, de Boer, & Weyer, 2013). Consequently, higher education institutions increasingly have to be able to demonstrate their relevance to society and document both the use of public funds and the results that have been obtained.

Krücken and Meier (2006) stress that part of the new global model for universities is the emergence of a *formal organizational structure* that becomes expanded, elaborated and differentiated. Differentiated means, for instance, establishing offices for a variety of tasks that are located in specific organizational subunits, including technology

transfer, personnel and international affairs (Krücken & Meier, 2006). This rationalization of organizational structure does not only concern organizational maps, it also concerns the ‘glue’ that integrates organizations into a coherent whole, and the kind of practices that can be found within the organization. From idiosyncratic practices within the individual university, the rationalization of organizational structure represents a shift towards more standardized practices and formalization (Ramirez, 2006). Organizations have various motivations to engage in this rationalization process. Having in mind that society itself is becoming more rationalized, this can provide a source for legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Furthermore, formalization clarifies hierarchical structures and can thus increase centralization processes (Bleiklie, Enders, & Lepori, 2015). However, creating a neat organizational structure is not always a straightforward process. While rationalized accounts of what a ‘good organizational structure’ looks like provide specific models, these models can also be a source for decoupling between formal organization structure and practice (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2013). One can nevertheless argue that engaging in a formalization process of the organizational structure – whatever the result is (decoupling or not) – signifies a change process on some level.

This formalization process emphasizes the vertical lines in the organization, where leadership and control mechanisms become clarified and strengthened. This allows for a more elaborate focus on *goal orientation* and mission statements (Krücken & Meier, 2006). Rather than academic authority being part of the slowly developing organizational sagas that are embedded in the fabric of the organization (Clark, 1972), focus on the definition of goals represents a more managerial and rationalized view of organizational development, where emphasizing quantitative and qualitative indicators, measurement and actual goal attainment gains importance. While rationalization and measurement are often associated with hierarchy (Seeber et al., 2015), quantifiable goals can also reduce leadership discretion, in particular when such goals are set externally (Bleiklie et al., 2015).

The formalization of organizational structure is thus expressed through what might be labeled the process of *professionalizing management*, what Krücken and Meier (2006) labeled the ‘rise of the management profession’. Traditionally, higher education has been characterized by a high degree of differentiation in the bottom part of the organization as well as being bottom-heavy in terms of academic authority (Clark, 1983). Management on the ‘shop floor’ in academia has been exercised by those with sufficient academic authority, and not necessarily those with the potential strategic leeway at this level. However, recent decades have witnessed a substantial professionalization of administrative services, due to changing demands from the state and society (Waugh, 2003), as well as technological development (Middlehurst, 1999). As a result of increased or changing demands regarding quantifiable, externally set goals, there is a growing belief that management is a key factor in assuring success and productivity, also at the institutional level (Brennan & Shah, 2000). The managerially oriented steering of universities is in turn closely related to increased autonomy and accountability mechanisms (Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2008).

This global development of higher education institutions can trigger various kinds of organizational responses, and it is possible to distinguish between two broad patterns of change, depending on the level of agency attached to the organizational response (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2013). In more broad terms, one can say that this division represents a distinction between: (a) the unquestioned adoption of social norms, and (b) behavior in a rational and strategic manner (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). Regarding the first pattern, the change processes would take place as a process of diffusion of a particular

model in a largely unmanaged manner. This can be seen as a pattern of isomorphic processes, where various organizations over time adopt similar solutions in an unintentional manner (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Characteristic of this kind of change would then be that the global model of universities as organizational actors would also have relevance for professional higher education institutions as both operate in the same broader sector, but that this change process would not be conscious adaptation. However, change processes can have a more strategic element in that organizations consciously interact with specific models from the environment, by either adjusting to these models or aiming to avoid adjusting to them (Oliver, 1991). The form the strategic response will take depends also on the contents of the specific change process, how it is related to the current organizational reality, as well as the consequences of non-compliance. While the construction of organizational actorhood is a description of a specific global transformation process, some of the dimensions can also be sanctioned, for instance compliance with accreditation procedures through the national quality assurance system. In this case, the national level can also influence the responses within the organization. For other dimensions, the kind of change might be more related to processes of imitation, where successful models are being followed (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2013) as a part of a strategic choice to signal specific status or organizational form. For the research questions in this article, one can argue that if one follows the argument that professional higher education institutions have less organizational capacity, one could also expect that their opportunities to engage in strategic responses would not be substantial.

None of the above would imply that the organizational change process is always consistent or uniform across the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). While the notion of organizational actorhood in higher education institutions emphasizes a managerial logic and rationalized organizational structure, these change processes can also emphasize loose coupling and ritual adaptation (Krücken & Meier, 2006). Coupling can also take place in a selective manner and lead to increased hybridity within the organization (Mair, Mayer, & Lutz, 2015). The reasons for this can be found in the core characteristics of universities – the nature of research production being open-ended, unpredictable and bottom heavy (Whitley, 2008), thus also challenging the opportunities to reduce loose coupling within the organization. The empirical question that remains is how such processes play out in the context of professional higher education where some of these core characteristics might not be as prominent.

To empirically study this, change is in this article examined in various aspects of the organizations, following the conceptualization of organizational actorhood: the relationship to the environment (accountability), in terms of the basic organizational structure (formalization of structures), in terms of organizational control (goal definition) and work processes in the organization (managerial profession).

### Context, case and methodology

In their article on organizational actors, Krücken and Meier (2006) primarily referred to universities. However, in many higher education systems one can find horizontal differentiation of institutional types; with varying level of formalization of this differentiation. We focus on a system where there is a formal division between universities and professional higher education (in Norway these institutions are referred to as *høgskoler*, directly translated as ‘university colleges’: we use the term university college when describing the Norwegian context but otherwise use professional higher education as a more generic term). Conventionally, universities were more research oriented, while

university colleges primarily offered professionally oriented education (i.e. nursing, teacher education, engineering). The sectors also share important characteristics: they operate within the same legal framework, the degree structure follows the same logic, and they have the same career structure etc.

Since the Quality Reform in 2003, university colleges can apply for university accreditation if they can fulfill the criteria. Current policy environment in Norway is focused on quality enhancement through two White papers that focus on system structure and quality. As a result of the 2015 structural reform, several university colleges have merged with one of Norway's eight universities, and many university colleges have merged with one another. Over a short period of time, 33 public institutions became 21. Most of the merged university colleges have stated an aim for university status within the next decade or so.

In this context, the article uses two case illustrations to explore the notion of organizational actorhood. One of our two case-institutions is a result of a merger between two university colleges some years ago, and the new institution's main goal is to acquire university status by 2020. Our second case-institution is also engaged in a merger discussion. Both have clear expectation of obtaining university status and are engaged in the process of organizational redesign, indicating that they can be seen as potent cases for examining the four dimensions emphasized by organizational actorhood.

The empirical material draws from two separate organizational evaluations that examined organization, management and leadership in these two institutions. The first study was an overall organizational evaluation, the other focused on the academic organization of the institution in question. Thus, the two studies had a somewhat different starting point, while covering a number of similar themes. Empirical material in the evaluations included a range of documents: organizational strategies, documents about organizational structure and planning, at various levels of the organization. In addition, the empirical material includes notes from over 100 in-depth semi-structured interviews at various levels in the two institutions. Those with a formal leadership responsibility (at every level) were interviewed in single interviews. This includes academic and administrative top leadership at central, faculty and department level. Students, academic and administrative staff and union representatives were as a rule interviewed in groups of 5–7 participants.

At the first case institution, 80 interviews were conducted (including group interviews with unit representatives, academic and administrative staff), at the second one, 26 interviews were conducted (including 6 group interviews with staff and students). The disparity is partially due to the different sizes of these institutions, as well as the broader scope of the evaluation that was conducted in the first institution. Interviews usually lasted about one hour, while focus group interviews were usually about one and a half hours. The interview questions had an emphasis on studying management and leadership on multiple organizational levels, the relationship between the levels (i.e. communication flow), administrative organization and its relation to academic organization, and experiences with strategic development. The interview guides also included a number of additional questions that were of relevance for the evaluations, but not of relevance for this article.

During the interviews, extensive notes were made. After the interviews, the researchers compared notes and discussed different interpretations. The first data collection was conducted in spring 2014, the other in autumn 2015. While the two studies were conducted with a time interval, the situation in terms of organizational development was comparable. Extended reports which explored the key elements of these two

organizations were prepared. The analysis conducted for this article is based on a synthesis of these case reports, aiming to identify and track the four elements of organizational actorhood and how these have been addressed in these two institutions. These two cases in the article should be seen as empirical illustrations rather than comprehensive holistic case studies.

## **Professional higher education institutions and the construction of organizational actorhood**

### *Organizational accountability*

The two case organizations are dependent on fulfilling external criteria, a notion that frequently comes up in the interviews. In order to establish Master and PhD level study programs, university colleges have to seek approval from the quality assurance agency (NOKUT). This is not new, and the university colleges in Norway are experienced with meeting external demands. Interviews demonstrated how catering to external demands was considered as routinized organizational behavior. These external demands also have impact on how study programs are designed. For example, one of the criteria is that a new educational program needs to be ‘sufficiently different’ from existing programs in this field to obtain accreditation. In the interviews, this was brought up as one example of how these external demands also would interfere with internal priorities, as it would mean that this criterion rather than profession and discipline-related concerns would guide program development. At the same time, the interviews did not reveal a high degree of resistance towards these external demands, perhaps because these criteria have not been experienced as a new limitation. Instead, several fields of study in these institutions have found opportunities to enhance the status of their field by working towards (or having already obtained) the right to offer for instance a PhD level program. While such a development also can be linked to more general academic drift processes in the field(s), the two cases also showed how these are in some instances connected to a shift of organizational priorities as a consequence of external demands, and how external demands can also strengthen particular internal processes.

In addition, both case institutions have an aim to change organizational categories and become a university. The interviews indicated emphasis among the employees of the case institutions (both leaders and non-leaders) directed towards the fulfilling of the demands linked to starting up PhD programs and reaching the criteria of becoming a university. While the demands showed a strategic focus on meeting the criteria, some of the interviewed academic staff raised concerns about putting too much emphasis on research, as there were some concerns of this coming at the expense of education that had traditionally been in focus in the sector.

While the emphasis on external quality assurance demands reminds of the accountability demands on universities, professional higher education institutions differ in how accountability is understood and acted upon within the organization. University colleges in Norway offer a wide range of professional fields where educational programs are steered through national frameworks (i.e. nursing), there is higher political salience (i.e. teacher education), and they involve a higher degree of involvement from the labor market and professional organizations. From this perspective, these are organizations that need to show their accountability not only to the state and public agencies, but to the society at large. In the two case institutions, this was also frequently highlighted in the interviews – being accountable to the profession and society at large were seen as

essential. This was also reflected in the way their university ambitions were conceptualized – ‘work life university’ or ‘professional university’ were specifically highlighted as important ways to distinguish their profile from conventional research universities, even if university status was obtained. The notion of accountability is also evident in research activity; in one of the institutions it was explicitly highlighted how research should be about ‘research *for* and *within* the professions’.

Thus, enhanced organizational accountability is not something that has been recently imposed on these institutions. University colleges were from the outset designed to be accountable in a different manner, towards the profession and society, expressed through a multitude of stakeholders and interests. However, these organizations also engage in positioning in the field by considering their profile and organizational status, aiming to fulfill the criteria to obtain university status. It would seem like this kind of strategic organizational accountability is primarily embedded at the leadership level, with varied distribution patterns across the organizations. While this is also a concern for the leadership, accountability towards the professions and society is framed within the specific professions as well.

### **Formal structures**

Both case institutions are comparably young organizations, being established in their current form after 1994 when various smaller institutions were merged as university colleges. One of the institutions went through a merger process some years ago, and the other institution is currently merging with two other university colleges. While the first institution merged about six years ago, it is frequently highlighted in the interviews that the organizational baggage from the old structures remains. In the other institution, the current merger is still underway during the time of data collection, and thus the potential consequences remain to be seen. That said, as a consequence of these processes, organizational structure is high on the agenda in both institutions.

In both organizations, the current organizational structure is a result of a process of evolution over time. This gradual development has led to variation regarding the organizing principles at the faculty level within the organization, and in the interviews concerns were expressed that these differences can hamper organizational efficiency. Both of the case-institutions operate with an organizational structure consisting of three levels of authority. One of the institutions has three, the other has four faculty-level units (with some variation in what these units are named), and these are further divided into department-level units. In the first institution, one of the faculty-level units has a different organizing principle than others, being organized like a matrix where the educational programs are organized across base units. The other faculty level units were organized in a more conventional manner, and this difference in organizing principles at this level was viewed as a challenge. In the other case institution, concerns were among other things related to the uneven size and function of department-level units.

In both of the institutions there seems to be an assumption by the institutional leadership that a re-structuring of the organizational chart can contribute to increased organizational efficiency. The manifestation of this is the very reason for conducting an external evaluation of organizational structure and seeking ways to re-organize. However, the belief in re-organizing is not necessarily shared throughout the organizations, and one can therefore observe some decoupling with the experiences of the academic staff. While there seem to be attempts at strategic change with respect to formal organizational structure, the empirical material indicates that on sub-unit level one can find



various responses – and in some cases there is also a clear preference towards avoiding change. Furthermore, decoupling between formal organizational structure and actual practice can be found in some instances. From both of the organizations the respondents frequently gave examples of how informal practices regarding ‘how things were’ prevailed through informal and personal networks, even when there had earlier been formal structural change.

Both institutions have attempted to standardize processes within the organization, for instance through the centralization of the administration over tasks such as admission and the processing and implementation of examinations. This can also be seen as a manifestation of a strategic process towards a greater degree of coherence in the organization. This standardization process has also led some of the staff to feel that the organizations have become more ‘top heavy’. At the same time, this strategic process is also accompanied with the rather traditional academic view where the emphasis is on the sub-unit level. It was frequently emphasized that it is on this lower level that the primary processes take place, and that this level should be strengthened, a view that was expressed in interviews at various levels of the organization.

In sum, emphasis on formal structure has been important in both of the organizations, in a rather conscious and strategic manner. However, in both case institutions it appears that, despite attempts to formalize organizational structure, this has not necessarily led to more transparent organization, and a mix of formal and informal practices remain.

### **Goal definition**

The two institutions are facing both similar and different challenges in order to achieve their main goal. One of the case institutions has chosen to use their overarching goal of achieving university status as an *instrument* in reaching the more specific goals. It is stated in the strategic plan that the ‘University initiative will be an instrument used to strengthen the professional subjects by connecting them with the knowledge development taking place within relevant R&D-activities both nationally and internationally’. The second case institution stresses in their strategy the importance of the professional subjects, and their overarching vision is one of ‘forming professional competency for the future, through knowledge, culture and innovation’. The basic ambition in the strategy was to be able to apply for university status within a ten-year period. One can argue that this kind of goal forms a more measurable overarching and tangible goal than might be found in many other strategic plans – university status either will be reached, or not.

The way in which these strategic goals are set was also linked to the procedures of changing institutional categories that emphasize quantitative measurable goals. In both institutions, there is an awareness amongst the academic staff regarding these goals. Their ambition of becoming a university has turned the overall focus towards research and the need to strengthen their research profile and performance. In order to reach a goal of 50% senior competence among the academic staff, this was prioritized in recruitment processes. Senior competence refers to the associate professor and professor levels, and the 50% target is one of the requirements for establishing PhD level studies.

Within both the institutions, this lead to concerns among staff. Those interviewed by us were worried both about how to achieve this goal (internal versus external recruitment) as well as about how this might influence the rest of the organization, in particular those among the existing academic staff without the possibility of achieving senior competence. Would this indirectly create a ‘A-team’ and a ‘B-team’ among the

academic staff? Moreover, some professional fields do not have a strong tradition of research and thus have a weak tradition of graduating PhD-candidates, making it difficult to recruit staff with the sufficient formal competence.

Furthermore, the respondents refer to an emphasis on establishing research groups and applying for external funding to produce more research and consequently more publications. However, despite the focus on increasing publication activity, only one of the institutions had a defined goal for the production of publication points, thus it is not on all dimensions that goals have become more quantified. Publication points refer to the Norwegian publication indicator that qualitatively differentiates between so-called Level 1 and Level 2 publications. Level 2 composes about 20% of the most prestigious, while Level 1 includes all other recognized academic outlets (Universitets- og høyskolerådet, 2004). The two levels provide publication points. Publications in outlets that are not part of the system are not considered 'point giving'.

Both of the cases illuminated how goal attainment appears to be a key theme in these organizations in their current situation. Even when not asked directly about any of the particular goals, emphasis on goals that had been set was brought up by many of the interviewees. The question that remains is whether this focus on externally set goals will continue within these organizations, or whether this is a temporary situation due to the transitional nature of these institutions in their current situation of aiming to shift institutional categories in an uncertain environment.

### ***Rise of the management profession***

Within the two case institutions, there has been a shift from the academic leadership tradition towards a more professionalized *management* role on every level in the organization. The quest of professionalizing academic leadership has also created new formal structures on the institutional level. In both of the organizations, the complicated role of deans was highlighted in the interviews. Kallenberg (2007) argues that the dean as a middle manager has an important strategic function. At the same time, he argues that this position has both upwards and downwards linkages, and balances several competing interests and tasks. In this study, this somewhat squeezed role was highlighted frequently, in particular in cases when communication and information flow proved to be an issue.

In both of the case institutions most of the academic leaders are no longer elected, they are appointed. Both of the institutions have kept (at the time of our investigation) the *elected* academic leader on the institutional level, but have nevertheless decided to *appoint* the rest of the academic leaders within the organization. One can assume that this choice is grounded on an assumption that *appointed* leaders are able to affect the achievement of strategic goals in a more effective way than *elected* leaders. The irony within the two institutions was that especially the leaders at the department level had little or no time for being strategic in their work. They spent much of their time taking care of administrative tasks, as the administrative resources had been centralized in order to achieve a more effective and professional organization. There were several examples of heads of departments describing how they spent time on tasks more appropriate for secretary or even maintenance personnel.

The professionalization also takes place regarding the administrative function of these two institutions, where one of the institutions also chose to appoint administrative leaders recruited from other sectors. A number of respondents at that institution highlighted how the language adopted from other business sectors seemed strange in a

higher education context, and there was a sense of clash of cultures among the respondents when it came to managerial views on what a good administrative process looks like, and an academic understanding of the same processes.

The centralizing of the overarching administrative tasks within the one of the case institutions was justified by the need to achieve a more professional administration which again would contribute to a more effective organization. However, this also meant that in some cases the ‘distance’ to the basic units was increased, a concern that was frequently highlighted in the interviews. Thus, the result of the centralizing of the administration to some degree might be a more ineffective organization due to long communication lines.

Overall, as leaders become appointed rather than elected, this would likely over time professionalize this function as managerial and less of a collegial leadership function. With emphasis on professionalizing administration, this further strengthens this managerial function. At the same time, as with the other dimensions of organizational actorhood, the way in which these functions and processes are understood centrally is not the same as would be the case among academic staff, and rather distinct logics for organization can be identified. In that sense, the adoption of a more professional management appears to be more strategic rather than a taken-for-granted diffusion of norms and values.

### **Concluding discussion**

The central question for the article was how professional higher education institutions address organizational actorhood, a term that has become widespread to describe some of the key change processes taking place in modern universities (Krücken & Meier, 2006). The key argument in this article is that the concept of organizational actorhood as developed for the university sector has relevance, but requires some adaptation when discussing professional higher education institutions according to most of the dimensions, but in particular with respect to how one understands organizational accountability.

The empirical cases in the article illustrated this argument. Both of the institutions examined appear as surprisingly similar when examined in relation to these four dimensions, despite some differences in terms of their history and organizational structure. While these institutions also have some organizational ‘baggage’ (i.e. earlier merger processes), one can still identify weaker institutional legacies than one would likely find in old research universities. While increased emphasis on goal orientation and formal structure were not greeted equally enthusiastically by all of the academic staff, not uncommon for higher education in general, the organizations as a whole appeared more geared towards specific goals and objectives. The general approach to organizational change also appears to be somewhat different from the approach found within the conventional universities, as there appears to be a more proactive view on strategic change processes among leadership. There appears to be a willingness to engage in experimentation and flexibility by creating processes that could change organizational structures considerably, something that would be complex in more research heavy universities. At the same time, professional higher education institutions also show a number of more general patterns of change in the higher education sector. For instance, emphasis on strengthening professional management and the challenges this can create largely reflect some wider issues in higher education, regarding decoupling between central level processes and local practices (see, for instance, Teelken, 2012).

Overall, when compared to conventional universities, emphasis on organizational actorhood in professional higher education manifests through some specific characteristics, which we argue are essential to professional higher education as a wider category. Rather than being in the outskirts of these processes due to weak organizational capacity, the two case institutions appear to be actively engaged in trying to create a complete and coherent organization. A more specific example in this case, the university ambition, represented a conscious strategic focus on engaging with the external demands. At the same time, these institutions also show some degree of decoupling between these aims of organizational change, and the way in which changes play out on base unit level. This would suggest that, despite their younger age and more professional orientation, the bottom-heavy nature of higher education (Clark, 1983) is also manifested in professional higher education.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, professional higher education institutions have a broader understanding of accountability, which is built into the institutions in question from the outset, due to the way in which professional higher education operates. This broader understanding implies that the notion of being accountable includes a broader set of stakeholders and relations, thus multiplying the scope of accountability relations in terms of complexity. Arguably, this is a more fundamental issue with the kinds of links there are between higher education institutions and the wider professional and disciplinary fields beyond. As research in the Finnish context has emphasized how professional higher education institutions can take an active role in these external relationships (Vuori, 2016), one could argue that the relationship between these tighter links to the environment and the way in which organizational actorhood is constructed is worthy of further studies.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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