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PATHWAYS THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH –
A FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF PETER MAASSEN

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SETTING THE TREND: EARLY CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF UNIVERSITY STRATEGY

A seminal paper:
Strategic Decision Making in Higher Education, 1990

As a PhD student writing a thesis on university strategies, I read at an initial stage of my research the important paper by Peter Maassen (with Henry Potman) on strategic decision making in higher education, published in *Higher Education* in 1990. Since then I have regularly referred to that piece over the years, and I consider it a “classic” in my trajectory as a scholar of organizations.

The paper analyzes the introduction of strategic planning in Dutch higher education in the eighties and its implications for the systemic diversification in the national landscape. This policy reform, anticipating several others across continental Europe in the years to follow, was aimed to trigger adaptive behavior and distinctive profiles of universities. By using their newly-gained institutional autonomy to define priorities and to allocate resources strategically, higher education institutions would differentiate from each other and find a sustainable niche. This would allow targeting specific groups of students, focusing on distinctive study programs, carrying out unique research activities. As such Maassen and Potman’s analysis pointed to issues that are still debated presently: what universities do with their autonomy? How can they contribute to mass higher education? How should they cope with shrinking or stagnating public financial endowment? The findings show that universities tend to pursue similar strategies and aim at similar profiles, thus proving new institutionalist hypotheses (Meyer and Rowan 1977; and DiMaggio and Powell 1983), which contend that in highly institutionalized organizational fields characterized by a high degree of uncertainty (as of number of students, external funding, knowledge dynamics in the case of higher education) organizations tend to mimic each other and strive towards the globally legitimate model of research intensive university.

At the same time, in an innovative way at the time of publication, Maassen and Potman combined their analysis with the strategic management literature, using Mintzberg’s seminal book on the structuring of organizations (1979), and Chaffee’s typology of strategies (1985a, 1985b). The authors drew from Mintzberg the model of professional bureaucracy to analyze universities as fragmented organizations where academics – as individual experts – hold the necessary knowledge to carry out teaching and research. They drew from Chaffee the interpretive model of strategy, where cultural and identity-based aspects, rather than rational calculation or adaptive moves, are central in building strategic capacity. The combination

of these two frameworks contributed to the emerging field of higher education research with a fine-grained analysis of isomorphic mechanisms.

Contributions to on-going debates: institutional autonomy and organizational actorhood

The argument put forward remains of central relevance in contemporary higher education studies. First, it provides valuable insight on the waves of policy reforms undergone by continental European universities. It does so based on theoretical arguments on why and how increasing institutional autonomy is often insufficient to redesign higher education systems (Verhoest *et al.* 2004, de Boer *et al.* 2013, Maggetti and Verhoest 2014) without implementing economic incentives or addressing structural constraints (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007) and without the support of identity-based strategic change (Paradeise and Thoenig 2016). The paper also links to the more recent literature on professional organizations, where it is argued that the encounter of the (academic) profession and the organizational setting leads to subtle change dynamics (Carvalho 2014, Nordegraaf 2015). Instead of the simplified vision in which academics and management struggle for decision-making power and professional autonomy, they illustrated how the reconfiguration of actors, resources, and governance structures give way to new organizational forms.

Second, with its focus on strategic planning, Maassen and Potman's paper anticipates the on-going debate on organizational actorhood (Krücken and Meier 2006), according to which universities are submitted to global scripts requiring them to develop into fully-fledged organizations with identity, hierarchy and rationality (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000, Seeber *et al.* 2015). In a distinct way, Maassen and Potman shed light on the complex nature of universities as "bottom-heavy" organizations (Clark 1983) and as institutions (Olsen 2007) which cannot be easily changed without the emergence of a whole array of unexpected outcomes. The authors demonstrated that there is no linear relationship between policy, strategy and organizational change, indeed an ecological view of co-evolving actors, resources, structural conditions and cultures needs to be taken into consideration (Gornitzka *et al.* 2007). Implicitly though, the paper prefigures some of the necessary conditions enacting – at least partially – university actorhood, as in the case of the active participation of universities in a "dialogue" with policy makers to discuss the future of higher education and the division of labor among the different stakeholders. As recognized partners in policy making, universities as organizations – and not academics representative of disciplinary fields – can profit from and further develop their "agency".

Ways forward: linking policy and micro level

Following this research trajectory, Peter Maassen has recently focused his conceptual and empirical work on the internal workings of the university. He has done so in an ambitious and clairvoyant way, linking his traditional interests

around policy and governance of higher education with a micro perspective on the “living autonomy” (i.e. the enacted institutional autonomy, or, its practices) at the shop floor level inside the university. The FLAGSHIP project, funded by the Research Council of Norway, has investigated how disciplinary fields embedded in university organizational sub-units (the departments) evolve differently within their own higher education institution, their national system, and against similar cases in several European countries. The findings provide a detailed and fascinating picture of the inner life of universities, more specifically in the departments where disciplinary fields and organizational structures come together to produce knowledge, build capacity to do so, and make sense of this endeavor. As such, the FLAGSHIP project is at the forefront of research into higher education policy and management, developing our theoretical understanding of how universities work, and providing a systematic comparative analysis. The project has already offered insights to policy makers and institutional and academic leadership on the tensions, opportunities and risks of reforming the higher education system and restructuring its universities. It has demonstrated how different types of interdependencies – such as between personnel policies and research management, or between academic leadership and administrative power – unravel and shape the decisions, actions, and outcomes in the contemporary university.

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