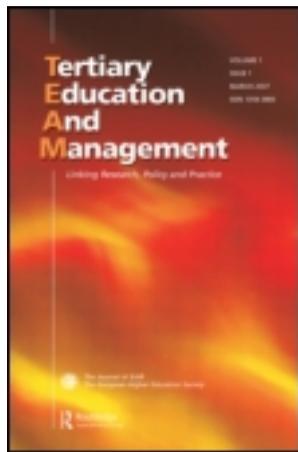


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Bridging the Local with the Global: Building a new university on the fringes of Europe

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In Norway, the higher education landscape is undergoing profound transformation. This process is being driven by a number of factors, including demography, competition and academic aspirations, with many so-called “university-colleges” aspiring to become fully-fledged universities. We shed light on the dynamics of one such institution, the recently established University of Agder, by posing three questions: what drove internal actors to attain full university status and what immediate effects have been felt across the university? What are the needs and expectations of regional constituencies? What types of university models have internal actors been working with? Conceptually, the article builds on the notion of the university as an organization and institution. The findings, which have implications for both theory and practice, suggest that the case university is attempting to find a balance between its global and local aspirations, but that it faces a number of challenges.

Keywords: *mission; organization structures; strategic planning*

Introduction

As is the case with many other countries, Norway’s higher education sector has been experiencing considerable transformation, partly as a result of the new realities posed by the rise of a knowledge-based economy, and partly due to efforts aimed at establishing a common European Area for Higher Education (Kehm, Huisman, & Stensaker, 2009). Recent policy developments, combined with fiercer competition for students and funding, have led to the erosion of the binary divide between university and non-university institutions. The domestic higher education

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landscape has, within a short time period, been significantly restructured as a result of the increase, from four to eight, in the number of public universities. The new university providers were upgraded from their previous status as university colleges and/or specialized university institutions. This is part and parcel of an ongoing “arms race” for attaining full university status, a phenomenon known as “academic drift” (cf. Kyvik, 2009). The reasons driving institutions to attain university status are manifold, but enhanced institutional profile and autonomy/accountability, student and staff recruitment, and access to external resources are major drivers. This article sheds light on the inner dynamics of one of Norway’s newest universities, the University of Agder (UiA).

We pose the following research questions:

- What drove internal actors to attain full university status, and what immediate effects, both structural and cultural, have been felt at central (university) and sub-unit (faculty) levels?
- What are the needs and expectations of regional constituencies, and what is their impact, if any, in the devising of new structural arrangements?
- How have university actors experimented with prevalent models of university organization?

The next section provides the conceptual backdrop for the analysis. The findings, based on desktop analysis of internal documents and interviews with university actors at the central and unit levels, are then presented. These findings are discussed in light of the conceptual framework and the existing literature. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting upon the implications of the findings for both UiA and future research in the area.

The Ambiguity of the University

The medieval notion of the university emerged around a relatively simple idea, that of a community of masters and students (Ridder-Symoens, 1992). Over time, a number of relatively distinctive geographically rooted (Great-Britain, France, Germany) models emerged (Rüegg, 2004). In many systems, the notion of a rule-governed “community of scholars” was gradually but steadily replaced, first, by the idea of the university as a “representative democracy”, and second, by that of an “instrument of policy” and “service-enterprise” embedded in competitive markets (Olsen, 2007). In spite of semantic variations, it is generally acknowledged these days that a university is, “an institution of higher learning providing facilities for teaching and research and authorized to grant academic degrees” (Merriam-Webster, 2013). The complexity associated with the university both as an *organization* (Gross, 1968; Tolbert & Hall, 2009), designed to achieve certain ends, and as a social *institution*, that is a set of organized practices embedded in structures of meaning and resources (Olsen, 2007), can best be described around *five* distinct

but nonetheless interrelated ambiguities, namely, of: *intention, understanding, history, structure and meaning* (Pinheiro, 2012; Pinheiro, Benneworth, & Jones, 2012).

The *ambiguity of intention* refers to the notion that universities have recently been conceived as having relatively ill-defined and multiple *goals* (Gross, 1968; Kerr, 2001) that are often at odds with one another (Castells, 2001). Universities have also been characterized as “coalitions of vested interests” (de Boer & Stensaker, 2007), where internal goals/agendas emerge out of a functional compromise between members of various stakeholder groups internal and external to the organization (cf. Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008).

A major feature of universities is that their basic *technologies*, teaching and research (Clark, 1983), are rather unclear (see Musselin, 2007). As far as the primary processes of teaching and learning are concerned, often students are only capable of assessing the importance of the knowledge and skills attained many years after graduation. Similarly, the outcome of research endeavours is difficult to predict in advance, both when it comes to their impact on science in general and their societal ramifications (Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons, 2002). The role of universities in regional development differs considerably from locality to locality (Pinheiro, Benneworth, & Jones, 2012), even in those cases where the universities in question have similar sizes, institutional profiles and/or core competencies (Nilsson, 2006). Such aspects are intrinsically related to the *ambiguity of understanding*.

The *ambiguity of history* pertains to university structures being largely shaped by path dependencies or past trajectories, resulting from the interplay between local traditions and environmental adaptations (Krücken, 2003). From a macro perspective, universities are deeply embedded in distinct national systems (Clark, 1983), which not only have evolved over relatively long periods of time, but are characterized by their remarkable stability (Frank & Gabler, 2006).

When compared to other organizations, universities possess rather weak interdependent units and knowledge domains. What happens in the humanities faculty does not necessarily affect developments within the natural or social sciences, and vice versa. This has led to the conception of the university as a “loosely-coupled” system (Birnbaum, 1988; Weick, 1976). Furthermore, the complexity surrounding knowledge structures and sub-disciplinary domains implies that, for the most part, academics enjoy considerable degrees of professional autonomy (Tapper & Palfreyman, 2011). These features are related to what is termed the *ambiguity of structure*.

Finally, the *ambiguity of meaning* is associated with the notion that universities are highly symbolic entities characterized by the prevalence of various sub-cultures (students, administrators, sub-disciplines, etc.) and their respective norms, identities and traditions (see Clark, 1983), some of which are endemic to the organization (Clark, 1992; Pinheiro, 2012). Amongst other things, this implies that internal stakeholder groups not only sense external dynamics differently, but also disagree in the ways in which university structures, functions and traditions ought to be locally adapted according to societal shifts and the demands of external stakeholders. Evidence suggests that, amidst periods of unprecedented environmental change, universities that are capable of upholding their distinctive identities

and values are more likely to withstand external pressures (Tapper & Palfreyman, 2011), thus reducing the risk of being *co-opted* (Selznick, 1966) by external interests and agendas. Yet, successfully managing the symbolic nature of the university is not an easy task, as demonstrated in recent studies from Northern Europe (Fumasoli, Pinheiro, & Stensaker, 2012).

Stylized University Models

Universities operate in highly institutionalized environments characterized by the proliferation of formal and informal rules and standard operating procedures (Clark, 1983; Olsen, 2007). As *open systems* (Scott, 2003), their structures and activities are susceptible of being influenced by dominant (macro-level) features prevalent across the organizational field of higher education (cf. Kyvik, 2009). Such predominant features—scripts, templates, blueprints, etc.—provide university actors with guidance on *how to*: (a) go about their daily activities; (b) operate within the field; and (c) relate to the outside world. There are two basic generic models or templates acting as legitimating scripts (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008) when it comes to the modern university. These are the globally oriented, *research-intensive university* and the locally embedded *regional university*.

As a *global* script (Beerkens, 2010), the research-intensive university is characterized by: the comprehensive nature (depth and breadth) of its academic core, spanning a variety of disciplinary fields and specializations; the importance attributed to the linkages between teaching and research; the attention paid to scientific inquiries of the highest levels of excellence; institutional- and scientific-autonomy as cherished norms; a multiplicity of roles or functions; its public, non-profit character; and, finally, a universalistic or global orientation (cf. Clark, 1983; Mohrman, Ma, & Baker, 2008; Pinheiro, Benneworth, & Jones, 2012).

The origins of the *regional university* model go back to the mid-1800s, with the emergence of specialized training (in Europe) and land grant institutions (in North America) (Christy & Williamson, 1992; Rüegg, 2004). The distinctive features of this particular stylized model include: a strong vocational orientation, along a selected number of professionally related fields; the importance attributed to teaching and learning dimensions and the needs of student audiences; local embeddedness, manifested around labour markets linkages, a strong service orientation, high level of civic engagement, etc.; the demographic profile of the student population, with the bulk originating from within the locality/region; and knowledge production in the context of application in partnership with local actors like industry (cf. Benneworth & Hospers, 2007; Gunasekara, 2006; Pinheiro, Normann, & Johnsen, 2012).

More recently, the literature points to the gradual emergence of what could be considered a new (third) stylized model, in the form of the *entrepreneurial university* (Clark, 1998, 2001), defined as an institution that is capable of standing “on its own feet in order to adapt, on its own terms, to a highly complex and highly uncertain world” (Clark, 2001, p. 10). The rise of this global script is intrinsically

linked with what some consider to be a “second academic revolution” (Etzkowitz, 2001), substantiated around the translation of research findings into intellectual property and the direct contribution to economic development.

It is important to note each model’s very different assumptions with respect to the relationship between the university and the region. The *research university* is global and universalistic in orientation, ascribing little strategic attention to regional issues. The *regional university* is locally embedded, responding to the needs and expectations of regional constituencies. The *entrepreneurial university* is globally engaged, yet highly responsive to local needs and partnerships, combining global excellence with local relevance (Perry, 2012).

UiA: Institutional profile and dynamics

Institutional Profile

UiA is a mid-size public-funded university located in the southern region of Agder (283,000 inhabitants). Its historical roots go back to the mid-1800s, with the creation of a teacher training college in the coastal city of Kristiansand. Its organizational form stems from the amalgamation, in 1994, of six regional public high schools, as part of a far-reaching reform culminating in the establishment of a binary system of higher education in Norway (Kyvik, 2009). In 2007, with approval from the Ministry of Education and Research, UiA changed its legal status from a university college primarily dedicated to training activities into a fully-fledged university expected to be actively involved with both teaching and research. During the autumn of 2012, it enrolled about 9800 students, close to 10% of Norway’s university population, and employed 900 people (central and unit levels), 60% of whom were directly involved with teaching and research activities. Academic activities span across five faculties. Geographically, UiA’s operations are scattered across two campuses, the main one in the city of Kristiansand (West-Agder County) and the other (a stronghold for engineering education) in the much smaller town of Grimstad in East-Agder County.

In the fall of 2013, UiA’s programmatic offerings encompassed 45 bachelor-, 28 master- and 14 doctoral-level degrees. The primary language of instruction is Norwegian, but the university also offers a number of English-taught master programmes, and about a dozen short-term courses for exchange students. As a result of the change in legal status, research has become a key strategic priority. In 2011, the most productive faculties (as per the total publication points awarded to its academic staff, with highly cited international peer-reviewed journals scoring highest) were engineering and sciences (34% of total publication points across UiA), followed by the humanities and education (31%), and economics and social sciences (24%). The least productive unit was the faculty of fine arts (3%). As a whole, UiA produced a total of 470 publication points, an increase of 55% since 2008, ranking sixth amongst Norway’s eight universities (Database for Statistics on Higher Education, NSD-DBH).

The current strategic platform (2010–2015) refers to UiA's core mission as of being actively involved with teaching, research and development (R&D), including its direct contribution to the well-being of the society/region. It also states the willingness to embrace innovative endeavours across the board, on par with that of other newly established universities across Europe. UiA's vision statement highlights the importance of finding an adequate balance between *local* (relevance) and *global* (excellence) dimensions. Regional imperatives rank high on the strategic agenda, and are exercised in the form of the (re-)training of adults, local networking across the public and private sectors, contributions to the local innovation system, etc.

Recent investigations show that the level of engagement between UiA academics and regional constituencies is far from optimal, and that there are divergent accounts with respect to its regional role (Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development, 2009). There is also empirical evidence of significant variations in the degree of external engagement across subunits and knowledge domains (Pinheiro, Normann, & Johnsen, 2012). In a nutshell, UiA aims at becoming a modern, responsive and innovative university that is capable of addressing local needs and, at the same time, of developing scientific excellence in a selected number of strategic fields.

In order to assess the extent to which the university is gearing up to the new expectations and realities, desktop analysis of internal documents (policies, strategies, annual reports, etc.) and a series of semi-structured interviews with university actors were conducted during the autumn of 2011. In order to best capture ongoing dynamics across UiA, a multi-level sampling strategy was adopted, including senior representatives from UiA's central administration and from three of its core academic units—the faculties of technology and science, economics and social sciences, and humanities and education—accounting for 74% of all enrollments and 63% of UiA's staff. Three major topics were discussed during the interview sessions: (a) the main drivers and immediate changes (structural and cultural) resulting from the shift in legal status; (b) external dynamics and expectations, with a focus on key regional constituencies; and (c) the adoption and/or adaptation of specific models or templates for organizing academic activities.

Drivers for, and Effects of, Attaining Full University Status

From the perspective of the central administration, the rationale for attaining full university status was, first and foremost, public recognition; in terms of the perceived quality and accreditation of education and research. This aspect is seen as enhancing UiA's external legitimacy (moral and financial support) and fostering the recruitment of talented students and staff, particularly across traditional disciplinary fields.

When it comes to the visible impacts, the accounts provided by internal actors reveal the immediate structural effects of the change in legal status as being rather negligible. This was particularly the case when it came to gaining access to

additional financial resources. The common motto amongst all interviewees was “business as usual”. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that internal, formalized structures and arrangements have gone unaltered. For example, recent structural adaptations across UiA occurred as an integral part of the preparation process leading or prior to the official attainment of full university status. The faculties of technology/science and humanities/education were particularly affected in this respect. In the latter, three previously separated institutes (of history, religion and philosophy) and faculties (one of pedagogical sciences and the other of the humanities) were amalgamated into a single, larger unit. Similarly, the fields of technology and the natural sciences were brought together into a much larger faculty, with a special focus put on the development of a new, more flexible and democratic, administrative structure based on a shared leadership model (with the faculty director, as head of administrative affairs, and the dean, as head of academic affairs, working side-by-side in the daily management of the unit).

The attainment of university status provided an important external recognition for most academic staff members:

To be employed by a university means a lot for academics from the traditional disciplines. (Senior administrator, central level)

Staff associated with more vocational, professionally oriented fields such as teaching education or nursing were concerned that their subjects would become the target of *academization* (see Kyvik, 2009) at the expense of their more practical vocational orientation. Some interviewees reflected upon the existence of two sub-groupings (vertical differentiation) of universities in Norway: a dominant group composed of the four “old”, established research-intensive universities (Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø), which tend to dominate the field domestically, for both student enrollments and scientific publications; and, the so-called “newcomers” (Agder, Stavanger and Nordland), former university colleges whose historical trajectories and organizational identities are anchored in a less prestigious (and legitimate) institutional profile, given the strong focus attributed to training certain professionals (teachers, nurses, business people, etc.) and the lack of an established scientific research tradition.

Two areas were found to be particularly affected by the change in legal status, namely increased institutional autonomy, for example, when it comes to the establishment of new degree programmes, and an overall enhancement of UiA’s market profile. Official records show that the number of applicants (self-financed students), many of whom originating from outside the region, increased by 46% in the four-year period 2007–2011 (NSD-DBH). This figure is aligned with domestic developments, as illustrated by a 31% rise across the entire higher education sector (49% within the university sub-sector alone). Nonetheless, comparatively speaking, UiA’s growth rates are significant. For example, the University of Stavanger, a similar type institution in terms of size and teaching profile, also awarded full university status during 2007, saw its number of student applicants rise by 17% in the same period. According to UiA respondents, the major change occurred in

terms of new applicants from outside the (Agder) region, with many from the surrounding (southern-eastern) regions of Telemark, Vestfold and Oslo-Akershus.

Student recruitment is a top strategic priority at UiA. This is particularly the case across “hard” fields such as technology and science which, until very recently, had less than one applicant per study place; having today about 2.5. In real terms, the number of applicants in these fields rose by 67% in the four-year period 2007–2010 (NSD-DBH). Similar upward trends were also detected within economics and social sciences (40%), and humanities and education (27%). Total enrolments at UiA rose by 20% between 2008 and 2011; a figure that is two and a half times compared to developments across the university sub-sector and the higher education sector as a whole.

Regional Needs and Expectations

Regional actors across the public and private sectors have played a critical role in the shift in UiA’s legal status, due to two main factors: the political importance attributed to the notion of a university-city/region, and the acknowledgement of, and the willingness to prepare the region for, the challenges brought by the rise of a global knowledge-based economy:

The establishment of the University of Agder has been a great inspiration to the region
 ... This will enhance Agder’s position as a knowledge region. (Vision 2020, p. 17)

A major policy goal is to attract more R&D funds, national and international, into the region. Per capita R&D investments rank amongst the lowest in the country. A major expectation is that UiA, through its strengthened research capacity, will, in the near future, help establish new knowledge-based industries throughout the entire region, through supporting technology transfers, the commercialization of academic ideas (spin-offs), industry (re-)location, etc. Such efforts are part of what Clark (1998) calls the *extended developmental periphery*, whose core function is to *bridge* (Scott, 2003) the university with its surrounding environment. Nonetheless, there are a number of key challenges or tensions, not least since external stakeholders are rather impatient regarding outcomes:

It [local impact] takes time, and it is important that they [regional actors] also help us develop this research competence. (Senior administrator, central level)

As for the role played by the “soft” disciplinary fields such as the social sciences and the humanities, the interaction between academic groups and regional actors has primarily been around teaching activities, via the rather large public sector presence throughout the region. An example is the local school system in the form of teacher training. Other encouraging developments include, but are not limited to, ongoing collaborations between UiA and the local hospital (at Kristiansand) around the issue of medical ethics, and an initiative entitled “Practice in the South” (*Praxis-sør*), involving a wide range of parties across the regional public sector (welfare, education, health, etc.).

There is a general acknowledgement by university stakeholders that, in the past, regional actors have often been unable to articulate their short- and long-term needs in a coherent manner. Yet, it was also stressed that UiA itself has underperformed when it comes to adequately informing external parties about its goals, core competencies and strategic priorities, and, consequently, the local developmental role it is both willing and capable of playing. Finally, internal accounts also reveal that, in some key areas, current engagement structures are thought to be inappropriate. An example is *continuing education*, where the format, both in terms of length and content, of some of the courses on offer (e.g. within technology) is seen as unsuitable to the pressing market needs of regional industry.

Experimentation with Prevalent Organizational Models

The data show that there is not a single dominant model for organizing internal activities, both across core and peripheral tasks. According to respondents (central and unit levels), UiA is not to act as the main *engine* of development (Castells, 1993) for the region. Instead, its role is that of a *network facilitator* or *knowledge-broker* (Fisher & Atkinson-Grosjean, 2002), whose core function is that of bringing together the various actors, public and private, composing the regional knowledge ecosystem (see also Benneworth & Hospers, 2007). In other words, UiA's regional role is that of a *developmental* rather than a *generative* or catalyst one (Gunasekara, 2006), meaning that other local actors like industry and government agencies are seen as the central players in regional development.

According to respondents at the central and unit levels, UiA's mission is to provide a cadre of skilled graduates (professionals) for regional, national and international labour markets. The strategic aim is to become a "professions-oriented" university by focusing on the provision of solid and relevant education while simultaneously supporting regional constituencies when it comes to knowledge production and innovation (Nilsson, 2006). The central administration is investigating the adoption of a working model enabling it to engage with the region in a more systematic, coordinated and strategic manner. The overall goal is to devise an organizational template similar to that of mid-size European universities that both play an active role in their regions and excel in a selected number of teaching and research fields or niches (cf. Pinheiro, 2012). The objective is to become a "modern European university", actively engaged with strategic partnerships with university counterparts across the continent, particularly within Northern Europe:

Our [UiA] vision is not to become a classic broad university, but a professionally-based academic entity with strong linkages across the region, and with a clear and articulated regional development role ... But, we need to have international quality in the [teaching/research] areas we are involved with. (Senior administrator, central level)

At the level of the individual units or *academic heartland* (Clark, 1998), there are a number of examples of attempts at adopting key features emanating from models perceived as both innovative and successful. This is particularly visible in the faculty of technology and science, where a number of concepts, many of which

emanate from North America, are currently being assessed. One such idea, also being explored at the level of the central administration, pertains to enhancing UiA's entrepreneurial profile (Clark, 1998; Etzkowitz, 2001). On the teaching front, this involves devising a *hybrid* model based on the combination of conventional (in-class) and more flexible (e-learning) methods of instruction, as a means of responding to the changing demands of various student publics:

I am trying to make other people [within UiA] worried, and to tell them if we are not doing this [innovate] then we are not doing our job ... There is nothing more important to do in the next four years than making this university the best it can possibly be. That's my mission! (Senior academic administrator, unit level)

Competitive pressures, nationally and internationally, are also being felt across fields such as the social sciences. A major goal is to strengthen the research competence around disciplinary-based milieus, and link this back to training programmes within professionally related fields. In other words, in addition to the attention paid to the structural linkages between teaching and research activities, the working model being explored seeks to integrate knowledge production within traditional disciplines with instruction preparing individuals for a given vocation.

When it comes to stylized models or blueprints at the level of the organizational field, and according to internal respondents at the unit level, the tendency is for traditional (dominant) domestic universities like Oslo and Bergen to become more like the new university providers such as UiA, instead of the other way around. Part of the reason is demographics. As a small country located on the edge of Europe, it is argued, Norway does not have enough students interested in classic disciplinary-based studies like those offered by the established comprehensive (research-intensive) universities. National figures for the period 2007–2011 present a more nuanced picture. Classic disciplinary fields like mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities continue to grow (university applicants), in tandem with professional programmes like nursing, law and education (NSD-DBH).

Coming back to the notion of specific models or templates being adopted across the academic heartland, variations exist in the light of institutionalized traditions, unique competencies and the aspirations of academic groups. An example is the faculty of social sciences and economics. Its economics department uses NHH (*Norges handelshøyskole*), one of the country's prominent business schools, as a benchmark reference. In contrast, political scientists follow closely the work of their peers at the University of Oslo. Similar patterns can be detected within the faculty of humanities and education, where there is a clear divide when it comes to the dominant *academic ethos*. Professional preparation programmes like teaching education tend to place practical knowledge (relevance), links with society (networking) and teaching and learning (the needs of student audiences) at the forefront of their activities. This normative posture is in stark contrast with that of fields such as the humanities and religion/theology, which have a tendency for paying close attention to developments within their respective disciplines (inward-orientation), and emphasize the importance of linking teaching and research.

Interestingly, the data show that *benchmarking* or comparative dimensions involving strategic reference groups (cf. Charles & Wilson, 2012) influence all spheres of university life, including ongoing efforts aimed at enhancing *professionalization* and *rationalization* (Ramirez, 2010); e.g. around quality control/accountability measures (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). That said, as is the case elsewhere (Beerkens, 2010; Pinheiro, 2012), stylized models were found to vary in line with contextual circumstances, thus suggesting local *adaptation* or modification rather than the simple *adoption* of universal templates. To give an example: at the level of the central administration, Denmark's University of Aalborg is used as a model for best practices in the realm of *efficiency*, whereas Norway's University of Bergen is the chosen reference regarding *examination procedures*.

Coming back to the notion of a *hybrid* or dual institutional profile (cf. Garrod & Macfarlane, 2009), contextual dimensions such as size, path and resource dependencies, in addition to the profile of the student population, were found to play a key role. For example, about half of UiA's students attend professionally-related education, whereas the other half enroll in some type of disciplinary-based degree. In the words of a senior academic administrator associated with the fields of the humanities and education:

We must think both ways, we do not have any other option ... We have to be an institution that trains teachers, nurses and engineers, but at the same time, we also need to be active in the traditional disciplines.

One direct consequence of this *hybrid* orientation lies in the importance attributed to research. Most professional preparation programmes at UiA are characterized by the absence of an institutionalized research tradition. In contrast, so-called "classic" disciplinary studies (social sciences, humanities, etc.) tend to put a strong emphasis on scientific excellence and the teaching–research nexus. Going forward, as alluded to earlier, a major strategic aim is to strengthen the research foundation of vocational-orientated programmes like teaching and nursing education. Such *academization* processes (Kyvik, 2009) largely result from the emphasis, by national policy makers and funding agencies, on the role of professional fields in the context of a knowledge-based economy, and the rise of strategic science regimes across Norwegian universities (Fumasoli et al., 2012).

As far as curriculum innovations are concerned, there is some evidence suggesting that these are easier to realize around emerging interdisciplinary programmes, such as mechatronics and/or renewable energy. Within such fields, not only is there an absence of an institutionalized tradition within teaching, but, equally important, scientific (global) *excellence* and (local) *relevance* are seen as complementary (Perry, 2012; Pinheiro, 2012).

Revisiting the Five Ambiguities

Having shed empirical light on the three research questions posed earlier, it is now appropriate to discuss the empirical findings in light of the theoretical premises

advanced at the outset. In other words, how can UiA's case illustrate the ways in which the ambiguity characterizing modern universities affects processes of change/adaptation?

When it comes to its mission (*ambiguity of purpose*), UiA's case shows that, on the one hand, the university aspires to develop global scientific competence in selected disciplinary areas, yet, on the other, it wishes to contribute directly to regional development *inter alia* by leveraging the skills and competences of its diverse student audiences. This suggests that, as is the case with most modern universities, UiA is attempting to fulfill a multiplicity of functions (Kerr, 2001). However, the latter are not necessarily aligned or in harmony with one another (Castells, 2001). This phenomenon is best illustrated by the dichotomous relation between preparing students for a given profession vs. providing them with a solid (more theoretical) knowledge-based foundation within a disciplinary setting.

Despite the recent structural integration of certain sub-units under a single faculty, the data suggest that, as is often the case, primary activities, particularly in the realm of teaching, are not necessarily tightly coupled (Birnbaum, 1988; Weick, 1976). Loose coupling was also found to be a prominent feature of UiA's strategic plan at the level of the central steering core, when compared to the strategic agendas held across the academic heartland. In short, in addition to paying close attention to the inherent *structural ambiguity* characterizing the modern university, the findings provide empirical support for the importance of investigating university dynamics at the sub-unit level (Jones, 2008).

UiA's historical legacy as a "teaching-only" institution, and the low prestige ascribed to such an institutional profile at the level of the domestic organizational field of higher education by the established (research-intensive) universities, is a key factor in understanding ongoing internal dynamics. The transition from university college to fully fledged university has made the pursuit of scientific excellence a strategic priority, not least given the need to enhance internal (field) and external (market) *legitimacy* (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Unsurprisingly, this has led to *academization* or academic drift (Kyvik, 2009), illustrated by the strategic attention (central and unit levels) paid to scientific excellence and the "teaching-research nexus" (Clark, 1983). In brief, this case study points to the role of path-dependencies (Krücken, 2003; Tapper & Palfreyman, 2011) in permeating processes of adaptation, an aspect associated with the *ambiguity of history*.

As for the third mission, the data reveal that there is, still, considerable ambiguity (across the board) regarding UiA's regional role. This is mostly visible at the sub-unit level, particularly across traditional disciplinary domains and their potential indirect contributions, but also when it comes to the (often unarticulated) needs and expectations of various local constituencies. A key issue in this respect stems from the shortcomings associated with UiA's strategic planning processes (cf. Fumasoli et al., 2012), where ambiguity with respect to the role of the university in society still prevails. As for external stakeholders, on the basis of first-hand accounts from university actors, the former are thought to possess a rather limited understanding of UiA's skills and competencies and,

consequently, the role it is capable of playing in regional development (Gunasekara, 2006; Pinheiro, Benneworth, & Jones, 2012). In a nutshell, these aspects point to the limitations associated with the rationalization of university structures and activities (Ramirez, 2010; Whitley, 2008), aspects related to the *ambiguity of understanding*.

Institutional Responses and Stylized University Models

The data suggest that the change in UiA's legal status to a fully-fledged university not only brought to the fore a new set of external demands and expectations, but also altered the inner dynamics of the university. This process includes, but is not limited to, the *adoption* and/or *adaptation* of (new/existing) structural arrangements and a re-definition of its regional role. As expected, change processes across the university are shaped by the interplay between external (organizational field and region) and internal (central steering core and academic heartland) imperatives and dynamics. Deeply institutionalized norms, preferences, traditions and identities were found to play an important role in determining the level of response across UiA's academic heartland. Yet, the university (central and unit levels) was also found to act strategically to make changes in its technical and institutional environments *inter alia* by taking pro-active steps to shape external circumstances in light of unique skills and competences, path and resource dependencies, institutionalized behavioural postures and cultural traditions, and academic aspirations.

When it comes to stylized models, it was found that UiA is attempting to combine conventionally distinct orientations in the form of a *hybrid* or dualistic institutional profile. On the one hand, the quest for external support or legitimacy is driving university actors, at central and unit levels, to adopt a number of key features emanating from the prestigious stylized model of the *research-intensive* university. Yet, on the other, external expectations, by policy makers and labour markets, towards the training of skilled professionals for both the region and the country as a whole, resource dependencies (e.g. student recruitment), and a deeply institutionalized cultural *ethos* of teaching and service, imply the adoption of an institutional profile geared towards professional or vocational education so characteristic of the locally embedded *regional university*.

These efforts are mediated by public pronouncements of the dangers associated with institutional paralysis or inertia, more often than not substantiated around strategic attempts, at unit and central levels, at infusing a spirit of risk-taking and entrepreneurialism. In doing so, university actors are both *adopting* and *adapting* key features emanating from the stylized model of the *entrepreneurial university*. In a nutshell, the quest for being accepted as "one amongst equals" by its better established domestic university counterparts is resulting in *isomorphic* behaviour (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), manifested *inter alia* through academization (Kyvik, 2009). Yet, the latter process is counter-balanced by the need to develop a distinct institutional profile and organizational identity (Fumasoli et al., 2012), materialized around the *adaptation* (Beerens, 2010) of specific features to UiA's unique

contextual circumstances (history, surrounding region, resource dependencies, etc.) and core capabilities (teaching and research). Hence, both *isomorphic* (the need to be like other universities) and *polymorphic* (the quest for a distinct profile and identity) postures were found to go hand in hand. The current dynamics across UiA are characterized by ongoing attempts at balancing its regional obligations while, simultaneously, positioning itself in an increasingly competitive (domestic and international) market place. Like other modern universities, UiA is following a model characterized by being “globally competitive and locally engaged” (Pinheiro, 2012; Pinheiro, Benneworth, & Jones, 2012).

Conclusion and Implications

This case provides an illustration of the organizational impact brought about by changes in legal status from a university college, primarily dedicated to teaching activities, into a fully-fledged university expected to compete (for students, staff and research funding), nationally and internationally, and, at the same time, be responsive to the needs and expectations of various regional constituencies. Going forward, UiA’s main strategic challenges are, in our view, best illustrated around the need for achieving an adequate balance between the following dimensions:

- Enhance the *recruitment of students* from outside the (Agder) region, nationally and internationally, while, at the same time, continuing to promote higher education, particularly long-term, amongst regional student publics, not least across smaller, inland localities characterized by the absence of a strong (higher) educational tradition.
- *Strengthen its academic core* by allowing more classic disciplinary studies to gradually adopt more cosmopolitan (global) orientations, especially within the realm of research; while, simultaneously, catering for the needs of regional student markets across its more vocational programmatic offerings.
- Gradually *reduce its dependence on the public purse* by instituting a “spirit of enterprise” across the board; for example, by internally promoting entrepreneurial units as “best in class” (benchmarking), and/or by strategically taking advantage of the existing linkages between UiA and the environment via its developmental periphery.
- *Align national and international aspirations* (excellence) with strategic efforts geared towards bridging the university with various regional constituencies (relevance), as a means of addressing the existing gap between external demands and expectations and internal (core) capabilities. One way of doing this is by adopting a more *entrepreneurial mindset*, for example substantiated around the infusion of regional dimensions in and around UiA’s academic core, and/or via a closer integration (tighter coupling) between teaching, research and third-stream activities.

When it comes to implications for researchers and university managers more generally, the findings from this case study suggest: (a) the need to undertake

inquiries at various levels within the organization, as a means of having a balanced (more holistic) account of developments and initiatives; (b) the importance attributed to contextual dimensions such as path and resource dependencies, as well as geography, in processes of local adaptation and change; (c) active agency by the university actors involved (steering core and academic heartland) in the re-construction or adaptation of prevalent models for organizing academic activities, in the light of core competencies, local traditions and academic aspirations; and (d) the challenges brought by isomorphic or imitative pressures, aligned with legitimating and prestigious university models and activities, and ongoing efforts (funding agencies and central administration) towards transforming universities into more coherent, predictable, responsive and self-reliable (i.e. strategic) organizational actors.

Finally, this case contributes to ongoing academic discussions regarding the transformation of (European) universities as organizations and institutions (Fumasoli et al., 2012; Olsen, 2007; Pinheiro, Benneworth, & Jones, 2012; Whitley, 2008).

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