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**Institutional positioning of higher education
institutions: a conceptual and empirical analysis**

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The University of Milan serves as the administrative headquarters and provides the facilities for most teaching activities.

To my wife Chiara, my parents and Tim B.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
References	10
Chapter 1 - The determinants of university positioning: a reappraisal of the organizational dimension	11
1. Universities as strategic actors and the changing academic field.....	11
2. The determinants of institutional positioning	13
3. The organizational dimension	20
4. Concluding remarks	26
References	28
Appendix	31
Chapter 2 - What do positioning paths of universities tell about diversity of higher education systems? an exploratory study	45
1. Introduction	45
2. Theoretical perspectives on institutional positioning in the HE literature	47
3. Data and methods	49
4. Results	52
5. Discussion and conclusion	60
References	64
Appendix	68
Chapter 3 - The impact of the organisational dimension on positioning processes of universities: a case-study approach.....	72
1. Introduction	72
2. A framework for analysis	73
3. Methodology and data	77
4. Discussion and conclusion	81
5. Concluding remarks	88
References	91
Appendix- Case-studies narratives	95

Introduction

Higher Education (HE) systems have faced several challenges and undergone considerable transformation in the last decades. First, the constant massification of tertiary education has compelled Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to deal with an increasing diversified population of students (Tight 2017). Second, HEIs face growing competition for resources due to both shrinking public funding and market-based reforms that have widely changed the systemic governance of HE systems (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007). Third, HE has rapidly become an international affair, characterised by both competition and cooperation, transcending thus national borders (Marginson 2007). Lastly, the ‘knowledge economy’ has set path-breaking and diversified demands for HEIs’ activities like balancing academic excellence and societal relevance of research, which has caused a potential risk of ‘mission overload’ (Van Vught and Huisman 2013). In this uncertain and increasingly complex environment, HEIs are constantly pushed to define and sharpen their profiles, deciding the right mix of activities and resources on which they should concentrate their institutional efforts, in other words, to position themselves distinctively (Paradeise and Thoenig 2016). Institutional positioning can be defined as “the process through which HEIs locate themselves in specific niches within the HE system” (Fumasoli and Huisman, 2013, p. 160). The niche reflects the activities (teaching, research, third mission) and resources (e.g. financial, human) in which the HEI can prosper as well as the potential relations (competition, cooperation) with the others HEIs that share the same position or a similar one. In other words, the positioning of a HEI tells what that institution does and how comparing to the other institutions in the same HE system. University positioning consequently becomes an increasingly central issue for both higher education researchers and policy makers (Marginson 2015). Despite its increasing relevance, positioning is a relatively new topic within the HE literature, and there has been no shared vision yet about its determinants (what cause positioning), outcomes (where HEIs position themselves) and the organisational processes that support it (how to position effectively), as also highlighted by Mahat and Goedegebuure (2016) and Fumasoli (2018).

This thesis is an attempt to investigate, both conceptually and empirically, the determinants (Chapter 1), outcomes (Chapter 2) and organizational processes related to institutional positioning of HEIs (Chapter 3). The thesis has been designed and developed as a collection of stand-alone papers. The first paper (Chapter 1) is conceptual while the second and third (Chapter 2 and 3) are empirical works. The two empirical papers clearly stem from the two different findings of the first

paper, as illustrated later. For this reason, they should not be read in a consecutive manner even if they present an operative connection.

The first paper (Chapter 1) performs a comprehensive literature review on institutional positioning within the larger debate on the diversity of HE systems, focusing its attention on the determinants of this phenomenon. The review yielded two main findings that also form the starting point of the second and third articles. Firstly, it highlighted how the debate about the determinants of positioning has been captured along two main opposite theoretical perspectives, namely, the ‘environmental determinism’ perspective and the ‘managerial rationality’ approach. The paper illustrates the determinants of these two perspectives (the environment vs. the intents and actions of the top management), their different methodological approaches and the connected mixed empirical evidences they generate.

Secondly, the paper recognises how the organisational dimension (Clark 1983) has often been neglected within this debate, integrating it as a meso-level intervening variable between the macro variable (the environment) and the micro variable (the management). The organisational dimension is operationalised through three variables, namely, organisational structure, identity and centrality. In this way, the paper contributed to the higher education literature, not only by systematizing the debate on the determinants of university’s agency, but also by reappraising the often neglected role of the so-called ‘organizational dimension’. This paper was developed in collaboration with Professor Tatiana Fumasoli¹ (Institute of Education, University College of London).

The second paper (Chapter 2) presents a quantitative analysis of the outcomes of positioning paths over time. Starting from controversial empirical evidence produced from the two above-mentioned theoretical perspectives as well as recent insights from the literature as highlighted in Chapter 1, this paper shows how, in spite of similar external incentives and constraints, HEIs can potentially display different types of positioning paths. Since the behaviour of individual HEIs and the direction of the entire HE system can only partially correspond, the analysis of positioning paths can enable the researcher to more effectively describe and understand the actual level of diversity of HE systems. The research goal of this paper is indeed to investigate how the analysis of positioning paths can improve our understanding of the diversity of HE systems. In specific terms, it analysed the positioning paths and diversity of HE systems in two countries (Italy and England) through clustering exercises and the construction of diversity indexes over a decade

¹ The main contribution of Professor Fumasoli in this paper is represented by her external supervision and revision of the text.

(from 2004 to 2014). This is indeed a reasonable period of time for analysing the positioning efforts of universities based also on the availability of the gathered data. Given the dearth of a public available database describing the features, activities and performances at the level of single HEIs over a significant period, an original and comprehensive dataset was built for this research by gathering data from different sources (Appendix, Chapter 2). In order to have comparable and reliable information between the two countries, the process of data cleaning and the construction of the indicators were informed by a formula and definitions from large, established research projects, like the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER)² (Lepori et al., 2017). The eight selected indicators refer to four broad dimensions, namely, the mission, the subject mix and the scope of the student. The analysis of the positioning paths contributed to identify three main contributions for understanding diversity of HE system. First, it disentangles the diversity of a HE system by revealing how HEIs mix the several dimension of the niche by being both similar and distinctive. Second, it allows to identify the dimensions in which positioning shifts are more likely to occur, detecting the mechanisms through which diversity of the entire HE evolves. Third, the analysis of positioning paths can contribute to identifying which groups of HEIs affect more the level of diversity. These three points represent also the main contribution of this paper to the literature. The methodological and exploratory nature of this article inevitably entails some limitations. First, the paper does not explain why HEIs change their positions longitudinally. In order to do this the analysis of this chapter should have considered deeper reforms that occurred in the time-frame the which have altered the environmental conditions in which HEIs operate and could explain why HEIs position themselves in a way instead of others. This could be the object of study for a further study. Second, this study investigated the positioning of HEIs as a given, without questioning if this is the result of either strategic choices of the leadership or a passive compliance towards external pressures. This dilemma can be a research topic itself, which might be investigated in future studies.

The third and final paper of the thesis (Chapter 3) focuses instead on positioning processes and, particularly, on how the organisational dimension influences the effectiveness of these institutional efforts over time. The organisational dimension was operationalised according to the three variables identified in the first paper (Chapter 1): the organisational structure, identity and centrality. A qualitative case study approach was adopted to investigate how the organisational dimension influences the positioning processes. Indeed, this methodology is claimed to be

² ETER is a research project that collects information on HEIs in Europe from 2011 with respect to their basic characteristics, geographical information, educational and research activities, staff, students and finances.

particularly suitable for exploratory studies that ultimately aim to identify expectations on the relationship between variables. Four case studies, two Italian and two English universities, were selected also based on the clusters identified in empirical analysis of the second paper (Chapter 2). Moreover, all four case studies share several features and they all operate in two regions that are comparable in terms of economic system as well as the number and type of tertiary education institutions. The data for each case study was gathered from 60 semi-structured interviews to key figures of the university's governance. The sample of interviewees was heterogeneous in terms of gender, age, role and disciplinary affiliation. In addition, since this study adopted a longitudinal perspective with a timeframe of almost 15 years (from 2004 to 2018), the sample of interviewees was constructed accordingly. A comparative analysis of the four case studies enabled the formulation of certain expectations between each organisational variable and the positioning processes. On the one hand, the case studies identified how specific values of each of the three variables are positively related to an effective positioning process. On the other hand, they also showed how some intervening/critical elements can, at least partially, modify these relationships. This is the main contribution that this article intended to bring in the higher education literature. Furthermore, the differences in the influence of the organizational dimension on positioning processes passing from one national context to the other are highlighted. This study presents a main limitation that is connected to the selection of the case-studies. By selecting universities that share several features all the variety that could be found in a HE system was not covered. In particular, the model of a large and world-class university is missing from the sample of the case-studies. In such a context the organizational dimension might assume a different role in relation to positioning efforts since governance mechanism differ and a large size may also play a relevant role.

The thesis has benefited from formal feedback obtained from conferences within the field of higher education. The first paper³ (Chapter 1) was presented at the annual conference of the Consortium for Higher Education Researchers (CHER) (Jyväskylä, Finland, August 28 - 30, 2017) and the XXXI Conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) (Newport, Wales, 5 - 8 December 2017). The second paper⁴ (Chapter 2) was presented at the cycle of seminars of the Institute of Education, University College of London, (London, 12 December 2017) as well as at the XXXII conference of the Consortium for Higher Education Researchers

³This paper has been submitted to the journal *Higher Education* and is currently under review

⁴This paper has been submitted to the journal *Studies in Higher Education* and it is currently under review (major revision)

(CHER) (Moscow, Russia, 29 August - 1 September 2018). The third paper is going to be presented at the 35th annual conference of the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS) (Edinburgh, Scotland, 4 – 6 July 2019). Finally, the whole thesis has also benefit from the valuable dialogues and discussions with the co-supervisor Professor Marino Regini and the participation in the meetings of the Research Project of National Relevance (PRIN) “*Comparing Governance Regime Changes in Higher Education: systemic performances, national policy dynamics, and institutional responses. A multidisciplinary and mixed methods analysis*”, which includes several Italian researchers in higher education.

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Chapter 1

The determinants of university positioning: a reappraisal of the organizational dimension

Barbato, G., Fumasoli⁵, T. and Turri, M.

Abstract

While institutional positioning has emerged as a central theme in the debate on university organizational actorhood, its determinants have not been consistently addressed. Our extensive literature review highlights two implicit assumptions: either positioning is shaped by environmental forces or it is designed by top management. Addressing the mixed empirical findings found in the literature, this paper argues that the organizational dimension, conceived as a meso-level intervening variable, helps understanding more thoroughly the drivers of positioning and contributes to the outline of a theoretical framework accommodating both environmental and managerial hypotheses. We conceptualize and operationalize the organizational dimension along three components: organizational structure, organizational identities, and organization centrality. Material and non-material resources can be found across these three components influencing university trajectories and positions. The paper contributes to the current debates on the transformation of higher education and, more broadly, to a more in-depth understanding of strategic agency of organizational actors.

Keywords. Intentionality, determinism, organizational dimension, micro level, meso level, macro level.

1. Universities as strategic actors and the changing academic field

The dramatic growth of the higher education sector has transformed the way in which universities operate: it has urged them to accommodate increasing numbers of diversified students, to carry out different types of research activities to achieve academic excellence and societal relevance, to strengthen services to their communities and legitimize themselves as economic, technological and innovation engines locally and regionally (Van Vught 2008; Toma, 2012; Van Vught and Huisman 2013). Equally, universities have been required to diversify their funding sources to face stagnating or shrinking state resources, and to act in a more integrated fashion, in order to decide how to compete appropriately in the markets of their choice (Bonaccorsi 2009; Rossi 2009b; Paradeise and Thoenig 2018). Under the pressure to participate in the construction of the “knowledge society” universities have also undergone several reforms aimed to make them more

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efficient, effective and sustainable (Krücken and Meier 2006; Bleiklie and Kogan 2007; Laudel and Weyer 2014; Seeber et al. 2015). These on-going transformations have been mostly considered external pressures endangering the university missions and autonomy. More recently though the scholarly debate has turned to how universities themselves are able to engage with such changes and have developed organizational capabilities allowing the selection of a course of action and the modification of the niche in which they are located (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013; Cruz-Castro et al. 2016; Paradeise and Thoenig 2016). University positioning becomes consequently an increasingly central issue for both higher education researchers, policy makers and institutional leadership (Marginson 2007; Klumpp et al. 2014; Marginson 2015; Shadymanova and Amsler 2018). In this paper, positioning is intended as ‘the process through which higher education institutions locate themselves in specific niches within the higher education system’ (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013, p. 160).

Against this backdrop, scholars of organization and higher education have analysed the processes of strategic positioning - strategic planning and decision making, sense-making and sense-giving in strategic change, branding and identity construction (Pedersen and Dobbin 2006; Frølich et al. 2013; Mampaey et al. 2015; Stensaker 2015; Seeber et al. 2017; Paradeise and Thoenig, 2018). Equally, outcomes of strategic positioning have been investigated to make sense of how universities locate themselves in their academic field according to their educational portfolio, research output, technology transfer and regional development (Pedersen and Dobbin 2006; Frølich et al. 2013; Mampaey et al. 2015; Vuori 2016; Seeber et al. 2017).

However, while processes and output of university strategic positioning are being widely debated, its determinants have remained neglected. Implicitly, some authors assume external pressures compelling universities to react in rather pre-defined ways (Pietilä 2014; Silander and Hakee 2016), while others take for granted the room to manoeuvre of the university leadership in redefining missions, activities and markets to engage with (Martinez and Wolverton 2009). Empirical evidence points to the necessity for further scrutiny, as mixed results have given way to articulated explanations that reflect rather idiosyncratically the data at hand instead of providing more general explanations to such heterogeneous findings.

To shed light on the determinants of university positioning this paper, first, presents a systematic literature review from a theoretical, analytical and methodological angle. Second, it points to the further development of a conceptual framework by integrating the organizational dimension (Selznick 1949; Clark 1983; Paradeise and Thoenig 2013, Fumasoli 2015) conceived

as a meso-level intervening variable between the macro variable (the environment) and the micro variable (the management).

The paper is organized as follows: in the next section the literature review on the determinants of university positioning critically highlights its gaps. In the third part we develop a conceptualization of the organizational dimension for analyzing strategic positioning and generate sets of relevant hypotheses. In the final section we discuss how the conceptual contribution of this paper can foster new research into the changing higher education sector.

2. The determinants of institutional positioning

2.1 Methodology of the literature review

A comprehensive literature review was carried out, based on different bibliographical databases namely, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, and covering a time frame of 38 years, from 1980 to 2018. Since institutional positioning is treated in different streams of literature, we searched for multiple keywords, such as Institutional positioning, Strategic positioning, Profiling, Market position, Niche.

The first stage of the literature review provided a sample of almost 600 publications, selected according to their keywords. In the second stage, we selected further by reading the all the abstracts resulted from the previous screening. The selection of publication during this stage was based on two main criteria. First, we include in the final sample only those whose level of analysis was the higher education institution whereas both the positioning of entire HE systems or that of individuals within universities was not considered. Second, the reading of the abstracts allowed identifying whether and how the determinants of positioning have been included in either a conceptual or both conceptual and empirical way. Since specific determinants of organizational actions are illustrated from different theoretical perspective, if a publication presented a theoretical framework this was ultimately selected. If any theory or theoretical approach/school was found during the reading of the abstract, the publication was briefly scanned in order to understand if its contribution could be useful for the aim of this paper.

After this second screening, we came up with 106 publications, which have constituted the sample used in this paper (Table 1 in Appendix). Articles published in scientific journals (85) were found in Higher Education journals (59), in Economics and Management (18), Sociology (4) and in Organization studies (4). The remainder comprised 18 book chapters or books as well as 2 conference papers. 17 of the 105 publications are conceptual works, 29 empirical studies, whereas the remaining 59 are both conceptual and empirical. Moreover, 42 publications present

a qualitative methodology, 36 a quantitative one, and 8 both a qualitative and quantitative approach. Finally, we observed that 61 works have been published after 2010, 38 between 2000 and 2010, while 7 before 2000. More information about the 106 publications of the literature review are reported in Table 1 in Appendix with the full list of the references.

2.2 Positioning between environmental determinism and managerial rationality

In our literature review two main theoretical frameworks were mostly used: the environmental determinism perspective and the managerial rationality approach (Table 1, Appendix). This dualistic view has historically shaped the debate about organizational actorhood (Astley and Van de Ven 1983; Fumasoli and Stensaker 2013), resonated also in conceptual work on university positioning (Richardson et al. 1995; Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). We outline the respective limitations of these two perspectives in explaining university positioning, particularly in relation to the mixed empirical evidence that we consider largely unsatisfactory.

The environmental determinism perspective

Neo-institutional theory claims that university positioning is generated by the quest for legitimacy in order to comply with the external pressures of the surrounding environment (Van Vught 2008). As legitimacy-seeking entities, universities are heavily influenced by the exogenous pressures of the organizational field since adaptation and compliance provide resources and ultimately survival (Di Maggio and Powell 1983). This is particularly true for higher education systems, which can be described as highly institutionalized contexts (Brankovic 2014), in which ‘legitimacy is more important than efficiency in sustaining organizational survival’ (Mampaey et al. 2015, p. 1181). Consequently, universities have no alternatives but to conform to external isomorphic pressures (Paradeise and Thoening 2016). Legitimacy can be described as ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, within some socially constructed system of norms, values and beliefs [...]’ (Suchman 1995, p. 574-575). The system of norms and values is expressed by the institutional environment of higher education systems (Vaira 2009; Brankovic 2014).

Neo-institutional theory illustrates the isomorphic nature of institutional pressures, providing three main types of these exogenous forces: coercive (pressures from political power, i.e. government, evaluation agencies), mimetic (imitating the most successful organizations), and normative (norms of conducts and values from professionals) (Powell and DiMaggio 1983).

While compliance towards these isomorphic forces strengthens the societal legitimacy of universities, distinctiveness is perceived to be a consequence of irrational behaviour (Toma 2012).

Secondly, population ecology theory focused on the influence of competitive environments neglecting agency for the single organization (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). The initial assumption is that organizations, as organisms in nature, rely heavily on their ability to acquire resources necessary to survive (Morgan 1986). When resources are scarce organizations face competition that will show which organizations are able to obtain a resource niche and ultimately survive (Hannan and Freeman 1989). Hence, the nature, number and distribution (i.e. the positioning) of organizations in their output space is dependent on both the resource availability and the level of competition, making competitive environment the main critical factor in shaping positions on universities over time (Van Vught 2008; Lepori et al. 2014). This correspondence between environmental conditions and organizations' trajectories is depicted by Hannan and Freeman with the term 'structural isomorphism' (1989, p. 62). The lower is the diversity of environmental conditions (i.e. availability of resources) and the higher is the similarity of universities' positioning, since each organization will tend to position similarly in order to secure the few available resources (Birnbaum 1983).

Despite different characterizations of the environment, both theories agree upon the increasing homogeneity outcome of this deterministic process (Morphew and Huisman 2002; Van Vught 2008). This outcome has been widely demonstrated (Birnbaum 1983; Neave 2000; Morphew 2009). Hence, it can be claimed that the first determinant of positioning trajectories is the quest for external legitimacy and resources.

Empirically, Maassen and Potman (1990), showed how Dutch universities tend to display strategic legitimacy-seeking behaviors when conditioned by coercive (from the government) and normative (from academic communities) pressures to enhance distinctiveness of their institutional profiles. Silander and Hakee (2016) and Pietilä (2014), shared similar results: they found that strategic profiling is used symbolically to comply with coercive and mimetic forces, for universities to gain legitimacy without introducing any actual change. Brankovic (2014) demonstrated that private universities in Western Balkans emulated their public competitors (mimetic isomorphism) in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of students that represent one of their major revenues. Similar findings are presented by Rossi (2009b), according to whom, in front of growing levels of competition, Italian universities do not differentiate their positions but strengthen their specialization in more popular disciplines and meet the consumer preferences of the student population.

Finally, if mission statements and strategic plans can be considered as indicators of positioning attempts, similar empirical evidence confirms the university quest for legitimacy. Investigating mission statements in the United Kingdom, Davies and Glaister (1996) argued that their relevance seems to be perceived in terms of meeting the demands and requirements of external stakeholders rather than offering the opportunity to develop a common goal within the institution. Hartley and Morpew (2008) and Wæraas and Solbakk, (2009) similarly showed that, despite some attempts to position distinctively from their own competitors, universities systematically present themselves in terms of widely accepted institutional values to gain legitimacy leading to a sort of ‘conformity trap’ (see also Mampaey, 2018, p. 2). Finally, Pizarro Milian (2017) analyzed marketing practices of Canadian universities, illustrating how both teaching-oriented and research-intensive institutions seek to emulate the same institutional template as a result of mimetic and normative pressures. Hence, despite increasing competitive pressures, legitimacy still appears to be a crucial determinant in how universities depict themselves (Sauntson and Morrish 2011).

However, more recent strands of the Neo-institutionalism (Quirke 2013) seem to question conformity as the only option available for organizations to obtain legitimacy, since multiple institutional logics and stakeholders might be at play within an organizational field. Pizarro Milian and Quirke (2017), investigating promotional profiles of Canadian For-Profit Colleges, proved that these low-status institutions behave beyond the mere mimicking of traditional public universities by drawing on different discourses (see also Pizarro Milian and McLaughlin, 2017).

The managerial rationality perspective

A managerial rationality approach claims purposiveness and actions of the top management to be the main determinant of institutional positioning (Fumasoli 2018). According to the strategic management literature and other theoretical approaches (Resource dependence theory; Resource-based view), environment cannot be treated as a ‘set of intractable constraints’ (Astley and Van de Ven 1983, p. 249), but it can be changed according to the actions and goals of the top-management (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Porter 1985). Managerial rationality is thus characterized as a strategic process, comprising intents and actions at the same time (Fumasoli and Lepori 2011).

Institutional positioning as a strategic process, assumes a twofold meaning (Mintzberg and Waters 1985; Mintzberg and Rose 2003). On the one hand, positioning can be described as the result of a deliberate intent and planning process of the management. On the other hand, it can also be

described as “emergent”, in other words, a dynamic process resulting from the on-going relationship between the organization and the environment consisting of opportunities and constraints. Consequently, positioning cannot be reduced to a mere output of a program to follow (Ahmed et al. 2015; Fumasoli 2018). Institutional positioning becomes thus the result of deliberate and emergent management’s attempts to deal with the external competitive environment in order to create a competitive advantage for the organization (Porter 1985; Martinez and Wolverton 2009; Toma 2012).

Differently from the environmental perspective, it is competition (not uncertainty) that drives managerial rationality. Competition derives from scarcity of resources and the need to acquire them (Deiaco et al. 2009), creating the essential premise for positioning (Cattaneo et al. 2018). Along this line Mahat and Goedegebuure (2016, p. 226) underlined how the core dimension of positioning is ‘to understand and cope with competition’. This argument is plausible, since competitive pressures have increased in the last decades due to the proliferation of assessment exercises, rankings (Wedlin 2006, Hazelkorn 2009), performance-based funding, growing mobility of students and academics, as well as globalization (Van Vught and Huisman 2013).

Concerning the outcomes of the positioning process, only differentiation from competitors, through the creation of a unique and non-reproducible profile, allows universities to position themselves in distinctive niches and access an on-going flow of resources (Mazzarol and Soutar 2008; Martinez and Wolverton 2009; Fumasoli and Huisman, 2013). As described by Bonaccorsi and Daraio (2007) and other micro-economic studies (Warning 2004, 2007; Olivares and Wetzel 2014), a unique position should take into consideration both inputs (mix of resources employed) and outputs (activities provided), considering both organizational effectiveness and efficiency as relevant criteria of success.

Studies on the outcome of positioning processes focus on measures of country-level differentiation over time (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2008; Bonaccorsi 2009; Fahy et al. 2010; Ljungberg et al. 2009; Van Vught and Huisman 2013; Bonaccorsi 2014; Huisman et al. 2015) and aim to demonstrate the “enhancing-diversity” property of competition (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007; Huisman et al. 2008; Tammi 2009; Rossi 2010; Teixeira et al. 2012). Cattaneo et al. (2018) investigated the relationship between competition and programmatic diversification highlighting how Italian universities strategically mould their educational offering balancing imitation and differentiating behaviors according to different levels of local competition.

Studies on the processes leading to strategic positioning focused on internal processes, instruments and approaches that can be adopted by the management to position their university

successfully (Finley et al. 2001; Lowry and Owens 2001; Harrison-Walker 2009). Examples are the use of the five forces model (Huisman and Pringle 2011; Mathooko and Ogutu 2015); the role of institutional research (Klemenčič 2016); the analysis of ranking indicators (Hou et al. 2012), the development of organizational capabilities (Lynch and Baines 2004; Bobe and Kober 2015) and other specific management tools (Brown 1993; Mashhadi et al. 2008; Dorozhkin et al. 2016; Haezendonck et al. 2017). Finally, some papers in the marketing literature, focus on how students' preferences impact the positioning of universities (Maringe 2006; Nicolescu 2006; Kayombo and Carter 2017). Yet, in these papers, the determinants of positioning are mainly tacit while universities are assumed to rationally choose their course of action.

Other studies highlighted more explicitly the role of managerial. Rossi (2009b) showed that, despite a highly institutionalized environment, some Italian universities were able to prioritize either research or teaching activities. Fumasoli and Lepori (2011) illustrated how the positioning patterns of three Swiss higher education institutions are the result of both deliberate and emergent strategies, even if with different degrees of success. Similar findings can be found in Mahat (2015) regarding the distinctive positioning attempts of medical schools in Australia. Naudè and Ivy (1999) illustrated how “newer” UK universities used marketing services to identify alternative niches and differentiate themselves vis-à-vis “traditional” universities.

Jamieson and Naidoo (2007) outline how an English elite university, as a result of its strategic evaluation of external challenges, decided to position itself in a specific niche by broadening the portfolio of doctoral education. Lastly, a group of empirical studies analyzed strategic plans (Brandt 2002; Strike and Labbe 2016; Morphey, Fumasoli and Stensaker 2018), mission statements (Hartley and Morphey 2006; Bevelander et al. 2015; Leiber 2016), branding activities (Opoku and Hultman 2008; Furey et al. 2014; Çatı et al. 2016) and institutional images (Ivy 2001) in order to investigate how universities look at exogenous constraints and opportunities eventually deciding to pursue distinctive profiles. The variety of these studies illustrates the increasing scholarly interest on how competitive forces trigger strategic responses by university top management and their quest for positioning by differentiation.

2.3 Conflicting hypotheses, mixed evidence and balancing

As highlighted so far, the environmental determinism and the managerial rationality hypotheses can be considered the two main theoretical lenses used to make sense of the drivers of university positioning. Nevertheless, once we turn to the empirical findings, we find mixed evidence in either hypotheses. Empirical studies show how distinctive strategic processes can indeed be found also

in highly institutionalized contexts (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007; Rossi 2009b; Mahat 2015), where convergence processes are expected (see also Kraatz and Zajac (1996) on the limits of Neo-institutionalism).

On the other hand, emulative and compliant behaviours have been illustrated in increasing competitive contexts, too (James and Huisman 2009; Silander and Hakee 2016; Pizarro Milian 2017). MacKay et al. (1996) found a weak and unclear relationship between increasing managerialism and distinctive responses of UK universities towards external competition, whereas Erhardt et al. (2016) depicted a low level of horizontal differentiation in German higher education in spite of a ten-year growing competition.

Several scholars point to factors mediating competition. Rossi (2009a; 2010) argues that students preferences for social sciences and humanities influenced over time subject mix choices of Italian universities, leading the overwhelming majority to increase the number of courses within these two faculties. Consequently, despite increasing competition for students, their demands mediate the expected outcome of competition, leading to growing homogeneity of educational portfolios, as also illustrated by Shadymanova and Amsler (2018) in relation to the Kyrgyz higher education system reality. Similar results are found by Teixeira et al. (2012) concerning the orientation of private universities in providing courses on specific disciplines. The authors also point out that regulatory effectiveness and the nature of universities as path dependent organizations played a role in reducing the effects of marketization of higher education. On the other hand, Lepori et al. (2014) found in their longitudinal study of Swiss higher education institutions that both convergence and differentiation forces co-exist. Equally, Hartley and Mophew (2006, 2008) illustrate findings supporting both the two above-mentioned hypotheses.

Our literature review also highlights how some empirical papers have addressed these mixed evidences. Drawing from the works of Oliver (1991) and Deephouse (1999), who used jointly strategic management, resource dependence and neo-institutional perspectives, positioning is depicted as a “balance” between the search for legitimacy and the search for distinctiveness. Since higher education systems have become both more institutionalized and increasingly competitive, legitimacy and distinctiveness are crucial assets for universities in order to gather the necessary resources. Deephouse suggests that distinctive positioning can only be ‘as different as legitimately possible’ (1999, p. 47). A university needs distinctiveness to secure resources, but it cannot ignore field norms, since it would lose the support of its main stakeholders (Mampaey et al. 2015) and in particular of its funders (Mophew et al. 2018). This conceptualization opens up for potential polymorphic results (Pedersen and Dobbin, 2006; Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013), given that

despite similar institutional pressures, universities can display different responses (Oliver 1991; Greenwood et al. 2006; Morphew et al. 2018). By looking at strategic documents, several studies claimed that convergence and differentiation could be optimally balanced within universities, (Huisman et al. 2002; Kosmützky 2012; Fumasoli et al. 2015; Mampaey, 2018). Mampaey et al. (2015, p. 11), prove that Flemish universities were able to offset their ‘conformity to macro-level institutional values by communicating organization-specific meanings’ of these values, thus gaining both legitimacy and distinctiveness at the same time. Kosmützky and Krücken (2015) and Seeber et al. (2017), contend that German and UK universities positioned themselves in specific groups in order to shield themselves from competition with other institutions outside their group.

Finally, some scholars combined Neo-institutionalism and Resource dependence theory, usually starting from Oliver’s seminal paper (1991). Bowl (2018), Jin and Horta (2018) and Huisman and Mampaey (2018), introduce in the study of strategic balancing attempts, the age and status of universities. They all illustrate how older and high-status institutions clearly preferred to not deviate from the historically-based institutional expectations, whereas younger and low-status universities looked more proactively for unconventional positioning paths. Pizarro Milian et al. (2016) identify instead four types of responses from higher education institutions towards the government’s attempts to enhance institutional differentiation in Ontario, namely remaining sensitive to the market, ceremonial compliance, ongoing status seeking and isomorphism.

3. The organizational dimension

The literature review clearly points to the unsolved relationship between determinants and outcomes of university positioning. Equally, it illustrates the limitations of the “balancing” perspective that conflates environmental and managerial hypotheses, explaining a variety of patterns in positioning by distinctive combinations of environmental determinism and managerial intentionality. By introducing what we call the organizational dimension this paper aims to develop further the existing theoretical framework and integrate macro (environment), meso (organization) and micro (management) levels of analysis.

The organizational dimension is not a new concept. Its relevance has been highlighted since the Old-institutionalism. Famously Selznick (1949, p. 10) stated that an organization, more than a tool in the hands of management, ‘has a life of its own’. Adopting a political science perspective, March (1962) characterises organizations as “political coalitions”, underlining that negotiation and bargaining between internal participants are the ordinary *modus operandi* within organizations. In doing so March provides a more nuanced view of organisational dynamics in

contrast with a limited focus on superordinate goals and missions of leadership and/or ownership. In other words, each organizational subunit holds its distinctive values and vision about themselves and the external environment in which they operate. In higher education studies Selznick's student Burton Clark has described universities' main organizational characteristic as "bottom heaviness" (Clark 1983), explaining that history, traditions, professional identities and disciplinary loyalties combine to produce complex and resilient organizations that exist quite separately and autonomously from their institutional leadership. More recently, Paradeise and Thoenig (2013) have used the concept of "local order" to argue that universities should be treated as potential meso-level order and action level. In this way, 'it is possible to break free from the all-pervasive global or one-size-fits-all standard' (Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013, p. 196).

We put forward the hypothesis that the organizational dimension mediates the effects of both environmental pressures and managerial rationality, acting as an intervening variable. In particular, it is claimed that the organizational dimension acts as a "filter" of the exogenous pressures of the environment (A), and as a "set of opportunities and constraints" of the rationality of the management (B).

A) The organizational dimension as a filter

The role of the organizational dimension as a 'filter' has been treated in different ways in the higher education literature. Clark (1983, p. 99), speaking about the identity that characterizes each university, calls it a 'switchman' able to mediate external pressures according to a unique internal mix of cultural beliefs. Paradeise and Thoenig (2013, p. 196), referring to 'local orders' suggest how a university 'may incorporate the changes arising from the global standardization process, while at the same time getting these to fit with all the organizational arrangements, cognitive processes and values that it uses for taking action and making decisions'. Although specific standards of academic excellence have imposed themselves globally, Paradeise and Thoenig (2013) showed empirically how different cognitive and normative organizational patterns led similar top-universities to conceptualize differently their vision of academic excellence and as a result, to undertake different positioning trajectories.

In another perspective, the theory of translation (Latour 1984; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008) has also shed light on the mechanisms at play within organizations. Along this line, environmental pressures are translated internally through the perceptions of the main organizational actors, based on a common historically constructed identity, which leads these macro-level ideas to be adjusted to the local organizational settings (Czarniawska and Wolff 1998).

Put differently, universities are absorbed into cognitive, cultural and normative attitudes that lend them ‘a variable sensitivity and responsiveness to changes taking place in the environments in which they operate’ (Paradeise and Thoenig 2013, p. 202). Consequently, even facing the same incentives and pressures, universities display different positioning patterns, according to how they interpret and internalize the expectations and demands of both their institutional and competitive environments (Frølich et al. 2013).

B) Organizational dimension as a set of opportunities and constraints

Each organization is characterized by its distinctive history, power structure, routines and practices that emerge over time and become institutionalized (Selznick 1949; March and Olsen 1989). These organizational factors provide formal constraints and benchmarks according to which organizational members (including management and leadership) fulfil their own tasks and make sense of the external environment. Olsen and March (2006), called this frame of action ‘logic of appropriateness’. In their view, human action is driven by rules of appropriate behaviour that are shaped by organizational values and settings, and these ‘rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate’ (Olsen and March 2006, p. 689). Hence, actors seek to perform their tasks ‘encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices, and expectations of its institutions’ (Olsen and March 2006, p. 689).

In accordance with this theoretical explanation, universities’ behaviour significantly involves established practices and shared cultural values, more than the rational calculation of consequences from the top management (Simon 1965). For instance, several empirical studies highlighted how concepts like “shared-governance” and “academic involvement” are core values and rule of action in universities, and therefore managerial rationality cannot be expressed in the way of a top-down and “close” leadership either (Clark 1998; Stensaker and Vabø 2013; Laudel and Weyer 2014; Stensaker et al. 2014).

Consequently, conceiving the organizational dimension as a set of constraints and opportunities ultimately means to describe strategic positioning as an ‘organisational fabrication’, or as a socially constructed process, that is made sense of in the interaction between the environmental incentives and the internal organizational rules, frames of actions and cultural values (Paradeise and Thoenig 2016, p. 298).

In conclusion, a positioning trajectory cannot be intrinsically conceived as the mere will and action of an entrepreneurial leadership, given that organizational rules impact significantly both the direction, coherence and rationality of the positioning effort.

3.1 Operationalization of the organizational dimension

The organizational dimension described above can be operationalized through three components that allow to investigate empirically this meso-level of analysis (Fumasoli, 2015): structure, identity and centrality.

I. Organizational structure

The organizational structure can be investigated by looking at governance and task allocation, mission and the size of the university. Governance can be defined as the set of practices through which decision-making is organized and coordinated within universities, whereas task allocation refers to how roles and duties are distributed throughout the organization. Governance can be analysed through the degree of centralisation, formalisation, and standardisation (Maassen et al. 2017). Centralization refers to the dispersion of authority to make decisions within universities, in other words where the locus of the decision-making is, and can be conceptualized along the continuum centralized - diffused. The collegial and academic oriented decision-making that has traditionally shaped universities (Clark 1983), has been questioned by managerial reforms that aimed to organize hierarchically decision-making processes, increase the power of executives and leadership and ultimately enhance a stronger leadership (Bleiklie and Kogan 2007). Formalization concerns ‘the degree according to which communication and procedures are written and filed’ (Maassen et al. 2017, p. 245), implying a continuum between legal requirements and spontaneous intents and actions. Similarly to centralization, managerial reforms introduced higher level of formalization through reporting duties, accountability requirements and stronger administrative offices that control and implement central decisions instead of merely supporting the individual initiatives of the academic community. Related to formalization is the degree of standardization, or the extent to which decision-making occurs according to rules that are applied invariably to all situations, equally, roles definitions, requirements and rewards are depersonalized. Standardization can be critical within knowledge-intensive organizations, where problems and practices have been historically handled “ad hoc” (Maassen et al. 2017), based on the principles of self-governance, academic freedom and professional expertise (Bleiklie and Kogan 2007). Centralization, formalization and standardization might enhance the administrative capacity of

universities to position themselves (Toma 2010), reducing inertia and enhancing organizational actorhood (Krücken and Meier 2006). On the other hand, flexibility might be also crucial, since it allows universities to rapidly adapt and respond to challenges, hence also modifying their positioning.

The second dimension, the “mission”, concerns the functions as well as the disciplinary fields in which the university focuses its activities. University functions and disciplines are, at least to some extent, organized hierarchically, prioritizing the importance of some (e.g. research and natural sciences) against others (e.g. teaching and humanities). While teaching and research historically shape the core activities of universities, growingly diversified demands from society and economic sectors exert pressures on universities to change priorities between their activities, as well as suggesting a potential risk of “mission overload” when it comes to outreach, technology transfer, community engagement (Collins 2004). Quantitative studies developed a set of “positioning indicators” and techniques on the orientation of universities towards these core functions as well as their relationships (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2008).

Thirdly, size can be considered in terms of budget, students and academic staff, as well as in terms of scope of the subject mix, making a distinction between generalist and specialist universities (Ljungberg et al. 2009; Huisman et al. 2015). The relation between organizational size and complexity affects university governance and decision-making processes, as well as the administrative capacity of universities to position themselves (Toma 2010; Fumasoli and Lepori 2011).

II. Organizational identity

Universities’ identity can be conceptualized as the result of different but complementary sources (Clark 1983): symbolic, cultural and social dimensions (Clark 1983; Stensaker 2015), in other words some unique beliefs and values shared by the internal members of the organization (Gioia and Thomas 1996) that steer their commitment (Selznick 1957; Aldrich and Ruef 2006; Cruz-Castro et al. 2016).

First, identity is shaped within disciplines through different knowledge traditions, categories of thought, codes of conduct and admission requirements (Becher and Trowler 2001). In this sense, disciplinary identities constitute an element of fragmentation of universities’ identity (Clark 1983; Frølich et al. 2013). Nevertheless, recent “managerial reforms” aimed to create and strengthen the organizational identity as a means of creating more “complete organizations” (Kosmützky 2012). This could be further achieved internally, through collective processes of

sense-making (Vuori 2015a, 2015b), and externally, by defining a clear distinctive image through mission statements and branding activities (Paradeise and Thoenig 2013; Furey et al. 2014).

A second source of identity is the university culture (Clark 1983), defined as the membership and identification of internal members with their academic organizations (Aldrich and Ruef 2006). The bonding power of the university organizational identity is affected by several factors such as organizational scale, age, integration and struggle, as well as, importantly, by the competitiveness of the external environment, since such pressures tend to trigger claims of uniqueness and a sense of collective effort. The university culture might be said to be a source of institutional coherence, acting as a risk-reducing device (Fumasoli et al. 2015), supporting potentially both conservative and innovative positioning patterns.

Thirdly, the culture of the academic profession comprises core values such as professional autonomy (freedom of teaching and research) and collegial self-government. These are shared universally, at least across disciplines and universities and (to a certain degree) across national higher education systems. It can then be expected that the academic profession culture, while integrating university fragmented disciplinary affiliations, also pushes towards positioning by conformity. The academic professional culture, described as a normative isomorphic pressure by neo-institutional studies (Rhoades 1990; Silander and Haake 2016), intrinsically strives for homogeneity across universities and national higher education systems, even if recent managerial reforms have challenged its foundations based on collegiality and academic freedom.

Finally, part of the universities' identity comes from specific traditions and historically based patterns of each national context (Ivy 1999). Beliefs concerning the complementary and/or substitute nexus between teaching and research, the access to the tertiary education and the employment of graduates are generally shared among universities of the same country, establishing commonalities that uniform the HE system. Finally, the national higher education system culture may suggest homogeneous positioning patterns within country borders. However, globalization and internalization phenomena, expressed also by global rankings, indicate the 'nested' nature of organizational fields, opening to potentially diversified and more complex positioning paths (Hüther and Krücken 2016).

Given these multiple sources of identity, it might be difficult to describe just one overall university identity, while different identities can be balanced within an overarching narrative (Wæraas and Solbakk 2009; Frølich et al. 2013; Mophew et al. 2018). Organizational identity can therefore be conceptualized as a multidimensional variable along a continuum between integration and fragmentation that impacts differently positioning outcomes.

III. Organization centrality

Each organization is located between centre and periphery. The closer the university is to the centre the higher are the opportunities to obtain resources, even though it can be assumed that competition is higher in the centre than in the periphery. Centrality is to be intended as a multidimensional concept in geographical, political, economic and social terms (Seeber et al. 2012; Fumasoli, 2015).

Geographical location affects differently positioning trajectories if a university operates in a major city, or in the countryside, in border regions or in central ones, in highly densely populated areas or not (Kosmützky 2012; Mathooko and Ogutu 2015). From a political perspective, universities closer to the political centers can engage with and influence policy processes, affecting their possibilities to gather material (funding) and symbolic resources (reputation) (Fumasoli et al. 2015; Fumasoli and Seeber 2018). Economic centrality points to universities operating in developed industrialized areas where they access more opportunities to initiate knowledge transfer activities as well as getting funding from industries, compared to those universities that are located in rural areas. Finally, centrality can also be understood in social terms. On the one hand, the closer the proximity to other universities (i.e. in a research consortium or a strategic partnership) the stronger the inherent competitiveness, which generates a competitive overlap (Seeber et al. 2017). On the other hand, universities can activate collaborative social relations with other universities, such as joining alliances or undertaking project-based networks, from whose embeddedness universities gain resources, status and critical mass (Gaehtgens 2015; Vuori 2016; Brankovic 2018). In these networks, universities can build capacity to hold “leadership roles” (Seeber et al. 2012).

4. Concluding remarks

The background of this paper is the increasing relevance of strategic positioning of higher education institutions, which has become a major topic in the scholarly debate about the current transformation of universities into organizational actors. We have argued that in order to understand better university strategic positioning (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013), the conditions and mechanisms driving university positioning need to be uncovered.

Our comprehensive literature review has revealed that, although mostly implicitly, two conflicting hypotheses have been used in research on university positioning so far: on the one hand, the environmental stance contends that university positioning is externally determined, on

the other hand, the rational approach posits that universities get positioned according to managerial design. Attempts at balancing these two hypotheses have been made both in management studies (Oliver 1991; Deephouse 1999) and higher education research (Gornitzka 1999) in order to accommodate the resulting mixed empirical evidence. Equally, determinism and intentionality have been partly conflated by arguing that it depends on the external conditions or on the level of analysis whether environmental pressures or managerial behaviour can be used to explain empirical findings.

To advance our theoretical understanding of university positioning we contend that the organizational dimension needs to be considered as a meso-level intervening variable affecting both environmental and managerial hypotheses. Subsequently we have operationalized the organizational dimension elaborating a model that can be systematically applied. This has led to an overarching conceptual framework that not only accommodates the environmental and the managerial hypotheses, but also allows for the systematic treatment of the organizational dimension and explains more coherently what has been observed in previous studies. At the same time, we have uncovered the mechanisms linking different levels of analysis by distinguishing the forces at play in the environment, the voluntarist actions of university leadership, and social structures of the universities themselves.

The three components of the organizational dimension – structure, identity, centrality – have been operationalized for measurement and have generated several expectations that can be tested in further research on university positioning. A promising avenue for empirical studies would be to observe how these components correlate among each other, for instance, does integrated university governance correlate with integrated university identities and, consequently, distinctive positioning? Are loosely coupled universities better off in more central locations, or can they gather the necessary resources also located in the periphery?

Finally, the organizational dimension holds promise not only to analyse the positioning of universities but could be applied and adapted to organizations in other sectors.

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Appendix

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Table 1. Classification of the publications of the literature review based on several characteristics

Author(s) and Year	Source	Topic/Research question	Type of paper	Theoretical framework
Ahmed, J. U. et al. (2015)	<i>Higher Education for the Future</i>	To apply concepts of strategic management into HE	Conceptual	Strategic management school
Bevelander, D. et al. (2015)	<i>South African Journal of Business Management</i>	What business schools tell in their mission statements and how these provide a basis for strategic positioning	Empirical (a sample of international Business schools) – qualitative	X
Bobe, B. and R. Kober (2015)	<i>Education + Training</i>	To measure the organizational capabilities of universities and how these are bundled to provide a long-term competitive advantage	Conceptual and empirical (Australia) – quantitative	Resource-based view
Bonaccorsi, A. (2009)	Book chapter	How to measure differentiation and positioning of universities in doctoral education	Conceptual and empirical (Aquameth dataset) – quantitative	Strategic management school
Bonaccorsi, A. (2014)	Book	Several issues on universities' performances, diversity and their contribution to the knowledge economy	Conceptual and empirical (EUMIDA dataset) – quantitative	Strategic management school and micro-economics
Bonaccorsi, A. and C. Daraio (2007)	Book	To provide micro-based evidence on the evolution of the strategic profile and positioning of universities in terms of research, education and third mission	Conceptual and empirical (six European countries) - quantitative	Strategic management school and micro-economics
Bonaccorsi, A. and C. Daraio (2008)	<i>Scientometrics</i>	Limits of ranking indicators and illustration of an alternative methodology based on the concept of positioning indicators	Empirical and methodological (Aquameth dataset) - quantitative	X
Bowl, M. (2018)	<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	How universities balance (communicate) distinctiveness and equality of educational opportunities based on their status	Conceptual and empirical (England and New Zealand) – qualitative	Resource dependence theory and Neo-institutionalism
Brandt, E. (2002)	<i>Higher Education</i>	What kind of strategies universities use to answer to the different demands for continuing education, looking for any signs of differentiation	Empirical (Norway) – qualitative	X
Brankovic, J. (2014)	Book chapter	To identify those forces that might may affect the positioning of private universities in the Balkans.	Conceptual and empirical (Western Balkans) – quantitative	Resource dependence theory and Neo-institutionalism
Brown, H. et al. (1993)	<i>Journal of Marketing for Higher Education</i>	To propose a model positioning concept for metropolitan universities	Conceptual	Strategic management school
Çatı K. et al. (2016)	<i>Education and Science</i>	To identify positioning strategies through which universities want to be distinctive in the mind of prospective students	Conceptual and empirical (Turkey) – qualitative	Strategic management school
Cattaneo, M. et al. (2018)	<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	How different levels of competition affects the diversification and specialisation positioning strategies of universities over time	Conceptual and empirical (Italy) - quantitative	Strategic management school
Cruz-Castro et al. (2016)	<i>Research Evaluation</i>	To evaluate and compare the responses of Spanish universities to the existence of the ERC	Conceptual and empirical (Spain) – qualitative and quantitative	Old-institutionalism and Organizational capabilities
Davies, S. W. and K. W. Glaister (1996)	<i>Higher Education Quarterly</i>	How mission statements have been introduced by universities and the appropriateness of their use	Conceptual and empirical (England) - quantitative	Neo-institutionalism
Deiaco, E. et al. (2009)	Book chapter	The existence of competition in higher education and how and why European universities are learning to compete	Conceptual	Economic theory (Schumpeter's vision of competition)

Dorozhkin, E. et al. (2016)	<i>Journal of Environmental Science and Science Education</i>	To develop a set of marketing actions in order to position a university and assess it	Empirical (Russia) - quantitative	X
Erhardt, D., and A. von Kotzebue (2016)	<i>Tertiary Education and Management</i>	To describe and measure the status quo of horizontal differentiation among German universities, highlighting further possibilities for increasing distinctiveness	Conceptual and empirical (Germany) – qualitative and quantitative	Strategic management school
Fahy, J. et al. (2010)	Conference paper	To analyse the competitive positioning of UK universities	Empirical (UK) - quantitative	X
Finley, D. S. et al. (2001)	<i>Journal of Marketing for Higher Education</i>	To analyse mission statements of Canadian universities and suggest alternatives to improve these strategic instruments	Empirical (Canada) – qualitative	X
Frølich, N. et al. (2013)	<i>Higher Education</i>	How individual universities deal with (interpret) institutional pluralism through strategizing	Conceptual	Old and New-institutionalism, sense-making approach and Strategic management school
Fumasoli, T. (2018)	Book chapter	Conceptualization of strategic planning and positioning in higher education	Conceptual	Strategic management school
Fumasoli, T. and B. Lepori (2011)	<i>Higher Education</i>	To investigate the nature of organizational strategies of universities focusing on the internal development process and the content of strategies (positioning)	Conceptual and empirical (Swiss) – qualitative	Strategic management school
Fumasoli, T., and J. Huisman (2013)	<i>Minerva</i>	How universities position themselves and how this process impact on diversity	Conceptual	Neo-institutionalism, Population Ecology theory, Resource dependence theory, Strategic management literature and Organizational identity
Furey, S. et al. (2014)	<i>Journal of Marketing for Higher Education</i>	To investigate brand promises from universities belonging to different mission groups	Empirical (UK) – qualitative	X
Gaehtgens, C. (2015)	Book chapter	How small universities can face and respond to the ‘Excellence Initiative’ in Germany	Empirical (Germany) - qualitative	X
Haezendonck, E. et al. (2017)	<i>International Journal of Inclusive Education</i>	How the ‘growth-share matrix’ can be used to position themselves in the social inclusion dimension and How this instrument can be used by universities	Conceptual and empirical (Flanders) - quantitative	Strategic management school
Harrison-Walker, L. J. (2009)	<i>Academy of Educational Leadership Journal</i>	To define the concept of strategic positioning, explain its importance and discuss its application for policymakers	Conceptual	Marketing literature
Hartley, M. and C. Morpew (2006)	<i>The Journal of Higher Education</i>	How colleges and universities mission statements differ in terms of content and how they differ between various institutional types	Conceptual and empirical (USA) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism
Hartley, M. and C. Morpew (2008)	<i>The Journal of Higher Education</i>	To examine themes of colleges’ viewbooks, how these vary by institutional type and which messages are communicated to students on the academic purposes of HE	Conceptual and empirical (USA) – qualitative	Strategic management school and Neo-institutionalism
Hazerlkorn, E. (2009)	<i>Higher Education Management and Policy</i>	How rankings influence national policy and strategic decision-making of universities (positioning)	Empirical (sample of OECD countries) – quantitative and qualitative	X

Hou, A. et al. (2012)	<i>Higher Education Research & Development</i>	To analyse global rankings in order to inform strategic plans and positioning for world-class universities	Empirical (International rankings) - quantitative	X
Huisman, J. and J. Pringle (2011)	<i>Canadian Journal of Higher Education</i>	Application of Porter's five force model to Ontario HE system	Empirical (Ontario) - qualitative	X
Huisman, J. and J. Mampaey (2018)	<i>Oxford review of Education</i>	How much the images of universities are different and similar, and how universities want external stakeholders to look at them.	Conceptual and empirical (UK) – qualitative and quantitative	Neo-institutionalism and Resource dependence theory
Huisman, J. et al. (2008)	<i>Science and Public Policy</i>	To discuss the use of research funding mechanisms as an instrument to either maintain or promote diversity in HE systems	Empirical (OECD dataset) - quantitative	X
Huisman, J. et al. (2002)	<i>Tertiary Education and Management</i>	Whether and How some universities established during the late '60s managed to develop their original goal of being 'distinctive' organizations	Conceptual and empirical (Netherlands, Denmark and Norway) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism, Resource dependence theory and Strategic choice theory
Huisman, J. et al. (2015)	<i>Research Evaluation</i>	How to conceptualize and measure diversity	Empirical (EUMIDA dataset) – quantitative	X
Hüther, O. and G. Krücken (2016)	<i>Research in the Sociology of Organization</i>	How the embeddedness of universities in nested organizational fields can produce homogenization and differentiation among universities	Conceptual	Neo-institutionalism (nested field structure)
James, H. and J. Huisman (2009)	<i>Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management</i>	How much mission statements of universities differ and (or not) compared with policies and market demands and pressures	Empirical (Wales) - qualitative	X
Jamieson, I. and R. Naidoo (2007)	<i>European Journal of Education</i>	How a university position itself in the changing market for doctoral study	Empirical (England) - qualitative	X
Jin, J. and H. Horta (2018)	<i>Tertiary Education and Management</i>	How two Chinese prestigious schools intend to position themselves in an external changing environment	Conceptual and empirical (China) - qualitative	Neo-institutionalism and Resource dependence theory
Kayombo, K. and Carter, S. (2017)	<i>Journal of Education and Vocational Research</i>	To identify the position of ZCAS university's brand in Zambia as a case study and to establish the position in relation to the other competitors	Conceptual and empirical (Zambia) - quantitative	Strategic management school
Klemenčič, M. (2016)	Book chapter	How much institutional research supports positioning within Central Europe universities	Conceptual and empirical (Central Europe) – qualitative	Strategic management school and Organizational capabilities
Klump, M. et al. (2014)	<i>Comparative Education</i>	To explore and compare policy approaches on differentiation and profiling/positioning in German and Dutch HE systems	Empirical (Germany and the Netherlands) - qualitative	X
Kosmützky, A. (2012)	<i>Tertiary Education and Management</i>	What mission statements of German universities contain, if they express a distinctive market position and which is their function	Conceptual and empirical (Germany) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism and organization theory
Kosmützky, A. and G. Krücken (2015)	<i>International Studies of Management & Organization</i>	How German universities balance sameness and distinctiveness within mission statements	Conceptual and empirical (Germany) – qualitative	Organization theory and Competitive groups theory
Ivy, J. (2001)	<i>International Journal of Educational Management</i>	How universities and Technikons use marketing to differentiate their institutional image and therefore to position themselves	Conceptual and empirical (UK and South Africa) – quantitative	Marketing literature (institutional image)
Laudel, G. and E. Weyer (2014)	<i>Research in the Sociology of Organization</i>	To investigate the relationship between universities' opportunities to shape their research profiles and the	Conceptual and empirical (Netherlands) - qualitative	Authority relation perspective

		changing role of the state as well as the impact of research-profile building activities inside universities		
Leiber, T. (2016)	Book chapter	What are the key contents of mission statements? What purposes of universities mission statements assist and are used by them?	Empirical (Germany) – qualitative	X
Lepori, B. et al. (2014)	<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	To investigate convergence and differentiation in HE binary systems	Conceptual and empirical (Switzerland) - quantitative	Neo-institutionalism and Population Ecology theory
Ljungberg, D. et al. (2009)	Book chapter	To investigate how structural characteristics influence the positioning of Swedish universities and their obtainment of external funds	Conceptual and empirical (Sweden) - quantitative	Strategic management school
Lowry J. R., and D. Owens (2001)	<i>Services Marketing Quarterly</i>	How a university can position itself based on a step by step approach (flowchart)	Conceptual	Marketing literature
Lynch, R., and P. Baines (2004)	<i>Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management</i>	To apply Resource-based view to the UK HE reality, underlying its potentiality, setting a research agenda	Conceptual	Resource-based view
Maassen, P. and H. P. Potman (1990)	<i>Higher Education</i>	How Dutch universities respond to the new planning system	Conceptual and empirical (The Netherlands) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism
Mackay, L. et al. (1996)	<i>Higher Education Management</i>	To what extent universities strive to differentiate themselves in a context of expanding demand for HE	Empirical (UK) – qualitative	X
Mahat, M. (2015)	Conference paper	To analyse the strategic positioning of academic organisations (medical schools) in a regulated environment	Conceptual and empirical (Australia) – qualitative and quantitative	Strategic management school
Mahat, M. and L. Goedegebuure (2016)	<i>Theory and Method in Higher Education Research</i>	To apply the Porter's five forces framework to medical higher education in Australia	Conceptual and empirical (Australia) – quantitative	Strategic management school
Mampaey et al. (2015)	<i>Higher Education Research & Development</i>	How branding of Flemish universities meets competitive and institutional pressures by balancing distinctiveness and legitimacy	Conceptual and empirical (Flanders) – qualitative	Strategic balance perspective and Translation theory
Mampaey, J. (2018)	<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	To shed lights on the dynamics underlying homogeneity vs heterogeneity in HE by focusing on translation rules adopted by universities	Conceptual and empirical (Flanders) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism and Translation theory
Marginson, S. (2007)	<i>Journal of Studies in International Education</i>	To analyse the global position and positioning-taking strategies a HE system and of its universities	Conceptual and empirical (Australia) - quantitative	Bourdieu Theory of Social Fields
Marginson, S. (2015)	<i>Higher Education</i>	The positioning of Australian research universities in East Asia	Empirical (Australia) - quantitative	X
Maringe F. (2006)	<i>International Journal of Educational Management</i>	To investigate those elements students consider important in choosing university and courses of study and how this impact on positioning	Conceptual and empirical (UK) - quantitative	Marketing literature
Martinez, M. and M. Wolverton (2009)	Book	Overview of the strategy literature applied to HE field	Conceptual	Strategic management school
Mashhadi, M. et al. (2008)	<i>World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology</i>	Application of the European Foundation of Quality Management model to position top Iranian business schools	Conceptual and empirical (Iran) - quantitative	Strategic management school
Mathooko, F. M. and M. Ogutu (2015)	<i>International Journal of Public Sector Management</i>	How much Porter's five forces model influence the choice of strategies adopted by public universities in Kenya.	Conceptual and empirical (Kenya) - quantitative	Strategic management school

Mazzarol, T. W. and G. N. Soutar (2008)	<i>International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing</i>	To explore if the strategic positioning behaviour of Australian educational institutions impacts on their competitiveness	Conceptual and empirical (Australia) - quantitative	Strategic management school
Mintzberg, H. and J. Rose (2003)	<i>Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences</i>	To identify the nature of strategies (deliberate vs emergent) and positioning attempts of McGill University over time	Conceptual and empirical (Canada) – qualitative	Strategic management school
Morphew, C. (2009)	<i>The Journal of Higher Education</i>	How institutional diversity has changed over a period of 30 years	Conceptual and empirical (USA) - quantitative	Neo-institutionalism
Morphew, C. and J. Huisman (2002)	<i>Higher Education in Europe</i>	To understand patterns of homogenization (academic drift) and differentiation in HE systems	Conceptual and empirical (USA and Netherlands) - quantitative	Neo-institutionalism
Morphew, C. et al. (2018)	<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	How do the strategies used to balance the multiple (public and private) identities of research public universities compare?	Conceptual and empirical (Northern Europe and North America) – qualitative	Strategic balance perspective
Naudè, P. and J. Ivy (1999)	<i>International Journal of Educational Management</i>	How old and new universities in the UK are responding to a rapidly changing external environment	Empirical (UK) - quantitative	X
Niculescu, M. (2006)	<i>Journal of Organizational Change Management</i>	To assist the decision-making processes of universities on topics like market structure analysis, market segmentation and positioning	Empirical (Romania) – qualitative	X
Olivares, M., and Wetzel, H. (2014)	<i>CESifo Economic Studies</i>	To explore the existence of economies of scale and scope in German HE sector and the technical efficiency	Empirical (Germany) - quantitative	X
Opoku, R. et al. (2008)	<i>Journal of Marketing for Higher Education</i>	How Swedish universities position themselves in the market space by looking at online brand personalities	Conceptual and empirical (Sweden) - qualitative	Marketing literature (brand personality)
Paradeise, C. and J. Thoenig (2013)	<i>Organization Studies</i>	What academic quality means for universities and how they achieve that, looking for difference between institutions	Conceptual and empirical (France, Italy, USA, China, Switzerland) - qualitative	Recognition (Merton, 1973) and Local order (March, 1962)
Paradeise, C. and J. Thoenig (2016)	<i>Minerva</i>	How three types of organizational capability influence the strategic capacity of four ideal-types of universities (reputation and research performances)	Conceptual and empirical (6 countries) - qualitative	Organizational capabilities and sociology of organization
Pedersen, J. S. and F. Dobbin (2006)	<i>American Behavioural Scientist</i>	Comparison between organizational culture and neo-institutionalism theories in order to reconcile them	Conceptual	Neo-institutionalism and Organizational culture
Pietilä, M. (2014)	<i>Higher Education</i>	How academic leaders conceive research profiling and how these are connected to the goals leaders are trying to achieve with profiling	Conceptual and empirical (Finland) – qualitative	Micro-level Neo-institutionalism and sensemaking approach
Pizarro Milian, R. et al. (2016)	<i>Canadian Journal of Higher Education</i>	How higher education institutions react to governmental attempts to increase institutional differentiation	Conceptual	Neo-institutionalism and Resource dependence theory
Pizarro Milian, R. (2017)	<i>Higher Education Quarterly</i>	How Canadian universities are depicting themselves towards external stakeholders and which type of symbolic resources employed to do it	Conceptual and empirical (Canada) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism
Pizarro Milian, R. and L. Quirke. (2017)	<i>Journal of Marketing for Higher Education</i>	How for-profit career colleges market themselves externally by adopting alternatives strategies to legitimate themselves	Conceptual and empirical (Ontario) – qualitative and quantitative	Neo-institutionalism

Pizarro Milian, R., and N. McLaughlin (2017)	<i>The American Sociologist</i>	Which marketing strategies Canadian sociology departments are using to communicate legitimacy to external stakeholders and these can be understood through current organizational theories	Conceptual and empirical (Canada) – qualitative and quantitative	Neo-institutionalism
Richardson, S. et al. (1995)	<i>International Journal of Public Sector Management</i>	To explain why customer responsiveness is a crucial aspect for universities and how to match it	Conceptual	Political contingency perspective and Strategic management school
Rossi, F. (2009a)	<i>Tertiary Education and Management</i>	To empirically investigate the relationship between the organizational features and strategies of universities and their ability to obtain external research funds	Empirical (Italy) - quantitative	X
Rossi, F. (2009b)	<i>Higher Education Policy</i>	How universities' responses towards competition impact on the horizontal diversity of higher education systems	Conceptual and empirical (Italy) - quantitative	Review of different theoretical perspectives on competition and diversity of HE systems
Rossi, F. (2010)	<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	How massification, privatization, increasing competition for students and research funds stimulate diversity between universities	Empirical (Italy) - quantitative	Review of different theoretical perspectives on processes promoting or hampering diversity of HE systems
Sauntson, H. and L. Morrish (2011)	Book chapter	How the discourses of managerialism impact universities in the UK by looking at what mission statements communicate and represent	Empirical (UK) – qualitative	X
Seeber, M. et al. (2012)	<i>Research Evaluation</i>	To investigate the a regional HE relational space in research and teaching and its determinants; to identify indicators to represent the relative position of each university	Conceptual and empirical (Italy) - quantitative	Network analysis (relational arenas)
Seeber, M. et al. (2017)	<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	To understand the factors influencing the content of universities' mission statements.	Conceptual and empirical (UK) – quantitative	Organizational identity and Strategic balance perspective
Shadymanova, J. and S. Amsler (2018)	Book chapter	Evaluation of the institutional strategies in terms of differentiation vs homogeneity after increasing autonomy and competition in a post-soviet country	Empirical (Kyrgyzstan) - quantitative	X
Silander, C. and U. Haake (2016)	<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	How the new system of evaluation and funding research influence research profiles of Swedish universities	Conceptual and empirical (Sweden) - qualitative	Neo-institutional isomorphism and Translation theory
Strike, T. and J. Labbe (2016)	Book chapter	To test if strategic plans are meaningful means through which catching the self-expression of university's identity	Empirical (Germany) – qualitative	X
Tammi, T. (2009)	<i>Higher Education</i>	how Finnish universities have reacted to the changes in their external environment in terms of funding	Conceptual and empirical (Finland) - quantitative	Economic of science (Institutional analysis of university behaviour, Genua 1999)
Teixeira, P. et al. (2012)	<i>Higher Education</i>	To explores empirically the issue of diversity in higher education and in particular, to measure programmatic diversification in higher education	Empirical (Portugal) - quantitative	X
Toma, J. D. (2010)	Book	To describe the internal structure and management strategies within universities by focusing on the organizational capacity concept	Conceptual and empirical (USA) - qualitative	Strategic management school and Organizational capabilities
Toma, J. D. (2012)	Book chapter	What is strategy and positioning for universities and how prestige move universities to position themselves	Conceptual	Strategic management school and Neo-institutionalism

Vaira, M. (2009)	Book chapter	To provide a descriptive and analytical account of the process convergence and differentiation that are shaping European HE systems and institutions	Conceptual	Neo-institutionalism and Population Ecology theory
Van Vught, F. (2008)	<i>Higher Education Policy</i>	Development of a conceptual framework to explain differentiation and dedifferentiation processes in higher education	Conceptual	Neo-institutionalism, Population Ecology theory and Resource dependency theory
Van Vught, F. and J. Huisman (2013)	<i>Tuning Journal of Higher Education</i>	Why positioning is becoming an increasingly important topic and how to represent it quantitatively	Conceptual and methodological	Strategic management school
Vuori, J. (2015a)	<i>Education + Training</i>	How a foresight project can support institutional positioning through sensemaking processes	Conceptual and empirical (Finland) – qualitative	Sensemaking approach
Vuori, J. (2015b)	<i>Tertiary Education and Management</i>	How institutional positioning emerges in the sensemaking activities between the Ministry of Education and Finnish universities	Empirical (Finland) – qualitative	X
Vuori, J. (2016)	<i>Higher Education Quarterly</i>	How Finnish universities of Applied sciences implement their profiling strategies	Conceptual and empirical (Finland) – qualitative	Strategic management school
Wæraas, A. and M. N. Solbakk (2009)	<i>Higher Education</i>	To analyses aspects of a branding process carried out within a university	Conceptual and empirical (Norway) – qualitative	Neo-institutionalism and Organizational identity
Warning, S. (2004)	<i>Review of Industrial Organization</i>	How and why German universities differentiated in the extent to which they specialize some disciplines and between teaching and research	Empirical (Germany) - quantitative	X
Warning, S. (2007)	Book	How German universities position themselves individually and within strategic groups	Conceptual and empirical (Germany) – quantitative	Strategic management school
Wedlin, L. (2006)	Book	How and why rankings were developed, how business schools responded to them, and which are the implications for the field of HE management	Conceptual and empirical (sample of Business schools) – qualitative and quantitative	Organization theory, Sociology of education and knowledge

Chapter 2

What do positioning paths of universities tell about diversity of Higher Education systems? An exploratory study

Barbato, G. and Turri, M.

Abstract

Diversity in Higher Education system has been a central topic for both scholars and policy-makers for decades. Several studies have investigated how to measure diversity and the nature of its determinants so far; however, contradictory empirical evidence has emerged. This paper contributes to this literature by adopting a methodological approach that starts from the analysis of positioning paths of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in order to explore diversity of HE systems. A comprehensive quantitative analysis performed across two HE systems over time shows how detecting the positioning of HEIs can provide information that an analysis of diversity at the level of the entire system might hide, in particular (I) if and how compliant and distinctiveness are concurrently displayed (II) in which dimensions positioning shifts are more likely to occur and (III) which groups of HEIs influence more the level of diversity in a HE system.

Keywords. Institutional positioning, diversity, cluster analysis, longitudinal perspective

1. Introduction

Diversity of Higher Education systems has been a central topic within the Higher Education (HE) literature since the 1970s and can be defined as the variety of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) within a HE system (Neave 1979; Birnbaum 1983; Codling and Meek 2006; Huisman et al. 2007). Diversity has been widely investigated since it is claimed that a diversified HE system is an inherent good for the economy and society of a country (Goglio and Regini 2017), even if these positive effects are still debatable (Van Vught 2008).

However, empirical evidence on the determinants (institutional pressures, competition) and outcomes of diversity has been rather contradictory with distinctive patterns highlighted in highly institutionalized contexts (Kraatz and Zajac 1996; Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007; Rossi 2009) and convergence processes found in increasing competitive contexts, where a growth in diversity was expected (Goedegebuure et al. 1993; Rossi 2010).

Based on this mixed evidence, some scholars started to argue how investigating positioning of HEIs can enhance the understanding of diversity of HE systems (Daraio et al. 2011; Fumasoli and Huisman 2013; Huisman et al. 2015). This consideration will be the object of study of this article.

Institutional positioning can be defined as ‘the process through which HEIs locate themselves in specific niches within the HE system’ (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013, 160). The niche reflects the activities (teaching, research, third mission) and resources (e.g. financial, human) in which the HEI can prosper as well as the potential relations (competition, cooperation) with the others HEIs that share the same position or a similar one. Ultimately, the positioning of a HEI tells what that institution does and how comparing to the other institutions in the same HE system.

How positioning affects diversity might seem quite trivial initially. If all the HEIs are located in the same position the diversity of HE systems is low while if different niches are occupied diversity increases. However, scholars claimed how HEIs can respond to the same environmental pressures differently (Oliver 1991; Paradeise and Thoenig 2013) and heterogeneous positioning paths can be potentially undertaken. Investigating how HEIs position themselves can help to disentangle diversity of the HE systems, e.g. in detecting if convergent and differentiating processes occur simultaneously and which of the two impact more on the level of diversity over time. Moreover, analysing how HEIs combine several activities/resources of the niche, and how this mix changes over time, sheds lights on which dimensions HEIs tend to appear more either or similar. Finally, analysing positioning can also reveal which groups of HEIs influence more on the level of diversity of the HE system by displaying a more distinctive pattern. In other words, investigating positioning allows considering some of the heterogeneity that an analysis of diversity, at the level of the entire HE, system might hide.

The goal of this paper is to show the importance of investigating institutional positioning of HEIs over time and how this can improve our understanding of diversity of HE systems. Moreover, empirical studies on positioning have been mainly concentrated on detecting distinctive positioning efforts by analysing mission statements and strategic plans (Mampey et al. 2015; Seeber et al. 2017; Morphew et al. 2018). There are instead much less empirical works on how to analyse positioning quantitatively (exceptions are e.g. Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007, 2008; Bonaccorsi 2009; Ljungberg, Johansson and McKelvey 2009; Cattaneo et al. 2018). This article intends also to start bridging this gap by analysing how HEIs position themselves in two countries quantitatively and longitudinally. The focus of the article is thus on how – instead of why – HEIs position themselves since its research goal is more of a methodological nature.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 illustrates in theoretical terms why and how positioning can affect diversity of HE systems. Section 3 describes the data and quantitative methods used to investigate positioning. The findings are then presented in section 4 and discussed in the final section.

2. Theoretical perspectives on institutional positioning in the HE literature

The Neo-institutionalism and the Strategic perspective are the two main theoretical perspectives that have been employed to investigate institutional positioning and diversity in HE (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). Both perspectives make specific assumptions about the nature and goals of HEI as organization (**I**) and the relationship between environmental pressures and the responses of HEIs to them (**II**). By focusing on these two dimensions the potential links between positioning and diversity are highlighted.

In relation to the first dimension (**I**), Neo-institutionalism and the Strategic Perspective approach claim the gain of legitimacy and the need of distinctiveness to be the ultimate goals of organizational agency. Legitimacy can be defined as ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, within some socially constructed system of norms [...]’ (Suchman 1995, 574-575). As legitimacy-seeking entities, HEIs are heavily influenced by the exogenous pressures since conformity towards them provide resources and ultimately survival (Van Vught 2008). Since HEIs operate under the same isomorphic pressures, they will consequently resemble each other, and diversity of HE systems has no other possibility but to decrease (Neave 1979; Morphew 2009). Therefore, positioning efforts consist in a more or less passive adaptation in the direction indicated by these external forces (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013).

On the contrary, a strategic perspective assumes HEIs to have some scope for strategic agency, so that positioning is the result of a deliberate or emergent strategy (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007; Fumasoli and Lepori 2011). Only distinctiveness from competitors assures survival since it enables HEIs to position themselves in exclusive niches of resources (Porter 1985).

However, scholars increasingly demonstrated how legitimacy and distinctiveness can be pursued concurrently by HEIs since these are both relevant for them (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013; Mampaey et al. 2015). Empirical studies evidenced how positioning is often more a ‘balance’ between legitimacy-seeking and distinctiveness-seeking behaviours (Pedersen and Dobbin 2006; Seeber et al. 2017; Morphew et al. 2018), in order to be ‘as different as legitimately possible’ (Deephouse 1999, 47). Mampaey et al. (2015, 11), for example, showed that Flemish universities were able to offset their ‘conformity to macro-level institutional values by communicating organization-specific meanings’ of these values, achieving both legitimacy and distinctiveness. Hence, since the positioning of a HEI expresses how several activities and other factors are combined into a unique position, the analysis of positioning highlights first of all in which

dimensions of the niche HEIs tend to converge or to differentiate themselves over time, highlighting the presence of polarization or imitating trends. Secondly, it allows us to verify if HEIs are striving to appear both distinctive and similar and in which ways they tend to do it.

Regarding the relationship between environmental forces and HEI's actions **(II)**, Neo-institutionalism and the strategic perspective approach look at institutional pressures and competition as the main forces that influence the behaviours of HEIs (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). Institutional pressures can be represented by government regulation whereas competition can be material (students, researchers, funds) and non-material (reputation). As underlined by Fumasoli and Huisman (2013, 156), empirical studies informed by these two theoretical frameworks have often assumed that HEIs respond uniformly to isomorphic pressures and competition by displaying either conformity or distinctive behaviours, even if this is not empirically established yet and with contradictory empirical evidences (Rossi 2010). Consequently, most of these studies looked at the level of the whole population (the HE system) while few papers look at institutional responses to these pressures (exceptions are e.g. Maassen and Potman 1990; Kraatz and Zajac 1996; Cattaneo et al. 2018).

However, there are also papers informed by the same theoretical perspectives mentioned above that started to reappraise the level of the HEI as a fruitful level of analysis which allow to understand why and how HEIs can respond to the same environmental pressures differently (Oliver 1991; Frølich et al. 2013; Paradeise and Thoenig 2013). The Scandinavian school of the Neo-institutionalism, for example, developed the 'Translation theory'. This argued that environmental pressures are internalized by organizations through the perceptions of their members, based on a common historically constructed identity, which leads these macro-level ideas to be adjusted to the local organizational settings (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008). Since translation processes are unique, these can generate a combination of heterogeneous responses from HEIs (Mampaey et al. 2015; Silander and Haake 2016). Other papers focused on how structural organizational features mediate the relationship between environmental forces and the HEIs' agency, thus affecting the diversity of a HE system (Ljungberg et al 2009; Rossi 2009). In particular, the status of HEIs has been widely investigated to understand why HEIs can deviate from the expected increasing differentiation in front of higher competition (Brewer et al. 2002; Van Vught, 2008; Brankovic 2018). On the one hand, it has been shown how low-status HEIs tend to copy higher-status HEIs to gain legitimacy, even in competitive contexts like the US, Australia and other English-speaking countries (Riesman 1956; Goedegebuure et al. 1993; Codling and Meek 2006; Toma 2012). Competition for prestige is said to be more relevant than

that for resources and mimicking more appealing than a more ‘rational’ differentiation (Van Vught 2008). More recently, Stensaker et al. (2018) and Huisman and Mampaey (2018) proved how differences in status can also lead to some differences in the strategies of HEIs, whereupon low-status HEIs present more distinctiveness and old and high-status institutions are more reluctant to lose an established external recognition.

Analysing positioning paths allows transitioning from the level of the whole population to the local level by including possible behaviours that were not expected theoretically. In addition, it offers the opportunity to include organizational variables that can mediate the expected relationship between a certain environmental pressure and the actions of a HEI and, as a result, point out if specific values are associated with positioning paths that impact more on the level of diversity of the system. In conclusion investigating diversity of HE systems by looking at a lower level of analysis (positioning of HEIs) can be beneficial as a more comprehensive picture of the former may arise from the analysis of the latter (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013).

3. Data and methods

3.1 Data and positioning indicators

To study positioning and how it potentially affects diversity, both the level of the HE system and that of the HEI were considered. To assure a meaningful relationship between these two levels of analysis, the same indicators were used in the two empirical investigations. The indicators were chosen according to three criteria.

First, since HEIs are multi-input and multi-output organizations (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007), positioning should be investigated on several dimensions that reflect relevant features/activities of HEIs and, therefore, of the niche. Three broad dimensions were identified for this article, i.e. the core functions (teaching, research, third mission), the subject mix (generalist vs specialized) and the market size (international, national, regional) of HEIs. In addition, data on the affiliation of HEIs to mission groups¹ have also been gathered as this is said to express the status of a HEI (Brankovic 2018).

Second, we drew on previous studies that reached considerable consensus on the most suitable and comparable indicators for studying diversity and positioning (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007, 2008; Rossi 2010; Daraio et al. 2011; Huisman et al. 2015).

Lastly, the availability of micro-data influenced the selection of the indicators. Based on these criteria, a list of 8 indicators was identified as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicators used in the empirical analyses

Dimension of the niche	Indicator	Definition	Code
Core functions of HEIs	Educational profile	Share of undergraduate students as a share of the total	EDUC_PROF
	PhD ratio (Research involvement)	Share of PhD students as a share of the total*	PHD
	Research intensity	Number of Web of Science publications per academics	ISI
	Third mission	Third party revenue as a share of total income	THIRDM
Subject mix of HEIs	Subject mix	Distribution of students by discipline	SUBMIX
Market size of HEIs	International orientation	Share of international students as a share of the total*	INTERNAT
	Regional orientation	Share of new students that are resident in the same region of the university as a share of the total	REG

*Values of PHD and INTERNAT are multiplied by 1000

Data were collected at the level of the single HEI for two HE systems, namely, the Italian and the English, covering the decade from 2004 to 2014 (see also Table 1 in Appendix). The finale sample consists of 95 English and 58 Italian HEIs⁶.

These two HE systems allow investigating positioning paths in two contexts with different level of competition but are still comparable. The English HE system presents indeed higher levels of competition as a result of several reforms started in the 1990s which affected in particular the funding mechanisms of HEIs (Brown and Carrasco 2013). By contrast, competition is still weak in Italy since funding is directly granted from the state (Capano, Regini and Turri 2016), even if there are empirical studies that increasingly showed how this situation is partially changing, in particular at the local level (Cattaneo et al. 2017, 2018). Moreover, English HEIs benefit from a high institutional autonomy than Italian HEIs, which certainly has an impact on the actual capacity of HEIs to position themselves distinctively. Despite these differences, both countries have unitary HE systems that are not too dissimilar in terms of number of universities and students, and which present strong institutional pressures in the form of evaluation exercises and QA mechanisms (Rebora and Turri 2013).

In addition, the choice of a HE system (England) which is historically more diverse than the other (Italy) (see Daraio et al. 2011; Huisman et al. 2015) can show if the analysis of positioning

⁶ Italian private universities and doctoral schools were excluded since they presented an issue of data availability for some indicators. Similarly, English research institutes, conservatories, drama schools and Royal academies were excluded due to their specificities and data availability problems.

is meaningful and can inform the understanding of diversity, also for HE systems that are less diversified, such as Italy, or it is instead more country-specific, in other words, it is meaningful only for England

3.2 Methods

Two different quantitative analyses were performed in relation to the two levels of study. At the level of the entire HE system, indicators were used to measure how the level of diversity changed over a decade, by using distance measures. The term diversity is here intended as ‘external’ and ‘horizontal’, in other words, it refers to differences in the type and orientation of activities/resources in HEIs (Huisman et al. 2007; Van Vught 2008). Distance measures were chosen to preserve the richness of continuous indicators (Bonaccorsi 2009; Huisman et al. 2015).

Consequently, the mean sum of Euclidean squared distance (MSSD)⁷ was determined for each indicator for 2004, 2007, 2010 and 2014⁸. Operationally, the Euclidean distance between each HEI (*i*) and all other HEIs (*j*) in the same country and for each indicator (*w*) was computed and then divided by the mean value of the indicator (\hat{w})⁹.

The Euclidean distance is considered to be the best measure in the case of a skewed distribution of indicators (Huisman et al., 2015). All the squared distances were then summed and divided by the square of the number of HEIs to enable comparison between the two countries (Bonaccorsi 2009).

$$MSSD = (1/n^2) \sum_{i=1}^n \sum_{j=1}^n \left(\frac{(w_i - w_j)}{\hat{w}} \right)^2$$

At the level of individual HEIs, two different clustering exercises were performed for each country. Cluster analysis has already been used as a fruitful method to investigate positioning and diversity in HE (Huisman 2000; Huberty, Jordan and Brandt 2005; Rossi 2010; Wang and Zha 2018).

The purpose of the first clustering exercise was to identify groups of positioning based on each indicator (except for the indicator SIZE). For these clusters, the internal distribution in 2004 and how the dispersion of HEIs changed in 2014 was analysed. In this way, positioning paths can be

⁷ The mean sum of Euclidean squared distance (MSSD) is reported and described in Bonaccorsi (2009)

⁸ Diversity scores were computed for the two extremes of the considered time frame (2004 and 2014) and two intermediate years (2007 and 2010).

⁹ For simplicity, all the distances in the dissimilarity matrix were summed, even though the resulting sum doubles distance values along the diagonal.

classified along the ‘conservative’ vs ‘discontinuous’ continuum, by considering whether HEIs changed their position (cluster) more or less distinctively from 2004 to 2014.

The second cluster analysis aimed at investigating the “intensity” of positioning paths, that is the extent of the change in the values of indicators between 2004 and 2014. Intensity is measured by considering the differences between 2004 and 2014 minus the mean of the sample. This last value is used as benchmark to establish if a positioning path displayed low, medium or high intensity over time. The higher the value was above 0, the greater the intensity of the positioning path was because its change was above the average change of the sample. A “high intensity” was registered when this difference was one (or more) times higher (or lower, depending upon the indicator) than the mean difference of the sample. The intensity of a positioning path was then classified as “medium” instead of “high” depending upon the number of indicators that has registered a significant change.

Both clustering exercises followed the same procedure. First, each indicator was standardized using z scores since there was no uniform metric (Huberty et al. 2005). Moreover, since the number of clusters cannot be predicted in advance, a hierarchical clustering exercise was performed. The Ward method was used as the algorithm to separate clusters since is claimed to be the best to obtaining distinct clusters (Huisman 2000). Finally, The Duda-Hart stopping rule along with observation of the dendrogram, were then used to identify the best cluster solution (numbers of clusters).

4. Results

4.1 Diversity scores for the two HE systems

Table 2 shows the level of diversity of the two countries and the 8 indicators computed through the mean sum of Euclidean squared distance (MSSD). First, it can be generally stated that the English HE system is more diverse than the Italian across almost all the indicators. Second, Table 2 describes in which dimensions diversity changed over time. The diversity of the English HE system decreased especially in the research dimension where diversity of Phd ratio (PHD) and Researcher intensity (ISI) were reduced by almost 50%. Regarding the Italian HE system, diversity decreased similarly across ISI and SIZE. Both systems have become increasingly heterogeneous in their market scope (international or regional orientation), whereas the educational profile and the subject mix of HEIs remained basically the same.

Table 2. Mean sum of Euclidean squared distance (MSSD) for each indicator* and country in 2004, 2007, 2010 and 2014

ENGLAND (n=95)							
Indicator/year	EDUC_PROF	PHD	ISI	THIRDM	INTERNAT	REG	SUBMIX
2004	0.052	2.715	1.611	1.105	0.776	0.360	0.474
2007	0.051	2.636	1.299	1.340	0.865	0.306	0.499
2010	0.058	2.423	1.341	1.640	0.774	0.482	0.433
2014	0.056	1.658	1.087	0.856	0.894	0.430	0.382
ITALY (n=58)							
Indicator/year	EDUC_PROF	PHD	ISI	THIRDM	INTERNAT	REG	SUBMIX
2004	0.032	0.282	0.237	1.276	3.006	0.087	0.512
2007	0.028	0.264	0.234	1.834	3.701	0.086	0.500
2010	0.035	0.353	0.197	1.739	4.412	0.081	0.497
2014	0.047	0.406	0.179	1.189	5.509	0.151	0.500

4.2 HEIs' positioning in 2004 and 2014

Clusters of positioning of Italian and English HEIs in 2004 and 2014 are illustrated in Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6. In relation to the Italian context, three clusters were identified in 2004 (Tab. 3). The clusters differed across a relatively small number of indicators, i.e. the subject mix, the international and third mission orientation. With respect to the other indicators, the clusters are rather homogeneous, thus it is not possible to identify a straightforward polarization between teaching and research orientation.

Table 3. Positioning indicators for each Italian cluster* in 2004

Cluster	EDUC_PROF	PHD	ISI	THIRDM	INTERNAT	REG	SUBMIX	TYPE OF POSITIONING
1 (n=22)	0.617 (0.059)	8.014 (2.441)	0.984 (0.190)	0.085 (0.044)	7.031 (7.389)	0.755 (0.154)	0.549 (0.147)	Highest research and third mission orientation + highest international and regional orientation (generalist sub. mix)
2 (n=11)	0.581 (0.042)	6.225 (0.906)	0.695 (0.139)	0.029 (0.015)	1.260 (1.239)	0.939 (0.072)	0.557 (0.075)	Average teaching and research orientation + highest regional orientation (generalist)
3 (n=25)	0.647 (0.078)	5.174 (2.111)	0.700 (0.332)	0.033 (0.025)	4.904 (5.990)	0.815 (0.136)	0.292 (0.192)	Average teaching and research orientation + average international and regional orientation (specialized sub. mix)
mean value of the sample	0.623 (0.069)	0.646 (2.425)	0.803 (0.285)	0.052 (0.041)	0.502 (6.308)	0.804 (0.152)	0.440 (0.203)	

*For each cluster the mean and standard deviation (*italics*) are reported

Table 4. Positioning indicators for each Italian cluster* in 2014

Cluster	EDUC_PROF	PHD	ISI	THIRDM	INTERNAT	REG	SUBMIX	TYPE OF POSITIONING
1 (n=19)	0.609 (0.054)	6.447 (1.908)	2.228 (0.305)	0.066 (0.027)	15.317 (13.21)	0.741 (0.111)	0.620 (0.099)	Highest research and high third mission orientation + high international and regional orientation (generalist sub. mix)
2 (n=9)	0.659 (0.062)	4.364 (1.098)	1.498 (0.450)	0.149 (0.036)	5.727 (4.64)	0.866 (0.120)	0.501 (0.221)	Average teaching and research + highest third mission orientation + highest regional orientation (generalist)
3 (n=11)	0.557 (0.079)	6.825 (3.194)	1.812 (0.689)	0.0782 (0.037)	27.048 (32.91)	0.752 (0.190)	0.205 (0.186)	More research oriented + highest international and regional orientation (specialized sub. mix)
4 (n=19)	0.637 (0.087)	3.603 (1.368)	1.389 (0.313)	0.020 (0.021)	5.250 (10.09)	0.834 (0.175)	0.508 (0.175)	More teaching orientation + high regional orientation (generalist)
mean value of the sample	0.616 (0.078)	5.264 (2.384)	1.761 (0.549)	0.066 (0.051)	12.756 (18.67)	0.793 (0.157)	0.486 (0.217)	

*For each cluster the mean and standard deviation (*italics*) are reported

However, a four-clusters solution was identified for 2014 (Tab. 4). Two clusters (1 and 3) can be described as more research-focused than the other two. The difference between teaching and research-oriented clusters is clearer after a decade. Indeed, the number of publications per academics (ISI) of the more ‘research-oriented’ cluster (n. 1) is almost the double of the more ‘teaching-oriented’ one (n. 4) while this difference was much lower in 2004. Clusters 2 and 4 are more teaching-focused even if their values of PHD and ISI also increase over time and are not excessively below the mean value of the sample. Moreover, clusters 1 and 3 are more internationally oriented than n. 2 and 4 but still imply a high percentage of regional students. Finally, between 2004 and 2014, 9 HEIs change position in a discontinuous way since they moved from clusters n. 1 and 3 (Tab. 3) to clusters 1 and 2 in 2014 (Tab. 4). Other 13 HEIs presented some discontinuity even if only for one indicator. 9 HEIs, for example, changed their cluster (n. 3 in 2004) for a similar one (n. 3 in 2014) except for its greater internationalization. Finally, 36 out of 58 HEIs maintained the same positioning over time.

Concerning the English case, HEIs differed on the basis of multiple indicators and this generated a high number of clusters both in 2004 (Tab. 5) and 2014 (Tab. 6). In 2004, the two ‘teaching-oriented’ clusters (Tab. 5, n. 1 and 3) varied also on their subject mix as well as on a more regional vs international orientation. Similarly, the ‘research-oriented’ clusters (4 and 5) differed based on their subject mix, third mission and international orientation. Furthermore, cluster n. 2 presented an average value of research intensity (ISI) besides a significant percentage of undergraduates (75%).

The six-clusters solution identified in 2014 (Tab. 6) underlined a clearer polarization between research and teaching focused clusters. First, there are no more clusters that have average values of research and teaching orientation like 2004’s cluster n. 2. Second, in 2014 ‘research-oriented’ clusters (Tab. 6 clusters n. 4, 5 and 6) display higher levels of Phd ratio (PHD), research intensity (ISI) and third mission orientation as well as much lower percentages of undergraduate students compared with 2004’s research-oriented clusters (Tab. 5, clusters n. 4 and 5). In general, this polarization reflects the affiliation of English HEIs to mission groups with the members of Russell and the 1994 in the ‘research oriented’ clusters both in 2004 and 2014.

Table 5. Positioning indicators for each English cluster* in 2004

Cluster	EDUC_PROF	PHD	ISI	THIRDM	INTERNAT	REG	SUBMIX	TYPE OF POSITIONING
1 (n=27)	0.833 (0.044)	11.84 (4.872)	0.204 (0.131)	0.094 (0.043)	99.53 (36.14)	0.349 (0.087)	0.486 (0.119)	Undergraduate teaching oriented + national market size (generalist subject mix)
2 (n=21)	0.750 (0.065)	17.42 (12.10)	0.509 (0.418)	0.125 (0.067)	193.09 (49.94)	0.415 (0.131)	0.534 (0.183)	Both average teaching, research and third mission oriented + high international orientation (generalist)
3 (n=15)	0.816 (0.090)	6.93 (6.451)	0.135 (0.205)	0.079 (0.076)	58.14 (35.48)	0.434 (0.152)	0.119 (0.069)	Undergraduate teaching oriented (specialized subject mix)
4 (n=30)	0.693 (0.053)	61.51 (30.57)	1.473 (0.734)	0.287 (0.108)	197 (62.58)	0.209 (0.101)	0.461 (0.141)	Highest research and third mission orientation + high international and national orientation (generalist)
5 (n=2)	0.382 (0.087)	132.28 (50.28)	0.866 (0.176)	0.135 (0.018)	477 (198.53)	0.230 (0.030)	0.157 (0.210)	Research oriented and postgraduate teaching + highest international and national orientation (specialized)
mean value of the sample	0.762 (0.100)	29.43 (32.90)	0.645 (0.717)	0.156 (0.115)	149 (90.21)	0.333 (0.142)	0.424 (0.196)	

*For each cluster the mean and standard deviation (*italics*) are reported

Table 6. Positioning indicators for each English cluster* in 2014

Cluster	EDUC_PROF	PHD	ISI	THIRDM	INTERNAT	REG	SUBMIX	TYPE OF POSITIONING
1 (n=23)	0.823 (0.043)	20.05 (7.62)	0.384 (0.210)	0.065 (0.036)	125.9 (43.06)	0.333 (0.068)	0.444 (0.090)	Undergraduate teaching oriented + national orientation (generalist subject mix)
2 (n=17)	0.808 (0.041)	24.78 (14.13)	0.483 (0.228)	0.064 (0.032)	163.5 (87.84)	0.527 (0.092)	0.514 (0.073)	Undergraduate teaching oriented + more regional orientation (generalist)
3 (n=18)	0.784 (0.068)	20.97 (20.18)	0.283 (0.236)	0.061 (0.055)	73.57 (64.89)	0.467 (0.153)	0.205 (0.157)	Undergraduate teaching oriented (specialized subject mix)
4 (n=30)	0.701 (0.055)	76.60 (23.04)	1.717 (0.708)	0.216 (0.088)	264.2 (58.38)	0.212 (0.102)	0.526 (0.138)	Research and third mission orientation + high international and national orientation (generalist)
5 (n=4)	0.569 (0.077)	212.3 (49.95)	2.357 (0.294)	0.519 (0.120)	367.1 (84.98)	0.155 (0.057)	0.618 (0.152)	Highest research oriented (postgraduate teaching) and highest third mission. + high international and national orientation (generalist)
6 (n=3)	0.432 (0.090)	84.73 (73.28)	1.211 (0.246)	0.109 (0.077)	462.1 (179.4)	0.293 (0.161)	0.235 (0.207)	Research orientation (postgraduate teaching) + highest international and national orientation (specialized)
mean value of the sample	0.758 (0.099)	49.07 (48.58)	0.913 (0.814)	0.132 (0.124)	187.2 (116.8)	0.344 (0.161)	0.438 (0.177)	

*For each cluster the mean and standard deviation (*italics*) are reported

Finally, when the positions of HEIs between 2004 and 2014 are compared, we can note that 66 out of 95 HEIs maintained the same or a similar cluster while 14 changed it significantly. HEIs belonging to cluster 2 in 2004 moved into a more distinctive cluster along the research vs teaching continuum in 2014 (clusters n. 1, 2, 3, and 6). Moreover, these 14 HEIs mainly belong to the Million + group (9), whereas the others present either no affiliation or are members of the University Alliance group.

Other 15 HEIs partially changed their position since they show discontinuity in only one indicator (e.g. some HEIs from cluster n. 1 in 2004 to n. 2 in 2014) and only one of them is part of the Russell group.

4.3 HEIs' positioning paths: differences between 2004 and 2014 (micro-level analysis)

Table 7 and 8 illustrate the clusters on the differences of indicators values between 2004 and 2014 (minus the mean difference of the sample). The identified clusters were then classified according to the intensity of the corresponding positioning paths. 6 types of patterns were identified for English HEIs (Tab. 7). Clusters differed based on a twofold criterion as mentioned in section 3.2. First, they varied according to how many indicators increase relevantly over time (1 or more time higher than the average difference). For example, HEIs in cluster 4 focused their positioning efforts only on a stronger international orientation (INTERNAT) by almost 2 times more than the mean difference of the sample. Conversely, other clusters (no. 5 and 6) showed significant changes across several indicators simultaneously.

Second, clusters differed in the scope of these changes. For example, Cluster no. 6 shows a difference (82.93) that is around 2 times higher than the mean (37.81), whereas for clusters no. 4 and 5 the extent of this change is lower. From this analysis, 27 positioning patterns were classified as 'high intense'¹⁰ (clusters no. 3,5 and 6), 37 as 'medium intense' (clusters no. 2 and 4), whereas positioning paths from cluster n. 1 displayed a 'low intensity' since values basically corresponds to the average change of the sample. Finally, 13 of the 27 'high intense' positioning paths are displayed by Russell group's universities while the others are distributed across the other mission groups.

Compared to England, Italian positioning paths do not present high levels of intensity (Tab. 8). The only path that was classified as such is cluster no. 4, which consists of 3 HEIs, and might be

¹⁰ Two of these 27 universities have been affected by a merger between the university and an institute of research or a campus from another university. The merger relevantly improved the values of these two universities on some indicators, which has consequently enhanced the intensity of their positioning path.

considered as an outlier, while clusters no. 1, 2 concentrated their major changes only on two dimensions (EDUC_PROF and REG). Consequently, 12 positioning paths have been classified as 'low intense', 43 'medium intense' and 3 'high intense'.

Table 7. Difference between 2004 and 2014 of positioning indicators minus the mean difference of the sample for each English cluster*

Cluster	EDUC_PROF	PHD	ISI	THIRDM	INTERNAT	REG	SUBMIX	INTENSITY OF POSITIONING PATH
1 (n=31)	-0.009 (0.0432)	-9.818 (11.35)	-0.143 (0.096)	0.013 (0.033)	-28.50 (43.29)	0.001 (0.050)	-0.003 (0.058)	Low: values close to the mean difference
2 (n=29)	<u>0.037</u> ** (0.055)	-7.821 (16.15)	0.058 (0.142)	0.005 (0.045)	<u>-40.05</u> (44.01)	<u>0.026</u> (0.065)	-0.007 (0.060)	Medium: Increase in undergraduate and regional orientation
3 (n=7)	<u>-0.071</u> (0.080)	-7.480 (15.41)	-0.117 (0.178)	-0.102 (0.029)	12.90 (66.99)	<u>0.074</u> (0.050)	0.066 (0.091)	High: Increase in postgraduate teaching and regional orientation
4 (n=8)	-0.013 (0.037)	5.539 (22.55)	-0.028 (0.228)	-0.004 (0.031)	<u>69.11</u> (68.85)	0.004 (0.047)	<u>-0.175</u> (0.087)	Medium: Increase in international orientation and a subject mix more specialized
5 (n=15)	0.013 (0.061)	5.455 (17.92)	<u>0.231</u> (0.195)	0.000 (0.034)	<u>65.82</u> (30.20)	<u>-0.062</u> (0.065)	0.052 (0.090)	High: Increase in research (ISI), international and national orientation
6 (n=5)	<u>-0.067</u> (0.041)	<u>91.48</u> (33.99)	0.124 (0.173)	<u>0.035</u> (0.088)	<u>82.93</u> (43.20)	<u>-0.081</u> (0.061)	<u>0.091</u> (0.073)	High: Increase in research (postgraduate + PHD), third mission, international and national orientation
mean difference 2004-2014 of the sample	-0.010 (0.061)	19.640 (27.86)	0.267 (0.196)	-0.023 (0.049)	37.81 (65.33)	0.011 (0.069)	0.020 (0.092)	

*For each cluster the mean and standard deviation (*italics*) are reported

** Values 1 or more times higher/lower than the mean difference of the sample are underlined

Table 8. Difference between 2004 and 2014 of positioning indicators minus the mean difference of the sample for each Italian cluster

Cluster	EDUC_PROF	PHD	ISI	THIRDM	INTERNAT	REG	SUBMIX	INTENSITY OF POSITIONING PATH
1 (n=30)	<u>0.036</u> ** (0.051)	0.85 (2,816)	-0.055 (0.313)	0.006 (0.045)	-1,30 (10.330)	<u>0.016</u> (0.073)	0.031 (0.072)	Medium: Increase in undergraduate and regional orientation
2 (n=13)	<u>-0.065</u> (0.057)	<u>-1.68</u> (2.736)	-0.170 (0.234)	-0.017 (0.027)	-4,45 (3.716)	<u>0.012</u> (0.035)	-0.002 (0.034)	Medium: Increase in postgraduate and regional orientation
3 (n=12)	-0.016 (0.040)	0.29 (1,735)	0.342 (0.254)	-0.002 (0.023)	-3,70 (2.828)	<u>-0.017</u> (0.035)	-0.058 (0.050)	Low: differences close to the mean of the sample
4 (n=3)	<u>-0.020</u> (0.080)	<u>2.53</u> (1,878)	0.535 (0.076)	<u>0.026</u> (0.032)	<u>47.04</u> (36.803)	<u>-0.190</u> (0.068)	-0.028 (0.028)	High: Increase in Phd ratio, third mission, international and national orientation
mean difference 2004-2014 of the sample	-0.009 (0.065)	-1.19 (2.762)	0.734 (0.348)	0.014 (0.038)	7,73 (15,195)	-0.010 (0.073)	0.046 (0.068)	

5. Discussion and conclusion

Based on recent insights in the literature, the aim of this paper was to investigate how the analysis of the positioning of HEIs can increase our understanding of the diversity of HE systems. The methodological and exploratory nature of this article inevitably entails some limitations. First, the paper does not explain why HEIs change their positions longitudinally. We did not specifically consider the new reforms in the two countries such as the introduction of variable tuition fees in England or the NPM-based reform in Italy (Law n. 240/2010), which have altered the environmental conditions in which HEIs operate and could explained why HEIs position themselves in a way instead of others. This could be the object of study for a further study.

Second, this study investigated positioning paths as a given, without questioning if these are the result of either rational strategic choices or more passive adaptations towards exogenous forces. This dualistic dilemma can be a research topic itself, which cannot be investigated through this quantitative analysis.

Despite its limitations, this paper identified three main contributions through which the analysis of positioning paths of HEIs can contribute to the study of diversity in HE.

I. Clustering HEIs at different periods allowed identifying both convergence and differentiation processes within the same HE system, which are hidden by an analysis at the level of the entire HE system. In this respect, Table 2 illustrated that the English and Italian HEIs are becoming more homogeneous in terms of research intensity (ISI) and increasingly heterogeneous in relation to their internationalization (INTERNAT). However, it cannot reveal, for example, whether the HEIs that are becoming more research-focused are also becoming more internationally oriented, or whether other combinations emerge.

The analysis of positioning paths (section 4.2) leads to a more comprehensive picture of diversity since it simultaneously considers all the indicators in which HEIs can either differentiate or converge (Daraio et al. 2011; Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). Positioning groups that result from the first clustering exercises (section 4.2) underline how convergence can occur along one indicator whereas distinctiveness can occur on a different indicator, which allows HEIs to balance both aspects as emerged from the previous works on mission statements (Mampaey et al. 2015; Seeber et al. 2017).

For instance, English clusters n. 1, 2 and 3 in 2014 (Tab. 6) are all teaching-oriented. However, they differ on their degree of regional orientation (cluster 1 vs 2) or a more ‘generalist’ vs ‘specialized’ subject mix (1 and 2 vs 3). Similarly, HEIs in clusters n. 4, 5 and 6 display

convergence in their levels of research orientation but are quite dissimilar with respect to their international and third mission orientation.

These processes can be identified also in a less diversified HE system like the Italian, even if to a lower extent. Clusters n. 2 and 4 (Tab. 4) are indeed both more ‘teaching oriented’ but the former present values of third mission orientation even higher than the mean of the sample. Similarly, the other two clusters (n. 1 and 3) are both more ‘research-oriented’ but present a clear difference in their international orientation.

II. A longitudinal analysis of the positioning of HEIs contributes to understanding in which dimensions of the niche positioning shifts are more likely to occur, thus suggesting first of all the indicators for which it might be more meaningful to investigate diversity of HE systems over time (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). Findings for both countries revealed indeed that HEIs are quite dissimilar in terms of their subject mix. However, distinctive changes within this indicator occurred rarely from 2004 to 2014 and were not significant in scale for both countries (Tab. 7 and 8). By contrast, indicators about the market size and the research orientation are those where positioning shifts occurred more radically.

Moreover, a longitudinal analysis of positioning revealed the actual processes (Ljungberg et al. 2009; Fumasoli and Huisman 2013) through which diversity of HE systems increase or decrease over time. For example, the decreasing levels of diversity of the English system in research (PHD, ISI) and third mission (THIRDM) (Table 2) seems to be the result of an increasing polarization between ‘teaching vs research/third mission’ orientation among HEIs from 2004 to 2014 as illustrated in section 4.2. Indeed, the split of cluster n. 2 in 2004 into either more research/third mission or teaching oriented clusters entails a decrease in the variety of HEIs since this cluster (n. 2) represented something different from this polarization (a middle way between research and teaching) and led therefore to a lower level of diversity in the English HE system as reported in Table 2. Since diversity is also measured by the number of types (species) of HEIs (Huisman et al. 2007), it can be claimed that a type of HEI (Tab. 5, cluster n. 2) disappeared from 2004 to 2014 as a result of this polarization and consequently, the diversity of the system on these dimensions (PHD, ISI and THIRDM) decreased. The same mechanism can be noticed in the Italian reality as well and explains the decreasing value of diversity in the research intensity (ISI) (Tab. 2). Although this polarization is less evident, there is a more significant difference among clusters in the values of the ISI indicator from 2004 to 2014, as already illustrated in the findings section.

III. The analysis of positioning paths can contribute to identifying which groups of HEIs affect more the level of diversity. The findings highlighted that only 14 out of 95 English HEIs changed discontinuously their position (cluster) between 2004 and 2014. These distinctive shifts were the result of either a “medium” or a “high intense” paths (as identified by the second clustering exercise) and displayed by low-status and younger HEIs (post-1992 universities). Moreover, it also emerged that a discrete number of English HEIs (29), presented a “high” or medium” intense positioning path without changing clusters over time. These HEIs did not change their mix of activities/resources (horizontal diversity) but they improved their performances (vertical diversity) in one or more dimensions of the niche in which they were already located. Almost the totality of these HEIs belonged to either the Russell or the 1994 group, namely, higher-status institutions. By changing distinctively their position over time, low-status HEIs affect more the horizontal diversity of the HE system in two opposing directions. Some of these low-status HEIs tried to enhance their research orientation, imitating higher-status universities and contributing to decrease the diversity of the system. Others position themselves more distinctively since they strengthened their undergraduate-teaching focus but concurrently sharpened their either international or regional orientation.

Hence, it seems that ‘positioning for prestige’ through the imitation of higher-status institutions (Brewer et al. 2002; Toma 2012) and more distinctive behaviours from lower-status ones (Stensaker et al. 2018) both occurred within the English system. The more conservative and less deviant patterns of high-status universities contribute to keeping the diversity of HE system more stable in spite of an increasing competition (Carrasco and Brown 2013). Even if only preliminary, it can be argued that the analysis of positioning offers the opportunity to consider the impact of organizational variables, such as status, which can alter the expected relationship between competition and horizontal differentiation, confirming the literature on elite institutions (Van Vught 2008).

Finally, the methodological contribution of this paper can be further expanded in two future directions of research. First, the number and types of indicators can be extended by including environmental and other organizational variables. On the one hand, there are recent attempts to quantify environmental factors such as institutional autonomy and competition (Cattaneo et al. 2018). On the other hand, given that HEIs can display several heterogeneous positioning paths despite the same environmental conditions, organizational features and capabilities should be considered in order to explain this potential variety (Rossi 2009). Second, a quantitative analysis

is not able to capture equally relevant aspects of positioning such as how the HEIs communicate its distinctiveness to external stakeholders and which model of HEI they aim to become. These elements could be viewed in documents such as mission statements and strategic plans of HEIs. A mix-method analysis of these texts and positioning indicators might contribute to increasing our understanding of positioning processes as interestingly illustrated in Seeber et al. (2017).

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Appendix

Table 1. data sources and formula of the indicators

Indicator	Formula	Source of Italian data	Source of English data
Educational profile (EDUC-PROF)	n. of ISCED 6 ¹ students / ISCED 6 + 7; (values between 0 and 1)	administrative data from the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) website	data from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) website
Phd ratio (PHD)	ISCED 8 / ISCED 6+7+8; (values between 0 and 1)	administrative data from the MIUR, available upon permission	data from the HESA website
Research intensity (ISI)	ISI publications / n. of FTE academics	InCites database	InCites database
Third party funding ¹ (THIRDM)	Third party funding / total income; (values between 0 and 1)	administrative data from the MIUR available upon permission	data from the HESA website
Teaching Subject mix (SUBMIX)	Normalized Herfindahl index on the number of students ISCED 6+7 by each of the 11 fields of study ² ; (values between 0 and 1)	administrative data from the MIUR website	data from the HESA website
International orientation (INTERNAT)	International ³ ISCED 6+7 / total ISCED 6+7; (values between 0 and 1)	administrative data from the MIUR website	data from the HESA website
Regional orientation (REG)	New ISCED 6 students/unique applicants ⁴ resident in the same region ⁵ of the university / total n. of new ISCED 6 students/unique applicants; (values between 0 and 1)	administrative data from the MIUR website	Not-public data about number of applicants and unique applicants from UCAS website

Notes

(1) We referred to the last International Standard Classification of Education UNESCO 2011 according to which: ISCED 6 = Bachelor or equivalent level degrees; ISCED 7 = Master or equivalent level; ISCED 8 = Doctoral or equivalent level;

(2) Since there is no an already established common classification for disciplines between Italian and English students, an ad-hoc classification has been built based on the possibilities given by the structure of the raw data. The 10 resulted disciplinary areas are: 1) Mathematics and physics; 2) Chemistry-pharmacy; 3) Geology and Biology; 4) Health; 5) Agriculture; 6) Engineering and Architecture; 7) Arts and Humanities; 8) Law; 9) Economics and statistics; 10) Politics and sociology;

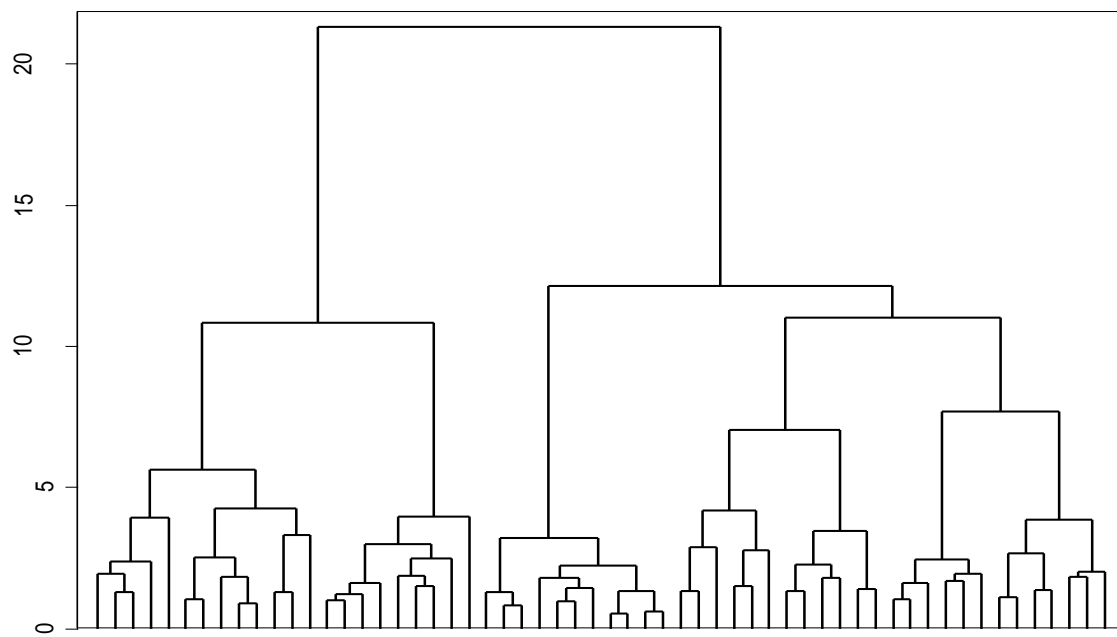
(3) International students are here intended as those students that present a foreign residence at the moment of the enrollment. Foreign refers to both European and non-European countries;

(4) Since the number of new students enrolled for every year is not available the number of unique applicants has been chosen to substitute this data. Even if not all the unique applicant that applied to a university will finally enroll at that specific HEIs it is a reasonable proxy.

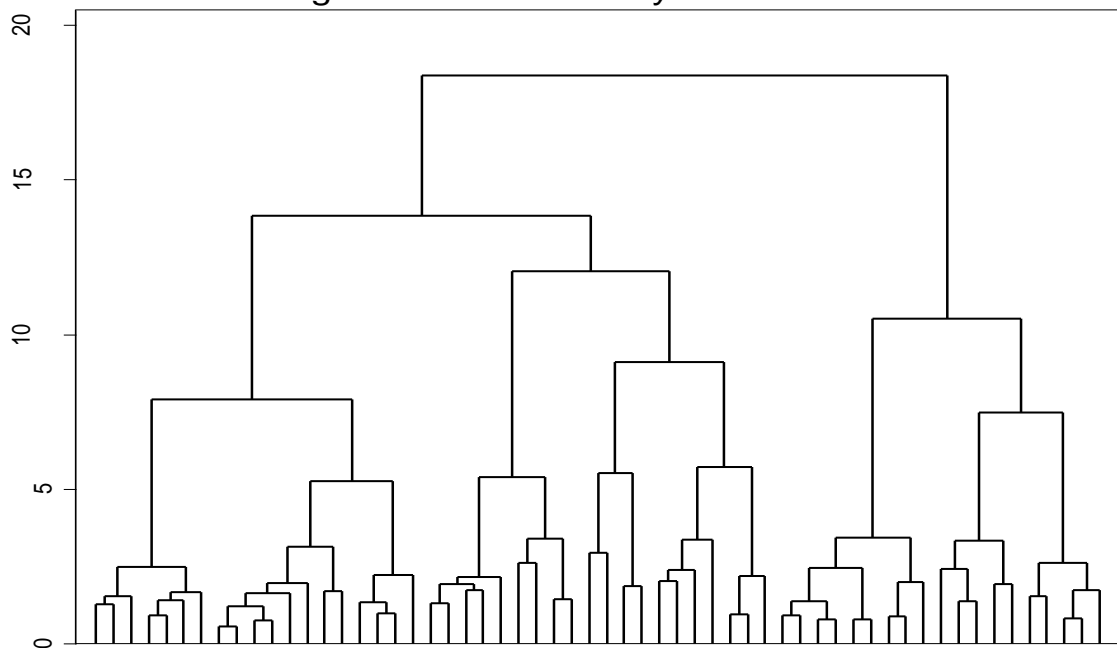
(5) The number of English regions is based on the HESA classification of 11 regions whereas the Italian regions correspond to the 20 administrative recognized by the law.

Dendrograms of the cluster analyses - Italian HEIs (Section 4.2, Tabs. 3 and 4)

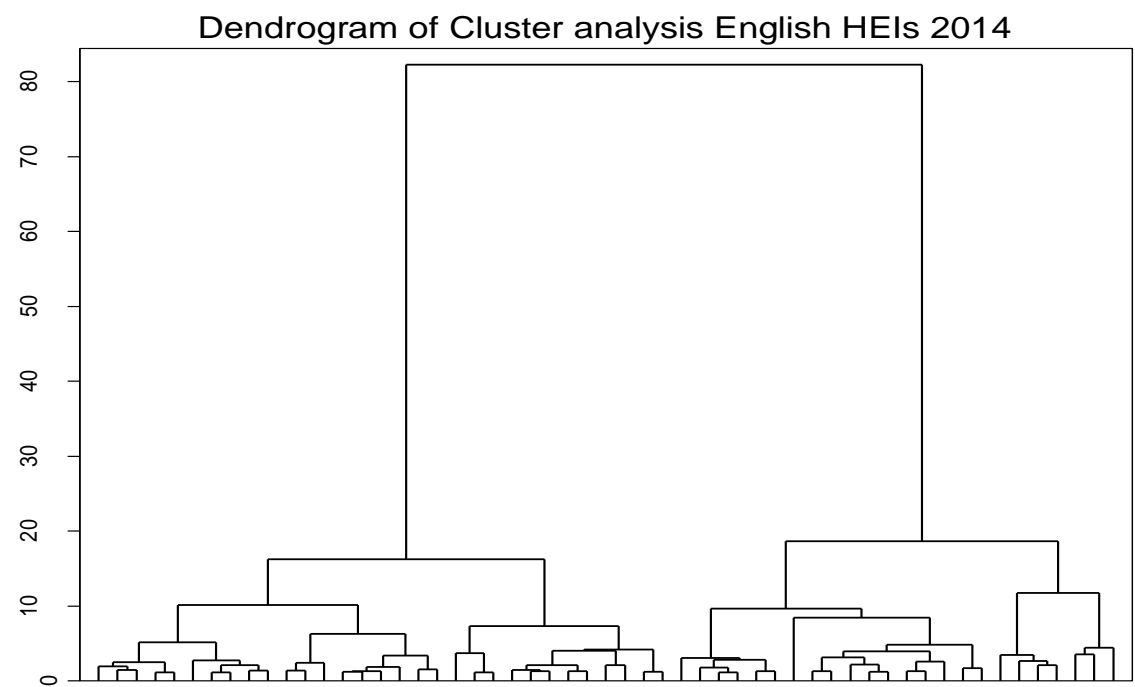
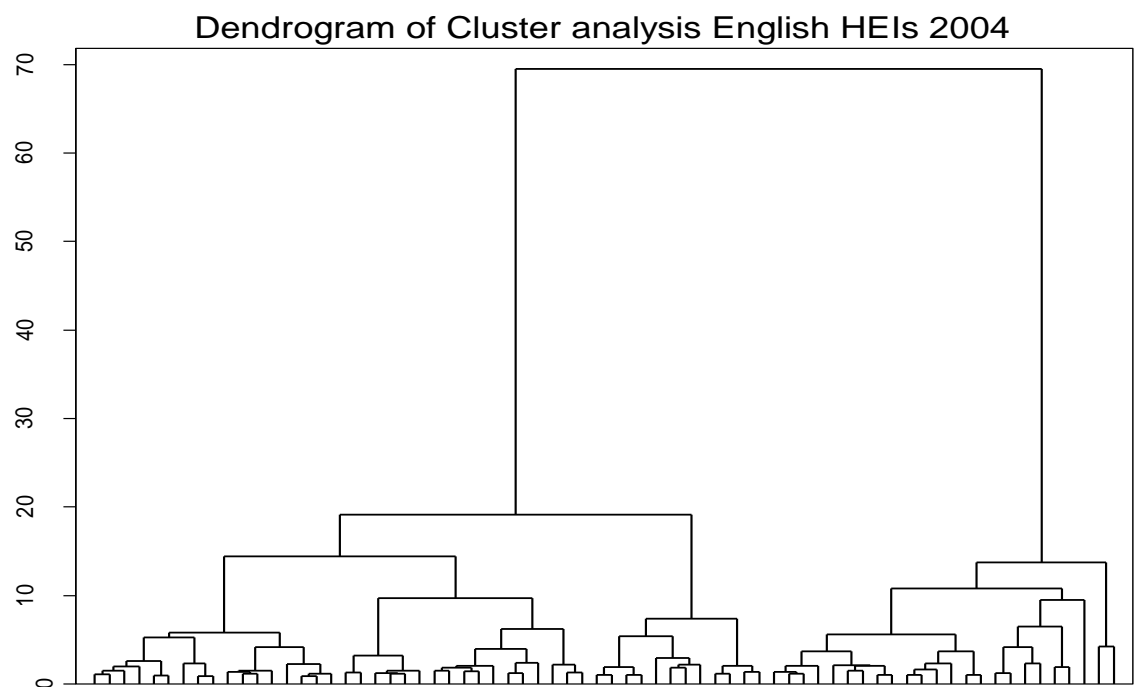
Dendrogram of Cluster analysis Italian HEIs in 2004



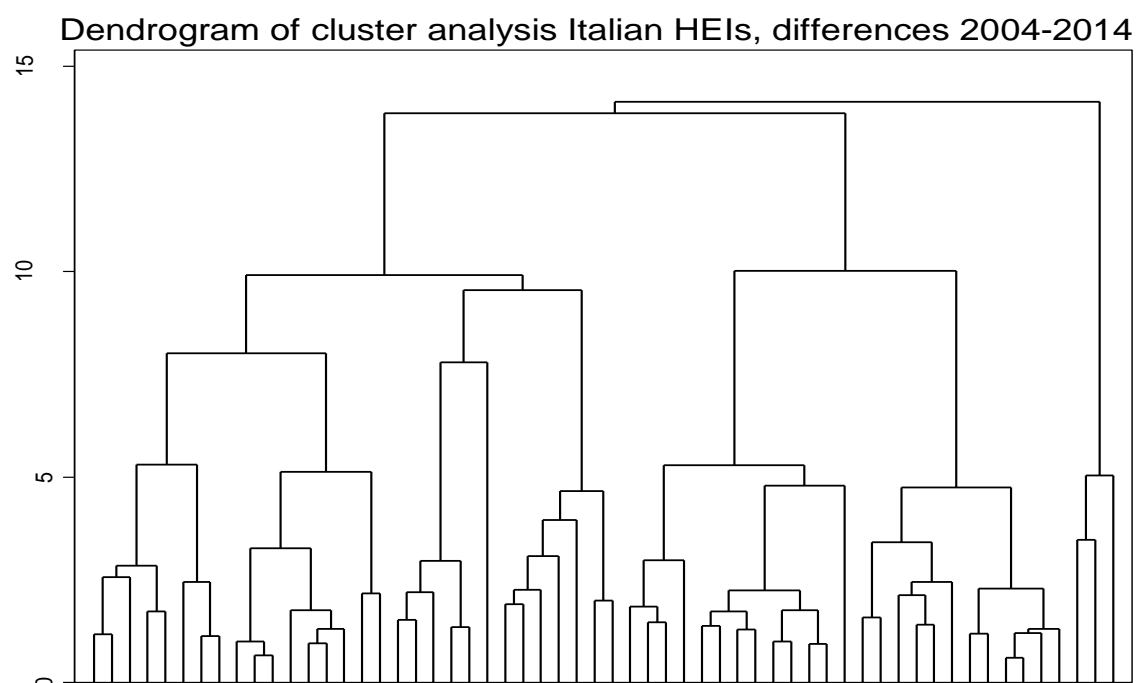
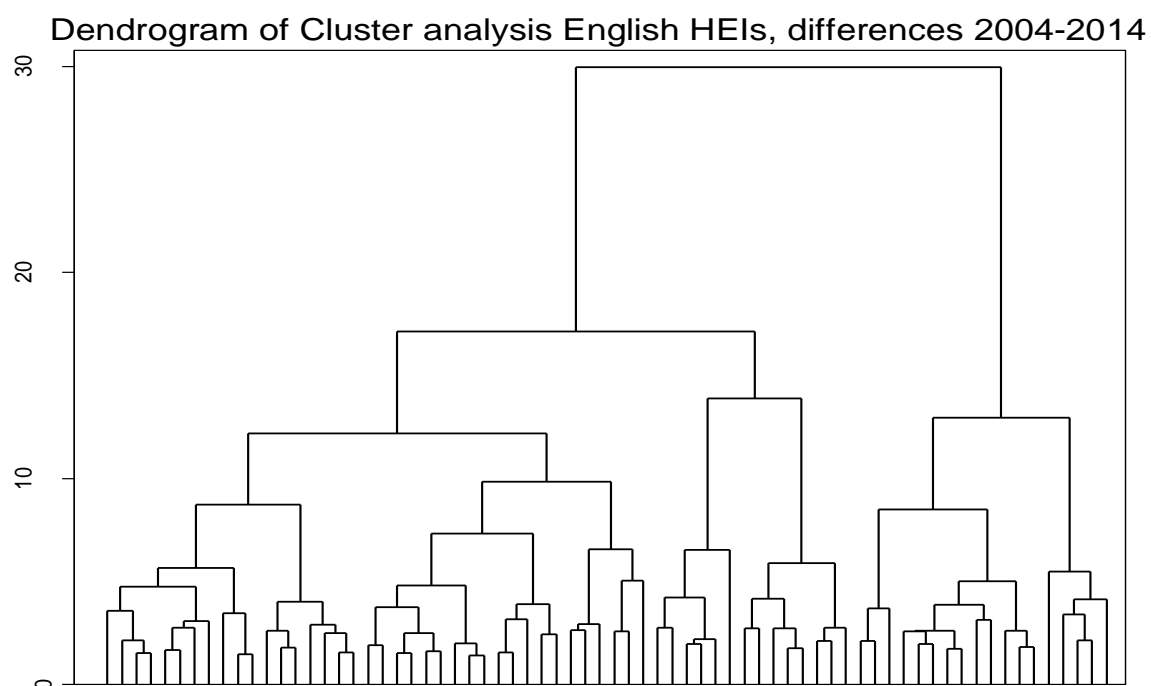
Dendrogram of Cluster analysis Italian HEIs 2014



Dendrograms of the cluster analyses - English HEIs (Section 4.2, Tabs. 5 and 6)



Dendrograms of the cluster analyses of differences between 2004 and 2014 - English and Italian HEIs (Section 4.3, Tabs. 7 and 8)



Chapter 3

The impact of the organisational dimension on positioning processes of universities: a case-study approach

Barbato, G. and Turri, M.

Abstract

Studies on university agency have been largely informed by the debate between the influence of environmental forces and importance of managerial rationality, often neglecting the role of an organisational dimension. The paper starts filling this gap by investigating how this meso-level of analysis influences the processes of institutional positioning. The broad concept of organisational dimension has been operationalized through three variables: the organisational structure, identity, and centrality. Four case studies, two Italian and two English universities, have been selected to empirically examine the relationship between these three variables and positioning processes. The findings highlight how specific values of the organizational structure, identity and centrality can positively support institutional efforts like positioning. However, these relationships cannot be considered as deterministic since some potential intervening factors might, at least theoretically, modify their expected directions.

Keywords. positioning, organisational dimension, structure, identity, centrality

1. Introduction

The debate on organizational behaviour, like that on university agency, has been largely influenced by an environmental determinism perspective according to which organizational actorhood is the result of compliance with isomorphic pressures in order to gain legitimacy (Astley and Van de Ven 1983; Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). Based on this approach, organizational research ‘has moved its focus, empirically and theoretically, from the organization to the field, population, and community’ (Greenwood and Miller 2010, 80) in order to analyse if and how organizations respond similarly to external macro-level forces and which model they tend to imitate. Consequently, a meso organizational level of analysis - meaning by this not only the internal structure and power relationships but also the set of informal routines/practices and cultural beliefs that shape each organization - has been increasingly neglected (Clark 1983; Greenwood et al. 2011).

In response to this situation, several scholars have urged reappraisal of the organizational dimension as a fruitful level of analysis. Greenwood et al. (2014, 1206-1207) claimed ‘the need to rethink this shift in the balance of emphasis, to re-emphasize an organizational level of analysis,

and to treat organizations as actors'. Similar calls can be also found in the Higher Education (HE) literature. Fumasoli and Stensaker (2013) underlined that greater attention should be paid to organizational processes as a fruitful analytical perspective from which to understand the factors that support university survival in front of increasingly complex and multiple challenges. Similarly, Paradeise and Thoenig (2013, 196) used the concept of 'local order' to argue that universities should be treated as a meso-level order and action level in order to 'break free from the all-pervasive global or one-size-fits-all standard'. Similarly, also studies adopting a managerial rationality approach (Astley and Van de Ven 1983) recognize that strategic change cannot be described as the mere result of the leadership's intent/action since other organizational-level elements prove to be crucial (Toma 2010; Stensaker et al. 2014).

This paper wants to respond to these invitations by analysing how the organizational dimension influences strategic positioning processes of universities. Positioning is indeed an increasingly significant topic for both researchers and policy makers. Processes like the massification and globalization of HE, the growing levels of competition and diversified demands from the knowledge economy and society, push universities to consider carefully on which activities and resources to focus, in other words to position themselves distinctively (Fumasoli and Huisman 2013).

Moreover, studies on positioning have focused more on measuring the distinctiveness of these institutional efforts and how to balance it with the need for legitimacy (Seeber et al. 2019; Morpew et al 2018) whereas less attention has to date been paid to the role of the organizational dimension in influencing the effectiveness of these processes. In particular, these studies have concentrated on just one organizational variable, such as the organizational identity or the governance style, whereas fewer works have adopted a more holistic approach (see e.g. Fumasoli and Lepori 2011; Paradeise and Thoenig 2016; Vuori 2016). This paper aims also to contribute to filling this gap through a multiple case-study analysis and a comprehensive view of the organizational dimension. For this reason, a framework of analysis is outlined in the next section.

2. A framework for analysis

The organizational dimension must be operationalized to be empirically investigated. Hence, we relied on previous studies in order to identify the main variables already used to analyse this meso-level of analysis (Clark 1983; Greenwood et al. 2011; Fumasoli and Stensaker 2013; Seeber et al. 2015; Fumasoli 2015; Paradeise and Thoenig 2016). Without aiming to be exhaustive, we

identified three main variables, i.e. the organisational structure, identity, and centrality, that recurred in the pertinent literature.

I. *Organisational structure* The organisation structure ‘reflects how hierarchy and authority are designed and dispersed’ within the organisation (Fumasoli 2015, 90). First of all, the structure can be empirically investigated by analysing the governance of the organisation. The term ‘governance’ refers to the way HEIs are governed, in other words, the set of structures, procedures, and actors through which decision-making is organised within them (Kezar 2004; Frølich and Caspersen 2015), and it can be investigated through its degree of centralisation (1a) and formalisation (1b) (Maassen et al. 2017).

Centralisation (1a) refers to the locus of the decision-making and underlines the complex relationship between the centre’s choices and the degree of autonomy of peripheral structures (faculties and departments) in implementing the former (Seeber et al. 2015). Centralisation also refers to the managerial orientation of decision-making and, therefore, to the distribution of competences between the executive body/leadership and collegial bodies (senate/academic board). Other relevant factors that impact on the degree of centralization of the governance are the type of task allocation (matrix vs. divisional structure) (Pinheiro and Stensaker 2014), the size and composition criteria of the executive team and the complementarity between the political leadership and the senior management team (Taylor and Machado 2006; Fumasoli and Lepori 2011).

Formalisation (1b) concerns how decision-making is managed. This can be left to spontaneous actions and ideas of the internal actors or based on more rational processes that rely on management-by-objectives, evaluation and monitoring mechanisms (Seeber et al. 2015). Centralization and formalization have acquired increasing importance within universities as a result of reforms enacted in recent decades which place great emphasis on strengthening internal hierarchies and introducing elements of accountability, even if these are in contrast with traditional academic values, like the autonomy of academics and self-governance of the university (Frølich and Caspersen 2015). Even if it could be expected that high centralization and formalization would support strategic positioning through the creation of a more integrated and effective governance (Pinheiro and Young 2017), other studies have underlined that participation and consultation are equally important since they have created trust among the internal members, contributing to make top-down decisions more legitimated (Kezar 2004; Stensaker and Vabø 2013).

A third factor that certainly influences the complexity of the structure is the size of the organization (1c). In the case of universities, size can be investigated by considering either the number of students and academics or the scope of the subject mix measured in the number of departments/faculties. This latter is particularly important since it determines how many figures the leadership of the university must deal with.

II. Organisational identity It has been widely argued in the HE literature that each HEI presents a cultural aspect in addition to its organisational structure (Clark 1983); a set of beliefs and values shared by the internal members of the organisation that distinguish it from the others (Czarniawska 1997; Stensaker 2015). In this regard, mainly adopted is an inner level of analysis focused on how internal actors perceive the existence of a common university identity (Weerts et al. 2014). Identity can be studied along a continuum between integration and fragmentation (2), as suggested by Fumasoli (2015). Scholars recognise different sources of both integration and fragmentation of the identity of a university (Clark 1983). First, disciplines constitute a factor of fragmentation since academics first belong to a disciplinary community and its related categories of thought and code of conduct (Weick 1976). By contrast, the membership/identification of internal members with their academic institutions constitutes a bonding element that contributes to generating a strong overall sense of collective effort and, as a result, a university culture (Clark 1983). A integrated identity is generated primarily by a strong a identification with enduring features (e.g. the traditional mission, the history) that uniquely distinguish the university.

Yet, it is also claimed that the identity is also dynamic in the sense that it evolves according to both the leadership's strategic project (what the university wants to become) and the challenges of the external environment (Stensaker 2015). Consequently, the management of the identity from the top-management is a relevant process in order to maintain its integrity (Morphew et al. 2018). On this view, factors such as the socialisation of newcomers, the criteria for career progression (Paradeise and Thoenig 2016), internal communication and sense-making processes can contribute to enhancing the integration universities' identity (Gioia and Thomas 1996). Sense-making, for example, sustains strategic change since it contributes to making complex circumstances more comprehensible and manageable (Pietilä 2014; Vuori 2015). Hence, the organizational identity presents both dynamic and enduring components that seem equally important for generating an integrated university identity.

III. Organisational centrality Every university is located on a continuum between centre and periphery. Since the position of an organization in a field influences its actions, a measure of organizational centrality should be considered (Greenwood et al. 2011; Fumasoli 2015). Centrality can be defined in several ways.

Economic centrality (3a) refers to universities operating in developed industrialized areas. Theoretically, the closer the university is to the centre, the higher should be its ability to obtain resources since it can access more opportunities to gain funding from industries compared to universities located in rural areas.

Centrality can also be conceived in social terms, i.e. as being at the centre of networks with other universities (3b). On the one hand, geographical proximity to other universities can generate greater competition, making it difficult to obtain resources. However, universities may also be induced to differentiate their profile in order to avoid competitive pressures (Seeber et al. 2019). On the other hand, operating next to other universities can also generate partnerships and collaborations that provide resources (Vuori 2016). Moreover, centrality in social terms can extend beyond the mere local area, as shown by the increasing number of international relationships among universities (Fumasoli and Seeber 2018).

These three variables will be the object of study of the empirical analysis. Table 1 provides a synthesis of these variables by illustrating their sub-dimensions and the empirical elements used to investigate them.

Table 1. Variables, sub-dimensions, and empirical elements of the organizational dimension

Organizational variable	Sub-dimension	Empirical elements
(1) Structure	(1a) centralisation vs. decentralisation	Locus of decision-making; composition criteria, size and power of the executive team; complementarity between top-management and political leadership; the power of collegial bodies; allocation task; the degree of faculties' autonomy in implementation; formal/informal participation of academics/faculties in decision-making;
	(1b) formalisation vs. informality	Presence and role of strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms; the relationship between evaluation systems and decision-making.
	(1c) size	Number of actors and peripheral structures involved in decision-making and related coordination issues.
(2) Identity	(2) integration vs fragmentation	Recognition of a historical identity; differences among disciplines; membership towards the organisation and related management processes.
(3) Centrality	(3a) centre vs periphery (Economic terms)	Location in industrialised areas; management of the relationships with the local industry; rationale of these connections.
	(3b) centre vs periphery (Social terms)	Participation in networks, collaborations, official partnerships with other universities; rationale of these connections.

3. Methodology and data

To investigate how the organisational dimension impacts on positioning processes, a qualitative case study approach has been adopted. The defining feature of this methodology is its focus on exploratory research questions that aim to investigate how certain variables influence one another and it is claimed to be particularly suitable for exploratory studies (Yin 1984; Byrne and Ragin 2009). Also, case studies are particularly useful for building expectations between variables (Merriam 2009), which is the ultimate aim of this chapter.

Hence, four universities were selected as case studies by using purposive sampling. Two universities belong to the Italian HE system (University 1 and 2) whereas the other two (University 3 and 4) to the British HE system. These two countries present certainly some differences but are also several similarities that made them comparable. The English reality registered an increasing internal competition among HEIs in the last decades especially due to the introduction of variable tuition fees for students (from 2006) and its increasing cap over the years as well as other market-based reforms (Brown and Carrasco, 2013; Hillman 2016). In addition, English universities can enjoy a strong institutional autonomy which grants them significant space for strategic action. On the contrary, competition for students and funds has been traditionally weak among Italian universities even if it is recently increasing (Cattaneo et al. 2018). This is claimed to be the result of both decreasing funds from the government and increasing public funds based on performance-related criteria linked to the research assessment exercise (VQR). Moreover, the NPM-inspired reform of 2010 (law n. 240) changed relevantly the governance of universities, strengthening the role of the Rector and that of the Council, and reducing that of the Senate, which had traditionally expressed the self-governance of academic guilds (Capano et al. 2016). The reform merged also teaching and research functions under the authority of departments, thus removing the role of faculties. The 2010's reform along with a growing competition started, at least theoretically, to create the conditions for more strategic behaviours of Italian universities, even though the institutional autonomy is limited compared with British institutions (Seeber et al. 2015).

Despite these differences, England and Italy present a quite similar number of universities and students enrolled in the HE sector. Other similarities can be found in the presence of a historical and large evaluation exercise of research connected with a performance-based funding as well as a comprehensive quality assurance system (Rebora and Turri 2013). Furthermore, in order to increase the comparability between the Italian and the British case-studies, we decide to select

universities belonging to two regions (North-East of Italy and Northwest/Midwest of England) that share a similar economic system as well as number and type of tertiary institutions (see also Regini 2011 for a similar methodological choice).

The four selected universities can be considered comparable even if they still present some differences in structural features like size and economic centrality in order to verify how different values of these characteristics impact on positioning processes. The main features of the four universities are summarized in Table 2. Since the four universities present similarities, we can also check if the impact of the organizational dimensional change passing from one context to the other.

For each of the four case studies, data were gathered through multiple sources, including 60 semi-structured interviews and the analysis of documents such as strategic plans, the charter, and the statutes (14), which allowed us to triangulate the data and enhance their richness. Interviews were performed face-to-face and audio recorded, assuring the anonymity of the interviewees and the correspondent university. Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. The sample of the 60 interviewees (Table 3) is heterogeneous in terms of official roles, disciplinary affiliation, age and gender (32 men and 28 women).

Table 2 Main features of the four case-studies

		University 1	University 2	University 3	University 4
GOVERNANCE	Number of Vice-chancellor/Rector for the period 2004-2018 and selection methods	3 Rectors elected in 2004, 2010 and 2015 by academics and administrative staff	3 Rectors elected in 2003, 2009 and 2014 by academics and administrative staff	1 Vice-chancellor for the whole period	2 Vice-chancellors appointed in 2005 and 2015
	Number of faculties/schools at 2017*	0	0	3 faculties	5 schools
	Number of departments at 2017**	14	8	12 departments and 15 academic areas**	6 departments and 17 academic areas
ORGANIZATIONAL FEATURES ¹¹	Size: number of students at 2017	15488	19603	14256	14605
	Size number of FTE academics at 2017	590	513	852	715
	Subject mix	More generalist (Both medicine and engineering)	More specialized (No medicine and engineering)	More specialized (only medicine)	More generalist (Both medicine and engineering)
	Geographic position	North-East of Italy	North-East of Italy	North-west of England	Midwest of England
	Centrality in economic terms	Low	High	Low	High

* The faculties were abolished in Italian universities as a result of the reform n. 240 of 2010.

** The academic areas are not formally structured departments but only an internal disciplinary division of the faculty/school

¹¹ Moreover, the two English universities have been differentiated between a pre-1992 (Univ. 4) and a post-1992 university

Since the perspective of this study is longitudinal and considers a period of almost 15 years (from 2004 to 2018), the sample of the interviewees has been constructed accordingly. Each university presents one or more periods that correspond to the terms of office of the Rectors/Vice-chancellors that have occurred in these universities¹². Each new Rector/Vice-chancellor usually change part of (if not the entire) the executive team and thus represents an element of organisational change. Even if each interviewee were asked questions about the period in which they were in charge of specific positions, some interviewees hold their tasks over more than a single period, providing a useful diachronic perspective.

Table 3. Interviewees per case study and period of time

Univ. 1	period 1 (2004-2009)	period 2 (2010-2015)	period 3 (2015-2018)	Total
	#1 Rector; #2 General director; #3 Pro-rector; #4 Senior administrative officer; #5 Administrative officer; #6 Academics with managerial responsibility; #7 Head of department 'Z' (senate member)	#8 Rector; #9 Administrative officer; #10 Pro-rector; #11 Head of department 'X' (senate member)	#12 Senior administrative officer; #13 Pro-rector; #14 Academics with managerial responsibility; #15 Head of department 'Y' (senate member); #16 Delegate of the rector; #17 Senior Administrative officer; #18 Delegate of the rector	18
Univ. 2	period 1 (2004-2008)	period (2009-2014)	period 4 (2014-2018)	
	#8 Senior administrative officer; #17 Head of Department 'Z' (senate member); #4 Administrative officer; #12 Academics with managerial responsibilities	#1 Pro-rector; #2 General director; #3 Delegate of the rector; #5, #6, #7 Academics with managerial responsibilities;	#9 Rector, #10, #11 Delegates of the rector; #13, #14 Head of departments 'Y' 'X'; #15 Senior Administrative officer; #16 Vice-general director	17
Univ. 3	period (2004-2018)			
	#1 Vice-chancellor; #2, #3, #4 Pro-vice-chancellor; #5, #6 Dean of the Faculty 'X', 'Y'; #7 Senior Administrative officer; #8 Director of the teaching and learning centre; #9 Administrative officer; #11, #12 Member of the faculty management team; #13 Registrar			12
Univ. 4	period 1 (2005-2015)	period 2 (2015-2018)		
	#1 Pro-vice-chancellor, #2 Senior administrative officer; #3, #4 Head of the Faculty 'X', 'Y'	#5 Deputy-vice-chancellor; #6 Pro-vice-chancellor; #7 Chief Financial officer; #8 Senior administrative officer; #9 Associate Pro-vice-chancellor; #10, #11 Dean of the Faculty 'X', 'Y'; #12, #13 Member of the faculty management team		13

The collection of the data followed a two-step process. First, to achieve a deep knowledge of the key facts that occurred between 2004 and 2018 in each university, an exploratory interview was performed with a key figure of the governance that joined each university before the period under

¹²Italian rectors of public universities are elected by academics (but only those with tenured contract) and the administrative staff. The term of office lasts 6 years, and they cannot be elected again according to the new requirement of the law n. 240 of 2010. Before the reform, duration of the term of office was 4 years but with the possibility to be elected again. English Vice-chancellors are almost always appointed by the council (or board of governors), and there are no term limits. For example, University 3 presents the same Vice-chancellor for the whole time-frame of the analysis.

consideration. Besides reconstructing the recent history of the university and gathering documentary sources, this exploratory interview also helped to identify key figures to interview in the second step. Second, once all the interviews were carried out, they were transcribed by using an analysis grid that was structured according to the three organisational variables. Each question corresponds to an empirical element of the organisational structure, identity, and centrality (Tab. 1). This process of data organisation allowed us to identify the relevant information and common trends among the case-studies useful for structuring the next section.

4. Discussion and conclusion

In this section, we examined, horizontally to the four case studies, the three variables used to operationalize the organizational dimension (structure, identity and centrality) in order to formulate some proposition between them and positioning processes of these universities. Case-studies narratives are instead reported in the Appendix.

I. Organizational structure

The relationship between this variable and positioning processes is viewed through the three dimensions highlighted in Tab. 1.

First, all of the case-studies underlined, to differing extents, an increasing process of centralisation (**1a**). On the one hand, executive teams' responsibilities have been better defined and expressed in small and cohesive groups that often include the senior management team, with academic members chosen for their managerial competencies rather than to represent their disciplinary community. Concurrently, task allocation increasingly assumes a 'matrix' structure (Univ. A, D) in which the executive team collaborates directly with the faculty staff in several areas. For example, Universities A, B, D have established permanent thematic working groups (e.g. on internal research assessment, spin-offs and patents) composed of representatives of the departments and one from the executive team. Moreover, at University D the senior administrative staff in charge of teaching, research, third mission and internationalization working within the five schools report directly to the equivalent member of the executive teams, with whom weekly meetings are held. On the other hand, the locus of decision-making has been increasingly concentrated in the relationship between the executive team and the council, with a less strong influence from the Senate (Univ. A, B, D). In Italian universities, this is the result of the above-mentioned reform (law no. 240/2010).

Small and managerial executive teams together with the shift in the locus of decision-making have produced clearer and faster decisions. By contrast, when the executive team is large and disciplinary-based and ‘collegial’ bodies exert a strong influence, the perception of decision-making is slower and under ongoing negotiation (Univ. A, period 2; Univ. B, period 1). Similarly, a strong complementarity between the senior management team and the leadership, as well as a ‘matrix’ structure, have increased coordination between the centre and periphery, reducing risks of internal heterogeneity (Taylor and Machado 2006; Pinheiro and Stensaker 2014). Therefore, this hierarchisation has produced an increasing institutional coherence and administrative capacity over time (Toma 2010; Fumasoli and Lepori 2011); in other words, it contributes to creating an integrated rather than loosely coupled organisation, which positively impacts on the university’s capacity to pursue an intended positioning choice (Paradeise and Thoenig 2016). As claimed by Pinheiro and Young (2017, 130), a ‘tighter coupling [...] provides both the capabilities and the legitimacy necessary to enforce change on the institution as a whole, allowing it to act as a single unit pursuing collective aims’.

However, these case-studies have also shown that institutional coherence cannot be achieved solely through hierarchisation. Centralisation has in fact grown concurrently with formal and informal practices that allow the periphery to be involved, to some extent, in the decision-making process. Formal mechanisms like the presence of the deans of faculties in the executive team (Univ. C, D) or other advisory bodies (Univ. A, B), for example, have made it possible to include the specificities of each faculty, with the deans acting as a ‘buffer’ between the centre and the periphery of the organization (Frølich and Caspersen 2015). Similarly, in all the case-studies also informal routines emerged as equally important to enhance internal participation. Examples are the weekly/monthly meeting with the heads of departments/faculties before each assembly of the senate as well as open meetings within faculties whose main aim is to widen the discussion, allowing people to feel that they can contribute to the evolution of the university. These practices have created trust and engagement of individuals which legitimate the entire positioning effort, confirming the findings of previous studies (Kezar 2004; Stensaker and Vabø 2013; Stensaker et al. 2014). Conversely, imbalance towards centralisation erodes the internal consensus and trust and generates discontinuity in the implementation of positioning since the subsequent governance usually aimed to be perceived as different from the previous one (Univ. A, D, the transition from period 1 to 2). On these bases, a first proposition and an intervening factor can be identified:

- Proposition I) Increasing centralization leads to faster, more efficient and more integrated decision-making which supports the development and pursuit of positioning processes;

- **Intervening factor I)** Involvement of academics and peripheral structures.

Second, centralisation has been often matched by a growth in the formalisation (**1b**) of decision-making that is increasingly data-driven and subject to ongoing, planning and assessment mechanisms. All the case-studies showed the growing relevance and spread of strategic planning processes and the increasing centrality of evaluation mechanisms. Formalisation gives positioning a more structured nature since the strategic plan is used as a management tool, which is further implemented through indicators/targets that are employed as benchmarks to assess if the organisation is going in the expected direction. The strategy of University D for the second period was developed through the guidance of a consulting company that facilitated workshops between the beneficiaries (students; businesses; region and society) and the executive team, whereas the previous strategy had been merely developed and managed within and by the leadership. From this process several implementation plans were developed, as also emerged in other universities (Univ. A, B, C). Moreover, evaluation systems can be used to align the goals of the periphery with that of the entire institution, through a system of faculty/department strategic plans connected with that of the university (Univ. B, D). Finally, when decision-making is data-driven, based on processes of monitoring and evaluation, organisational changes are perceived as less personalistic and more objective, enhancing their internal acceptance.

However, it should also be stressed that increasing formalization generates fruitful effects only if it is not perceived as a mere instrument of control. Interviewees from University B highlighted that the elaboration of departments' strategic plans was developed through an ongoing discussion and collaboration between central and peripheral offices, with representatives of the former that went physically to the latter. This was claimed to generate engagement and clarity of the final goal of this process. By contrast, for example, if evaluation is perceived as a control mechanism, this has led to resistance from the peripheral structures that can either hamper these processes or implement them only ceremonially (Univ. A, period 3; Univ. D, period 1). A second proposition can thus be formulated:

- **Proposition II)** A high formalisation positively impacts on positioning since it favours a more structured and objective implementation of the latter, favouring an alignment between the university centre and periphery;

- **Intervening factor II)** A ceremonial and superficial implementation of evaluation and planning processes.

Third, in relation to the size of university (1c), a smaller size proved to be crucial in supporting the balance between centralisation and involvement of the periphery, leading also to a more shared and integrated decision-making process. A smaller size allowed all the deans of faculties/departments to be part of either the executive team (Univ. C, D) or members of the senate (Univ. A, B). Moreover, at University C, which consists of only three faculties, centralization processes were less evident while the involvement and participation of peripheral structures in decision-making processes was more easily managed. This seems to corroborate Birnbaum's argument (1991) that centralized organizational structures are more important in larger institutions. Concerning the disadvantages of a smaller size, the lack of a 'critical mass' required to obtain external resources emerged from interviews. Consequently, the third proposition is as follows:

- **Proposition III)** A smaller size facilitates the balance between centralization and decentralization, enhancing the involvement of the periphery and its commitment towards strategic organizational change;
- **Intervening factor III)** A smaller size can imply the lack of enough 'critical mass' to obtain critical resources.

II. Organizational identity

All of the case studies pointed out that when the identity of a university is more integrated (2) there is a positive impact on positioning attempts this it provides moral incentives and individual engagement towards the intended strategic change (Clark 1998; Stensaker et al. 2014; Cruz-Castro et al. 2016; Paradeise and Thoenig 2018). Interviews showed how this integration is generated by both enduring and dynamic aspects of the university identity. First, interviews showed how enduring features (Czarniawska 1997), such as the history of the university, its traditional mission (teaching vs research orientation), and the connection with the territory, proved to be elements that are generally shared and accepted also among different disciplinary communities which contributed to strengthening the affiliation with the university, confirming B. Clark (1983) viewpoint. In addition, a more specialized subject mix seems to reduce the risk of a fragmented identity. Furthermore, those disciplinary communities that founded the university proved to be those in which the sense of a common identity is stronger. Instruments such as entry requirements and criteria for career progression were deliberately used to socialize newcomers with these values (Paradeise and Thoenig 2016). For example, the demonstration of research contribution towards society and economy is one of the most relevant criteria for academic career progression in University 4, since it expressed its historical mission. Also, branding activities and cultural events

(Univ. 1, 2, and 3) proved to be a valuable means to reappraise the specificities of a university and constituted an element of integration of the identity (Stensaker 2007). All the celebration of the 150 years of University 2 foundation, for instance, aimed exactly to spread internally a shared sense of honour of being part of this centenary institution.

Second, interviews underlined how besides the recognition of shared traditional values of what defines the university, each governance proposed indeed its own vision about what the university intends to become (positioning), in other words, how the identity of the university can evolve in front of an external changing environment without failing its traditional traits. As argued by Gioia and Thomas (1996) and Stensaker (2015) the university identity presents also a dynamic aspect that is the result of an internal and socially-constructed process. Therefore, an integrated identity is also the result of a high membership from internal members in the strategic vision proposed by the university leadership. All the case studies equally illustrated how the executive team undertook formal and informal processes aimed at increasing this membership. Sense-making processes proved to be crucial in this view, since changes that potentially break the ordinary operation and create uncertainty, were introduced through an ongoing interaction between several actors (the executive team, deans of the faculties, academics...) which not only explain where and how the university wants to position itself (Vuori 2015), but also determine how each part can contribute to it, ultimately making complex circumstances more comprehensible and manageable (Gioia and Thomas 1996; Pietilä 2014). Common examples of this process include the regular public meetings between the executive team and members of departments and the ongoing internal communication from the vice-chancellor/rector office towards the administrative and academic staff. Several members of the administrative staff from University 1 recognized, for example, how ongoing training, team building activities and weekly constructive meeting with the general director contributed to empower significantly the entire middle management team. Feeling to be part of a large and comprehensive project become ultimately a kind of moral incentive which generates engagement in the proposed organizational change and impact thus positively on positioning (Stensaker 2015; Cruz-Castro et al. 2016).

When these attempts are not carefully developed, the risk of the fragmentation of the identity is higher, and engagement will usually be concentrated only within those academic groups that express the leadership, thus creating a disciplinary-based segmentation that impacts on the implementation of the overall positioning process. Therefore, both enduring and dynamics aspects emerged as crucial in creating an integrated identity.

Proposition IV *An integrated identity impacts positively on positioning processes since it creates moral incentives and engagement for the members of the organization*

Intervening element: *The creation of an organizational identity is the result of both enduring and dynamics aspects which have to be managed by the top-management of the organization*

III. Organisational centrality.

The impact of organization centrality on positioning processes stems primarily from the greater availability of resources for those universities located in a more central position, especially in economic and social terms.

First, a central position in economic terms (3a) provides higher opportunities to build a distinctive positioning since it allows the university to select which of the multiple demands/targets of the knowledge economy/society to deal with (Vuori 2016), avoiding a potential ‘competitive overlap’ with other local universities (Seeber et al. 2017). In this view can be seen the several relationships that University 4 established with small-medium enterprises instead of large multinational companies which are more easily captured by the large research-intensive universities of the same city. Establishing formal relationships with the local economy not only enhances the link between graduates and the labour market (e.g. through the involvement of companies in curriculum development) but also provides funds for joint research. In addition, centrality in economic terms enhanced the university’s capacity to attract students, and researcher. This has emerged clearly with University 2 that is located in one of the most important cultural centres of Italy.

However, even if a peripheral position naturally provides fewer opportunities/resources that support positioning, this assumption cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, Universities 1 and 3 showed how this trend can be partially inverted over time if universities act as ‘agents of local development’ (Rossi and Goglio 2018), in other words, by becoming themselves a new centre of development for the surrounding environment. For example, Universities 1 became a relevant centre for the creation of spin-offs, patents and start-up, creating by itself entrepreneurial opportunities. In addition, the main local stakeholders were involved directly in the life of the university (through a specific statutory body) and by developing social reports underlining the impact of research activities on the local territory (until 2014). Similar examples can be made also for University 3. These attempts created positive externalities and contributed to creating a distinctive image of the university as a centre of innovation, thus (in the long-term) also activating resources. Yet, this type of proactive behaviour is not an intrinsic consequence of the peripheral

position, but always a deliberated choice of the leadership that was supported by an effective and cohesive organisational structure. Therefore, it could expect that:

Proposition V *Centrality in economic terms enhances the opportunity of distinctive positioning processes which facilitate also the obtainment of resource*

Intervening element: *the university might act as ‘agent of local development’*

Second, a central position in social terms seems instead to provide univocal positive effects. Being part of official partnerships with other universities (**3b**), particularly international ones, provides symbolic and material resources (e.g. in 2017 15% and 24% of the students respectively at Universities 3 and 4 are international). A peripheral position can be modified strategically also in social terms as shown by almost all the case-studies (Universities 1, 2, 4). These universities invested much in the establishment of formal collaborations with other universities (e.g. joint degrees) to be perceived as an ‘international university’, thus enhancing also their external status and reputation (Brankovic 2018). Centrality in social terms seems also to partially reduce competitive as emerged especially for University 4 which is in a metropolitan area with other seven universities. This situation supported the launch of a regional networks of universities whose aim was to coordinate themselves to moderate competition and create economies of scale. Based on these the last proposition is as follows:

Proposition VI *Being at the centre of relational networks (international and local) can support the access to several types of resources that not only sustain positioning efforts but contributes to made them distinctive to in eyes of external stakeholders*

The description made so far is based on the common patterns identified from the analysis of the four case studies. On the contrary, if a more country-comparative perspective is adopted some differences in the relationship between the organizational dimension and positioning processes passing from one national context to the other can be highlighted. Even if the number of universities per country is too small to draw strong conclusions, two main preliminary points have been underlined.

First, the organizational dimension influenced positively positioning processes in the Italian case-studies (in particular the first period of Univ. 1, and the second of Univ. 2) when this was initiated and introduced by a strong leadership expressed in the strong connection between a visionary/charismatic Rector and a business-inspired General director. When these two figures missed, it seems that the historical, academic-centred, disciplinary-based and collegial governance

that characterize Italian universities (Capano 2011), is only partially able to sustain effectively distinctive positioning efforts. A strong leadership appears thus to be a necessary condition, the only trigger that is able to turn loosely coupled organizational structures into more complete organizations. Furthermore, in such realities, the coexistence of centralization and involvement of the periphery is even more important, and examples of unsuccessful attempts can be tracked exactly in the two Italian universities (e.g. Univ 1, period 1; Univ. 2, period 1). This also connected to the fact that the heads of peripheral structure (departments) are not appointed by the university leadership but elected by the academics belonging to that structure. In the English case studies this dependence on the leadership is not so evident from the interviews. This might be certainly the result of a previous introduction of the so-called ‘managerial discourse’ and the increasing competition for funds which, according to Shattock (2017), contributed to strengthened hierarchical structures within universities. However, this might also a consequence of the fact that the Heads of the Faculties are often members of the executive team (both in Univ. 3 and 4). This contributed to create a more diffused rather than monocratic conception of the leadership.

Second, as underlined by Clark (1983), competitiveness contributed to create an integrated university’s identity since such pressures tend to trigger claims of uniqueness and a sense of collective effort. In English case-studies, several efforts to emphasize, maintain and communicate which features make a university unique can be tracked. It is not a case that these were mainly explained by the need to attract external resources, appearing distinctive to external stakeholders. The strive for competitive resources contributed thus to give institutional coherence. In the Italian HE system competition for resources is only recently intensified. For this reason, the perception of competition for resources is still not so compelling and it is less easy to speak about university identity. Again, it seems that only a strong action from the executive team contributed to compact departments’ goals into a more collective direction.

5. Concluding remarks

Reappraising the organizational dimension as a fruitful level of analysis, this paper has examined how the organizational structure, identity and centrality influence strategic positioning process of universities. The analysis of the case-studies identified six propositions that express the relationship between the so-called organizational dimension and positioning efforts. Concurrently, the case-studies also showed how this relationship cannot be conceived as deterministic since elements of two types make it much more complex and unpredictable.

First, it is possible to identify some intervening factors that are able, at least partially, to modify the expected relationship between the three organizational variables and positioning processes. If we consider the organizational structure, for example, the positive effects of centralization on positioning has somehow to be balanced with the involvement of the periphery in order not to lose administrative capacity. Similarly, since a university's identity is constantly challenged by the strategic vision of the leadership, identification with this latter seems to be just as important as the recognition of historical-based features.

Second, even if it would warrant deeper investigation, the connection among the three variables can affect the expected relationship between each of them and positioning processes. Some examples emerged from the case-studies. The behaviour of 'agent of local development' especially apparent in the case of University A, was clearly the result of a centralized governance which supported these outward actions through specific goals in the strategic plans, successively implemented through the creation of specific administrative offices and even a statutory body. Likewise, the limited size of University C (only 3 faculties) and a very long mandate of the vice-chancellor supported the creation of a strong and shared sense of identification with the strategic direction of the university that made it possible to maintain a less centralized governance without losing institutional coherence and administrative capacity. Finally, it emerges from all the case-studies that an integrated identity provides moral incentives for internal members even when decision-making is more top-down.

The analysis conducted in this paper entails a simple but not naïve policy indication. In the rush to adopt quick-fix solutions, there could be the risk of focusing only on strengthening internal organizational structures and procedures. However, this paper has shown that informal practices, routines, of sense-making processes are relevant factors that support strategic efforts like positioning. These cannot be introduced merely by law and are more the result of socially-constructed and long-term dynamics that underline the importance of human relationships within organizations (Kezar 2004). Since university positioning is becoming an increasingly central concern for national and local policies, this article is also an invitation for policy-makers to reflect on the role that the organizational dimension can exert on such processes (Fumasoli and Stensaker 2013).

Finally, this study presents a main limitation which suggests also a path for future research. The selection of four case-studies did not allow to capture all the variety of universities that could be found in a HE system. In particular, it could be relevant to widen the present sample by investigating the same three organizational variables in a large, old and top-research university

where collegial mechanisms of governance might be still relevant as ‘Oxbridge’ (Shattock 2017). An equal interesting path might be to select universities based on their reputation and examine if differences between low-status and elite institutions emerged, as suggested by Paradeise and Thoenig (2016).

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Appendix- Case-studies narratives

University 1

The positioning of University 1 is described as more research-oriented, with relatively greater attention directed towards the third mission and internationalisation from the first period (#1¹³, #6, #15). Interviews highlighted how the organisational structure is marked by a strong discontinuity over time. The governance of period 1 was characterised by a small executive team that included the rector, the vice-rector, two delegates, and the new general director. The limited size ensured a strong cohesion and a clear strategic vision (#1, #11). The clarity of the chain of command lends to hierarchical but efficient decision-making, which created several new practices positively ahead of times¹⁴ (#2, #3). However, centralization was balanced through attempts to widen the discussion with the faculties (#7), through two statutory collegial bodies (the research council and the council of the departments' directors), and informally through thematic working groups (e.g., spin-offs and patents) composed by departments' representatives and the executive team, through which a kind of 'matrix' structured was created (#10). Centralization was matched with an innovative internal process of monitoring that also provides public moments in which the advancement of the strategic process was presented. The second governance is instead described as an attempt to restore the traditional power of the academic community (#6, #18), that was claimed to be reduced by the previous centralisation and by the 2010 national reform, by preserving the role of the Senate and creating a large and disciplinary-based executive team (#8; #14). Finally, several interviews recognised how the current governance presents a renewed managerial proactivity but without a clear strategic direction (#15, #16). The executive team is broad to open the decision-making leading to ongoing processes of negotiation (#12). Moreover, an ambiguous and long reorganisation of the administrative staff contributed to slow the expected changes (#6, #17). Decision-making is often described as hierarchical but only in some dimensions (teaching), with a relatively good degree of freedom for the departments in the implementation of decisions aimed to maintain an internal consensus (#12, #13). Reporting duties and evaluation procedures are still high but now perceived from the periphery as more controlling rather than enabling (#15).

¹³ The symbol # refers to the interviewees reported in Table 3 (section 3).

¹⁴ Examples are the introduction of the figure of the 'teaching manager' to coordinate teaching activities and the establishment of one the first academic center for spin-offs in Italy.

Concerning the organisational identity, interviewees equally recognised that University 1 presents a clear historical identity, characterised by a commitment towards the quality of research (#1, #8, #17). Interviews highlighted several attempts to strengthen the membership towards the organisation, especially during the first period. Several people spoke about ‘enthusiasm’ about doing their jobs, explaining that despite an increasing hierarchization, there was an undeniable attempt to value individual competencies and to link these with an overall strategic goal (#2; #4; #11), e.g., through training programs and team-building activities. These initiatives have been slowly abandoned by the following governances. Moreover, the above-mentioned reorganisation together with a blurred strategic vision contributes to a lessening of this sense of identification (#9, #16).

Finally, University 1 is clearly at the periphery. Yet the interviews underlined how the first governance started to act proactively with the local territory, by involving the main stakeholders in the strategic direction of the university (through a specific statutory body until 2011) (#1; #7), developing social reports underlining the impact of research activities’ in the local society/economy (until 2014), and investing in spin-offs, patents, and start-ups (#2; #8). From a social and political viewpoint, the university instead started to establish partnerships with other universities (#1; #15) and use national associations of universities (like CRUI¹⁵) to diffuse its experience and to influence the policy-making.

University 2

The positioning efforts of University 2 are depicted as aiming to strengthen its traditional research quality and the international orientation of teaching (#1, #18). If interviewees recognised a continuity in the contents of positioning direction, the organisational structure clearly differed over time (#4, #8). While the first period faithfully represents the traditional collegial and disciplinary-based governance, the second one explicitly presented the goal of transforming the operation of the organisation (#2, #17). This started by the appointment of a younger executive team and with established managerial competencies and international reputation. Moreover, it quickly internalised the changes of the 2010 reform, creating a hierarchical and clear chain of command directed by the rector. This hierarchization was also expressed by a small and cohesive executive team and by the strong alignment between the Rector and the new General Director, who also substituted part of the management team with fresh managerial competencies (#1, #5).

¹⁵ (3) CRUI is the national conference of Rectors of Italian universities.

Centralization and coordination were supported by the fact that all the directors of departments were part of the Senate. This centralised decision-making was supported by the introduction of internal evaluation practices, inspired by national indicators, that continues to inform the internal distribution of internal funds also nowadays (#15). Centralized decision-making was compensated not only by a strong internal communication (managed by the rector) but also by the attempt to open the discussion with departments through some ad-hoc advisory bodies (about research) (#6, #7). Nevertheless, this balance broke down in the last 2 years of the second period. Features of the third governance are interestingly described as the opposite of the previous (#4, #11, #12). This governance is described as less centralised, with more structured and collaborative attempts to face the requests of the periphery (#13, #14). There is indeed always a meeting before the Senate session in which department directors can report bottom-up internal issues/initiatives, and it is deliberately used to reach consensus before starting the official deliberative process (#9; #13). Similarly, to reach the highest alignment between departmental strategic plans and the organizational one but without being perceived as a mere control, the monitoring process occurred through several informal meetings where central administrative officers go directly to the offices of each department's directors (#16).

Interviews confirmed that University 2 presents a quite integrated identity characterised by its particular subject mix and its unique geographical territory (#2, #14). Yet, this perception is undeniably higher from the representatives of the two disciplinary communities that found the university in the half of the XIX century. This element contributes to creating an element of fragmentation since membership toward the institution differs. Aware of this heterogeneity, the second governance started to launch several institutional, cultural, and sportive initiatives that were thought to enhance the pride of working for the university, as well as to reappraise the historical identity of the same through, e.g., the celebration of its 150 years. Yet, as underlined by some interviewees, it is the capacity to make people feel part of a project that most influences this identification (#3, #10). This is indeed the rationale that lies behind the 'collaborative' governance style of the third period (#9).

Finally, University 2 is located next to an industrialised area (#2) and within one of the most important cultural cities in Italy. This centrality has been deliberately used to foster the attractivity of the university towards foreign students/researchers supporting its internationalisation (#13). Interviews did not highlight any strong attempts to move closer to the national policy-making process, whereas the university is traditionally at the centre of several networks of universities, particularly in the humanities and economic disciplines. Moreover, the second governance

initiated several new international partnerships (supported afterwards) through the institutionalisation of already existing connections between individual academics/departments and other universities (#1, #5).

University 3

University 3 is a small regional university that obtained degree-awarding powers and the ‘university title’ in 2005. Since its foundation in the second half of the XIX century, its main positioning efforts focused on the provision of high-quality teaching (#1, #3, #5), widely recognised over time through league tables (gold medal in TEF) and official awards (‘university of the year’¹⁶). This traditional teaching orientation has only recently been deliberately aligned with the enhancement of research capacity, legally initiated with the obtainment of research degree awarding powers in 2008. However, this increasing attention towards research (e.g., hiring over 200 academics with doctorate) did not shift the historical orientation of the university, as witnessed by ongoing large investments in the modernisation of the campus and facilities for students (#1, #4).

This positioning path has been supported by a unique continuity in the organisational structure over time. Indeed, the vice-chancellor and part of the executive team guided the university since the beginning of the century. The executive team is composed of the vice-chancellor, three pro-vice-chancellors, and the deans of the four faculties (#2, #4). Its limited size and the presence of the deans ensures a strong cohesion of the whole decision-making throughout the organization since, e.g., a weekly meeting of the executive team is followed by that of the faculty, creating an ongoing process of central top-down indications and bottom-up positive feedbacks from the periphery (#1, #5, #6). Decisions adopted by the deliberative process (council, senate) are indeed perceived by the faculties/departments as a framework within which developing the rules/procedures for each departmental reality in a very ‘enabling’ way (#4, #10). The small size of the university (four faculties) also allows the executive team to go frequently into faculties meetings, getting feedbacks about strategic decisions and widening (as much as possible) the decision-making process (#1, #6). The role of the executive team is described as directing the discussion instead of imposing top-down decisions, as highlighted by the interviewed members of the Senate (#5, #9). A more collegial and decentralised governance does not necessarily mean

¹⁶ (4) The ‘University of the year’ is an annual awarded from the Times Higher Education to English universities that have demonstrated exceptional performance during the year of reference in teaching and research.

a more informed decision-making process since the executive's decisions are often informed by an increasingly important process of institutional research carried out by a specific administrative office (#7).

Interviews equally underlined how the perception of a 'collegial' and 'open' governance created a strong sense of identification and loyalty towards the institution and its strategic vision, which is further reinforced by a transparent internal communication directly managed by the executive (#3, #9, #10). This finding underlined that it is exactly the creation of an organisational culture that contributes most to the implementation of a long-term strategic direction (#1, #2). This does not mean that formalised processes, like the development of implementation plans, are neglected (#8). A strong membership also contributes to a clear awareness of an organisational identity expressed primarily in the commitment towards teaching and the students experience (#5, #6, #10).

Finally, university 3 is located at the economic periphery. Yet, this position traditionally pushed the university to both go outside its geographical borders and invest in the local territory to acquire resources and relationships that can support the high employability of its graduates (#4, #7). The university's position is peripheral also in political and social terms, but while there is a constant attempt to participate in the national associations of universities ('Universities UK'¹⁷) to influence the national policy-making (#1), the effort in building cooperative relationships with the other universities is more recent and thus weaker (#5).

University 4

The positioning of University 4 is well expressed by an overall balance between teaching and research. However, what really distinguishes this university from its local competitors is that both teaching and research activities are highly connected with the needs of the local society and economy (#1, #5). It follows that the main goal of teaching activities is the generation of highly employable students whose majority comes from disadvantaged social classes (#1, #11), whereas the worth of research lies in the generation of a socio-economic impact (#2, #10). It is not a case that the last strategy of University 4 has been developed starting from the identification of its beneficiaries (students; business; region and society), and their needs used as strategic goals (#3, #4).

¹⁷ 'Universities UK' is an advocacy organization for universities in the United Kingdom whose main aim is to defend the interests of universities

Hence, if continuity in the contents of positioning is widely recognised, discontinuity emerged in the organisational structure between period 1 and 2. What is mostly underlined is a twofold process. First, the traditional autonomy of the three faculties has been reduced during the second governance to align the individual performances of the faculties with the organisational strategic goals (#1, #2, #6). Yet, this attempt has been made as collaboratively as possible, through the presence of the deans of the faculties in the executive team and through thematic working groups for teaching and research, in which representatives of the faculties participate (#7, #9, #11). Second, both the strategic and the ordinary decision-making is described as increasingly formalised and managerial. The last strategy of the university has been developed through the guidance of a consulting company that facilitated workshops between the beneficiaries and the executive team, whereas the previous strategy was solely the expression of the latter (#2, #5). The ordinary decision-making is indeed now clearly connected with the strategy, through cascading implementation plans, as well as data-driven through a comprehensive process of monitoring (#1, #4). This formalised and centralised decision-making is coordinated by a small-medium-sized executive team that is (from the second period) divided into three subgroups, each presenting clear responsibilities and organised according to a matrix-based structure (#6) with part of faculties' administrative staff that directly report to the executive on specific themes. Interviews also highlighted how the current leadership is more 'open' and less personalised than the previous ones (#3, #8), contributing to improve the relationships with the council and the Senate.

In terms of organizational identity, interviews identify how the contribution towards society and the economy is what makes University 4 distinctive in the local territory, without presenting any significant disciplinary bias (#8, #9). This feature can be tracked both in the annual individual evaluation process and in the progression of careers. Academics are assessed based on different targets, among which the external engagement and citizenship are weighted as important as the production of world-class research (#1, #2). Similarly, recruitment of academics is not based only on bibliometric performances but also through a portfolio about how your research impacts society/economy. This process has been undertaken to socialise newcomers towards the mission of the university since the first governance (#2).

The positioning process is also supported by the centrality of the organisation in economic and social terms. Indeed, University 4 operates in an industrial area and presents many formal connections, especially with small-medium enterprises (#6, #4, #12). These relationships are expressed by the participation of companies' representatives on the advisory boards of faculties and by the construction in joint placement year programs. Similarly, the presence of many official

relationships with international universities (East and Middle Asia) contributes to enhance reputation but also to allow student exchanges, double degrees supporting, as a result, the mission of creating highly employable and global graduates (#5; #11).