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**Universities as Metaphors: From McUniversities
to Ivory Towers**

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Abstract

A vast amount of scholars have debated over the new forms of universities and respective changes in higher education sector in general. Labels like *entrepreneurial university*, *corporate university*, *elite university*, *mass-university*, *McUniversity*, *postmodern university*, and so on have spread around the scholarly literature, yet meaningful classifications of operating modes of universities are not easy to be found. By crafting typology of universities, current article strives to make sense of the organizational jungle out there in the higher education sector landscape. Instead of giving descriptive overview of the existing labels used to describe new forms of universities, the stress is on bringing out patterns and bridging existing labels in order to cluster those universities that operate in a similar mode.

Key Words: university, higher education, metaphors, management

Introduction

Traditionally universities have been open to the fortunate few, to the elite. Today, most parts of the world facilitate open access to the higher education, and this being so, universities as organizations have grown by size and scope. The largest university in the world in terms of enrolment numbers is the Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, which facilitates over 4 mln students. That exceeds even the population size of many countries, not to mention the size of the big business sector organizations. Such numerical examples are of practical importance, since they represent the enormous growth of higher education sector organizations. Building on this context it is easy to agree that universities as organizations are not only an attractive research matter, but furthermore, considering their impact to any society (Greenwood and Lewin 2001), making sense of higher education sector organization`s peculiarities will produce a valuable input both for university management and higher education policy makers.

Most of the studies tend to point out to the global trends in higher education in general, and un-proportionally few treatises address the question from the organizational level. Today, there is a vast jungle of universities out there, and it would be too bold to state that every single one of them is facing trends in higher education arena in similar way. That said, one needs to put more attention to the existing diversification of higher education institutions.

Current article seeks to cluster universities as metaphors so to produce systemized image of the existing university modes out there. Gareth Morgan`s book *Images of Organization* (1998) signposted the great power of metaphors for giving a simplified picture of one`s subject matter. Morgan`s (1998) metaphors of organization as a machine, a brain, an organism, as political systems, as cultures, as prison, as instrument of domination and as a change or flux provided intellectually attractive overview of organizations as such. Although some authors like McCourt (1997) have questioned the fruitfulness of metaphorical approach, it is hard to deny that sometimes it is very useful to draw a simplified picture before going deep into the matter.

In light of the global changes in higher education the use of metaphorical language has entered the discourse for some time now. Labels like *entrepreneurial university* (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Etzkowitz 1997; Vogel and Kaghan 2001), *corporate university* (Abel and Li 2012; Rademakers 2005; Prince and Stewart 2002), *managerial university* (Anderson 2008), *elite university*, *mass-university* (Altbach 2000), *McUniversity* (Parker and Jary 1995), *Postmodern university* (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Smith and Webster 1997), and so on have spread around the scholarly literature, yet among all single metaphors meaningful classifications of operating modes of universities are rare.

Identities Beyond the Ivory Tower

Morgan (1998: 31) has warned us how metaphors may create only “partial ways of seeing, for in encouraging us to see and understand the world from one perspective they discourage us from seeing it from others.” I believe this is in fact what has happened to the higher education institution landscape. A remarkable amount of time and (digital)paper has been spent on mystifying over the good old times when higher education was considered to be available only to the elite and universities stood strongly as Ivory Towers. Such an image is often clashed with understanding how universities today are feeling pressures and the world demand that “the university once and for all abandon its serene ivory tower” (Ibarra-Colado 2001: 204). Current

article dears to make a bold statement how such an image has been made up by rather limited frames of reference, since universities for a long time have not been that homogeneous as often illustrated. A statement also supported by Delanty (2001: 151):

There have been many historical as well as national models of the university, which, as an institution that is based on universalistic values—such as science and the world scientific community—is also, and necessarily so, very flexible and can accommodate different demands.

This being so, there is no reason why university as such should be operating homogeneously in Ivory Tower fashion. In fact, what reality from higher education landscape suggests, universities are far from similar to each other, expressing plurality of identities. It is here where I believe organizational identity becomes crucial in determining the taxonomy of universities in higher education landscape. Taking after Glynn (2000), organizational identity affects not only the way how organization defines itself, but most of all how it approaches such practical issues like strategic arrangements or organization`s capabilities. Simply put, organizational identity is a set of claims regarding what makes an organization distinctive (Albert and Whetten 1985). Yet as usually organizational identity has been approached by scholars as being deeply individual and intrinsic to organizations, current article strives to make use of organizational identity at the macro-level. That is, whether and how by looking from outside, all those identities of universities work together to form certain taxonomies. I could not agree more with a general agreement that organizational identity is a collective-level concept (He and Brown 2013), and as such the collectivity should not be limited only to single organization level, but looked from the eyes of the field or sector it is surrounded by. Regarding this, identity of a single university can be also seen as belonging to a specific cluster of identities in higher education sector. Organizations, especially universities take their legitimization from the surrounding environment. This being so, in order to exist, organization needs to get a “social acceptance” from the society (or to put it simple, from its potential “clients”) and it becomes clear how identities are often created through metaphors, e.g. labels like *elite* and *McUniversity*. Although organizations are constantly engaged in the process of self-formation (Deetz 1982), in terms of Weick (1988: 130), this process is shaped by enactment with a wider surrounding as “the external environment literally bends around the enactments of people”. Thus, building taxonomies in order to systemize reality is the core of sensemaking.

Methodological Framework

Current paper took the mission statements of the top 400 universities by Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2014. A mission statement can be defined as a justification of existence, a brief wording, which states who we are and what we do. With that in mind, mission statements often address various stakeholders, organizational members, clients, external partners, and so on (Stallworth Williams 2008). By analyzing the mission statements from the top universities of the world it is possible to bring out whether and how homogeneous the top universities actually are?

Such qualitative data from mission statements was analyzed and coded in order to be entered into the NVivo qualitative software program. Mission statements centered around two thematic

clusters or domains, which in turn had two subthemes: 1) the degree of specialization – either low or high, and 2) the degree of selectivity – either low or high. The overall categorization under the mentioned nodes is illustrated via table 1 below. Some illustrative extracts from the mission statements are brought to address the rationale behind the categorization.

Table 1. Listing content nodes emergent in mission statements

Categorization of labels (codes)	Description
Degree of specialization	
<i>Low</i> “A wide range of subjects, programs and disciplines” “Large university” “Public university”	Low degree of specialization indicates universities that offer a very broad spectrum of programs and cover wide array of disciplines. Often these are also large, public universities.
<i>High</i> “Sciences” “Technology” “Challenging fundamental problems” “Breaking research” “Engineering” “Achieving excellence”	High degree of specialization covers universities that indicate great efforts on science and technology, thus might offer highly specialized courses and more limited array of disciplines. The focus is on delivering ground-breaking discoveries and foster innovative ideas.
Degree of selectivity	
<i>Low</i> “Public service” “Open” “Affordable”	Low degree of selectivity refers to the universities that are oriented in serving large number of students, thus making higher education to be easily acceptable to many.
<i>High</i> “Exceptionally talented men and women” “Outstanding (students and staff)” “Careful selection”	High degree of selectivity refers to the universities that strive to pick out the most talented students and employees.

Source: Compiled by the author.

Conceptualizing Existing University Models: From Aristocrats to Technocrats

Rich (2005: 758) has proposed how organizational classification or taxonomy building can provide a solid ground for strong research by “breaking the continuous world of organizations into discrete and collective categories well suited for detailed analysis.” The analysis of mission statements delivered how firstly, some universities tend to be more open than others – some deliberately try to control or restrict the access or the membership, while others facilitate growth by all means. Secondly, universities vary remarkably by their degree of specialization, whether it by technology, science, teaching, etc. Taking these two aspects as the axes for clustering university models, four different metaphors can be created: university as a bureaucrat, technocrat, aristocrat and democrat (See figure 1).

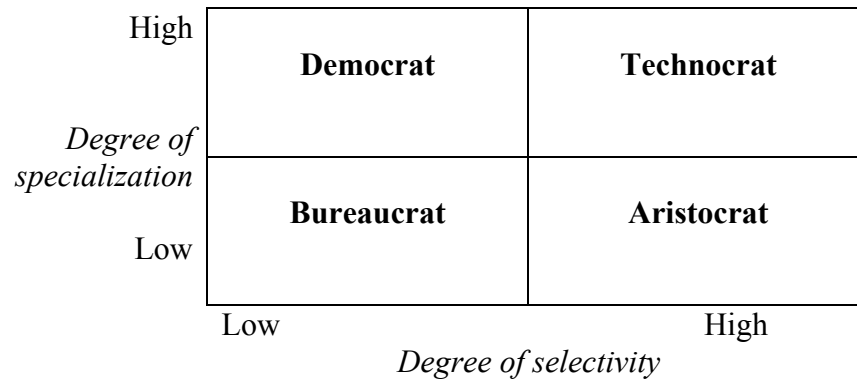


Figure 1. Four metaphors of universities.

Universities as Bureaucrats. Globally most evident is the tendency to move from elite specialization to *Fordist* style of mass production arrangement, where comparability and standardization at all levels are central to higher education institution management (Parker and Jary (1995: 321), similar to *tayloristic* work organizations (Greenwood and Levin 2001: 435). Borrowing operating modes from the business sector and profit-oriented organizations, such strive for standardized arrangements has been labelled by Ritzer (1993) as the *McDonaldization* of society. As several authors (Deem 1998) have reflected, the expansion of higher education sector due to an increase in demand for higher education, the pressure to justify one’s eligibility for public funds has turned into a tight competition. All in all it reflects university management modes, where universities are seen as means of massconsumption of higher education in a fast track mode – low degree of selectivity guarantees large enrolment numbers and low degree of specialization delivers higher education at the most universal level, covering a broad spectrum of programs and disciplines.

Universities as Democrats are the most frequent model of universities in most countries. This mode represents universities that are mostly national universities with long history in their country. Being often symbolic landmark of country’s higher education heritage, they offer full spectrum of traditional faculties or administrative structures, and are therefore with low degree of specialization. The label ‘democrat’ reflects here over the idea that such universities are often faced with pressures from different parties or stakeholders, who’s interests they can not neglect. With internal orientation, their mission is to guarantee high quality higher education in the national language of the country (which does not imply that international scope would be automatically missing). That said, the degree of selectivity can be rather high, mostly restricted by the language barriers as most of the curricula are taught in the national language.

Universities as Technocrats. Originating from Greek language, *technē* denotes “know-how”, skillful knowledge. In a sense, technocrat refers to someone who has the power to rule by know-how. Hence, technocracy is generally understood as the rule of the technical experts, which by all means is very accurate description or metaphor to a certain cluster of universities – that is research or technology intense universities. They tend to be highly specialized institutions

that are most often oriented to technological expertise. Technocrats have usually strong collaboration with business organizations, but furthermore, they tend to be a good ground for spin-offs and are often coined with a label *entrepreneurial university*. High degree in specialization is coupled with high degree of selectivity, since technocrats are focusing on selecting the best brains to be enrolled to the studies and recruited to work. That said, technocratic universities rely on highly specialized experts both at the student and employee level.

Universities as Aristocrats. It has been noted that originally, the expansion of higher education sector was possible mainly by expanding the elite universities, but it became soon inevitable that the old and graceful institutions could not expand endlessly due to their distinct traditions, organization and functions (Trow 2007). For this reason it is eligible to state how in the evolution of higher education elite Ivory Towers have not disappeared, but have just been complemented by many other forms of higher education institutions. In a similar fashion, there is no reason to believe that other modes of universities should be seen as “the enemy of elite higher education”, because all in all what has happened is that “elite higher education which was once the totality of higher education becomes a constantly smaller proportion” (Kerr 1978: 266). Universities as aristocrats metaphor tries to encapsulate the glorified image of the universities that carry on long and distinct academic heritage, the image of academic community as citizens in Ivory Tower. It is an image sharply pictured by Binder (1984: 29):

Most of us in the academic profession have dreamed of a university where there is a continuing dialogue among faculty members and students, where students learn how to learn, and where administrators facilitate the growth of autonomous but responsible faculty activities focused on creative teaching. Such a university would have an unusual commitment to teaching as a vocation and to professors as individuals...

They reflect strong cultural background, where membership is marketed as a strong status and not accessible to many. For this reason, they are highly selective. Such image is often carried by Oxford and Cambridge in UK, but also Harvard, Princeton and Yale in USA. Universities as aristocrats have low degree of specialization in a sense that they usually deliver classical array of disciplines and programs, though these programs are often also taught at high level. The latter, high level taught programs is what differentiates aristocrats from other universities with low specialization, e.g. from bureaucrats. Aristocrats are focused on delivering intense and complex subject teaching (Trow 1976). They tend to build fields of science and teaching around high concentration of the best expertise and experts possible, e.g. attracting best scientist to work for them. In fact, the greatest distinction between other forms of universities and elite universities emerges from the ambitions injected into their members. As Trow (2007: 250) has expressed it:

Whatever the specific content of the course of study and syllabus—and that indeed varies rather widely—this form of higher education conveys (and intends to convey) to students that they can accomplish large and important things in the world, that they can make important discoveries, lead great institutions, influence their country’s laws and government, and add substantially to knowledge. In this sense, institutions of elite higher education are arrangements for raising ambition

and for providing social support and intellectual resources for the achievement of ambition.

In this sense, metaphor of an aristocrat becomes increasingly acute as it dears to image the attitude incorporated into the elite universities. Furthermore, Brennan (2004) brings forward how with expanded higher education and new forms of institutional hierarchy, higher education has become to reproduce social inequality as the access to the elite universities still remain highly restricted to those below the upper class.

Conclusion

A profound number of scholars have debated over the new forms of universities and respective changes in higher education sector in general. Seeing universities through metaphors allows to give a comprehensive image of the higher education sector's landscape. Elaborating further, much of the literature on the global changes in higher education is written in style "to whom the bell tolls", that is, transformative changes in university landscape are seen as downgrading the essence of the university. I would rather argue that these global shifts should not be translated into negative meanings, since all they do is addressing different types of universities. As Kerr (1978: 270) has stated, "higher education cannot effectively be organized around a single model". University landscape 50 years ago was much more homogeneous, if not to say dominated by elite universities, yet today it is not to say that such Ivory Tower universities have dissapeared into McUniversities. Aristocratic Ivory Towers are still there, just that they exist side by side to Bureaucratic McUniversities.

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