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Navigating the academic landscape: understanding university dynamics, challenges, and strategic responses

Navegando el panorama académico: comprendiendo la dinámica universitaria, los desafíos y las respuestas estratégicas

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the structural and strategic challenges in university governance, focusing on the balance between institutional autonomy and external accountability. Using an inductive, qualitative approach grounded in secondary data analysis and reflective observations from an academic career, the methodology involved thematic coding to identify patterns in university governance, role differentiation, and external influence. Key findings reveal a tension between autonomy and control by government and funding bodies, internal divisions between faculty and administration, and a hierarchical recognition system that prioritizes research roles over teaching-focused ones. These dynamics contribute to internal fragmentation, affecting morale and collaboration. Implications highlight the need for governance models that value diverse contributions, promote cross-functional communication, and enhance adaptability. Limitations

include reliance on secondary data and lack of direct interviews, pointing to the need for further research on governance models and faculty engagement. This study provides insights for universities navigating complex educational landscapes while fostering cohesion and strategic adaptability.

Keywords. University strategy, stakeholder-centric models, democratization, excellence, scholarly output, organizational structure, recognition disparities, governance models, inductive research, financial constraints.

RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga los desafíos estructurales y estratégicos en la gobernanza universitaria, enfocándose en el equilibrio entre la autonomía institucional y la rendición de cuentas externa. Utilizando un enfoque cualitativo inductivo basado en el análisis de datos secundarios y en observaciones reflexivas de una carrera académica, la metodología incluyó codificación temática para identificar patrones en la gobernanza universitaria, la diferenciación de roles y la influencia externa. Los hallazgos clave revelan una tensión entre la autonomía y el control ejercido por entidades gubernamentales y de financiamiento, divisiones internas entre el cuerpo docente y la administración, y un sistema de reconocimiento jerárquico que prioriza los roles de investigación sobre los roles centrados en la docencia. Estas dinámicas contribuyen a una fragmentación interna que afecta la moral y la colaboración. Las implicaciones destacan la necesidad de modelos de gobernanza que valoren diversas contribuciones, promuevan la comunicación interfuncional y mejoren la adaptabilidad. Las limitaciones incluyen la dependencia de datos secundarios y la falta de entrevistas directas, lo cual indica la necesidad de más investigación sobre modelos de gobernanza y estrategias de compromiso del profesorado. Este estudio ofrece ideas para universidades que buscan navegar en entornos educativos complejos mientras fomentan la cohesión y la adaptabilidad estratégica.

Palabras clave. Estrategia universitaria, modelos centrados en los interesados, democratización, excelencia, producción académica, estructura organizacional, disparidades de reconocimiento, modelos de gobernanza, investigación inductiva, limitaciones financieras

INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of knowledge has indeed been the cornerstone of societal progress, serving as a linchpin for economic, technological, and cultural prosperity across civilizations. Scholars and intellectuals have long prioritized the generation and transmission of knowledge, which forms the essence of academia. Universities, as institutional embodiments of this mission, manage knowledge in a dual capacity: its creation and dissemination. Historically, this role is profound, extending beyond modern conceptualizations of academia into an enduring practice fundamental to humanity's evolution (Boyer, 1990; Bastedo et al., 2016).

Universities as centers for both the inception and spread of knowledge evoke early human gatherings that might be considered precursors to contemporary "technological universities." Much like the medieval *studium generale*, which served as a hub for intellectual exchange, today's universities carry forward this mission by fostering interdisciplinary learning and inquiry, supporting both scientific and humanistic exploration (Bailey, 2008; Perkin, 2014).

Over three decades ago, Peter Drucker's *Post-Capitalist Society* (1993) highlighted a paradigm shift from industrial production to knowledge generation as the primary driver of societal progress. Drucker asserted that expertise in knowledge creation, rather than merely production skills, defines

success in a post-industrial economy, positioning knowledge as the strategic resource of the future (Drucker, 1993; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2007). Consequently, the modern university must act as a vanguard institution, adapting to and influencing societal shifts. By observing, understanding, and strategically navigating complex environments, universities not only support society's adaptation to these changes but also proactively shape pathways for future prosperity (Altbach, 2016; Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2018).

A notable outcome of this evolving landscape is the observation that, for over 35 years in developed nations, intangible capital—comprising intellectual property, human capital, and technological knowledge—has surpassed the value of tangible assets like infrastructure. This trend is particularly evident in the market valuations of technology giants such as Microsoft, Google, and Facebook, which consistently exceed those of traditional industrial companies like Ford, despite Ford's historically prominent market presence (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2016; Haskel & Westlake, 2022). The shift toward knowledge-based economies underscores the increasing value of intellectual property, software, and innovation as crucial drivers of value creation in contemporary markets (Corrado et al., 2009; OECD, 2015).

Recognizing this transformation, policymakers in OECD countries have advocated for significant investments in research and development (R&D), public education, and software, aiming for a sustained annual GDP investment growth of 3% to bolster innovation and maintain global competitiveness (OECD, 2015). David A. King highlighted the critical role of scientific research in a 2004 *Nature* article titled "The scientific impact of nations: What different countries get for their research spending," where he argued that investment in scientific research is indispensable for national progress, contributing to both economic and societal well-being (King, 2004).

The types of knowledge that should engage a university's interest span both theoretical and applied domains. Theoretical knowledge underpins fundamental discoveries, while operational knowledge drives innovation and practical applications, necessitating universities' active involvement in global academic networks while remaining attuned to local contexts (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000; Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Hossain et al., 2023). Consequently, universities are expected to achieve dual impact: global visibility, reflected through international rankings such as the Shanghai Ranking, and regional influence, fostering a reciprocal flow of knowledge between academia and society (Salmi, 2009; Arocena et al., 2017). This dual mission requires universities not only to generate foundational knowledge but also to engage in knowledge transfer and commercialization processes that channel research into innovative, real-world applications (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Altbach et al., 2019; Hammoda, 2023).

To meet these diverse objectives, universities must develop capacities for foresight, adaptive strategies, proactive innovation, and visionary planning. However, these ambitions are often hindered by structural constraints at both strategic and organizational levels. The complexity of these challenges is compounded by the interactions between strategic, organizational, socio-psychological, and psychological factors, underscoring the need for nuanced analyses of university dynamics (Mintzberg, 1979; Clark, 1983; Boyce, 2003; Menon & Suresh, 2021). Such analyses reveal that universities, while often resilient, can be slow to adapt, sometimes defaulting to a posture of structural rigidity that hinders evolution (Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Clark, 1998; Teece, 2018). This paper, therefore, aims to highlight speculative insights into the multifaceted challenges that confront contemporary academia, acknowledging the complexity of universities as organizations navigating an intricate and dynamic environment (Marginson, 2016).

So, how can university governance models balance institutional autonomy with external accountability while fostering internal cohesion, equitable role recognition, and strategic adaptability in an evolving higher education landscape?

This paper is structured into five main sections, beginning with an introduction. The second section, *University Strategic Concerns: Factors Influencing Strategy Formation*, examines key elements shaping university strategies, including financial stability, stakeholder engagement,

governmental mandates, and the balance between democratization and academic excellence. The third section, *Methodology: Inductive Qualitative Research and Action-Research Framework*, outlines the study's qualitative approach, detailing data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The fourth section, *Results and Findings*, presents three major insights: the relationship between organizational strategy and university structure, disparities in recognition affecting stakeholder commitment, and governance models shaping academic leadership. The final section discusses the study's implications, limitations, and future research directions, concluding with a summary of key findings and recommendations.

UNIVERSITY STRATEGIC CONCERNS: FACTORS INFLUENCING STRATEGY FORMATION

The strategic direction of a university is shaped by three pivotal factors: context, objectives, and missions (Mathies & Ferland, 2022).

A distinctive context: transitioning from financial stability to stakeholder-centric models

The university, characterized as an "estimable organization" (Selznick, 2020), owes its existence to the framework of the "welfare state." This intricate relationship with the state, often encapsulated in the notion of "public service," has historically hindered the university's ability to formulate an autonomous strategy.

The profound reliance on the "welfare state" constitutes a significant financial backbone, contributing between 80% and 90% of the university's income (covering operations, investments, and personnel), as well as granting it authority to confer degrees (Clark, 1998; Selznick, 2020). While the state, driven by a virtuous logic of providence, allocates resources to sustain the university system, it simultaneously restricts genuine self-financing capabilities. Direct funding by students or users through specific fees is either disallowed or severely limited, constraining the creation of organizational slack crucial for implementing innovative actions and fostering new identities for the university (Marginson, 2016; Selznick, 2020).

These challenges in university autonomy and strategic development within a complex framework have been extensively documented in the academic literature. The inability to independently formulate resource policies and the limited negotiating power with the state have been identified as significant obstacles to maneuvering and cultivating distinctive competencies within higher education institutions (Marginson, 2016; Clark, 1998)

The dependence on external funding sources, particularly from the state, exacerbates these challenges. Political constraints, such as non-selective entrance policies and constrained financial benefits, further impede the university's flexibility and strategic decision-making (Magalhães et al., 2018; Amaral and Magalhães, 2023). Additionally, budgetary limitations and strict tutelary control contribute to a restricted capacity to manage supplies, implement effective financial strategies, and adapt to the evolving higher education landscape, resulting in a notable reduction in autonomy (Deem et al., 2007).

These constraints not only shape the day-to-day operations of universities but also influence their long-term strategic planning. Overcoming these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationship between universities and their external environments, as well as innovative approaches to institutional governance and resource management.

The dynamics of accreditation and its impact on program quality have been subject to extensive analysis in academic literature. National accreditation, while serving as a mark of quality for university programs, inadvertently introduces complexities, particularly in the global context (Marginson, 2016; Amaral and Magalhães, 2018). This is particularly evident in the unintended

consequence of shielding certain programs from the imperative of international accreditation, a phenomenon that has gained increasing significance over time.

The exemption from international accreditation requirements places these programs in a unique position. While enjoying the benefits of national accreditation, they must concurrently address the challenge of establishing robust quality assurance mechanisms to compete in increasingly global and competitive markets (Deem et al., 2007). This is crucial for attracting students, who are often viewed as clients in the educational marketplace, ensuring the economic sustainability of these programs.

In contrast, the university as a whole, protected from immediate survival concerns due to its insulation from student-users, may experience a certain detachment from the competitive dynamics that programs face. This insulation, while offering stability, may also pose challenges to the university's overall evolution and openness to global trends and standards. This observation underscores the need for universities to carefully navigate the balance between national and international accreditation to ensure both programmatic excellence and institutional agility in the face of evolving educational landscapes.

The specific challenges faced by universities in forging a genuine strategic pathway within an environment with reduced immediate survival concerns have been a subject of scholarly examination. Notably, certain institutions, such as engineering schools or institutes, emerge as distinctive cases that partially transcend these challenges.

Aligned with professionalization and subject to a secondary form of supervision from companies, these institutions capitalize on unique advantages. They enjoy financial benefits, including apprenticeship tax and continuous training opportunities, fostering strong connections with the corporate sector (Clark, 1998; Amaral and Magalhães, 2018). Furthermore, they leverage pedagogical advantages, such as robust internship and apprenticeship programs, which enhance the practical relevance of their education.

The governance structures of these institutions play a pivotal role in justifying and supporting strategic initiatives. Often involving advisors or board chairs from the corporate sector, these governance bodies contribute industry-specific insights that can significantly impact the institutions' direction (Deem et al., 2007). This external involvement not only aligns the institutions with industry needs but also bolsters their credibility and relevance.

Moreover, the support garnered from major national employers' associations adds another layer of influence and legitimacy to these institutions. Endorsement from these associations not only validates the institutions' strategic direction but also positions them as key contributors to national economic and workforce development agendas. This external validation becomes particularly influential when exerting influence on relevant ministries and policy-making bodies (Marginson, 2016).

In summary, the distinctive characteristics and strategic positioning of certain institutions, such as engineering schools or institutes, provide valuable insights into how universities can navigate challenges and cultivate strategic pathways, even in an environment where immediate survival concerns are less acute.

Imposed efficiency objectives

At the educational level, governmental initiatives emphasize a commitment to ensuring equal opportunities through the central concept of "democratization" in higher education. This entails advocating for non-selectivity, encouraging universities to admit a diverse array of graduates with the overarching goal of an 80% success rate in the baccalaureate within a specific age group. The seamless integration of this mandate within the education system reflects a favorable trajectory, akin to navigating with the wind at its back. However, the university's royal instrumentalization, characterized by lower funding per student compared to engineering schools and a lack of control over resources, presents a complex challenge in balancing democratization and excellence.

Despite achieving quantitative success, concerns arise about achieving uniform levels of academic excellence, potential lowering of standards, and the state's financial capacity to sustain these ambitious objectives. Balancing democratization and excellence requires careful consideration of educational policies, resource allocation, and the long-term implications for students and the university's standing in the broader academic and professional community (Trow, 2007; Altbach and Mathews, 2019; Johnstone, 2004).

The university operates within a "low-cost" mass production paradigm, characterized by significantly lower funding per student compared to engineering schools, coupled with the absence of a selection process or control over resources. This predicament presents a formidable challenge as the institution strives to delicately balance the imperatives of democratization and excellence. Financial constraints and a lack of mechanisms for optimal resource allocation compound this challenge, hindering the university's ability to uphold academic standards and support initiatives that foster excellence.

Despite achieving quantitative success in meeting the 80% success objective within a specific age group, it's essential to acknowledge that numerical accomplishments don't automatically ensure uniform levels of academic excellence across the student body. Questions about the feasibility of such ambitious objectives persist, especially given the state's financial capacity constraints. While democratization goals are likely to be realized, uncertainties linger regarding the realization of excellence, external diploma recognition, and the ensuing opportunities for graduates. This discussion prompts reflection on whether the pursuit of excellence might be secondary to addressing unemployment or emphasizing the importance of tacit knowledge and adaptive faculties in the professional world. Furthermore, societal endorsement, particularly from families, aligns with a positive outlook on higher education, associating occupational insertion and degree level with positive correlations. However, unintended consequences may include the devaluation of short vocational training and its declining popularity, as the democratization of higher education fosters the notion of securing a good job.

At the research level, setting quantified efficiency thresholds ex-ante is a formidable challenge. However, the evaluation of research performance often relies on ex-post measures, such as the number of publications selected in the most internationally recognized journals. This evaluation is grounded in the expectation that research should yield returns to society commensurate with the investments made (Merton, 1968). While certain disciplines allow for more objective measures of research quality, such as the quantification of inventions and patents filed, many fields prioritize the reputation of journals as a critical factor in ensuring quality assurance (Hicks et al., 2015).

In some disciplines, a preference for so-called theoretical publications, often pre-formatted, exists. However, this emphasis on theoretical work can potentially distance researchers from the practicalities of the subjects under study (Ioannidis, 2005). Despite the debatable nature of these rules, they bring a level of structure to the research system. The recognition of journal reputation as a determinant of quality assurance reflects the intricate dynamics involved in evaluating research output, where diverse disciplinary norms come into play (Larivière et al., 2015).

Over the past decade, the race for high-level publications has become a dominant trend in academia, particularly given its decisive influence on the career trajectories of educators (De Rijcke et al., 2016). The promotion prospects of a teacher now hinge predominantly on the quality of their publications, overshadowing other considerations and marginalizing the significance of their educational or administrative investments (Stephan, 2012).

This emphasis on scholarly output as a primary determinant of academic success has become a prevalent theme, shaping the prevailing culture within universities. However, despite the heightened importance of scholarly publications, there are instances where the rate of faculty actively engaged in publishing does not surpass 60%. This indicates a nuanced landscape within academia where individuals may prioritize other facets of their roles, such as teaching or

administrative responsibilities, over the relentless pursuit of high-impact publications (Abbott, 2002; Labaree, 2020).

The convergence of these trends underscores the complex dynamics within contemporary academia, where a diverse range of priorities and values coexists, shaping the varied approaches adopted by educators in navigating their careers. It is essential to acknowledge the broader implications of this shift, including potential challenges and opportunities for academic institutions and the scholarly community at large.

The kaleidoscope of missions

In the corporate world, the primary goal is unequivocal: generate profit. This pursuit is driven by two main factors—return on investments and shareholder interests (Clark, 1998; Taylor, 2012; Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). From a somewhat cynical perspective, the nature of the product and its manufacturing location are considered secondary concerns. The university, however, operates within a more complex framework. As the "estimable daughter" of the sovereign state, defining its missions precisely becomes intricate (Marginson, 2016). The university must navigate a delicate balance between pursuing excellence and facilitating mass education. It is tasked with conducting high-level research while simultaneously addressing issues of student attrition in the early educational cycles.

Furthermore, its educational spectrum spans a wide range—from philosophy to short technological courses—reflecting a commitment to diversity in training (Trow, 2007). The university must harmonize traditional initial education, apprenticeship programs, and continuing education. In making decisions, it must navigate through the complexities of face-to-face and distance learning, as well as the choice between direct tutoring and the self-paced learning encouraged by Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). All of these diverse missions must be managed within a singular organizational framework, adding another layer of complexity to the university's operational landscape.

Leading all these missions is undoubtedly challenging, perhaps bordering on the impossible or unrealistic, despite the inherent nobility and rationale behind each one (Clark, 1987). Addressing undergraduate failure necessitates a profound commitment to intensive pedagogical activities, diverting attention and resources from the research endeavors that fall under separate considerations. The dispersion of effort across the myriad missions mentioned often leads to a gradual wear and, over time, potential abandonment of certain responsibilities by educators.

The vast diversity of roles and expectations compels teachers to make choices at various points in their careers, often culminating in the adoption of specialized profiles reflective of the priorities of a particular moment (Marginson, 2016). This dynamic reflects the ongoing tension within academia, where educators grapple with the multifaceted nature of their roles and the necessity to navigate through competing demands on their time and expertise (Trow, 2007).

METHODOLOGY: INDUCTIVE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND ACTION-RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This study adopts an inductive qualitative research methodology combined with an action-research framework to explore complex themes in higher education, specifically around university autonomy, strategic development, and institutional constraints. Qualitative research is well-suited for investigating intricate social and organizational phenomena, allowing for an in-depth understanding of underlying patterns and interactions (Denzin et al., 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2024). The inductive approach enables theory development from observed data rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses, making it particularly relevant for studying evolving university governance structures (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). By blending secondary data from literature

with the researcher's extensive, action-based observations, this study captures both documented trends and practical insights drawn from a lifelong career in academia. Action research, which emphasizes iterative reflection and real-world engagement, provides a dynamic, participatory lens for analyzing institutional behaviors and strategic decision-making (Reason et al., 2013; Kemmis et al., 2014). This dual methodology allows for a nuanced exploration of higher education dynamics, fostering theory development grounded in both structured research and experiential understanding (Argyris, 1993; Coghlan, 2019).

Rationale for inductive qualitative and action-research approach

The rationale for employing an inductive qualitative approach is rooted in its capacity to derive theories from patterns observed within a dynamic and multifaceted context (Thomas, 2006). Inductive research is particularly suited to studies seeking to develop new insights rather than test hypotheses, which aligns with the exploratory goals of this research. Furthermore, by integrating an action-research framework, the study leverages the researcher's professional role to capture real-world observations over time. Action-research's emphasis on reflective practice and iterative cycles of observation and analysis allows the researcher to contribute actively to the field while generating knowledge through firsthand insights (Kemmis et al., 2014).

In this study, data are drawn from secondary sources—peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, policy documents—and supplemented by documented professional observations from the researcher's academic career. This combined approach allows the study to address higher education's institutional complexities from both theoretical and applied perspectives, creating a comprehensive and contextually rich analysis (Patton, 2014).

Data collection process and observational insights

Data collection involved two main streams: secondary data review and action-based observations.

1. **Secondary data review**: A systematic review of scholarly literature, institutional reports, and policy documents was conducted to establish a foundational understanding of current themes in higher education. Specific areas of focus included academic autonomy, governance, resource allocation, stakeholder relations, and strategic adaptation. Sources were selected based on rigor and relevance, prioritizing peer-reviewed publications and authoritative reports from the past decade, with foundational studies included where historical context was essential (Bowen, 2009). This literature provided the framework for understanding documented trends and served as a reference point against which the researcher's observations could be compared.
2. **Action-based observations**: The observational component is grounded in decades of accumulated experience across various roles within higher education institutions, primarily in the Grenoble region of France. These roles enabled the researcher to gain real-time insights into governance processes, policy implementation, and academic decision-making. Observations were systematically documented in reflective journals throughout the researcher's career, capturing a broad spectrum of institutional dynamics within this specific demographic context. Topics recorded include shifts in governance priorities, institutional responses to policy changes, and interactions among stakeholders. This longitudinal collection of observations provides a detailed perspective on the evolution of institutional behaviors and strategic decisions under both internal and external pressures.

The action-research framework emphasizes the researcher's active participation in these settings, allowing observations to be interpreted in real time and adjusted based on emerging trends or situational changes. Such a reflective, iterative approach aligns with Schön's (1983) concept of the "reflective practitioner," where professional experience is used as a resource for generating practical and theoretical insights.

Criteria for source selection and data integration

To ensure rigor and relevance, strict criteria guided the selection of secondary sources. Only scholarly articles and reports that offered substantial insight into higher education issues were included, focusing on recent publications to maintain currency. However, influential foundational studies were also referenced when they contributed to the broader theoretical context. This secondary data was integrated with personal observations, which served as a longitudinal data set, adding historical and practical depth to the findings.

The integration of personal observations enhances the study's interpretive richness by incorporating real-world insights from an academic career spanning multiple decades. By capturing data through both structured review and action-oriented reflections, the research bridges theory and practice, allowing observed behaviors and patterns to inform thematic analysis. This reflective practice aligns with the principles of action-research, which prioritize the researcher's role as both participant and observer, contributing a layer of experiential understanding to the analysis (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Data analysis: inductive coding and action-reflection cycles

The data analysis used a content analysis approach, systematically examining both secondary literature and observational data to identify, organize, and refine themes relevant to the study. This process followed an iterative cycle where data were reviewed, categorized, and interpreted, allowing for deeper insights into patterns within the higher education landscape. Content analysis, commonly used in qualitative research, allows researchers to systematically explore textual and observational data to derive meaningful themes (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

The analysis began with an initial review of all data sources, including peer-reviewed articles, institutional reports, policy documents, and documented observations from the researcher's career. Relevant topics—such as university autonomy, governance structures, stakeholder relations, and resource management—were identified, based on their frequency and significance across different sources. These topics served as the foundation for thematic exploration, allowing the researcher to focus on recurring issues critical to understanding the complexities of higher education.

As the analysis progressed, connections between these topics were systematically examined to reveal underlying patterns and relationships. This iterative comparison process helped to refine the themes by examining how different factors, such as governance practices and external influences, interact within the academic environment (Bowen, 2009). By integrating insights from both literature and professional observations, the researcher was able to interpret not only what issues were prominent but also how these issues impacted university operations over time.

Through this process, several overarching themes emerged, providing a holistic view of the challenges and dynamics in higher education. Key themes included:

1. **Strategic adaptability within structural constraints:** This theme explores the university's ability to adapt its strategies while facing limitations in resources, budget, and external controls, which restrict its autonomy in decision-making and long-term planning.
2. **Autonomy vs. external control:** This theme addresses the tension between universities' desire for independence and the control exerted by external bodies, such as government agencies and funding organizations, which influence critical aspects of institutional functioning.
3. **Faculty vs. administration dynamics:** This theme highlights the complex relationship between faculty and administrative staff, often marked by differing perspectives and roles that can lead to conflicts, misunderstandings, and challenges in collaboration.
4. **Recognition and role hierarchies:** This theme examines the varying levels of recognition and prestige afforded to faculty based on their roles, whether they focus on teaching,

research, or governance, and how these hierarchies impact their professional experiences and career satisfaction.

5. **Influence of external stakeholders on governance:** This theme explores how external stakeholders, such as government agencies, accreditation bodies, and industry partners, shape university governance, influencing strategic priorities and institutional policies.
6. **Impact of role and recognition disparities on morale and performance:** This theme looks at how disparities in recognition and role valuation affect faculty morale, motivation, and overall organizational performance, with potential implications for communication, decision-making, and workplace satisfaction.
7. **Pedagogical vs. research priorities:** This theme captures the divide between faculty who prioritize teaching and those focused on research, and how these competing priorities impact resource allocation, institutional support, and the fulfillment of the university's dual missions.
8. **Governance models and leadership types:** This theme examines different styles of university governance, such as budget-focused or strategic leadership, and how these models influence the institution's strategic direction, culture, and adaptability.
9. **Cycle of accountability and motivation:** This theme discusses the relationship between faculty motivation, accountability, and institutional commitment, highlighting how positive experiences can foster engagement, while negative experiences can lead to disengagement.
10. **Local vs. institutional belonging:** This theme focuses on the stronger sense of belonging that faculty often feel at the departmental or local level compared to the broader university level, which can lead to fragmented loyalty and reduced engagement with institutional goals.

To ensure rigor and reliability, the researcher used multiple data sources and maintained reflexivity throughout the analysis, acknowledging potential biases stemming from personal observations. Reflexivity is critical in qualitative research, especially when the researcher's experiences are part of the data, as it encourages continuous self-assessment to enhance objectivity (Finlay, 2002).

The final themes synthesized insights from the literature with the researcher's professional experiences, offering a comprehensive perspective on the strategic and operational challenges faced by universities. This content analysis approach allowed the study to generate a nuanced understanding of higher education's evolving landscape, informed by both documented trends and firsthand observations.

Throughout the analysis, the iterative cycles of action-reflection, integral to action-research, were employed to validate and refine themes. Reflective notes, akin to memoing, documented evolving insights and helped capture the underlying motivations and constraints that shape institutional actions in higher education. This iterative reflection allowed the researcher to continuously refine themes, ensuring they were grounded in both observed reality and academic discourse (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021).

Validity and reflexivity

Validity in this study was enhanced through rigorous reflexive practices, acknowledging the researcher's dual role as observer and participant. Reflexivity involved documenting biases, assumptions, and potential influences on data interpretation, ensuring transparency in how personal experiences shaped the findings (Finlay, 2002). Given the reliance on secondary data and personal observations, reflexivity was crucial to balance subjective insights with objective analysis. Cross-referencing secondary sources and triangulating insights with academic literature further bolstered the credibility of the findings (Kaman & Othman, 2016; Meydan & Akkaş, 2024).

Reporting and ethical considerations

Findings are presented in a narrative format to capture the process of discovery, emphasizing the integration of professional observations with literature-derived insights. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, particularly regarding the use of personal observations. Specific institutions or individuals were anonymized to ensure confidentiality, and findings were discussed in broader thematic terms rather than through individual cases, respecting privacy while maintaining transparency (Orb et al., 2001).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results and findings section presents a comprehensive analysis of the complex organizational dynamics within universities, focusing on the interplay between strategy, structural design, and external influences. Through examining these interactions, key themes emerge that reflect the challenges and nuances of managing a higher education institution within the constraints of external oversight and internal role differentiation.

Universities, often operating as "professional bureaucracies," are marked by a division between administration and faculty, each with distinct roles and priorities. While administrators focus on stability, continuity, and operational efficiency, faculty members contribute primarily through teaching and research, significantly impacting the institution's reputation. These roles, although complementary, can lead to tension, especially when recognition and resource allocation differ across functions. Additionally, external stakeholders, such as government bodies and accreditation agencies, play a critical role in shaping university policies and strategic directions, further influencing the internal dynamics.

The following findings explore these themes in depth, addressing issues such as strategic adaptability, autonomy challenges, role recognition, and the impact of external control. These insights provide a deeper understanding of how universities navigate their dual missions of knowledge creation and dissemination while managing competing demands and expectations.

Correlating organizational strategy with structural design: unveiling the intrinsic connection

Peter Drucker, the renowned American management guru, articulated rules for effective management in the late 1950s, emphasizing the importance of having a vision, surrounding oneself with competent individuals, providing adequate resources, and maintaining control in a broad sense (Drucker, 2006). The application of these principles raises questions about whether a university can successfully adhere to such guidelines.

As previously discussed, a university's project, vision, and strategies are often beyond the direct control of its management team. Financial considerations, while overseen by the organization, are constrained within a relatively modest budget. Furthermore, the recruitment of teachers is subject, to some extent, to external oversight by state organizations, institutions, or aggregation boards (Marginson, 2004; Teichler, 2017; Marginson, 2024).

In the realm of education, teachers often seek to enhance training through continuous learning or alternative methods, requiring additional energy and time (Fulton et al., 2014). In the field of research, educators frequently develop strategies for self-financing and circumvention, engaging in national or international funded projects that grant them a degree of independence from the institution itself (Millones-Gómez et al., 2021; Usman & Ab Rahman, 2023)

While this portrayal simplifies the complex reality, the overarching theme is that a university's strategy is often shaped by external factors, and the institution has limited autonomy in crafting its own path. Control mechanisms remain primarily ex-ante, centered around resource allocation and external regulations (Jongbloed, 2015; Muyters et al., 2022).

Organizationally, the university operates as a professional bureaucracy, a concept elucidated by Mintzberg (1989). This organizational model is delineated by the presence of two distinct bodies: administration and faculty. The administration plays a pivotal role in comprehending and adapting organizational mechanisms, ensuring operational continuity, stability, and long-term viability. Administrative staff members are typically characterized by a high level of competence, operating within the bureaucratic framework of the organization (Strużyna et al., 2021).

Conversely, faculty members, often regarded as the "professionals" of the organization, contribute to the university's identity through their specific expertise and academic specialties. Teachers, through the quality of their teaching and, more significantly, their research endeavors, significantly impact the institution's reputation and prestige. The perceived excellence of research output becomes a critical factor in enhancing a university's visibility on the global stage, as reflected in various rankings, including the Shanghai ranking and others (Altbach et al., 2010; Marginson and Considine, 2000). This visibility plays a pivotal role in shaping the overall perception of the university's academic standing (Faraoni et al., 2024).

The interaction between administrative staff and faculty in a university setting is complex and can sometimes lead to tension or conflict (Stanley & Algert, 2007). Faculty members often perceive administrative staff as a support resource and, if this perception results in neglecting their involvement or considering them merely as technical administrative personnel, it can lead to disinterested behavior and a decline in overall performance (Clark, 1983; Kuo, 2009; Pinho & Colston, 2024).

Consequently, the consequences of these dynamics on the behavior of actors, particularly teachers, and on the overall functioning of the university organization are multifaceted:

1. **Decreased performance and morale:** When administrative staff feel undervalued, it can result in decreased morale and motivation, impacting their performance and efficiency in critical administrative processes (Scott, 2008).
2. **Communication breakdown:** Lack of collaboration between faculty and administrative staff can lead to communication breakdowns, hindering the flow of information and coordination within the organization.
3. **Suboptimal decision-making:** Ineffective collaboration can result in suboptimal decision-making, as alignment between academic and administrative units is crucial for making informed choices that align with the institution's goals.
4. **Workplace culture and satisfaction:** Negative perceptions of administrative roles can contribute to an unhealthy workplace culture, leading to lower job satisfaction and a less cohesive work environment (Baez and Hurtado, 2018).
5. **Inefficiencies in processes:** Effective collaboration between faculty and administrative staff is crucial for streamlining processes related to curriculum development, student services, and other administrative functions. Without this collaboration, inefficiencies may arise.

To address these issues, fostering a culture of mutual respect and recognizing the complementary roles of faculty and administrative staff is essential. Encouraging open communication, involving all stakeholders in decision-making processes, and promoting a shared sense of organizational identity can contribute to a more harmonious and effective university environment.

The use of the terms "Noble, commoner, or manant" appears to draw an analogy between the roles of teachers in a university setting and societal classifications. Let's explore the analogy:

1. **Noble:** In the context provided, the term "Noble" might symbolize the elevated status of teachers who assume leadership roles such as the presidency of the university or other high-ranking administrative positions. This could imply a recognition of their influence and authority in shaping the direction of the institution.

2. **Commoner:** "Commoner" may represent teachers engaged in more routine or common management functions, such as overseeing academic programs (direction of studies) or serving as directors or deans. These individuals may contribute significantly to the daily operations and management of specific areas within the university.
3. **Manant:** The term "Manant" could signify the foundational role of teachers as educators and researchers. Regardless of administrative responsibilities, teachers remain rooted in their roles as trainers and researchers, contributing to the fundamental mission of the university.

In essence, teachers, or the "teacher-researcher", navigate various roles within the university, ranging from high-level governance to more common or foundational educational and research functions. The analogy draws attention to the diverse and interconnected nature of their contributions to the academic institution.

The description outlines three caricatured profiles (P1, P2, P3) representing different positions on the teaching-research-governance triptych within academia.

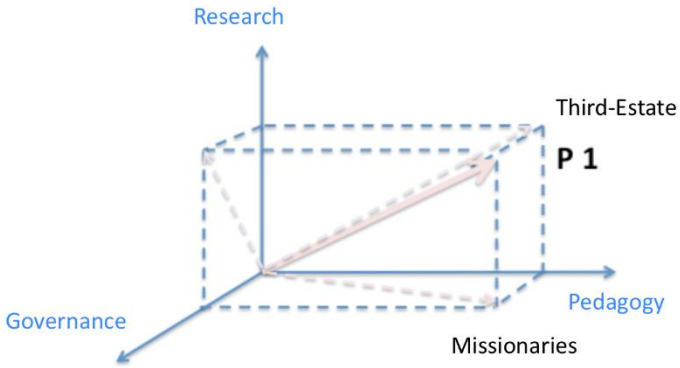
Profile P1: The "Third Estate"

- **Emphasis:** Pedagogy
- **Characteristics:** Busy with teaching, limited availability for research, minimal involvement in governance.
- **Typical Context:** Practices in institutions with a strong focus on training and high teaching hours.
- **Career Outlook:** Often lecturers with reduced ambitions for promotion, promotion based on seniority, or eventual transition out of the classroom.
- **Engagement:** Common in secondary school teachers, particularly engaged in pedagogy and managing continuing education programs.
- **Recognition:** Generally undervalued and less recognized by the university.
- **Contribution:** Main driver of knowledge transmission, especially in bachelor programs. Contributes significantly to the enrichment of the university through personal resources.
- **Innovation:** Often initiates important educational innovations such as ICT integration, new learning methodologies, and international student mobility.

Approximately 50 to 60% of teacher-researchers fall into the P1 profile. While it may be less acknowledged, this profile plays a crucial role in fulfilling the diverse missions of the university, particularly in transmitting knowledge and fostering innovation in teaching methodologies.

Please note that these profiles are caricatures and do not encompass the full complexity of individual academic careers. They serve as generalized representations to highlight common tendencies within the academic landscape.

Figure 1. Representation of Third-Estates' features

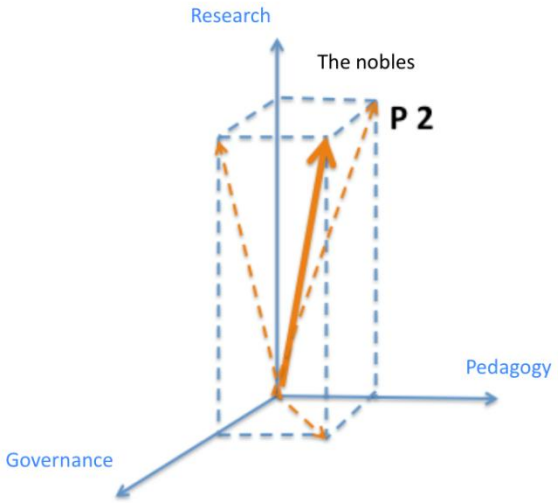


Profile P2: The "Nobility"

- **Emphasis:** Research
- **Characteristics:** Exclusive focus on the creation of knowledge, heavily engaged in high-level international journal publications.
- **Career choice:** Involves 50 to 70% of teachers.
- **Career outlook:** Promising in terms of advancement and promotion, crucial for obtaining habilitation to supervise research, progressing to the rank of professor, or accessing the highest index scales.
- **Teaching consideration:** Teaching ability is often secondary, with the main emphasis on research and publication.
- **Competition:** Intense competition, particularly in research master's degree teaching and the supervision of doctoral students.
- **Community perception:** Highly considered within the academic community. The number and level of publications contribute significantly to university rankings (e.g., Shanghai rankings), enhancing the institution's reputation for excellence and attractiveness.
- **Disciplinary influence:** In some disciplines, the influence of laboratories led by P2 profiles can be substantial, contributing to the academic prestige of the discipline.
- **Co-optation system:** P2 profiles play a central role in the co-optation system for the recruitment or advancement of their peers, establishing a form of academic mandarinate with significant powers.

This profile is integral to the academic ecosystem, shaping the reputation of universities and disciplines while wielding considerable influence in peer selection and promotion processes.

Figure 2. Representation of the Nobles Features

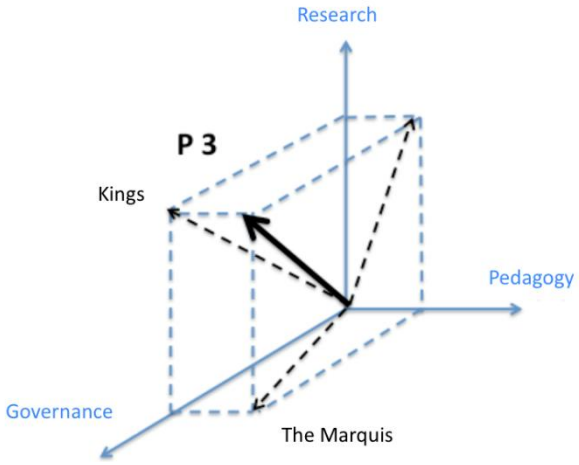


Profile P3: The "Kings"

- **Emphasis:** Governance
- **Characteristics:** Engaged in high governance functions such as president, vice-president, dean, etc.
- **Motivation:** Primarily driven by power (often imaginary), with financial or publication motivations taking a back seat.
- **Composition:** Mainly comprises professors seeking roles beyond teaching and research, opting for leadership functions.
- **Perception:** Often associated with terms like "Kings," highlighting their pivotal roles in university leadership.
- **Recognition:** Consideration extends beyond the specific scientific community to external realms, including the territory, political, or economic communities.
- **Responsibilities:** Involved in decisions related to resource allocation, strategic positioning of the university, and external relations with other universities, territorial actors, and the ministry.
- **Duration of functions:** Functions are typically ephemeral, lasting around 5 years, with some positions renewable once.
- **Incentives:** Image-bearing functions with limited long-term financial benefits, often comprising bonuses.
- **Representation:** Represents a small percentage of teachers (around 10%).
- **Sub-profile:** The "Marquis" is a specific P3 profile solely dedicated to governance, with minimal involvement in research and teaching. Common in medium-sized structure directors.

The P3 profile, or the "Kings," holds pivotal roles in steering the university's overall direction, making strategic decisions, and representing the institution in broader external contexts. Their influence extends beyond the academic community to impact the university's relationships with various stakeholders.

Figure 3. Representation of Kings and Marquis features



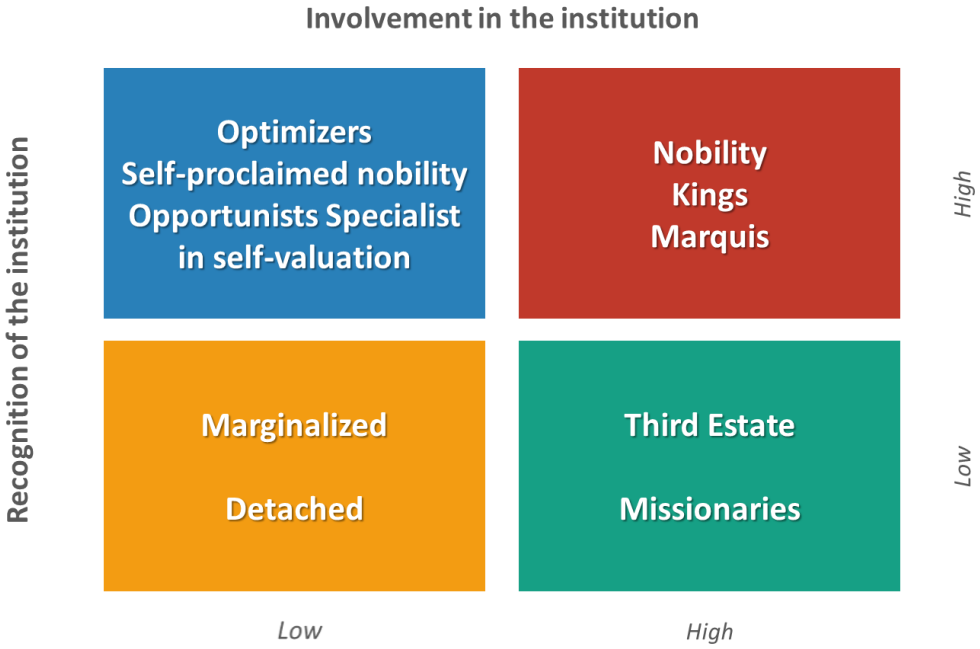
In conclusion, the three outlined profiles—P1, P2, and P3—play indispensable roles in the functioning of the university, each contributing in its unique way. However, the recognition, whether financial or in terms of prestige, varies significantly within the university, creating a division among teacher-researchers. This division is often characterized by a schizoid logic, particularly evident in the dichotomy between those emphasizing teaching and those prioritizing research.

The discrepancy in recognition suggests a broader dynamic where knowledge creation holds greater esteem than the transmission of knowledge. This observation becomes more reasonable when the creation of knowledge is perceived as genuinely valuable to society, transcending disciplinary boundaries. However, challenges arise when recognition is confined to insular, artificially constructed bubbles based on peer evaluation and disciplinary communities—a situation that, regrettably, occurs in some instances. The recognition and appreciation of diverse contributions within the university ecosystem are vital for fostering a balanced and effective academic environment.

Exploring recognition disparities in university commitment: an analysis of gratitude and injustice

The postulate of global coherence (Galbraith, 2007) posits that the relationship connecting society at large to an organization must align with the relationship that links the organization to individuals. However, this postulate is not consistently upheld. As depicted in Figure 4 below, the university is not impervious to some form of injustice; third-estate teachers warrant more significant recognition from the institution, while it should be of lesser importance for opportunists or those optimizing their actions (often modest in nature).

Figure 4. Typology of implications



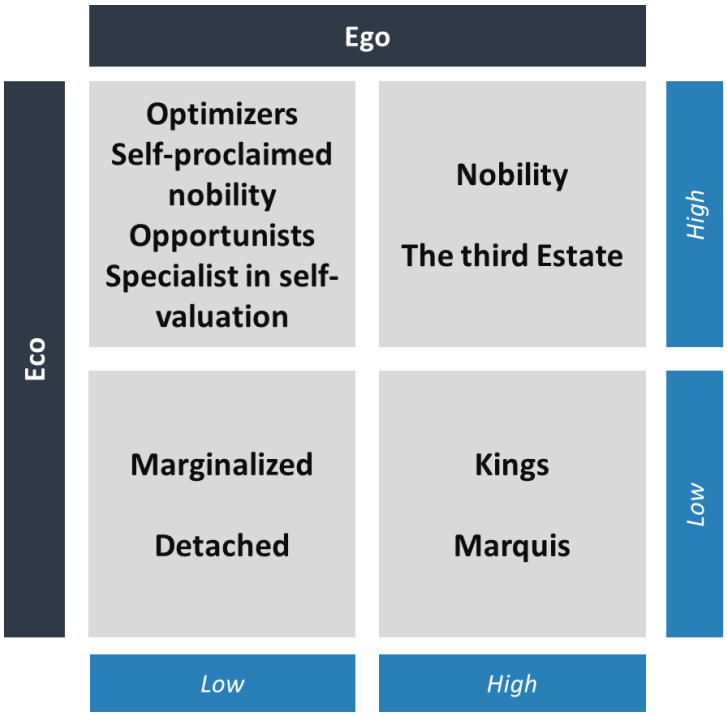
Hence, the inquiry into involvement, and more significantly, the commitment of various actors shaping a enduring relationship between employees and the organization arises. If implication is construed as the identification and active participation within a specific organization, it becomes both the catalyst for motivation and the outcome of satisfaction. Motivation instigates performance, whose positive impact results in, via satisfaction, involvement or a willingness to embrace future challenges. Reciprocally, involvement, facilitated by motivation, can foster satisfaction, establishing a virtuous circle or cycle of accountability.

Figure 5. Representation of accountability cycle

Implication arises when there is active involvement, balance, or alignment between the employee's value systems and the goals of the organization, coupled with a perception of opportunities within the organization beyond the immediate tasks. In such a scenario, the university transforms into a group of membership or reference. Based on these terms, only strongly committed and institutionally recognized teachers (the nobles or kings) should exhibit involvement, constituting around 60 to 70% of the faculty. However, the question arises: why is the postulate of

global coherence only partially adhered to? Does the university institution effectively function? An answer is proposed in Figure 6, drawing inspiration from the "Eco-Ego" model developed approximately twenty years ago by the consulting firm Bossard.

Figure 6. Typology Eco-Ego



In this model, four types of recognition of commitment are defined through two dimensions: ego and economic. Similar to the previous table, the "north-east" quadrant (eco +, ego +) is considered significant. While institutional recognition is low for teachers of the P1 profile from an economic standpoint, given bonuses and complementary hours, they find themselves in this quadrant. This economic recognition generates satisfaction and partly compensates for the lack of institutional acknowledgment. Thus, the assumption of global coherence is respected, but membership and a sense of belonging to the university institution are somewhat diminished.

Nevertheless, this membership exists at the local level (department or faculty), not only due to the economic dimension but also owing to reasons like geographical proximity and recognition at the student level. Pedagogical closeness locally creates a kind of "human warmth," contributing to making a department or a pedagogical area a place of belonging. Conversely, the university structure is perceived by the P1 profile as a distant and mandarinal "cold snake" type of space, resulting in weak membership and participation. In such a context, local strategies can develop, while joining a project at the university level becomes more challenging. However, the existence of various recognition systems that ultimately interconnect allows the university to function. Overall, it works because everyone eventually finds their place.

Unveiling university governance models: a comparative analysis of strategists in academic leadership

When discussing a teacher-researcher, our immediate thoughts go to their academic roles. However, the university functions as a professional bureaucracy, and its management falls under the responsibility of the teachers. Despite limited training in pedagogy, their preparation for

governance is even scarcer. Nevertheless, the electoral process facilitates a sort of "parachute policy," allowing individuals to assume leadership roles. For many elected officials, the journey to the highest office typically involves a phase of gradual learning.

Figure 7 introduces a typology of decision-makers based on the level of ambition in proposed actions and the degree of involvement in the institution. This typology applies to the behavior of teachers, regardless of their profile, and how they exercise administrative responsibilities at various levels.

University-level governance typically takes on two primary forms: that of the "strategist builder" or the "virtuous thrifty." In the context of being the "estimable daughter" of the sovereign state, adopting the posture of a strategist builder can be challenging. Change and risk-taking may disrupt the institution, which often only accepts such disruptions when mandated by the state. Frequently, rulers prefer the model of the virtuous thrifty as it aligns more with the university's culture. This internal culture follows an idiosyncratic logic shaped by the "estimable daughter" status. Academics tend to better comprehend a logic of budgetary restriction than one of change. In a simplified perspective, spending 0.5 euros when the state provides 1 euro is seen as more virtuous than acquiring 1 euro externally and spending 1.5 euros, even though the net balance is 0.5 euros in both cases, and the energy invested in the institution differs. Accumulating financial reserves is considered virtuous, especially when state grants are perceived as insufficient. "Doing poor" becomes a virtuous model, and the governing keywords in the virtuous thrifty governance model are ethics, morality, or deontology. Often, the sought guilt conceals a lack of strategic ambition, namely a reluctance to take risks.

Figure 7. Typology of university decision-makers

Level of intensity and commitment to action			Level of ambition in the actions and projects selected: Low	Level of ambition in the actions and projects selected: High
	High		**THE TALENTED ADVISOR**	**THE BUILDER STRATEGIST**
		Style	**The faint-hearted "yakafocon"**	**The manager of a medium... public company**
		Features	▪ Often has good ideas but does not want to get involved ▪ Low motivation to take responsibility ▪ Wants to exist, influence decisions and excels in the role of advisor ▪ Typical justification: "as long as I do research ... I can't get involved" ▪ Science is its good pretext not to invest beyond	• Think that an institution must evolve, adapt, change by itself : Offensive strategy • Develops a global vision, a project and a strategy for his institution. Take the risks of change • Seeks to implement a managerial approach to problems • Think efficiency, competition, development, capture of resources • Open and attentive to his environment, likes experimentation • Seek to avoid entropy, concern to release energies in the coherence of the project • Rebel and warlike behavior, calling into question the existing. • Needs to be accompanied by a strong administration to whom he lets manage daily operating problems
		Default	• His motto "let's arm ourselves and you go" may be dangerous for the real decision maker	• Not always attentive to the inside because sometimes too focused on the project and consistency issues • The ambition implemented may be out of step with the rest of the institution and not understood • A certain tendency to megalomania • Culture shifted from the general atmosphere of a university
	Law		**THE REASSURING OPPORTUNIST**	**THE VIRTUOUS BURSAR**
		Style	**The engaged falsely disinterested**	**The manager... of a public grocery store**
		Features	• Moderate motivation to take responsibility • His reasons can be a discharge of service to do less teaching, a business card, a small bonus,... • But claims to "sacrifice" in the interest of the institution • Believes in management by the invisible hand and trusts the system's self-regulation • Draws heavily on secretariats and administration	• Think efficiency more than effectiveness: technical management, accountant : Defensive strategy • Promotes the implementation of procedures. Keywords: rationality, savings, cost killer, equity,... • Governance through control and (budgetary) constraint • "We are being forced to save", "you have to be exemplary", "good student" • Work on its virtuous image a lot, in the name of public service: orient its policy by mimicry Likes to put forward words such as: ethics, morality, deontology... • Can hardly evolve the institution he heads. Just administer it • Culture closer to the general atmosphere of a university
		Default	• Insecure and lasting commitment. High risk of resignation. • Often justifies his action with a pessimistic speech: "in any case there is nothing we can do, everything is locked ..." • Degrades an atmosphere quickly, especially with secretariats who feel they are doing all the work	• No external projects, no risk-taking, map of miserability • "Castrating" governance of the institution. Leave little autonomy to other actors • Superimposition of the role of politicians with that of administrative staff • Appropriate virtue, set it up as a mode of governance and use it to camouflage its lack of ambition • A certain tendency to paranoia

The "estimable daughter" status does not foster the development of a university-specific strategy, which may not be desired by the actors themselves. It is essential to qualify these remarks and note that while this typology portrays rather extreme caricatures, leaders in university governance typically position themselves in a more central part of the continuum between these extremes. Nonetheless, many of them are often drawn towards and share similarities with the model of the "virtuous thrifty."

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The findings reveal a nuanced understanding of the structural and strategic challenges that universities face within the higher education landscape. A major theme is the tension between institutional autonomy and the external controls exerted by stakeholders, including government bodies and funding agencies. This external influence shapes nearly all aspects of university governance, from resource allocation to strategic decision-making. Additionally, the distinct roles within universities—where administrative staff focus on operational stability, and faculty members prioritize teaching and research—create inherent divisions that impact internal dynamics. These differences can lead to conflicts, inefficiencies, and a fragmented organizational culture that challenges the institution's ability to present a cohesive strategic direction (Birnbaum, 1989; Mintzberg, 1989; Marginson, 2016; Kocatürk & Karadağ, 2021).

The hierarchical structure within universities further complicates this dynamic, as varying levels of recognition are afforded to different roles. Faculty members involved in high-prestige functions, such as research and senior administrative roles, often receive greater institutional recognition, while those in teaching-focused or routine management roles may feel undervalued. This disparity not only affects morale and job satisfaction but also fosters a divide that impacts collaboration and organizational effectiveness (Clark, 1983; Godbold et al., 2024; Si, 2024). The contrasting governance models identified in the study—the "strategist builder" and the "virtuous thrifty"—highlight differing approaches to leadership, each shaping institutional culture, risk tolerance, and the ability to adapt to change (Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Drucker, 2018; Graham & Donaldson, 2020; Egitim, 2022).

These findings have significant implications for higher education institutions seeking to navigate these complex dynamics. One implication is the importance of promoting a balanced recognition system that values diverse roles equally, thereby acknowledging the contributions of teaching-focused faculty alongside those focused on research. Recognizing the essential role of each profile could improve morale, foster a more cohesive organizational culture, and encourage collaboration between faculty and administrative staff (Scott, 2008; Stenvall-Virtanen, 2023). Additionally, enhancing communication and collaboration between faculty and administration could address the existing divide. By implementing structures that facilitate open communication and mutual respect, universities may foster a more inclusive environment where all stakeholders feel valued and heard (Maak & Pless, 2006; Nijkamp, 2024). Strengthening autonomy and adaptability is another critical implication. While external control will likely remain a reality, universities can advocate for policies that provide greater financial and operational flexibility, enabling them to be more responsive to external pressures without compromising their core mission (Martin & Samels, 2006; Jayabalan et al., 2021). Finally, fostering a sense of belonging at both local and institutional levels can enhance faculty commitment to the university as a whole. University-wide initiatives, recognition programs, and cross-departmental projects may help create stronger connections between faculty and the broader institution (Campbell et al., 2002; Nuñez, 2021; Cheng et al., 2024).

Despite these insights, the study is not without limitations. A primary limitation is the reliance on secondary data and the researcher's observations, which may not capture all perspectives or provide a fully objective view of the issues. Incorporating direct interviews with faculty, administrators, and external stakeholders could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play (Foos et al., 2006; Biondi & Russo, 2022). Additionally, the findings may not be universally applicable across all universities, as institutional structures and external influences vary widely depending on regional, cultural, and policy contexts. Future studies should take these variables into account to ensure the findings are more broadly generalizable (Antonowicz, 2013; Filatotchev et al., 2022). Finally, while this study addresses external stakeholders' impact, its

primary focus is on internal dynamics. Future research could explore how various external pressures, such as governmental policies and market competition, influence strategic decisions and institutional culture.

This study opens several avenues for future research and practical exploration. One promising area of inquiry is the examination of alternative governance models that might balance autonomy and accountability more effectively. Comparative studies across different types of institutions and regions could help identify best practices in university governance (Paradeise et al., 2009; Molas-Gallart, 2012; Chankseliani et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2024). Another area for future study is faculty motivation and engagement, specifically how role recognition and reward structures impact these factors. Understanding what drives job satisfaction can inform more effective retention strategies and improve overall organizational performance (Nguyen, 2020; Htun & Bhaumik, 2022). Additionally, further analysis of external stakeholders' influence, including government bodies, industry partners, and accreditation agencies, could provide valuable insights into how these actors shape university policies and priorities. Such an analysis could help universities navigate external expectations more effectively while preserving their core mission and values (Hinton, 2012; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). Investigating the factors that contribute to a strong sense of institutional belonging among faculty is also a relevant area for future research. Understanding how local and institutional loyalties interact could inform initiatives to foster a stronger institutional identity and cohesion (Fominaya, 2010 Jones & Volpe, 2011; Vargas-Hernández, 2024). Finally, as digital transformation continues to reshape higher education, future studies could explore how digital tools impact governance, communication, and collaboration within universities. This would be especially relevant for understanding how technology can facilitate closer connections between faculty and administrative staff (Berrett et al., 2012; Nuere & De Miguel, 2021; Zhang & Zhang, 2024).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the complex challenges that universities face, particularly within the French higher education landscape. These challenges arise from a web of dependencies, cultural inclinations, and structural limitations. Historically, universities have maintained a close, protective relationship with the state, providing financial stability but fostering a resistance to change. This reliance has often hindered the university's ability to swiftly adapt to external pressures and independently pursue innovative strategies for the future.

In comparison, institutions such as schools and specialized institutes, which operate under both state oversight and industry influence, have demonstrated greater adaptability. Their hybrid structure, blending academic and professional orientations, enables them to respond flexibly to industry demands and maintain strong connections with local communities. This flexibility stands in contrast to traditional universities, which are often perceived as slower to embrace change.

The broader push for democratization and professionalization in education raises important questions about the university's future. Should universities consider adopting hybrid governance models similar to those of more adaptable institutions? Additionally, as collaborations with external research centers grow, integrating these institutes within the university framework could become increasingly relevant.

Despite these challenges, universities have demonstrated a commitment to evolution, seen in efforts to modernize infrastructure, adopt innovative teaching methods, and address the dual demands of broad access and research excellence. However, balancing the mission of mass education at the undergraduate level with the pursuit of research specialization presents a significant challenge, revealing the difficulties of reconciling practical needs with broader institutional goals.

While obstacles persist, it is essential to acknowledge the university's efforts and recognize its achievements within the context of its unique constraints. A balanced perspective, one that combines critical assessment with an understanding of these challenges, is vital in shaping the future path of higher education institutions. This study calls for a discourse that appreciates both the complexities and the contributions of universities, providing insight into their trajectory in an evolving educational landscape.

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