



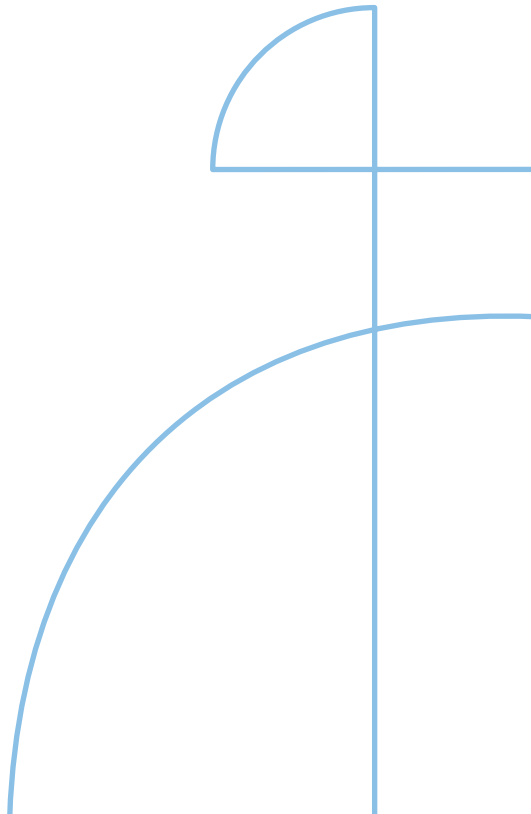
Doctoral Thesis in Technology and Learning

The Alpha, the Omega, and Everything in Between

Managing Expectations in Swedish Higher Education

STEFAN LUNDBORG

KTH ROYAL INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY



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I Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to determine how the combination of expectations on higher education institutions affects their capacity to stake out their own strategic positions. This purpose is established in relation to an ongoing transformation of the conditions of higher education and research through a global development often called the rise of the knowledge society, positioning universities as increasingly important instruments for societal development through their dominion over academic knowledge generation and proliferation. With this growing importance, an increasingly wide variety of expectations from an increasingly wide variety of stakeholders has followed, stemming from within and outside the confines of the university and blurring the lines between the university and its surrounding environment. Taking its point of departure from the multitude of expectations laid upon higher education institutions, the overarching research question of this thesis is as follows: How can a higher education institution consolidate disparate expectations into cohesive positioning?

The thesis approaches this question from four different and complementary angles, guided by an overarching resource dependence perspective that places the spotlight on the management and negotiation of internal and external pressures that provide inputs to the positioning process. This overarching perspective is complemented by insights from theories of organised hypocrisy, the principal-agent problem, crisis management, academic freedom and organisational hybridity. Together, they provide a varied yet consistent image of how uncertainties are managed, and balances are negotiated in the

processing of myriad expectations. The empirical focus of the thesis is on Swedish higher education, studied through in-depth interviews exploring internal decision-making processes, survey data generating overviews of systemic patterns and publicly accessible opinion papers highlighting the interfaces between universities as organisations and their stakeholders.

The results of the thesis show that the internal balancing of expectations systematically reinforces the status quo while changing conditions are met by adaptation, resulting from an internalisation of external pressures through the management of uncertainties. The balance does not move unless necessary, and when necessary, it moves only as much as it must. Thus, higher education institutions respond readily to changing conditions to maintain continued operation but are subject to severe constraints in their capability to actively shape their own strategic positions.

The responsiveness of higher education institutions to pressures means that the way they function becomes fundamentally contextual. Cultural conditions, physical realities and mechanisms of governance matter, because they act as determinants of the way the balancing of expectations moves. Paradoxically, this may make higher education institutions — nominally the most unmanageable of organisations — easier to influence than most, but perhaps not with easily foreseeable results.

Keywords

Higher education, university governance, resource dependence theory

II Sammanfattning

Syftet med denna avhandling är att avgöra hur kombinationen av förväntningar på lärosäten påverkar deras förmåga att utveckla egna strategiska positioner. Detta syfte etableras mot bakgrund av en pågående global förändring av förutsättningarna för högre utbildning och forskning som ofta beskrivs i termer av kunskapsamhällets framväxt. Denna utveckling placerar lärosätena som allt viktigare instrument för samhällsutveckling via deras kontroll över skapande och spridning av akademisk kunskap. Med denna växande betydelse följer också en allt större variation av förväntningar från en allt större variation av intressenter, som härstammar från såväl inom som utanför lärosätets väggar, och suddar ut själva gränserna mellan universitetet och dess omgivning. Med utgångspunkt i mångfalden av förväntningar som riktas mot lärosätena formuleras en övergripande forskningsfråga för avhandlingen enligt följande: Hur kan ett lärosäte konsolidera disparata förväntningar till en sammanhållen positionering?

Avhandlingen angriper denna fråga från fyra olika och kompletterande håll, vägleda av ett övergripande resursberoendeperspektiv som sätter fokus på hur interna och externa tryck hanteras och förhandlas i positioneringsprocessen. Detta övergripande perspektiv kompletteras av insikter från teorier rörande organiserat hyckleri, huvudman-agentproblemet, krishantering, akademisk frihet och organisatorisk hybriditet. Tillsammans tillhandahåller dessa perspektiv en varierad men konsekvent bild av hur osäkerheter behandlas, och balanser förhandlas, vid hanteringen av mångfalden av förväntningar. Det empiriska fokuset ligger på den svenska

högskolesektorn, som studeras via djuplodande intervjuer som utforskar interna beslutsprocesser, enkätdata som ger en överblick över systematiska mönster, samt offentligt tillgängliga åsiktsdokument som belyser gränssnitten mellan universitet som organisationer och deras intressenter.

Avhandlingens resultat visar att den interna balanseringen av förväntningar systematiskt förstärker status quo, medan förändrade förutsättningar hanteras genom anpassning – orsakat av en internalisering av externa tryck via processer för hantering av osäkerheter. Balansen rubbas inte om det inte är nödvändigt, och när den rubbas sker det endast i den utsträckning som det krävs. Lärosätena är därmed tydligt responsiva gentemot förändrade förutsättningar i syfte att upprätthålla fortsatt verksamhet, men är föremål för starka begränsningar av deras förmåga att aktivt forma sina egna strategiska positioner.

Lärosätenas responsivitet gentemot olika typer av tryck innebär att deras funktionssätt i grunden blir kontextuellt betonat – kulturella förhållanden, fysiska realiteter och styrningsmekanismer spelar roll eftersom de avgör i vilken riktning balanseringen av förväntningar rör sig. Paradoxalt nog kan detta göra lärosäten – nominellt bland de mer svårstyrda organisationerna – lättare att påverka än många andra organisationer, men inte nödvändigtvis med enkelt förutsägbara resultat.

Nyckelord

Högre utbildning, högskolestyrning, resursberoendeteori

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IV List of Publications

Paper I: Lundborg, S. & Geschwind, L. (2023). Matrix Hybridity: The Complex Realities of Strategic Councils. In L. Liudvika, J. Dee, & B. Van Der Meulen (Eds.), *Handbook on the Transformation of Higher Education*. Edward Elgar Publishing

Paper II: Lundborg, S. & Geschwind, L. (Under revision) Trial by Fire: Management During Crisis in Swedish Higher Education Institutions. In L. Alonso de Andrade, E. Pekkola, K. Kettunen, & S. Lundborg (Eds.), *Unravelling Emerging Hybridity in Nordic Higher Education*. Brill.

Paper III: Lundborg, S., Ismayilova, K., Geschwind, L., & Broström, A. (In Press) Gilded Cages: Reliance on External Funding in Research. In L. Leisyte, M. Marquina, & G. Jones (Eds.), *The Transformation of Governance and Management of the Academic Profession in the Knowledge Societies*. Springer Nature

Paper IV Lundborg, S. Putting Mouths Where the Money Is: An Analysis of Input to the Swedish Research Bill of 2024 (Manuscript)

Previously published or submitted papers were reprinted with due permission from the respective publishers. The papers are not included in the electronic version of the thesis.

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1 Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to determine how the combination of expectations on higher education institutions affects their capacity to stake out their own strategic positions. Such expectations originate from both within and beyond the organisations themselves, forming a complex network of different ideas regarding the purposes of higher education in society as well as different interests in relation to these purposes.

The exact shape of this network is heavily dependent on the national context due to a great deal of variability between systems in terms of the governance of research and higher education. This thesis examines the Swedish case because of its largely unitary system of public higher education institutions and a method of governance that focuses heavily on the outputs of the system rather than on the processes. These characteristics provide an interesting opportunity to gather insights into how different types of pressures from different types of sources can interact in the decision-making process of individual higher education institutions. With the same regulatory conditions but with a large degree of institutional autonomy as long as expectations are fulfilled, one can trace the paths that different institutions choose to reach the same specified set of end goals.

To explore the stated purpose, we first outline its two main components: the expectations of society and the governance of higher education.

1.1 Higher Education and the Expectations of Society

Higher education as an activity has a long history, often traced back to the first European universities in the Middle Ages or even further to schools of learning in pre-Grecian cultures and the Middle East. Even before the emergence of organised schools, knowledge generation and proliferation have always been part of the human experience (Pedersen, 1997). Thus, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when and where ‘learning’ became ‘education’ and when and where ‘education’ became ‘higher’. Exactly what role higher education is supposed to play has been approached from a variety of perspectives (Karlsohn, 2016). Deeply ingrained in the relationship between these perspectives and missions, there has been continuing tension between ideas of knowledge as a tool for societal development and the idea of knowledge for its own intrinsic sake (Barnett, 2004).

Clark Kerr famously coined the term ‘multiversity’ to describe a university characterised by a multitude of different missions, internal communities and roles (Kerr, 1963), illustrating a growing complexity in the makeup, organisation, and stakeholder arrangements of higher education in modern society. This is echoed in an enduring tale of higher education as subject to a wide variety of societal pressures that continuously push it towards new directions, providing a global pattern of transformation with local, contextual effects – sometimes raising concerns regarding loss of academic agency and sometimes celebrating innovation and development (Dee et al., 2023).

A driving force for this development has been tied to the fundamental domain of higher education – knowledge on which society is fundamentally built. Everything we can do rests on a foundation of what we know or what we think we know: knowledge concerns the alpha, the omega and everything in between. In this foundation, there is also an in-built self-reinforcing mechanism in which advances in knowledge contribute to changes in society that – to an increasing extent – rely on the knowledge that enabled them (Stehr, 1994). Therefore, knowledge has acquired a more central role in the further development of society as history progressed, and the current era is often described as a transition towards a crescendo in the *knowledge society* (Drucker, 1993), built on a *knowledge economy* (Bain & Cummings, 2021) focused on the value of *information* and *learning* as driving production resources (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008). The chief characteristic of the state described by these terms is an increased practical reliance on the generation,

proliferation and utilisation of knowledge as an integral part of both everyday life and the overall governance of society.

In this, the scientific knowledge of academia plays a pivotal role (Delanty, 2002). On the personal level, scientific knowledge feeds into the body of what will eventually become ordinary knowledge of people in general (Bunge, 1998a). What were once cutting-edge theories on the shape of our world, the workings of the tides or the functions of bodily organs are now everyday facts taken for granted by everyone who has attended primary school or even had reasonably attentive childhood guardians. On a societal level, higher education is being positioned as a central driver of overall national development efforts (Jung et al., 2021; Cloete & Maassen, 2015), while international conflicts and political machinations are increasingly concerned with information, education and intellectual property (Aarrevaara et al., 2021; Varghese, 2010).

Consequently, higher education has gone from a matter for the small elite to that for the general masses (Perkin, 2007) – furthering the feedback loop of knowledge dependence. As part of the increasing dependence of society on knowledge, knowledge has, in turn, become increasingly dependent on academia as its primary nexus (Nowotny et al., 2001).

Although this would seem a triumph of academia, as is often the case, the conqueror has also in turn been conquered by the influences of its new domain. The new role of higher education has brought new expectations, new stakeholders, and new struggles for control over the production and distribution of the precious resource that academic knowledge represents (Carvalho, 2021). The pressures resulting from this have been keenly felt across the world, and efforts to utilise universities to further the interests of the state are numerous and varied (Bégin-Caouette et al., 2021; Götze, 2021; Ndibuuza et al., 2021; Shen & Jinwen, 2021). A hallmark of academia as a generator and proliferator of knowledge is its fundamentally broad domain; it potentially concerns itself with everything because everything is potentially concerned by knowledge. Accordingly, the term ‘university’ is derived from the Latin ‘*universitas*’, which means ‘the entirety’ (Kassaye Alemu, 2018).

1.2 The Governance of Higher Education

The intertwining of higher education and overall societal development has two major implications. The first implication is the fundamental degree of reciprocity between the two: universities do not exist in isolation but are parts of their surrounding society just as much as anything else. As universities contribute to the development of society, the development of society also contributes to the development of how the universities function. The second implication is that as this integration grows tighter and as the notions of isolated ivory towers become increasingly antiquated, the effects of broader trends and developments that go far beyond the borders of higher education echo within the borders as well.

1.2.1 Patterns of Public Management Reform

The foremost examples of global trends that tend to affect higher education in general are found in liberalisation, marketisation, and economisation of the public sector through approaches in the vein of *new public management* (NPM), which entails a focus on managerial control, use of performance measurement schemes, disaggregation of large units in the public sector, introduction of competition in public engagements, incentivisation, and cost control (Hood, 1991). Compared with more traditional public management, NPM means a shift from a *process orientation* to an *output orientation* (Pierre & Painter, 2010; Adams & Balfour, 2010). NPM initially gathered quite a few enthusiastic proponents, but in time, the balance has shifted towards a strong opposition, at least in academic circles, arguing that the model weakens moral barriers (Johansson, 2015), undervalues the humans behind the numbers (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000), undermines transparency and accountability (Pierre & Painter, 2010), and prevents the adoption of innovative processes (Ross et al., 2022).

The reason for the great deal of attention given to the effects of NPM in academic circles is its relative ubiquity. Various elements of the approach and the related mechanisms situated in the same broader vein of liberalisation have been implemented in most parts of western society, and the changes that they bring are often sweeping. A salient example is the creation and expansion of various types of market structures based on competition between service providers. In some cases, this has taken the form of privatisation of previously public operations in which private entities start to compete for public contracts. In other cases, the operations of public entities and sectors have

been reformed to mimic private market structures with internal sales and competition (Ahrne et al., 2014). Both versions of this approach have occurred in higher education (Newfield, 2008).

Although this movement from direct regulation to (more or less) free markets may seem like a case of deregulation, it is more a case of *reregulation* in that a certain set of rules has been replaced with another. Market practices rest on common understandings of how exchanges are supposed to work. This means that they rest on shared cultures and notions of ownership, governance, contracts, and agreement. These norms are generally codified by the state, which provides the rulebook that the parties bring to the playing field (Fligstein, 1996). The loosening of one rein is thus coupled with the tightening of another. Actors may choose their own path but only from the set of open avenues delineated by the state (Gooden & Martin, 2005).

Although NPM and its cousins have had a profound effect on the governance of the public sector since the 1980s, the change is perhaps not as profound as is often claimed. This is because NPM-like models coexist with both previously established management traditions and with competing contemporary as well as more recent trends. They have not replaced earlier models wholesale, but have rather been layered on top of and beside them, together with other parallel and subsequent developments (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). The fact that NPM-like models do not occupy a hegemonic position in public administration is very much part of the challenge of dealing with societal expectations—that is, increasing the need to consolidate competing logics and satisfy different simultaneous demands based on different value priorities.

For higher education specifically, liberalisation can perhaps be most clearly illustrated by its two-fold marketisation, encompassing both education itself and the research activities that underpin it. Higher education institutions compete among themselves for both students and research funding, and the behaviour that this gives rise to is often called *academic capitalism*, which entails competition for grants, contracts, funds, partnerships, investments, fees, donations and other types of money. On an institutional level, this competition generates for-profit phenomena that are not immediately obvious parts of academic activity, such as patents and copyrighting, intellectual property offices, and business forums (Münch, 2020). On a functional level, it transforms student recruitment into enrolment management, students to clients and education to product sales (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). On a policy level, it is closely tied to performance measurement and incentivisation, in that

measures of productivity and quality are designed to increase competitiveness in the scramble for funding opportunities (Söderlind, 2020). On an individual level, it spurs an everlasting chase for more publications in more prestigious journals to attract the funding necessary to sustain both steady employment and productive career development, generating a culture often called *publish-or-perish* (Zivney & Bertin, 1992; de Rond & Miller, 2005; Neill, 2008; Miller et al., 2011; Rawat & Meena, 2014).

The rise of academic capitalism is spurred in part by NPM-like modes of thinking about public administration, but also by the shift towards a knowledge society built upon a knowledge economy. When knowledge becomes the dominant production resource, the role of academia becomes intimately intertwined with economic development. Therefore, higher education policy also becomes intertwined with economic imperatives, particularly in times of economic crisis (Jessop, 2018).

With the tight integration between economic policy and higher education resting on a background of global patterns of public management reform, academia has also become a battleground among different stakeholders trying to make use of its resources and steer its direction. Surges of neo-nationalist agendas have challenged the autonomy of higher education institutions across the world (Krull & Brunotte, 2021; van der Wende, 2021; O'Malley, 2021; Fischer, 2021; Chirikov & Fedyukin, 2021; Balbachevsky & Guilhon Albuquerque, 2021; Brøgger, 2022), and disruptions in multilateral relations can quickly come to disrupt the conditions of academic activity, such as international student enrolment or mobility grants (van der Wende, 2021).

1.2.2 The Swedish Case

The rise of the knowledge society, and the patterns of liberalisation and economisation in public management in general as well as higher education in particular, are fundamentally international trends. These trends are also clearly visible in the Swedish case, which provides the empirical focus of the thesis for three interrelated reasons.

The first reason is based on the status of Swedish higher education in the overall system of education, research, development, and innovation. The sector has been set in a state of continuous expansion since the end of the Second World War, with an increasing level of student enrolment (Hedmo, 2014), and a steadily deepening role as the primary provider of public research efforts through the establishment of large-scale research funding bodies primarily

directed towards higher education institutions (Lundborg & Geschwind, 2021), the introduction of recurring research bills considered to be heavily skewed towards the higher education system (Lundborg, 2024), and heavy government investment (Bitard et al., 2008).

This eventually culminated in universities establishing themselves as key players for government efforts in post-secondary education (Andersson et al., 2016), research (Geschwind, 2017) and innovation (Lidhard & Petrusson, 2012), thus becoming one-stop shops for the entire value chain (Lundborg & Geschwind, 2021). Swedish higher education thus represents a key component of the emerging Swedish knowledge society.

The second reason is based on how the higher education sector is and has been governed. Throughout much of the 20th century, the governance of Swedish higher education followed a steady movement towards centralisation and detailed regulation. This culminated in the reform of 1977 and its aftermath in the form of a common, unified system of post-secondary education based on fixed and centrally planned study courses (Hedmo, 2014). Starting with the reform of 1993, an echo of general trends towards NPM-like modes of governance has instead guided the policy on Swedish higher education, with the stated aim of increased institutional autonomy (Ahlbäck Öhberg & Boberg, 2023).

However, this movement is still constrained by the parallel status of higher education institutions as (mostly) public authorities, which means that autonomy applies only as long as the interests of the state are upheld and the output goals are met (Lundborg & Geschwind, 2021). This echoes the layering of different models of public administration, with an overlap between the traditionally internally defined governance of higher education institutions (Ahlbäck Öhberg & Boberg, 2023), the more rigidly controlled mechanisms of a Weberian legacy in public administration (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011), and the market-like behaviours of an NPM system (Hall, 2013). The result is a system of governance that is nominally largely hands-off when it comes to process apart from the maintenance of a strict, unitary regulation focused on public sector values, which encompass all higher education institutions equally, and instead focuses on regulating outputs in a system of shared basic responsibilities (Lundborg & Geschwind, 2021).

The third reason concerns the structural characteristics of the system. Swedish higher education has a long history, with universities and university colleges established in waves throughout half a millennium, the first of which was

Uppsala University, founded in 1477 primarily as an educational institution for priests (Gren-Eklund, 2020). This was then followed in 1666 by the establishment of Lund University as a consequence of the Swedish conquest of Skåne, which fed requirements of a local centre of education and border control against the region's previous owner, Denmark (Sanders, 2018).

Further expansion followed in the 19th century, among others bringing the introduction of specialised universities such as the Karolinska Institutet – established to improve the capability of Swedish field medicine and surgery in light of disappointing war efforts (Lundborg & Geschwind, 2021) – as well as the technical universities of Chalmers University of Technology and the KTH Royal Institute of Technology as part of industrialisation efforts (Geschwind & Broström, 2020).

The sector was further expanded by the establishment of additional waves of universities and university colleges during the late 20th century as part of regional policy and growth efforts as well as efforts to generate a more unitary system. This expansion ended up in the 21st century with a back-and-forth policy between opening and closing the door for additional universities (Lundborg & Geschwind, 2021).

The historical legacies of individual higher education institutions are important for the system because they live on as active driving forces for their future development (Jernberg, 2017). Thus, the Swedish system is structurally characterised by a multitude of universities with unique and often instrumentally motivated historical drivers, while being subject to a model of governance characterised by regularity, uniformity and a strong focus on higher education as a vehicle of development.

This combination of traits positions Sweden as a fundamentally illustrative case of the intersection between the rise of the knowledge society and the international patterns of liberalisation, which is made particularly interesting by the tension between uniformity and specialisation caused by the juxtaposition of historical legacies and formal regulation. Each higher education institution is subject to a myriad of expectations that formally apply to all equally but that practically exert different types and levels of pressure on different universities. A seemingly unified system of higher education possesses a stronger degree of variation than the regulation would imply, but the expectations regarding what a given institution is supposed to do remain largely the same for everyone.

1.3 The Alpha, the Omega, and Everything in Between

1.3.1 Aim and Research Question

[...] some functions combine better than others and there are a number of functions in totality to be performed by higher education.

(Kerr, 1991)

The Swedish system of higher education is based on the idea of all institutions fulfilling all the roles of higher education at the same time. These roles are multitude and grow increasingly numerous and complex over time as the knowledge society develops and new modes of governance are layered on top of pre-existing ones. It stands to reason that this presents a challenge for higher education institutions, as some of the roles have directly opposing drivers, and some of them are difficult to fulfil simultaneously simply because there are only so many resources to put to work.

Given that higher education institutions are conglomerates of researchers acting within disciplines, fields, and philosophical traditions in which value priorities and interests can vary significantly, and given that each higher education institution also has its own particular historical baggage and local context to consider, there is, in principle, room for considerable variation in how they can choose to approach this challenge.

At the same time, it is unclear how much of this room for manoeuvring can actually be utilised in light of the uniform regulatory demands and expectations within the sector. Therefore, as stated in the introduction preamble, the purpose of this study is to *determine how the combination of expectations on higher education institutions affects their capacity to stake out their own strategic positions.*

The overarching research question of this thesis is as follows: *How can a higher education institution consolidate disparate expectations into cohesive positioning?*

1.3.2 Key Concepts

A number of recurring terms throughout this thesis are imbued with a measure of ambiguity. Some of this ambiguity is by design, as the same term can have multiple relevant and related meanings in the same (or different) context. Some of the ambiguity is not only possible, but also desirable, to disperse. Thus, in terms of how they are used in this thesis, some words require

explanation to clarify their relationship with one another. Further discussion on the mechanisms that give rise to these envisioned relationships can be found in Chapter 2 on the theoretical framework.

- An *expectation* concerns an idea that someone has in relation to what someone else should be doing.
- A *demand* is a variant of an expectation; it is stronger and is tied to some sort of tangible authority or influence in which meeting the demand is stated or implied to be a (not *the*) condition of continued support.
- *Pressures* are the sum total of the expectations and demands felt.
- A *constraint* is a limitation of someone's room for action resulting from someone else's expectations or demands.
- An *interest* is a matter of importance and desirability for someone and forms the basis of one's expectations of others.
- An *environment* is a collective of parties with interests that concern someone.
- A *function* is the manner in which someone can serve or affect the interests of others.
- A *role* is a collection of related functions.
- A *strategy* denotes the method used to enter, maintain or exit a role.
- A *position* describes the currently occupied set of roles.

The relationship between these concepts is illustrated in Figure 1. The *environment* has *interests* that give rise to *expectations* and *demands* (collectively called *pressures*), which in turn cause *constraints*. The higher education institution adopts a *strategy* to navigate these *constraints*, resulting in a *position* containing *roles* that fulfil *functions* that serve or change the *interests* of the *environment*.

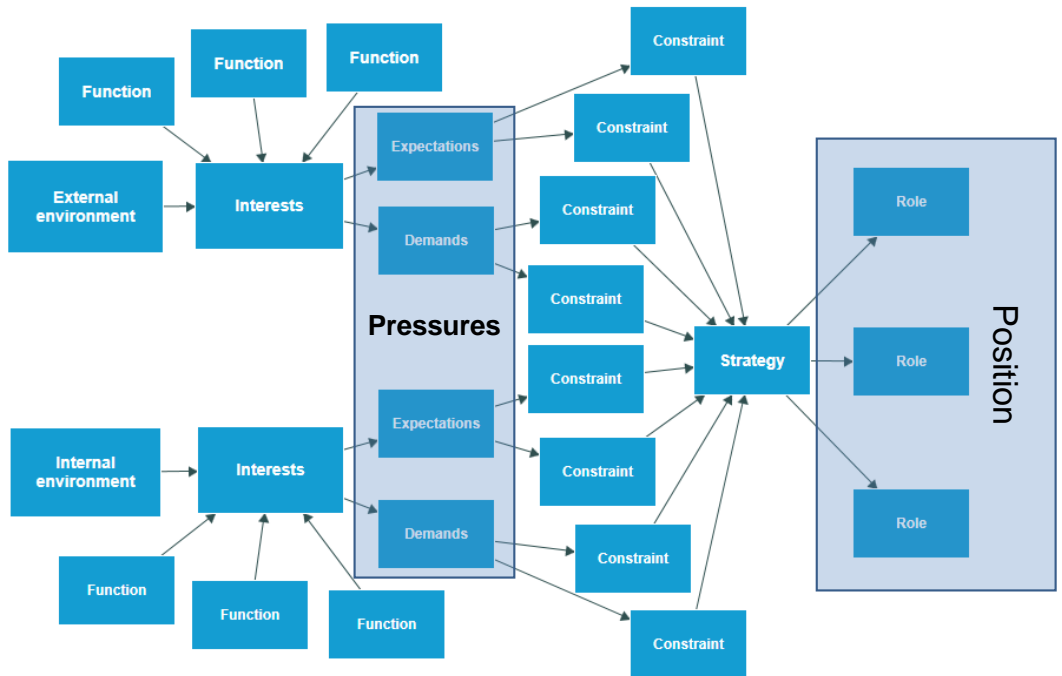


Figure 1: Relationship Between Key Concepts in the Thesis

Note that the relationship described here details what meaning is assigned to the terms within the context of this thesis. For example, when a ‘constraint’ is mentioned, it is done in relation to the pressures faced by the organisation and the courses of action that are open to the organisation as a result – see further discussion in chapter 2 on the resource dependence perspective adopted. This does not mean that constraints cannot also affect the interests held by an organisation; it simply means that how interests are generated is not the focus of the thesis. Similarly, there is likely much to be said about the intricacies of what constitutes ‘the environment’, how its internal and external components may be subdivided or understood, and of the various roles adopted by higher education institutions – but the focus of the thesis is squarely at the centre of Figure 1: the pressures exerted, the constraints caused and the strategies that are open as a result.

1.3.3 Overview of the Thesis

This thesis builds on four papers. The starting point is how the strategic positioning of higher education institutions takes shape. As an organisation is conceptualised as an open system (see the theoretical framework) upholding a boundary, there is an inside and an outside in relation to this boundary. Therefore, the contextual pressures that affect the positioning of individual higher education institutions are divided into two categories: *internal pressures* and *external pressures*. Within each category, one paper traces the process of how pressures are negotiated into a balance, while another addresses how uncertainties related to this balancing act are dealt with.

Paper I – Matrix Hybridity – examines how internal interests meet, interact, and form negotiated balances between them. Paper II – Trial by Fire – explores what happens to such negotiation processes when the organisation is faced with an unexpected crisis.

Paper III – Gilded Cages – shifts to an external perspective and traces how external pressures are received by the organisation. Paper IV – Putting Mouths where the Money Is – shows how higher education institutions attempt to generate more secure environments.

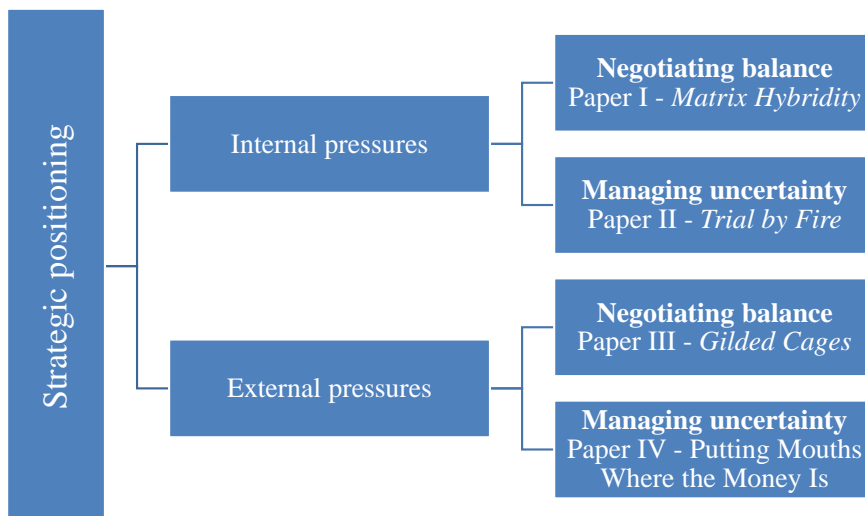


Figure 2: Outline of the Project Design

Collectively, the four papers do not constitute an exhaustive image of all the different contexts and processes in which strategic positioning takes place within a higher education institution. Rather, they provide insights into the mechanisms by which external and internal pressures are consolidated and weighed against each other — mechanisms that are valid not only in the specific contexts where they are studied, but are transferrable to other contexts within the organisation where positioning processes take place.

Chapter 1 of this thesis introduces the research problem. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework guiding the overall research design. Chapter 3 describes the methods and materials used to produce the empirical results. These results are reported in Chapter 4 through overviews of the four papers. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings and formulates conclusions about their implications for the research problem.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 An Overarching Research Dependence Perspective

This thesis and its theoretical framework are based on a resource dependence perspective (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Resource dependence theory carries extensive theoretical baggage, being a synthesis and development of previous insights into organisational interdependencies (Drees & Heugens, 2013).

Its conceptual roots are found in an open systems view of organisations (Biermann & Harsch, 2017), in which the primary task of management is found in boundary regulation between the organisation and its environment — that is, managing the inputs and outputs to make sure that the organisation can fulfil its functional imperatives. This places organisational survival at the forefront, framing the organisation as an analogue to a biological organism balancing its food intake with its expended energy through work. There are two important implications of this theoretical base. The first is a streak of rationalism in which actions are assumed to be consciously taken to achieve a rational purpose (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The second is a focus on the organisation as the basic unit of analysis — that is, the organisation represents the system receiving input from the environment and expelling outputs into it (Pfeffer, 1987). Both ideas are echoed in this thesis but with modified emphasis.

Resource dependence theory emphasises the environment, and its central argument is that what goes on outside the boundary of the system is fundamentally more important to the organisation than what its components do within (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). This means that what one defines as *the organisation* is a key issue, and this is where the emphasis of this thesis

changes. The analysis of power relations on which the notions of boundary regulation and organisational survival depend is fundamentally based on individual asymmetries: B controls something that A does not (Johnson, 1995). Accordingly, the argument is that '*organisations are not so much concrete social entities as a process of organising support sufficient to continue existence*' (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

This thesis adopts the view that what constitutes an organisation is fundamentally contextual: the organisation is the unit of analysis, in that an organisation is a way of conceptualising the framework for cooperation within or between the given groups of individuals with shared interests. This makes the boundaries of an organisation flowing and nested (Pinheiro et al., 2014): an organisation may partially or completely encompass one or several other organisations and may in turn be partially or completely encompassed by other organisations.

This view also has implications for the assumption of rationality. Rationality is conceptualised as variable in relation to the organisation in which it is defined (what is rational from one perspective may seem irrational from another), and the rationality of an organisation is bounded by the same constraints that apply to the organisation – imperfect information, imperfect internal cohesion, and imperfect control over external conditions (Nienhüser, 2008).

In sum, the adoption of a resource dependence perspective with an emphasis on *interest groups* – or stakeholders – as the determinants of the organisation as a unit of analysis entails the view that organisations are coalitions of interest groups interacting with each other and their environments through the exchange of resources. As resources are finite, resources spent on one thing mean resources not spent on another. Different actors have different ideas about how these resources should be spent; thus, actors with similar interests unite directly or indirectly in *interest groups* to secure a distribution that aligns with their preferences. The *organisation* constitutes a framework for such processes. It provides an opportunity to pool resources of common availability, to exchange resources of different value with different participants and to secure resources of common deficiency.

In accordance with resource dependence theory, resources are not considered limited to money but can include equipment, time, information, legitimacy or anything else that an interest group could require or provide (Biermann & Harsch, 2017). Because not all interest groups have the same access to or need of the same resources, and because the availability of some resources is

dependent on the availability of others (e.g. one group may only get access to equipment if it is provided funding from another), dependencies and interdependencies are generated between interest groups. The ability of an interest group to further its own interests hinges on its ability to contribute to the advancement of the interests of other groups, satisfying their expectations and demands. Possessing such ability allows the group to become an attractive partner for resource exchanges that, in turn, allow it to secure the things it needs to move forward.

These interdependencies generate constraints on what an interest group can and cannot do. These constraints are rarely absolute, but mean that different levels of risk and effort are involved in taking different actions. If group A requires resources from group B and group B is only willing to provide funding if group A takes action C, then the expectations of group B constrain the room for action of group A by imposing a cost for choosing not to take action C. Depending on how dependent group A is on group B's resources, this constraint can have various levels of strength. If the resources are vital to the survival of the interest group and there is no other conceivable source, then, in practical terms, the group has little choice in the matter. If the resources are of marginal importance or if there are other potential sources, the expectations of group B may only nudge the probability of group A taking action C in a positive direction (Biermann & Harsch, 2017).

The totality of interest groups with connected dependencies constitutes the *environment* of a given interest group. They represent the parties whose expectations and demands the interest group needs to consider in varying degrees when deciding on a course of action. Generally, it would be impossible for an interest group to satisfy all the expectations stemming from its environment at once because these expectations may be subjects of direct conflict (e.g. if one group demands that action A is taken and another demands that action A is not taken) or indirect conflict (e.g. if one group demands the entire supply of a certain resource and another group also demands the entire supply of the same resource). Fortunately, an interest group does not need to please everyone; it just needs to meet *enough* expectations to secure the resources it needs to achieve its goals (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). In weighing the expectations against each other and deciding on which ones should be met and which ones can go unfulfilled, an interest group selects a *strategy* that results in it playing different roles in relation to various elements of its environment.

This process of strategy selection is not inherently objective, fully rational or independent. The interest group has imperfect access to information regarding the interests, resources, and even members of its environment. It *enacts* the environment rather than *reacts* to it; it interprets signals and applies its own meanings to them in order to determine how the environment functions (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Thus, the interest group's view of the environment is affected by imperfect knowledge and, thus, by errors of judgment and outside influence (Nienhüser, 2008). It is also affected by the combination of worldviews and preferences within the group itself. The same signal can often be interpreted in different but equally likely and legitimate ways based on the same information (Biermann & Harsch, 2017). Therefore, the strategic position adopted can be deliberate or unintentional, and the actual position taken may diverge from the believed position. The interest group acts in relation to the *perceived* environment rather than to the *actual* environment.

An interest group is not static. Most actors have several different interests at once, and rarely do all the interests of a collective of actors align completely on all fronts. Therefore, a given actor can belong to one interest group in one case and to another interest group in another case. The actor can also shift between different interest groups in the same case over time. The actor's interests are not static either, but are subject to change based on structural circumstances, personal development and outside influence. The dynamic nature of interests and interest groups means that these groups are not primarily coalitions of actors but of roles. The demands championed by a single actor in different interest groups may differ depending on the context of their participation and may even contradict themselves across contexts (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

This dynamic also extends to organisations as a whole. As coalitions of interest groups whose composition are subject to change, the line between who and what is internal or external to the organisation becomes a contextual matter. The same actor can be part of the internal environment of an organisation under one role — and one interest group — while simultaneously being part of the external environment under another.

All roles are not equal, but are instead tied to different types of resources. Within an organisation, these resources can take the form of, for example, formal authority, legitimacy, funding, or personal connections. The makeup of roles within the organisation and the distribution of pooled resources between them depend on the interests, resources and dependencies of each interest group. Intra-organisational power is determined by how dependent the other

interest groups in the organisation are on *you* and by how dependent *you* are on the other interest groups. Asymmetrical dependencies breed control over an organisation's processes, which in turn breeds control over its structures, which then breeds control over its actions (Johnson, 1995).

This is not a direct link; thus, a perfect relationship cannot be expected between who controls the important resources and who governs the actions of the organisation. In part, this is because a given organisation is dependent on a multitude of resources that are seldom all in total control of the same interest group; therefore, there are strong elements of negotiation, compromise and competition that dampen the influence of each party. Moreover, organisational influence is filtered through multiple steps of control mechanisms that each adds an additional layer of dilution and redirection of original intent. Dependencies determine the distribution of power, which determines managerial selection and authority, which then determines the formation of formal structure and decision-making. In each step, the process is reciprocal and non-linear in such a way that the steps all affect and are affected by each other, thus essentially describing a loosely coupled system (Weick, 1976).

A key translator between dependencies and action is found in managerial action, which is the process of manipulating or processing constraints imposed by the environment. The reciprocal nature of the relationships within the process means that the constraints are not static but are subject to change. This means that, in response to any given constraint, there exists the choice to either adapt to it or seek to renegotiate it. From the resource dependence perspective, the first choice is characterised as *responsive management*, and the second choice is called *discretionary management* (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

Responsive management consists of taking an inventory of relevant constraints, deciding which ones to heed and which ones to reject, and matching the resulting selection to generate a course of action. Conversely, discretionary management entails identifying detrimental and unstable constraints, as well as utilising available resources to leverage instability in redefining the nature or interaction of the constraints. Discretionary management and responsive management are similar in that they both entail evaluating the system of constraints and finding a way to make it past them. They differ in that responsive management seeks to move around the obstacle, whereas discretionary management aims to move the obstacle itself.

Both types of managerial action have an active, conscious, and directed component, but there is also a more passive transporting function in that the available and viable alternatives result from environmental constraints. In the same way that power is distributed based on dependencies, so are expectations. Because the available resources that generate room for action are sourced from different interest groups with different ideas about what should be done and how, some resources will only be available for use for a specific set of actions that the supplying interest group supports. Similarly, other resources will be unavailable for the same set of actions. There may very well be only one path forward that allows the simultaneous use of all needed resources.

Because the resources that underpin managerial action are sourced from a variety of different interest groups, roles and actors, such action is not solely the province of managers. Organisational power is wielded and exercised by those best positioned to navigate and cope with organisational uncertainties with regard to the resources at hand. Therefore, anyone can facilitate managerial action as long as they are in control of the resources required for its enactment.

2.1.1 Use of the Framework

Resource dependence theory is utilised as an overarching perspective for this thesis in four ways. First, it is used to inform the overall project design and understanding of key concepts. In this way, resource dependence theory provides the basis for subdividing the research problem into a matter of internal and external pressures, and lays the groundwork for the terminology, argumentation, and rhetoric of the thesis. Second, it acts as a starting point for the methodological approach. Third, it provides a recurring frame of reference for the individual papers included in the thesis, complemented by additional theories and models that share their basic outlook with resource dependence theory but specialise in narrower phenomena in focus of a particular study. These include, for example, the addition of organisational hypocrisy and the trustee–delegate spectrum of representativeness to the framework of Paper I. Fourth, resource dependence theory is used to interpret and draw connecting lines between the results of the individual study for the overarching analysis in the final sections of the thesis. It serves as the basis of the discussion of the conclusions and their implications for society, higher education institutions and further research.

Therefore, resource dependence theory plays the overall role of providing an overarching perspective that links individual trains of thought and findings, each based on their own particular context, to a common frame of reference. This function is dependent on the compatibility between the complementary perspectives, and this compatibility is the focus of the following section.

2.2 Complementary Perspectives

2.2.1 Organised Hypocrisy

Brunsson's theory of organised hypocrisy departs from previously established ideas of loose coupling (Weick, 1976) and defines talk, decisions and actions as *coupled in a different way than is usually assumed* (Brunsson, 2002). This furthers the conceptualisation of coupling with the idea that coupling is not only a matter of strength but also of type. Herein lies the connection between organised hypocrisy and the overarching resource dependence perspective of the thesis, as well as its primary relevance in Paper I in which it was employed. Organised hypocrisy shows how apparent contradictions in outcome may contribute to the formation of a stable, negotiated balance.

The theory states that organisations engage in organised hypocrisy not by accident but as a solution to the problem of conflicting demands. By talking in one manner, deciding in a second and acting in a third, an organisation can simultaneously satisfy several seemingly conflicting goals at once (Brunsson, 2002). This does not necessarily imply that hypocrisy in itself is consciously enacted as an intended goal; it can also arise dynamically through the conflict it solves. The important part is that hypocrisy is not an unwanted side effect, but an example of problem solving (Brunsson, 2007).

Although the theory outlines a three-way street for the maintenance of hypocrisy (i.e. talk, decisions, and actions), Paper I uses only two of these roads in the construction of its theoretical model, namely talk and action. The primary reason for this is that in the context of the paper's subject matter — strategic councils that may or may not have formal decision-making powers — decisions represent a muddled half-way point between talk and action in that they may represent only one (talk, if the council serves as an advisory board and does not make formal decisions) or the other (action, if the council is primarily expected to act by making decisions). Thus, decision-making is interpreted as absorbed into a dualistic pair of talk versus action.

2.2.2 Principal–Agent Theory

In Paper I, resource dependence theory is used in tandem with the concept of organised hypocrisy to identify the outcomes of negotiation between different interests. The trustee–delegate spectrum of representativeness forms the basis of the identification of inputs by delineating various starting points that involved parties can adopt in the negotiations. At its core, this spectrum concerns the style and focus of the representational roles — that is, the relationship between a principal and its agent (Weßels & Giebler, 2010).

Principal–agent theory, in turn, can be described as less of a unified theory and more of a collection of models of analysis. It focuses precisely on the principal – agent relationship (Gailmard, 2014) but echoes the same broad perspective that birthed resource dependence theory (Lane & Kivisto, 2008). It also provides a suitable base for conceptualising a particular kind of interdependency and traces its resource exchanges, namely the exchange between a principal and an agent.

Principal–agent theory returns as a complementary perspective in Paper IV and contributes to the delineation of different types of control and thus interdependencies. Through this, it also serves as a link between Paper I and Paper IV by illustrating the principal–agent relationship within and outside the borders of the open system of the university.

2.2.3 Crisis Management Theory

A significant component of resource dependence theory concerns the managing of uncertainties (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). In the context of Paper II, which examines events in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, crisis management theory provides a framework for understanding the uncertainties themselves rather than the way they relate to the workings of the organisation and its internal politics.

The theory from which Paper II draws specifically concerns a relational view of crisis management, which echoes the dynamic view of organisations as flowing coalitions of interest groups found in resource dependence theory. Crisis management is conceptualised as a set of clusters of related elements in which individual elements may overlap and flow into each other. Specifically, the model outlines four clusters in crisis preparedness, crisis prevention, crisis incident management, and post-crisis management — each of which deals with

a particular aspect of a crisis and its relation to the organisation that deals with it (Jaques, 2007).

The relational model of crisis management contributes a way to consolidate the disruptive components of the studied crisis with the organisation's structure for managing uncertainties, even when normal operations are disabled or disturbed. This enables the tracing of how the processes behind managing uncertainties change depending on the circumstances of the uncertainty.

2.2.4 Academic Freedom

The inverse of the control, pressures, and dependencies explored by this thesis is found in academic freedom, which fundamentally represents the absence of various constraints. Research into academic freedom does not follow a single, general theoretical tradition, and it has not produced a general framework that can be used as a point of reference for tracing the relationships between the various proposed perspectives (Finkin & Post, 2009). Therefore, it is perhaps the most difficult of the complementary perspectives to consolidate with the overarching resource dependence perspective. However, this is not due to a lack of apparent compatibility but rather a lack of clarity in the evolution of ideas about academic freedom. In Paper III, a variety of potential perspectives are explored until Yudolf's (1987) idea of three faces is identified as key to combining an eclectic flora of perspectives on what is and ought to be free and why with the overarching perspective of the thesis.

The three faces outlined by the model encompass personal autonomy, government expression and institutional autonomy. Personal autonomy broadly represents the freedom of individuals, government expression represents the freedom of the academic domain, and institutional autonomy represents the freedom of the academic organisation (Yudolf, 1987). If individual academics, academia as a whole, and higher education institutions are envisioned as various levels of coalitions engaged in a continuous state of negotiation with their environments for the resources they require, then they must have something to negotiate with. As indicated in the Introduction section, which outlines the rise of the knowledge society and patterns of public management reform, what is often negotiated is the nature and direction of academic work. The three faces of academic freedom contribute to Paper III's ability to differentiate between different types of academic freedom as resources up for negotiation — that is, what is being given up in return for the material support of the environment.

This ability is also utilised in tandem with principal–agent theory to highlight different kinds of pressure in focus for the border maintenance studied in Paper IV. Therefore, perspectives on academic freedom serve as a conceptual link between Papers III and IV, translating studies of both the negotiation and management of uncertainties into a common vocabulary.

2.2.5 Hybridity

Hybridity is not fully adopted as a guiding framework of any of the individual papers but constitutes a recurring theme. It is used as a conceptual outlook on how higher education institutions work. In this form, hybridity theory plays a significant role in Papers I and II, which explore internal arrangements within higher education institutions.

Perspectives on hybridity applied to higher education are still in their infancy. This means that there is not much of a unified framework to adopt, which is a contributing factor to its relatively modest role in the component papers of this thesis. There is scant agreement on what it is, both in terms of how hybridity may be defined and of what role it can play from an analytical perspective, based on its definition (Pekkola et al., 2022). However, the very notion of hybridity, which implies the existence of pre-existing ‘purities’ that mix and flow into each other, rests on a philosophical underpinning that it has in common with the notions underpinning resource dependence theory. For example, it is similar to the idea of an organisation as an open system in which the borders between what falls within and what falls outside are flowing and ambiguous (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003) and can serve as a vehicle for highlighting the movements of this flow.

In accordance with this reasoning, the perspective on hybridity adopted by this thesis is that a hybrid arrangement occurs when two or more phenomena that are considered conceptually distinct become intertwined and create something that is difficult to identify as one or the other. This reflects Johanson and Vakkuri’s definition of hybridity as ‘*an impure existence in between pure types*’ (Johanson & Vakkuri, 2018) and Hsieh’s definition as ‘*elements that are individually linked to specific origins (such as hierarchies, markets, or other ideal models), with these roots themselves often being contradictory to one another*’ (Hsieh, 2023). From this perspective, all organisations are hybrid to some extent, but some are more hybrid than others (Hallonsten & Thomasson, 2023). That is, the combination of several conceptually distinct phenomena is

sometimes a more salient trait than at other times, and hybridity becomes a useful analytical perspective in these cases.

Therefore, it matters little whether something *is*, in absolute terms, a hybrid or even what all phenomena contributing to this hybridity are. What matters is whether it is analytically useful to *view* it as a hybrid in order to identify and separate tensions, or — depending on the case — to identify and separate the evaporation of tensions when the new hybrid phenomenon arises. For this thesis, hybridity is used as a conceptual description to identify tensions in Paper II and to highlight their evaporation in Paper I. Therefore, it serves as a conceptual link between papers focusing on internal pressures.

2.3 A Consolidated Perspective on Higher Education

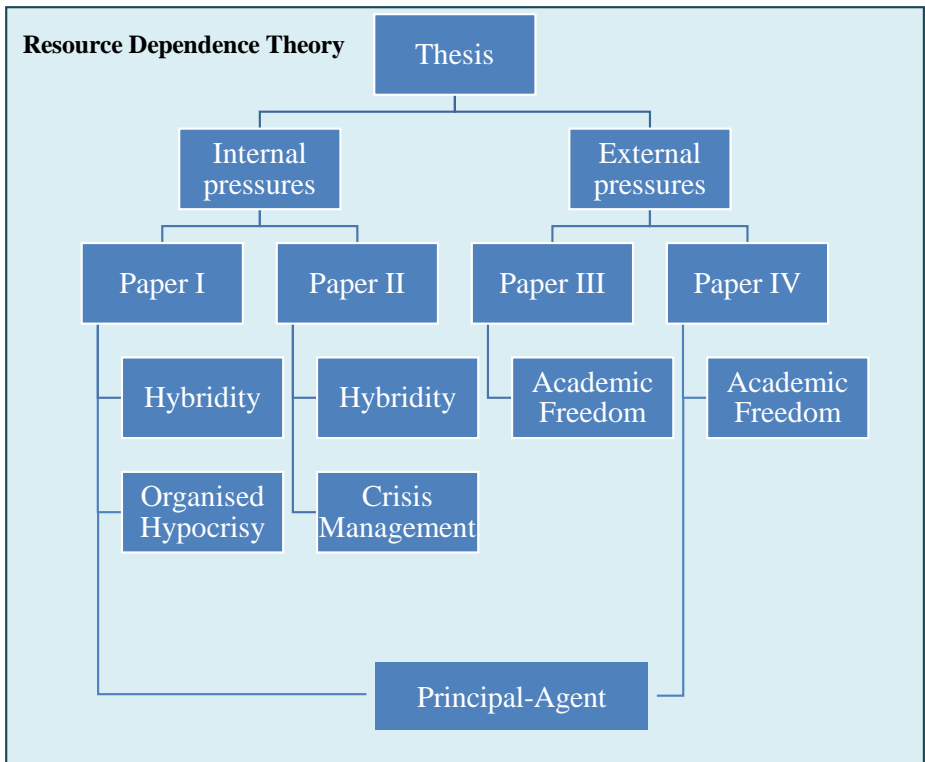


Figure 3: Theoretical Framework

Figure 3 illustrates the structure of the thesis and the hierarchy of its theoretical underpinnings. In sum, the thesis borrows from six different theoretical bases sharing common philosophical underpinnings: theories

concerning resource dependence, organised hypocrisy, principal–agent relations, crisis management, academic freedom, and hybridity. Each plays a specialised role in each paper and the studies therein. Four of the theories serve additional roles:

- Hybridity serves as a link between Papers I and II, forming a cluster of papers dealing with internal pressures. Both papers are thus conceptualised as concerning hybrid arrangements in higher education.
- Similarly, academic freedom serves as a link between Papers III and IV, forming a cluster of papers dealing with external pressures. Both of these papers are thus conceptualised as relating to issues of academic freedom.
- Principal–agent theory, included in Papers I and IV, serves as a link between the two clusters. Both clusters are thus viewed as expressions of the relationships between higher powers and their representatives.
- Finally, resource dependence theory provides an overarching perspective on the thesis as a complete product. All papers are thus considered to describe and explain how borders are maintained in higher education institutions as open systems.

3 Methodological Approach

This study aims to determine how the combination of expectations on higher education institutions affects their capacity to stake out their own strategic positions by raising the question of how a higher education institution can consolidate disparate expectations into cohesive positioning.

This question has two main elements that need to be elucidated to find an answer. The first part concerns *disparate expectations*, and the second concerns *cohesive positioning*.

Regarding disparate expectations, insights from resource dependence theory tell us that it is the *perceived* environment that guides how an organisation will act, and that this perception *enacts* or creates the environment. This means that the perceptions and perspectives of higher education institutions on what pressures and constraints they are subject to, how strong they are, how they relate to each other, and why they do what they do are paramount to identifying the enacted environment to which they act and react. Pressure is real if they feel that it is real, as this feeling generates real effects.

Concerning cohesive positioning, insights from resource dependence theory also tell us that when facing environmental constraints, there are two basic courses of action available, namely adaptation and manipulation (which may, in turn, be further subdivided and combined into more nuanced strategies; see, e.g., Oliver's (1991) response strategies). The starting point for these courses of action is — whether consciously or not — identifying what constraints are present and sorting them into categories based on their alignment with organisational interests and level of strength. This process positions the constraints in relation to each other and outlines a path forward for the

organisation that follows from how the constraints are ordered, thus positioning the organisation accordingly. This means that the positioning process and its level of cohesion can be understood by studying how higher education institutions approach perceived constraints.

For both of these issues, the perspectives of higher education institutions necessarily provide primary material. Only their own perspectives can show how they perceive their environment and why they act as they do in relation to it. Because higher education institutions are not monolithic entities, but rather coalitions of actors with varying interests, these perspectives need to be captured from multiple angles, as detailed in the following section.

3.1 A Mixed Methods Approach

3.1.1 Philosophical Underpinning

This thesis adopts a mixed methods approach by combining different types of material and methods of analysis to generate a multi-faceted image of the study object. This choice is based on a fundamentally realist perspective on science.

When a person observes a system, event, process, or state, this is an event in itself. A phenomenon is generated in the translation between the fact observed and the event of the observation (Bunge, 1998b). This line of reasoning has three implications. First, there is such a thing as an objective fact—an event occurs regardless of whether someone acknowledges it. Second, such acknowledgement would itself be an objective fact, as someone *has acknowledged* the event. Therefore, the flora of objective facts is not static, but influenced by human perception. Third, the same fact can give rise to multiple different phenomena depending on the unique combination of the observed event and the event of observation.

This implies a levelled structure of reality. Facts are dependent on each other in layers: The existence of a system is independent of the event of its observation, but the event of its observation is not independent of the system. A thing exists without a person looking at it, but a person cannot look at a thing that does not exist. This means that each fact has characteristics generated in a layer that is irreducible from itself: one cannot describe the observation of a system using the system alone but must factor in the event of observation.

Approaching a problem from only one direction will thus provide only one unique combination of the observed system and its observation. Therefore, obtaining multiple vantage points from multiple directions can provide a better understanding of how the image of the observed system varies depending on the perspective. This motivates the use of a combination of different theoretical as well as methodological lenses that must nevertheless be compatible with each other in order to secure the ability to consolidate them.

The combination of theoretical lenses is outlined in Chapter 2. Conversely, this chapter outlines a combination of methodological lenses. This combination consists of quantitative data, which show the spread and extent of phenomena (John, 2002), and qualitative data, which provide an understanding of their meaning and characteristics (Devine, 2002).

When combining different methods, four concerns need to be addressed in the design. The first concern is *timing*, in which it is necessary to determine whether one method should build upon the results of another in a sequential manner or should be used concurrently. The second concern is *weighting*, which indicates the need to determine whether priority should be given to one of the methods or whether their weight should be equal. The third concern is *mixing*, which examines when and how the methods should be combined and whether the datasets and analyses should be consolidated or kept separate. The fourth concern is *theorising*, in which how and to what extent the methods can produce compatible results that can be integrated into the same theoretical base should be considered (Creswell, 2009). In the next section, these four concerns will be discussed in relation to how the methods of each paper combine in the context of the thesis as a whole.

Aside from the characteristics of the combination itself, each type of data also needs to be evaluated in isolation relative to the circumstances of its own generation. Quantitative and qualitative data rest on different criteria of quality and knowledge generation. For quantitative data, the aim is to produce reliable and valid results capable of producing generalisations. Someone else doing the same thing should be able to produce the same accurate picture of a broader phenomenon by studying a representative part of it (Read & Marsh, 2002).

Because dealing with qualitative data focuses on the interpretative aspect of a phenomenon, the same quality criteria cannot apply. The same data can and will be interpreted in different ways by different researchers because of the variability of the human perspective. Reliability becomes more a question of

transparency — that is, making assumptions explicit so that the thought process of the analysis becomes possible to trace. Validity remains a relevant criterion, but it becomes focused on demonstrating a coherent logic and connection between the assumptions made, the questions asked, the data collected, and the interpretations made. *Empirical* generalisations are difficult to justify based on a small and unrepresentative selection of cases. However, *theoretical* generalisations based on, for example, the transferability of mechanisms are possible and expected. Demonstrating that a process works a certain way based on characteristics that are also present in other contexts and showing how different contexts may produce variances in the process makes the analysis relevant for the broader phenomenon (Mason, 2002).

3.1.2 Data Collection

Papers I and II are based on the same material, or rather on the same gathering process for that material. The material consists of 21 interviews with senior academic and administrative management functions and members of strategic councils (centrally located committees tasked with advising on or governing a certain issue considered of strategic importance to the university) at three Swedish universities. The choice of interviews as the material for both papers is based on the need to capture in-depth data on experiences and perspectives of how the studied processes work in practice (Mason, 2002), based on the underlying theoretical understanding of organisations as, fundamentally, coalitions of people with shared (and, in other respects, differing) interests (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). The universities were selected based on differences in size and disciplinary width to capture indications of any variation that could depend on structural characteristics.

The interviews were carried out in 2021 and lasted about one hour each. They encompassed two different areas of inquiry: 1) the strategic councils and their roles in the internal system of governance and management (for Paper I), and 2) how this system works in general and how it was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (for Paper II). The interviews were carried out in Swedish and transcribed verbatim.

Paper III is based on data from the international Academic Profession in the Knowledge Society (APIKS) project, which produced a survey among academics that — at the time — had yielded 38,000 responses from 19 countries regarding their working conditions and views of how their respective academic organisations are governed and managed. The paper uses a subset of

this data, specifically the responses from Swedish and Finnish academics (n = 3,785). The response rate was 28.5 per cent for Sweden and 21 per cent for Finland. The choice of the APIKS survey data as the material for the paper is based on the need to capture large-scale patterns of the interaction between the organisation and its external environment, guided by an understanding of organisations as open systems in which what comes from the outside of an organisation affects what happens inside (Biermann & Harsch, 2017).

The data for Paper IV consist of opinion papers from various organisations related to the higher education sector, all provided to the Swedish government through an invitation to contribute to the coming research bill of 2024. In total, 77 out of the 253 papers are included in the selection, of which 35 are from higher education institutions. The papers, which are written in Swedish, were downloaded from a public repository on the website of the Swedish government and imported into the qualitative analysis software NVivo for further processing. The initial data collection was part of a study commissioned by the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF) in preparation for a dialogue seminar between higher education institutions and research funding bodies. The choice of these opinion papers as data for the fourth paper is based on the need to capture the interaction between higher education institutions and their environments in the process of managing uncertainties related to external pressures (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

As previously established, combining different types of methods and materials necessitates a discussion of how they can and should be *timed*, *weighted*, *mixed*, and *theorised* in relation to each other. With regard to *timing*, the data for Papers I and II were collected simultaneously from the same people for two reasons: one practical and one grounded in the connection between the processes studied. The practical reason is that many of the people interviewed were senior staff members with very busy schedules. Thus, each interview represented a highly precious resource that needed to be used to its maximum advantage. This ties in with the second reason in that the processes studied in Papers I and II had such tight connections that 1) some material intended for one study could also be used to inform the other, 2) both sets of material required approaching many of the same people, and 3) making the data collection simultaneous enhanced the comparability and compatibility of the results for the final compilation in the overall thesis. Papers III and IV are linked to a different, externally oriented part of the thesis project and, thus, to

different processes and types of data, which means that the issue of timing is less consequential for them.

Regarding the *weighting* of the different studies, they are all designed to illuminate different parts of the same overarching research problem from different directions, and there is no clear argument as to why a certain direction should be given more weight than another. Instead, they are treated as four parts of a greater whole. They are links in a chain in which each link serves a different purpose, and where no link is less important than the other to maintain the structural integrity of the chain.

As for *mixing*, the datasets are mostly kept separate and compartmentalised as the basis for each respective study. The main reason for this is that such a design enables the tailoring of each dataset to the specific requirements of the individual research questions of each paper, generating maximum credibility for the components that later form the basis for the conclusions of the thesis as a whole. As previously implied, the main exception concerns the data for Papers I and II, in which some interview responses could be used for both papers (e.g. responses on the structure of the internal system of government and management). In this case, the connection between the datasets did not significantly impede the ability to tailor the data to the research questions, as the shared data concerned matters of common interest to both studies.

Finally, in *theorising*, there are no significant incompatibilities between the different methods or materials used. This is a design goal of the thesis, in that each study is anchored in similar philosophical and theoretical traditions, and the methods are in turn anchored in the frameworks established from these traditions. This ensures that the knowledge claims produced by the respective papers will not rest on incompatible assumptions.

3.1.3 Data Analysis

Papers I, II and IV are all fundamentally based on thematic analysis as the method for interacting with the data. On the surface, this means that the mixed methods approach primarily concerns the data collection stage, and that the methods used are in fact rather uniform in the analysis stage. This would be a partially correct characterisation, but also misleading. As understood in this thesis and its papers, thematic analysis is less of a unified method and more of a *'cluster of sometimes conflicting approaches, divergent both in procedure and underlying philosophy, but which share an interest in capturing patterns in data'*, in the words of Braun and Clarke (2021), who are often cited as

authorities in this particular methodology. Braun and Clarke's original work on the subject (2006) serves as the methodological reference for Paper I, while Paper II adapts its approach to a more developed version (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Paper III, in turn, adopts a more specialised perspective that attempts to fully harness the reflexive component (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Thematic analysis, however, is inherently theory-laden — not primarily because of its own theoretical baggage, but because the analytic process is fundamentally dependent on assumptions and ideas held by the analyst. It is thus broadly compatible with everything from critical realism to constructionist philosophies, as the assumptions it reflects shift depending on the theoretical perspective applied (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A defining trait that follows from this circumstance is that thematic analysis gains different characteristics depending on the assumptions and ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In other words, the method will differ depending on the theoretical basis of the analysis. Therefore, it is uniquely constructed and applied for each paper, and it follows the same basic procedures but differs in the interpretative component, depending on the theoretical perspective. In this manner, thematic analysis is utilised in the thesis layer as a tool for consolidating disparate materials with the overarching resource dependence perspective, modified and tailored to each context by the specific complementary perspectives of the paper layer.

The analytical process of the papers utilising thematic analysis broadly corresponds to the six-stage model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), in that a process of data familiarisation is followed by code generation and various stages of theme definition, refinement, and report construction. The relationship between the stages varies depending on the paper in question, however, in relation to the theoretical or conceptual framework applied as well as the perspective on the interpretative component.

Generally, the papers follow a progression in which the interpretative component and reflexive opportunities of the thematic analysis are increased sequentially. Paper I begins with a fairly mechanical process in which the codes are defined by categories from the theoretical framework and 'emergent' complementary themes. The vocabulary of themes "emerging" has been strongly criticized by Braun and Clarke (2022;2021;2006) for implying that themes exist in the data and spontaneously crawl out of the data independently of the researcher, but in the case of paper I it rather refers to this subset of themes being independent results of the otherwise deductively guided process.

The reason for this process is the rather narrow focus of the study itself, while working with material produced to satisfy the information demands of multiple studies. The theory-oriented process allowed for sifting through the data and concentrating on the most relevant components for the subset of issues in focus for the study.

In Paper II, the analytical process was more strongly inductively oriented, with the main deductive component being a sorting process according to the temporal perspective of the coded material. This reflects a more open point of departure for the paper, in which issues generally related to the governance of the organisation in any form were considered of interest.

Paper IV, as the final example of thematic analysis in the thesis, delineated the analysis more clearly into a two-level process that separated an inductive coding phase focused on "topic summaries" (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which described patterns in the data, from a deductive theme-generation phase that consolidated seemingly disparate data points into a common framework of shared meaning.

Paper III stands out from the rest in that it is not based on thematic analysis, but rather on regression analysis. This is largely an adaptation to the data, in which there are not many opportunities for themes to be generated in pre-defined, closed survey responses. The advantage of such responses is instead their ability to show large-scale patterns and connections between different variables, which is the primary strength of regression analysis (Sen & Srivastava, 1990). Similarly to thematic analysis, however, regression analysis is inherently theory-laden in that the regression models constructed need to be based on theoretical notions of how the variables relate to each other (Allen, 1997). The regression analysis itself then functions as a test of how these notions hold when faced with empirical data. In this, the regression analysis and the thematic analyses find common ground through the interpretative layer. They relate different forms of empirical data to theoretical assumptions and preconceptions, and attempt to form an idea of what is found in their intersection.

3.1.4 Publication Strategy

Three of the four papers included as the empirical basis of this thesis are, or are set to be, published as chapters in edited volumes. Paper IV is intended to be submitted to an international journal. The choice of publication channels

illustrates a conscious publication strategy with dual instrumental purposes: aiding the production of the thesis and strengthening the utility of its results.

The publication of chapters in edited volumes provides an opportunity to draw on and contribute to the cohesive development of key topics of scholarly discussion (Salmons & Kara, 2019). In the case of this thesis, these topics concern issues of the transformation and hybridity of governance and management mechanisms, illustrating the changing and dynamic role of higher education in the emerging knowledge society (Drucker, 1993). This provides a solid foundation from which each chapter can be developed, and ensures that the results of each study are included by default in a broader analysis of the overarching phenomenon that the book addresses and of which the chapter serves as a 'case'.

Publication in international journals provides something of a gold standard for scholarly publication, and various schemes to encourage this particular form of publication are widely implemented (McGrail et al., 2006). However, not all journals are created equal — and producing a sound contribution to a relevant scholarly discussion in a journal article format involves a great deal of navigating many different publication channels in order to find the context in which one's specific contribution fits best (Salmons & Kara, 2019). This means that the researcher is required to take a more active role in generating a context for a journal publication that, by contrast, 'comes with the territory' when publishing a book chapter. In the case of this thesis, the first three papers were formatted as book chapters, while the fourth and final paper is set to be submitted to a journal. This illustrates the progression of the contributions made by the thesis, in which the process of establishing a context for the final paper rests on the previous three papers — which were in turn provided a foundation for their context by their respective volumes.

In terms of the publishing process, all papers pass through a rigorous peer review and are published in reputable publication channels. In the case of Paper II, the book is the result of a workshop series on hybridity in higher education funded by the Norwegian Research Council. As a result of my contributions during these workshops, I was invited to participate in the editorial team of an edited volume in which Paper II is also set to appear. At the time of writing, the paper is provisionally accepted for inclusion in the book, having passed through an initial review with a recommendation for minor revisions, but it may yet be subject to additional revision further into the publication process. If any important revisions cannot be completed to

satisfaction, the chapter may also end up rejected. The review process is carried out in two stages: an initial review by other editors and a final review by an external reviewer.

3.1.5 Quality Criteria and Knowledge Claims

As previously discussed, the combination of different types of data characteristics and analytical paradigms — both quantitative and qualitative. The latter also arguably includes both ‘small q’ and ‘big q’ perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2022) in different papers. Consequently, the quality criteria and knowledge claims of the respective sub-studies of the thesis are inherently disparate in nature. However, disparate does not necessarily mean that they are incompatible or impossible to consolidate.

Fundamentally, Paper III rests on empirical generalisability determined by the criteria of validity and reliability. These criteria are perhaps the simplest to evaluate, as they are generally accepted and proven measures that can aid in determining strong and weak points, many of which are covered by the paper itself.

The main difficulty of Paper III is that it makes use of pre-existing survey data that were not generated with the purposes of the paper in mind. This means that there is an imperfect fit between the available variables and the information requirements of the paper, which presents potential issues of validity. This problem is addressed by calculating an additional variable that weights one utilised variable based on the relative value of another. Specifically, this involves weighting the data on sources of research funding by available research time to approximate the volume of research funding. The accuracy of this approximation depends heavily on how research funding interacts with research time in a given national system. However, it can be considered sound for the specific comparison between Sweden and Finland made in this paper.

As for Papers I, II, and IV, their basis in qualitative data and a common basic methodological approach of thematic analysis shift the focus to other forms of generalisability. Braun and Clarke (2022) list several potential routes proposed by other authors. Examples include intersectional generalisability and flexible (discursive) generalisability, which rest on showing how mechanisms such as oppression or discursive patterns reproduce. Additional examples are idiographic, analytical, vertical, transferable, inferential, naturalistic, and representational generalisabilities. These approaches all broadly describe how

conclusions regarding the theoretical connection or contextual situation can be used to inform studies based on the same theoretical perspectives or broad phenomena by considering similarities and differences. A strategy for this thesis is to explicitly outline the theoretical constructs utilised and devised in relation to the specific contextual characteristics of the individual study, facilitating theoretical generalisability and transferability. In effect, the aim is to secure this value through transparency in the analytical and interpretative components of the papers as well as in the overarching argument of the thesis. How well this succeeds will depend on the specific theoretical or contextual situation in which any other given study attempts to transfer or utilise the conclusions of the thesis. Thus, the approach will prove more suitable for some (more similar) perspectives and contexts than others, which is an in-built feature of qualitative research. Contextual conclusions demand contextual evaluation.

This does not equate to a limitation of the thesis, but rather illustrates the relationship between the conclusions drawn in the different papers. The empirical generalisability of Paper III is fundamentally limited by the studied contexts in the same basic way as the more theoretically generalisable Papers I, II, and IV. The difference is that the limitations of empirical generalisability are possible to isolate to specific variables, whereas the exploration of the limits of theoretical generalisability requires a rich, interpretative, and analytical component in order to trace disparities between contexts. Effectively, the generalisability of the respective studies represents two sides of the same coin. The theoretical generalisability of Papers I, II, and IV can serve as the basis for generating empirical generalisability by providing the basis for the generation of theory-based statistical tests, while the empirical generalisability of Paper III can serve as the basis for producing theoretical generalisability by providing the foundation for a deep, contextual analysis of significant relationships.

3.2 Limitations

There are three primary groups of limitations of the approach that this thesis takes, that merit extended discussion when considering its potential knowledge claims as a whole.

The first of these groups concerns studying the Swedish case as an illustration of mechanisms also broadly applicable to higher education institutions elsewhere. There are multiple features of Sweden as a country, as well as its

particular higher education system, that make it stand out as a very different context from many other parts of the world. Many of these features are described in various levels of detail both previously in this thesis and in the individual papers: the largely unitary system, the dominating status of the public sector, the dualistic system of government, comparatively strong employment security, and the tradition of academic freedom and movement towards institutional autonomy. To these features can be added the relatively modest size of the country itself, the (now broken) historical hegemony of social democracy, the comparatively strong economic conditions, as well as unique demographic and geographical conditions. All these characteristics set the stage for how universities can be staffed and expanded, how cooperation and mobility arrangements can be formed, and a plethora of other practical intricacies. Therefore, care must be taken when interpreting the results and conclusions produced in this thesis. They must be considered in relation to the specific context that shaped them, and when applied to other contexts an analysis should be undertaken regarding which contextual variables might be sufficiently different and impactful to motivate adjusted expectations.

The second group concerns limitations arising from the material, which uniformly represent the perceptions of actors within the higher education system. Given that the thesis is a study of the relation between pressures, constraints, and strategic positioning, the focus on what amounts to *perceived* pressures and constraints could be viewed as a deviation from what this thesis is purportedly about. However, it is important to note that the theoretical point of departure for the thesis as a whole positions the perception of pressures and constraints as equally real as ‘actual’ pressures and constraints. This is because actors act according to what they perceive, not according to any dissenting external reality of which they are unaware. More importantly, the perceptions of the studied actors do not represent the only layer of perception involved, as there are several additional layers introduced by the design of the papers. One such layer is the selection of actors to study; what perceptions are found depends heavily on whose perceptions are sought. Another layer is the interpretative work inherent in data analysis, perhaps particularly when the analysis rests heavily on a reflexive methodology. Thus, it should be noted that this study does not actually capture the perceptions of actors within higher education but rather perceptions of these perceptions, thus providing a valid image but not *the* valid image. The interpretations and conclusions of this thesis should be understood in relation to the theoretical and personal points of departure that guide them. Similar to limitations relating to the empirical

case of Sweden, the application of the results in contexts with different underpinnings requires translation according to principles of transferability.

The third group of limitations results from the choice of processes studied in the four papers. The first paper specifically studies a phenomenon here termed 'strategic councils' as a mechanism of coordination between different internal interests; the second paper examines the processes of strategy formulation and crisis management; the third study analyses the pressures related to research funding; and the fourth study discusses opinion papers delivered from agents to their principal at the latter's request. Each process and context represents a unique example of components within broader systems of governance and management. The selection of these particular examples is bound to illustrate different aspects of the system with different levels of focus and under different lights, compared with what could have been shown with a different selection. Therefore, this thesis does not represent a cohesive image of how higher education is governed or managed in general, or even in this particular context. Instead, the thesis represents a series of traits evidenced by the individual processes studied. These traits can be connected to one another and to the characteristics of broader systems, helping to identify instances where clashes occur or patterns are reinforced. This thesis shows how certain mechanisms contribute to the greater whole, but leave other mechanisms unexplored and thus must be interpreted as a piece of the puzzle rather than a completed puzzle in itself.

3.3 The Researcher's Perspective

This thesis is authored as part of a so-called industrial PhD student arrangement. This means that I have been employed at an organisation other than the one where I study, and this organisation graciously allowed the undertaking of doctoral studies as a competence development effort within the scope of my employment. This has three important implications for the thesis which, in line with the reflexive component of the methodology, require a measure of reflection.

3.3.1 Professional Background

The first implication is the professional background that inspired the thesis work and enabled the study arrangements. Before beginning my doctoral studies, I worked for several years within the central planning functions at two different universities, providing close analytical support for senior university

management. Among the tasks that this work entailed, one of particular relevance is that I was the main author of the opinion paper delivered by one university to the government in preparation of the research bill of 2020, the next iteration of which is part of the material for Paper IV. Other examples include being the editor of annual reports and budget proposals to the government, coordinating various internal governance processes, and conducting analyses related to the organisational structure, administrative processes, and academic outputs of the organisation as a whole.

This has given me intimate personal knowledge of how these processes work behind the scenes, how to identify window dressing, how to read between the lines and how to find key actors behind policies, strategies, structures, and actions. This has also provided me with invaluable aid in the process of identifying and reaching suitable material, as well as defining research problems and finding appropriate theoretical approaches through which these problems can be understood.

On the other hand, my background has also produced a set of preconceptions about how things work that are not necessarily grounded in the scientific process. Some of these preconceptions have, through that scientific process, been confirmed along the way — but some have also required rejection and more or less heavy adjustments. To leverage the benefits of my background while attempting to minimise the risk of it leading me astray, a continuous strategy has been to systematically discuss drafts of project plans, reports, and papers in collegial discussions with the research group I belong to — Higher Education Organization Studies (HEOS). Especially during the start of the thesis project, I also sought feedback from other relevant groups that could provide competing perspectives. A particular strength of this strategy is the multidisciplinary nature of HEOS, which comprises many PhD students who are — like me — simultaneously engaged in professional activities in other roles in the higher education system. This has ensured steady access to insights from peers with different sets of preconceptions that have frequently been quite at odds with my own.

Nevertheless, for good or ill, my background and the personal perspective on higher education that has been fed by this background are clearly visible as artefacts throughout the thesis. The research problem was identified through struggles and contradictions I noticed in my daily professional activities, and the overarching perspective of resource dependence is a result of my — perhaps overly cynical — view of money as a key driver of academic activity as

reflected by my own previous role as a planning officer. My choice of materials is influenced by my ideas of who decides who gets what, when, and how in higher education, and my conclusions are inevitably affected by the preconceptions I started with and the adjustments made along the way. In sum, I believe these circumstances transform into strengths for the thesis, as they have helped generate a more cohesive image. There are, however, also drawbacks in that this image would have looked differently if the circumstances had been different, and there is no telling whether that image would have been more interesting.

3.3.2 The Employer as a Principal

The second implication is my relationship with the employer or, as it turned out, employers. When I started the thesis project, I was employed as analytical support for the vice chancellor and other senior management at a university that signed an agreement with the KTH Royal Institute of Technology for my PhD education. This occurred with the understanding that insights from my thesis project would also aid the governance and management of my employer's organisation, both through my own competence development and through the knowledge and perspectives brought by the thesis itself. As some topics dealt with by the thesis directly or indirectly concerned the interests of my employer, this presented a variant of the principal-agent problem. Although my employer's approach was very hands-off throughout the process, implied expectations could potentially be levelled with regard to areas of particular focus or conclusions of particular interest. However, none of the constituent papers of the thesis were published during this employment, as I changed employers two years before the publication of Paper I. Moreover, the thesis, as an overall project, has evolved much since its first incarnation.

I currently serve as the chief audit executive of another university, and this has two implications for the potential principal-agent problem. First, the thesis project was not commissioned by this employer, as it simply came with the package when making the new hire. Second, the role of an internal auditor carries explicit regulatory conditions of formal and functional independence from the internal management structures of the organisation (Institute of Internal Auditors, 2024), including the vice chancellor and other senior management. The work is focused on the analysis of internal control mechanisms on behalf of the university board, whose primary interests are precisely these mechanisms rather than the internal or external politics of the university. This means that any expectations regarding the thesis project,

whether implied or explicit, could be freely discarded, even if any were to be voiced. Therefore, the potential principal–agent problem can be considered marginal.

3.3.3 Loose Coupling to the Place of Studies

The third implication is my relationship with the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, where I undertook my doctoral studies. My place of work is, and has always been for the duration of my studies, geographically distant from KTH. This means that I have had little connection with the day-to-day workings of the academic environment there, and mostly participated in events directly related to my thesis project or research group.

During the first part of my studies, when I was still at my original employer, this disconnect was managed in two ways: 1) through a connection with the political science division at my employing university, where I have had a co-supervisor and participated in higher seminars, and 2) through my trips to KTH roughly every two weeks to participate in research group activities in person. This ensured both close proximity to an academic environment where I could participate as needed in day-to-day activities, and a stable, systematic link to the environment at KTH. This arrangement served to generate a strong link to collegial discussions and contexts during the primary formation of my academic identity as a doctoral student.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, both of these arrangements evaporated — partly due to the cancellation of physical trips for the duration of the lockdowns and partly due to my change in employment, which was located in another part of the country. During the later part of my doctoral studies, my primary connection to KTH was regular attendance — sometimes physical but mostly virtual — in research group activities.

The main advantage of this for the thesis is the continued avoidance of the principal–agent problem. A weak link to KTH means that there are few interactions between the interests of the organisation and the interests of my thesis. The disadvantage is that my anchoring in the collegial structure has been significantly weaker during the second half of my studies, but this weakness has been partially mitigated by its temporality. The anchoring was significantly more important during the first formative years than it has been since, when my academic identity has taken an increasingly steady shape.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2023) outlines four basic principles for ethical research: reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability. Based on these principles, the code further outlines sets of good research practices for different levels and activities within the research system. These include: the research environment as a whole represented by organisations and institutions; training and mentoring activities represented by the actions of, for example, PhD supervisors and research leaders; research procedures represented by the conduct of the individual researcher; infrastructural safeguards and data management practices; and practices of recognition, collaboration, acknowledgement and assessment.

In the Swedish context, the principles of the European code are commonly operationalised and complemented by the Swedish Research Council's guidelines for research ethics (Swedish Research Council, 2024).

Fundamentally, there are two types of principles: 1) legally mandated requirements based on data protection regulations and ethical review that mandate specific procedures and safeguards and 2) more general ethical considerations that mandate that certain principles should be upheld in the construction of any given research procedure.

To a significant extent, the legally mandated requirements are tied to the subject of the research project in question. The Ethics Review Act (SFS 2003:460) applies specifically to projects that involve the processing of sensitive personal data corresponding to Article 9.1 of the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or personal data regarding crime, as well as research which involves physical intervention on a (living or dead) person, is intended to affect a person or risks harming them, or involves studies of biological material that can be traced to a (living or dead) person. Article 9.1 of the GDPR includes personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data, health data, and data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation.

None of these categories of research data are relevant to the studies conducted in this thesis. Thus, regulations concerning ethical reviews or the processing of sensitive personal data are not directly relevant for further consideration.

As for the more general ethical considerations, the Swedish Research Council lists a set of questions that are appropriate for reflection on a given research

project. These questions are primarily directed towards identifying which interests and principles apply, which different paths of action are open or limited in relation to these principles, which risks and consequences may surface during or after the project, whether these risks and consequences are proportional to the expected value gained, and how any conflicts between different principles could be managed (Swedish Research Council, 2024).

This thesis generally deals with fairly uncontroversial material and subject matters, with any reasonably probable effects on the research subjects being indirect and slow moving. For example, Papers I and II deal with interview data regarding how the respondents perceive different internal decision-making processes within their respective higher education institutions, while Paper III utilises previously collected survey data broadly encompassing the respondents' perceptions of working conditions within academia. Paper IV is based on publicly accessible opinion papers formally delivered from various organisations to the government.

Of these different data sources, the respondent data would seem the most sensitive. It is conceivable that some characterisations of how a certain internal process works could cause other stakeholders to take issue, which could negatively affect the relationship between the respondent and those stakeholders if the interview data were made fully transparent. As a reasonable safeguard against this, all interview data are reported in a depersonalised form that fosters confidentiality. Illustrative quotes are attributed to a general description of the type of respondent rather than to the individual respondent's name, no lists of interviewees are provided in the papers, and any identifying information as part of a quote or analytic argument is redacted or converted into a more general format that reduces personal traceability for a knowledgeable reader. Together with similar alterations to enhance readability, such alterations are contained in [brackets] to maintain the transparency of the researcher's interpretation of the data.

It is technically possible, although not necessarily likely, that the process and findings of this thesis could influence future policy decisions or the actions of different stakeholders within higher education systems. For example, the act of carrying out an interview could cause the interviewee to reflect upon their work in new ways and therefore change their continued behaviour. Readers of the thesis could gain new insights into the way they exert influence on the processes in which they are involved. To an extent, these would not necessarily be unwanted side effects of the research. It is my stance that the societal utility

of a given project is a significant and relevant measure of its value. What is important, however, is that any utilisation of the research findings should be based on a sound understanding of the reasonable knowledge claims of the thesis, which points to the value of transparency and explicit reporting of the interpretative perspective and limitations of the thesis. This is also discussed in Sections 3.2 and 3.3 and is broadly illustrated by the theoretical approach described in Chapter 2 and the philosophical underpinning of Section 3.1.1.

4 Results

4.1 Paper I – Matrix Hybridity

Lundborg, S. & Geschwind, L. (2023). Matrix Hybridity: The Complex Realities of Strategic Councils. In L. Liudvika, J. Dee, & B. Van Der Meulen (Eds.), *Handbook on the Transformation of Higher Education*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

This paper is part of an edited volume intended to generate an understanding of the workings of the transformation of higher education. This particular chapter outlines a salient outcome of ongoing transformation processes, namely the introduction and proliferation of internal councils within higher education institutions tasked with advising on or governing strategic issues within certain thematic areas. For the thesis project, this paper provides insight into how priorities stemming from different stakeholders within the university intersect and form negotiated balances.

The chapter discusses the transformation of university governance through the introduction of permanent thematic university-wide strategic councils that focus on issues such as external collaboration, infrastructure, sustainable development, and equal opportunities. These strategic councils are permanent in that they have no fixed term and will not disband until they are specifically dissolved. They are thematic in that they are tasked with handling a particular type of issue, so their agendas are clearly focused on their assigned theme. They are university-wide in that they are directly tied to the vice chancellor or other senior university managers. They are strategic in that they are meant to further a particular interest and deal with issues of importance for the long-term development of the university. Finally, they are councils in that they

consist of a collection of people gathered to discuss, advise, or decide their issues.

They are created in response to a transformation of the requirements and demands of higher education institutions, but they also signify a transformation of internal management structures in and of themselves. Because they are composed of several different professional groups and stakeholders within the university, they provide an arena in which different interests and values can intersect to form new priorities, but these meetings between stakeholders as well as the new avenues for exerting influence that the councils represent also generate tensions with existing structures of line management and collegiality.

The chapter is based on 21 interviews with senior academic and administrative management functions as well as members of strategic councils at three universities. The latter category consists of different types of staff, depending on the makeup of the council and includes staff both with and without other leadership or management tasks. The interviews were coded through a data-driven thematic analysis process in which recurring themes and patterns in the responses were defined and grouped in relation to a pre-defined set of categories and complementary emerging themes. The first interview was carried out jointly by myself and my co-author to generate cohesion between our perspectives as interviewers. Afterward, I conducted 16 further interviews by myself, and my co-author carried out the remaining four. The recorded interviews were then transcribed by an external consultant, after which I carried out initial analysis and drafting of the chapter, while my co-author reviewed and adjusted the resulting draft. As the first author, I led the overall study design.

Resource dependence theory and the concept of organisational hypocrisy are combined in the paper to create an organisational coping matrix and classify the outputs from the strategic councils. The councils can *affirm*, *implement*, *influence*, or *develop* the norms of their assigned thematic area in order to deal with demands and expectations. An *affirming* council would isolate problematic demands and expectations in a harmless enclosure, whereas an *implementing* council would attempt to meet these pressures with concrete action in support of them. An *influencing* council would attempt to renegotiate the expectations and spread new ways of thinking, and a *developing* council would attempt to generate new policies, processes and activities that disrupt the status quo.

To trace which interests intersect in a council, an academic representation triangle is adapted from Karlsson's (2013) take on the trustee–delegate spectrum of representativeness. In this triangle, each corner represents a viewpoint that council members can take on their mandate: the viewpoint of a *line delegate* that represents their part of the organisation, that of a *collegial delegate* that represents the collegium as a whole, or that of a *trustee* that represents an expert function put in the council to act in accordance with their own best judgment.

All studied councils are shown to serve an *affirming* function, as they provide platforms for learning and the establishment of mutual understanding between their members, regardless of their specific functions, mandates, procedures or agendas. They generate acceptance of the way things work in other parts of the organisation and thus help maintain the status quo. Other functions are more dependent on the specifics of the individual case, largely because there is no consensus within the organisation or even the council about its purpose in the system of internal governance. This means that individual ideas on the part of each council member about their purpose and mandate become highly influential in determining the outputs of their work. A group consisting of self-identified line delegates seeking to serve the interests of their specific parts of the organisation produces vastly different outputs compared with a group consisting of self-identified collegium delegates seeking to look at the interests of the university as a whole. A group consisting of some line delegates, some collegium delegates, and some trustees will produce unpredictable results that depend on the momentary internal balance of power.

There is a tendency to increase the number of strategic councils over time, because the threshold for creating a new council is smaller than that for dismantling old ones. It is easier to distribute power than to retake it. There is also a tendency for councils to gain more high-profile members over time, as a straightforward way of increasing the impact and control over the output of a council is for it to have a direct representation of senior management functions. Overall, these tendencies generate council bloat in which strategic councils come to play increasingly influential as well as unruly roles in the internal management system over time. Instead of generating strategic cohesion by allowing disparate interests to meet and negotiate common positions, they risk producing more inconsistent positioning from the higher education institution as new, uncoordinated interest groups are created in each council.

4.2 Paper II – Trial by Fire

Lundborg, S. & Geschwind, L. (Under revision). Trial by Fire: Process and Priority in Swedish Higher Education Institutions. In L. Alonso de Andrade, E. Pekkola, K. Kettunen, & S. Lundborg (Eds.), *Unravelling Emerging Hybridity in Nordic Higher Education*. Brill.

This paper is currently in the middle of a review process for an edited volume exploring hybrid arrangements in Nordic higher education. The paper compares the slow-moving and predictable processes behind strategy formulation and similar activities with the rapid and unpredictable processes behind universities' responses to government initiatives regarding the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021. For the thesis, it contributes with an understanding of how higher education institutions deal with the effects of uncertainties in their environments.

The paper is based on the same study as paper I, with the material being 21 interviews with senior academic and administrative management functions as well as members of strategic councils at three Swedish universities. The interviews were coded through a data-driven thematic analysis process, in which recurring themes and patterns in the responses were defined and grouped in relation to whether they described long-term strategic processes, short-term crisis management, or the transition between one and the other. As it was based on the same interviews as in Paper I, the material was jointly produced by myself and my co-author. I led the initial analysis and drafting of the chapter, while my co-author reviewed and adjusted the resulting draft. As the first author, I led the overall study design.

Universities tend to maintain complex structures of internal governance and management, and this complexity is increasing. This generates a system that can be both unwieldy and unstable in the face of rapidly changing conditions. This system was put to a critical test by the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered a crisis in both general society and the structures of higher education. Studies on COVID-19 responses in higher education have shown a lack of crisis preparedness and indications of structural breakdowns giving way to temporary ad hoc procedures. This provides the backdrop of the paper in exploring what the crisis broke down, how it broke, and what it reformed into. The study focuses on the Swedish case, in which the unitary nature of the

higher education sector combined with a national coordination of the crisis response at odds with the conventions of higher education governance in the country provides a suitable proving ground for complex management structures.

To aid in the analysis, the paper combines insights from resource dependence theory and crisis management theory into a resource-dependent crisis management relational model, which outlines four clusters of elements of crisis management processes and their relationship with the structuring of interdependencies. Elements related to *crisis preparedness* serve to provide a structure for existing interdependencies, while *crisis prevention* measures manage uncertainties related to this structure. When a crisis occurs, *crisis incident management* provides avenues for short-term renegotiation of the previous structure, which is then consolidated into a renegotiated balance in *post-crisis management*.

The study shows how long-term processes, such as strategy formulation, are described as collegial and driven by operational core and academic management. By contrast, short-term crisis management in response to the pandemic revolved around central crisis management groups staffed primarily by senior university management and administrative officers, with comparatively little involvement from academic personnel.

The different structures of the respective types of processes are tied to a feeling of insecurity among academics, as they feel more confident about what the university should be doing on a principal level in the future than what needs to be done here and now. There is also a perception that crisis management has a correct course of action and incorrect courses of action, contrasting with an idea of competing perspectives and interests when it comes to long-term development. These differences generate a greater degree of unity in crisis management than in cases of strategy formulation. If there is only one correct course of action, and the academic stakeholders are hesitant to define it on their own, then there is little need for further discussion once the road forward has been identified.

Apart from the differences in perspective, there are also differences in practical considerations. How the course is set is not necessarily how it would have been preferred if the circumstances were different. Academic decision-making processes are normally somewhat slow and cumbersome, and when there is a need for fast and forceful decision-making some parts of these processes must be expedited or bypassed entirely. The key goal becomes reaching a course of

action, and precisely what course of action that is and how it was reached becomes secondary. In this triage-like process, the academic perspective is deemed expendable, and administrative functions take the reins.

The results of the study reflect previous findings in that disruptive changes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, cause breakdowns of established structures — and that the vacuum is filled with new processes that shift the focus from the academic to the administrative perspective. In terms of the crisis management framework, crisis preparedness (which defines the status quo) falls under the purview of academics, while crisis prevention and crisis incident management (which ensures that the system works under pressure) are placed in the administrative domain. Post-crisis management, in which the new reality is consolidated into a revised status quo, once again becomes an academic concern. The division of labour between the long-term perspectives of crisis preparedness and post-crisis management on one side, and the short-term perspectives of crisis prevention and crisis incident management on the other, is suggested as an explanation for why the identified breakdowns take place. The mechanisms of the systems are designed by one party and applied by another, in a structure referred to by crisis management literature as *compartmentalisation*.

In terms of resource dependence theory, the COVID-19 pandemic upended the delicate balance between interest groups established through crisis preparedness mechanisms and filtered through crisis prevention mechanisms, thrusting the organisations into new phases of renegotiation in crisis incident management. Post-crisis management finally serves as a translation process between the renegotiated balance and the previous status quo. The variable control over the resources that govern each phase, in which administrators control the filter and the short-term renegotiation, results in comparatively strong administrative control over the processes that generate adjustments to the status quo. These findings echo previous research that has observed movements towards line management structures and away from collegial governance mechanisms, a stronger emphasis on administrative concerns in higher education and the emergence of audit cultures, as well as the entry of administrators into traditionally academic domains.

Ongoing hybridisation processes are posited as explanations for these structural movements. Long-term strategic planning and short-term crisis management are conceptualised as distinct, but in practice, they are more like different aspects of the same seamless continuum. What is placed in one of the

boxes might just as easily be placed in the other under different circumstances. As one is seen as the purview of administrators and the other as the purview of academics, when a certain issue shifts from the long term to the short term in the face of a crisis, the control, development and future placement of the issue are also affected. The Swedish case likely provides an unusually clear picture of this mechanism because of an in-built division between the administrative and the academic in the fabric of financial accounting and organisational structure. Therefore, the categories themselves are immutable, which means that the only way for the system to adapt in the face of change is to move the borders between them.

4.3 Paper III – Gilded Cages

Lundborg, S., Ismayilova, K., Geschwind, L., & Broström, A. (In Press). Gilded Cages: Reliance on External Funding in Research. In L. Leisyte, M. Marquina, & G. Jones (Eds.), *The Transformation of Governance and Management of the Academic Profession in the Knowledge Societies*. Springer Nature

This paper is part of an edited volume intended to explore patterns and examples of the transformation of how the academic profession is governed as part of the international project *Academic Profession in the Knowledge Society* (APIKS). The paper explores the relationship between employment security and reliance on external funding in Sweden and Finland, based on APIKS survey data, and discusses the implications of this relationship for academic freedom. For the thesis, the paper contributes an understanding of how external interests interact with and affect internal value priorities.

The paper argues that the rise of the knowledge society has led to a struggle for control over knowledge production and proliferation through academia, which has established a tug-of-war between academic freedom on one side and external imperatives on the other. Efforts to safeguard academic freedom have frequently been tied to employment security, with tenure tracks and permanent employment considered primary defence mechanisms. If one cannot be dismissed for going one's own way, then all roads are open.

On the other hand, there is an increasing tendency to use funding mechanisms as instruments of control over research production and performance, as well as an increasing reliance on external funding sources for the maintenance of an academic career. As funding is typically a necessary condition to pursue a given research agenda, the freedoms afforded by employment security may not

translate into the practical ability to make use of these freedoms. This paper tests the conditions for academic freedom in relation to both employment security and funding pressures.

The paper is based on material from a survey conducted through the international APIKS project, at the time of the paper totalling over 38,000 responses from 19 countries. Data from two of these countries — Sweden and Finland (n = 3,785) — are used, and a regression analysis is conducted to explore the relationships between nine different variables. Among these variables, six are constructed through the combination of two survey items to identify the prevalence of pressures in relation to funding structures and employment forms. As the first author, I led the study design and divided the drafting process of the chapter into three stages. I drafted the problem description and framework, one co-author (Khayala Ismayilova) drafted the results, and all the contributing authors jointly reviewed the work in preparation for my draft of the concluding discussion. The draft was circulated again among the contributing authors for a final review and adjustments.

The pressures are interpreted and discussed in relation to two hypotheses concerning their links to three faces of academic freedom: personal autonomy, government expression and institutional autonomy. The first hypothesis is that external funding is linked to weak employment security compared with internal funding, which generates risks for personal autonomy and institutional autonomy. The second hypothesis is that external funding is associated with increased pressure to maintain funding, which generates risks for personal autonomy and government expression.

The results show that funding arrangements have clear implications for an academic's contract status but that the implications vary by country. In the Swedish case, the first hypothesis is confirmed, with indications of the government's ability to affect employment practices at higher education institutions through the balance between funding mechanisms. In the Finnish case, the hypothesis is not confirmed because temporary forms of employment are associated with *all* funding sources rather than just external ones. This means that the more research time and funding someone has, the more insecure their employment is. A suggested explanation for this is the link between internal research funding and external funding in the Finnish system, in which some internal funding is distributed based on its ability to attract competitive research funding.

The second hypothesis is partially confirmed in both national cases. Different funding streams seem to play different roles in the system, in which some replace more secure forms of funding rather than add to that secure base. These sources are associated with increased pressure.

In relation to the three faces of academic freedom, the paper concludes that all three are potentially at risk from the studied funding arrangements. With regard to personal autonomy, it concerns a risk of pressure to align the choices of research problems, methodological approaches, or modes of publication with the expectations of important funders and funding streams. Regarding institutional autonomy, external funding may, over time, steer higher education institutions towards particular directions with regard to decisions on the employment structure. In terms of government expression, the government may affect the direction of research by diverting funds to specific mechanisms, funding bodies, and research agendas.

Thus, the ability of permanent employment forms to function as defence mechanisms for academic freedom can be stunted in two ways: through decreased prevalence by influencing how employment gets funded, and through circumvention by restricting the funding necessary to pursue independent research agendas. Measures such as the introduction of tenure-tracks and legal protections for appointment procedures and dismissals must therefore, together with funding mechanisms, be considered as parts of a greater system of incentives and barriers in order to provide functioning safeguards.

4.4 Paper IV – Putting Mouths Where the Money Is

Lundborg, S. Putting Mouths Where the Money Is: An Analysis of Input to the Swedish Research Bill of 2024. (Manuscript)

This paper takes its point of departure from the growing importance of higher education institutions to various political aspirations, in light of the movement towards a knowledge society. This, in turn, puts the spotlight on higher education institutions as political actors within a broader system. The paper adds to this thesis by showing how higher education institutions attempt to harness their influence on the structure of external pressures in the management of internal dependencies.

The problem is approached through a combined lens of academic freedom and a principal–agent perspective. This generates a view of how organisations are

positioned relative to the government as a principal of the research system. It is assessed through different aspects of academic freedom, covering the individual autonomy of researchers as well as the institutional autonomy of universities. The dual perspectives are consolidated into an academic freedom–control matrix that provides the conceptual foundation of the analysis.

The empirical material of the paper consists of 77 opinion papers submitted to the Swedish government in preparation for drafting the upcoming research bill of 2024. Roughly half of these papers originate from higher education institutions, while the other half were authored by research funding bodies and other organisations, either closely related to higher education or research or particularly noteworthy in the Swedish policy debate in general.

The results show tensions between the government as a principal and the organisations behind the opinion papers as agents, but there were also tensions between the organisations as principals and their internal constituents as agents. Academic freedom and excellence are key topics of the policy debate, but their conceptualisations differ between organisations, with different meanings assigned to the words depending on the perspective represented by each paper. Ostensible agreements when it comes to the goals of the system are thereby hidden by structural disagreements, generating conflicts between issues such as whether academic freedom should be interpreted as an institutional or individual value, and whether excellence is tied to values such as scientific progress or economic efficiency.

The structural components of these conflicts show an element of integral organisational self-interest inherent in advocacy work. The perspectives of each organisation are shaped by its position within the system, which skews its priorities and valuations of various imbalances in different directions relative to those of other actors. These differences are manifested in the perspectives on what principles should be adopted for the governance of research — primarily in terms of funding mechanisms. A focus on institutional autonomy and behavioural control, which leaves intended outputs up to the recipient, points towards basic funding for higher education institutions. In contrast, a focus on personal autonomy for the researcher and outcome control, which targets specific research areas or societal challenges, points towards the need for competitive funding through directed calls from research councils.

The direction taken by an opinion paper is tied to the organisation's interests for different levels of autonomy and different positions in relation to the

funding system. Higher education institutions do not necessarily perceive a difference between institutional autonomy for the university and personal autonomy for the researcher because they view their own processes as researcher-driven. For research funding bodies, their operations are instead primarily tied to interactions with individual researchers, meaning that institutional autonomy for universities — which enables greater flexibility for internal control systems — would strengthen the dependence of those interactions on the organisational imperatives of the university.

The paper concludes that external and internal pressures are inextricably linked by mutual interdependencies: Each half of the pair contributes to the material conditions of the other and nudges priorities and value systems in relation to each other. Opportunities to influence external conditions thus also become vehicles for influencing internal conditions, which enables higher education institutions to harness their influence in their attempt, whether consciously or not, to simplify the management of internal interests. Proposals are geared towards shifting the balance between institutional and individual autonomy, depending on the characteristics of the organisation in question, and between behavioural and outcome-oriented models of control.

5 Concluding Discussion

Swedish higher education institutions are expected to perform a wide range of functions encompassing educational, research, and societal purposes and activities, such as basic research, applied research, economic growth, innovation, competence provision, *Bildung* and sustainable development. This is part of a well-studied, long-standing global development in which universities and societal needs are becoming increasingly intertwined (Aarrevaara et al., 2021; Gornitzka & Olsen, 2006; Clark, 1998; Kerr, 1963). This development also comes with an increasing variety of stakeholders — both internal and external — who all have different ideas about the relative value of each function a university can perform, as well as how these functions should be more specifically defined. These ideas form a myriad of pressures on higher education institutions, constraining their room for action through expectations and demands that can be more or less difficult — sometimes borderline impossible — to escape. Thus, higher education institutions use various strategies to deal with a multitude of stakeholder perspectives. Some expectations they meet, some they try to redefine, some they keep at arm's length, and some they just ignore.

This thesis has sought to answer the question of how higher education institutions can consolidate disparate expectations into cohesive positioning. The overall answer is that they cannot. From each studied angle, there are important mechanisms at play that prevent the formation of cohesion and, arguably, positioning as an overall activity.

The first angle mirrors the idea that higher education institutions are not actors in themselves, but rather, as previously discussed in Chapter 2,

coalitions of interest groups. These coalitions may be subject to a nested structure of more coalitions, all the way down to individual people and even individual roles played by the same person in different contexts. Therefore, there is no single force behind the consolidation process that may steer the positioning into a cohesive whole. This is clearly illustrated in Paper I, in which different interest groups meet in strategic councils only to end up mostly conserving the status quo due to the sheer multitude of interests and perspectives failing to align in new direction. The strategic element of the councils is lost because there is no force driving the definition of goals or active repositioning towards them. As new issues emerge on the strategic agenda of upper management, new councils are formed and more influential representatives are appointed to facilitate the formation of a new direction that never comes. Over time, the councils themselves form new interest groups layered on top of the existing ones. The layering of management solutions mirrors a layering of management ideals stemming from societal transformation (Sahlin, 2012) and ends up mostly serving to prevent change rather than facilitating it.

The second angle shows what happens when change is no longer a choice, but instead represents something that must happen. There is a distinct order of priority regarding which values are considered integral to the organisation and which ones may be dropped if necessary. The primary value that gets preserved when push comes to shove seems to be conformance to expectations. If a task needs to be done quickly, and there is a chance that it may turn out badly, then the safest option is to do as one is told so the blame ends up somewhere else. There are few incentives for risk taking when the stakes are high. This puts an effective pause on visionary discussions about where to go until the crisis is over. In the meantime, the organisation is nudged ever so slightly towards the direction of conformance for every decision about the practical details of crisis management. Short-term decisions carry long-term effects, but this interaction is hidden by the disconnect between vision and implementation, which promotes strategic separation rather than cohesion in the positioning process. In the vocabulary of Myer et al. (2011), different elements of the process become compartmentalised from each other, and limited focus causes the organisation to lose track of where it is heading.

The third angle takes aim at what conformance means in practical terms. In essence, it is about continuous negotiation for the resources that drive academic work — where the resources available for academics as the

compensation is precisely that work. Therefore, if the availability of resources is unstable and needs to be secured, the only thing academia can bring to the negotiation table is adaptation to the perceived interests of those in control of the required resources. This means that the status quo reinforced by internal negotiation does not represent stagnation in a stable position, but rather a continuous process of adaptation towards external interests. The strategic element of the process is mostly the selection of what expectations to conform to, based on the resources offered on the other side of the table. The array of open positions is largely determined by external realities (Stensaker & Benner, 2013).

The fourth and final angle shown by this thesis concerns what the organisation can do – and does – to affect what interests it may choose to conform to. As higher education institutions are subject to constraints from within and without, strategic positioning is the act of balancing different constraints against each other to find a workable path forward. Every path means submitting to some constraint in some way, whether it be through the lending of legitimacy or through achieving a certain result (as in the case of Brunsson's (2002) division between 'talk' and 'action'). The question is what paths are open, and how they appear to be selected.

One salient method appears to be the mobilisation of external pressures to manage internal conditions – consciously or not – mirroring conventional lobbying behaviour (Lundberg & Hysing, 2016; Lowery, 2007). Any given opportunity to influence the environmental pressures of a higher education institution is invariably tied to the circumstances of its internal management, because the internal conditions are fed by external material realities. In the same way, the influence of a higher education institution on its environment is necessarily guided by the perspectives afforded by its unique contextual conditions, internal structures and interests, as an actor cannot attempt to change what it cannot see.

The effects of this are twofold. The first effect is that internal interdependencies and balances are highly sensitive to changes in the external environment. Changing the regulations, incentives, resource allocation mechanisms, principles of governance, or goals also affect the way the organisation and its components approach these variables as inputs into the internal system. The second effect is an inherent organisational self-interest in the interaction between a higher education institution and its environment. The organisation is a conglomerate of internal interest groups with imperfect

views of the system as a whole; thus, any perceived challenges will be skewed towards areas important to the operation of the organisation. Regardless of any conscious altruistic intentions, the influence of the university is geared towards the material interests of the university – and notably, not necessarily the interests of the various components *of* the university. In the relationship between these two mechanisms, there exists a self-reinforcing feedback loop in which the operations of the higher education institution serve to recreate and reinforce the external conditions that have led to its existing internal value priorities.

Taken together, then, what does this mean in relation to the purpose of the thesis: *to determine how the combination of expectations on higher education institutions affects their capacity to stake out their own strategic positions?*

The answer to this lies in what can be seen when the four previously mentioned viewing angles are combined. The difficulties in mobilising internal stakeholders towards new directions, a disconnect between long-term and short-term perspectives that skews the balance in favour of compliance, the sensitivity to external pressures, and the external control of the internal balance, severely constrain the strategic capability of higher education institutions. The expectations on higher education institutions are myriad and mounting, and both internal and external mechanisms of negotiation and prioritisation are geared towards conformance. Instead of staking out positions of their own, higher education institutions are largely limited to staking out positions into which they fall or are pushed.

Going back to the structure of the thesis outlined in Section 1.3.3, Figure 2 is updated to Figure 4, which shows a set of boxes bearing the main implications of each component study in the rightmost part.

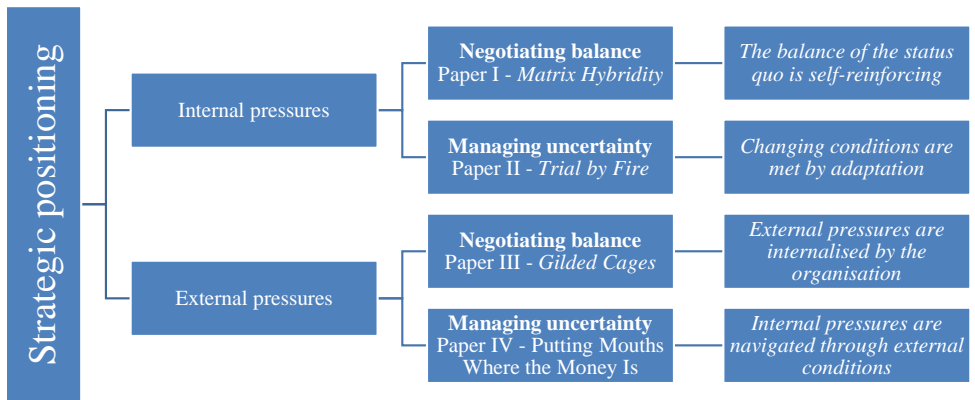


Figure 4: Outline of the Project Conclusions

The management of the internal environment appears to be fundamentally conservative. The balance does not move unless some external imperative compels it to do so, and even then it mainly moves as much as it has to. This mirrors, perhaps, what Oliver (1991) calls acquiescence, in which the organisation follows habit and complies with the rules of the game until the conditions make such acquiescence untenable. The organisation is then forced to compromise and generate a new balance.

However, this is not a conscious design, but rather the result of a multitude of different wills and interests wanting to go into many different directions, with no force systematically gaining the upper hand. Instead of finding a common direction, different interests more or less organically find ways to coexist with each other and generate a balance that is dependent on precisely the *lack* of direction. This can be seen as the loosely coupled organisation (Weick, 1976) in action, or as the survival of internal interest groups through generating internal governance focused on talk rather than substantive action, exemplifying organised hypocrisy (Brunsson, 2002): loudly declaring one's interests and opinions but without the intention of imposing them on the organisation.

In this way, the external environment also becomes something rather paradoxical: it is an influential governor of the university, but simultaneously also an unwitting tool of it. In funding mechanisms, there are clear indications of great responsiveness to external pressures. Higher education institutions

adapt their practices to the requirements and espoused values of funders. However, they also nudge these requirements, and the mechanisms and conditions behind them, in efforts to regulate the internal balance between interest groups. The focus thus appears to be pointed steadily inwards, with external boundary work acting as reinforcement for the maintenance of internal boundaries within the organisation. Higher education institutions are constrained, and these constraints partly seem to be a prison of their own making and maintenance.

Similar notions have been put forward, such as ‘institutional lock-in’ or ‘strategic inertia’ caused by the reproduction of societal templates for what it means to be a modern university (Stensaker & Benner, 2013). This echoes a much-discussed inability of the sector to establish and maintain institutional profiles (Öquist & Benner, 2012), long-standing institutional isomorphism (Holmén & Ringarp, 2023), path dependence (Fenney & Hogan, 2017) and homogenisation through academic drift (Holmberg & Hallonsten, 2015). It seems to be partly a failing of academic culture, and partly a failing of the system that academia works within. Academic culture is said to be based on the questioning of established truths and the critical assessment of authority (Jaspers, 2016/1946). It is also a meritocratic and competitive order in which the survival of the fittest rules (Becher & Trowler, 2001). The first part makes it difficult to gather internal strength for common purposes because it must be the freedom of all to deviate from these purposes, while the second part drives individuals to constantly seek new ways to gain an edge. The system, in turn, provides very little in the way of regulatory differentiation and direction. Everyone has the same goals, the same structural characteristics, and generally the same starting conditions. Thus, uniform incentives have uniform effects: we follow the money, and we toe the line.

The system in question is likely an important variable to consider when reflecting on what this means for academia as a whole. The mechanisms of governance matter, because higher education institutions are so fundamentally sensitive to external pressures due to their difficulty in managing their internal interests. Paradoxically, this would seem to make higher education institutions – nominally the most unmanageable of organisations – easier to rule than most. Many of the findings of this thesis appear to be artefacts of the Swedish system of governance of higher education and research, with its nominally strong commitment to academic freedom and institutional autonomy generating a focus on indirect control, and clashing with the general and

detailed regulation of universities as public agencies. This sets the stage for a set of reins that is loose in name but tight in practice. The university is similar to a goat tethered by a dozen ropes tied to a dozen poles. Each rope allows for slack that remains unusable due to the constraining influence of others. When expected to provide for everything, higher education institutions seem more able to do nothing.

5.1 Implications for Further Research and Practice

There are multiple sets of practical implications of the conclusions of this thesis. The first set, which is particularly relevant for policymakers, is that higher education institutions appear to be simultaneously highly suggestible and difficult to steer, because, while they readily adapt to changing external conditions, the adaptation process is fundamentally guided by their unique internal context and position within the system. Therefore, small changes in the rules of the game or structure of incentives can be expected to have substantial structural effects on university behaviour over time, but precisely what these effects are may be unpredictable. The message, then, is this: Handle with care.

The second set, which is relevant for higher education management functions, is that great care must be taken to maintain an overview of the links between external and internal conditions. In the management of an open system, the borderline between the organisation and the world becomes of paramount importance, and the inflows to the system must be monitored and steered in relation to its outflows. Any given change will be difficult to implement if only looking in one direction. It matters little what internal regulation gets instituted if the external structures remain the same. Thus, to change the shape of the organisation, its position relative to its environment must also be changed.

The third set, which is directed towards researchers, carries a dual meaning — for researchers as actors *within* the system and as scholars *of* the system. Higher education institutions are paradoxically uniform as well as unique in the way they function. The uniformity can be found in the common mechanisms of interactions among the different components of the system, whereas the uniqueness lies in the particular combination of these components. To successfully navigate the system, one needs to keep one eye on the road in front and another on the zoomed-out map, taking stock of how the

individual case works in all its contextual peculiarity and what broader phenomenon the case fundamentally represents.

There are multiple potentially interesting avenues of further research opened by the findings of this thesis. As previously stated, this thesis does not represent a comprehensive mapping of the higher education system as a whole, but rather provides a detailed view of how a few specific mechanisms within the system interact. In a complex system, there are always further mechanisms to explore and other processes to add to the map. Two avenues stand out as particularly interesting.

The first of these takes aim at the fact that this thesis primarily deals with how higher education institutions *approach their constraints* – referring to the focus on the approaches themselves. It affords less attention to the *result* of these approaches: the actual positions adopted in relation to each other and to other stakeholders, the degree of differentiation through the establishment of institutional profiles, and the different roles they play in their environments as cogs in a greater system. Exploration of these factors would enhance the understanding of the interactions both between universities, and between universities and their environments.

Second, this thesis addresses *how higher education institutions* approach their constraints – referring to the focus on higher education institutions as actors. Higher education institutions are not the only players on the board. In certain respects, the actions and perspectives of other closely related organisations, such as research funding bodies, independent academies, rectors' conferences, and student and teacher unions, may even have a greater influence on how higher education institutions work than their own internal processes. A comprehensive map of the system, if such a thing can even be conceived, should include all its components in the core and in its periphery – and there are significant pieces of this map still left to draw.

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