**Making sense of institutional positioning in Finnish higher education**

**Abstract**

This paper examines how institutional positioning has emerged in the meaning-making activities between Finnish higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education and Culture. The study is based on a qualitative analysis of the performance agreement documents of all higher education institutions filed with the Ministry for contract periods 2010-2012 and 2013-2016. The results show that in the first cycle, higher education institutions used profiling vocabulary in vastly different ways, and their lists of priority areas were quite wide ranging. By the second cycle, profiling statements had become more specific and structurally more alike, but the lists of priority areas continued to have a wide scope. As a response, the Ministry has consistently demanded and rewarded more focused profiling efforts and used the concepts of profiling to support other steering measures.

**Introduction**

Higher education institutions' strategies are increasingly linked to their institutional positioning efforts. The terms 'profiles,' 'academic portfolios,' and 'priority', 'focus', and 'core' areas of research and education are used to describe how higher education institutions focus their activities by carving out suitable niches in national and international markets. By allocating resources in selected areas they attempt to gain better competitive positions. Institutional positioning efforts are based on the presumption that, similar to businesses, higher education institutions will benefit from concentrating their activities in areas that offer favourable opportunities to attract resources and have fewer constraints (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013; Hazelkorn, 2009; Martinez & Wolverton, 2009; van Vught & Huisman, 2013).

Governments are increasingly encouraging higher education institutions in their institutional positioning efforts (Berkeens et al. 2010; Bonaccorsi & Dario, 2007; Coates et al., 2013; Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Kitagawa & Oba, 2010; Klumpp, de Boer, & Vossensteyn; 2014; Laudel & Weyer, 2014; Meier & Schimank, 2010; Silander, Haake, & Lindberg, 2014) because institutional positioning is the linking pin between organisational-level actions of a higher education institution and system-level diversity (Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013). Previous studies have shown that the market mechanism does not always increase diversity (Birnbaum, 1983; Morphew, 2009) and that government steering, such as the establishment of binary systems, might actually preserve system diversity (Huisman, Meek, & Wood, 2007).

This paper aims to contribute to a growing body of global empirical research on profiling. It examines how institutional positioning has emerged in Finnish higher education in its early stages. The analysis is based on the exchange of documents between the Ministry and Finnish higher education institutions related to performance agreements in 2010-2012 and 2013-2016.

**Profiles and priority areas**

The term 'profile' is commonly used to refer to the dimensions of a higher education institution's mission. Profiles indicate what higher education institutions do, want to do, and for which audience (van Vught & Huisman, 2013). Profile definitions are important for individual higher education institutions, and in aggregate they create diversity in the nation's higher education system. North American higher education institutions have used the Carnegie Classification since the 1970s to classify institutions. The creation of the European Research Area and European Higher Education Area have emphasised the need to create transparent classifications tools for Europe, too. The European U-map was created for this purpose. It includes 23 profile indicators that are grouped under six dimensions: 1) teaching and learning, 2) student profile, 3) research involvement, 4) involvement in knowledge exchange, 5) international orientation and 6) regional engagement. (van Vught et al., 2010).

Higher education institutions have sought further market differentiation through activity portfolios in which higher education institutions specify which educational fields, programme types or research areas will be prioritised (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011). Portfolio-building decisions are managerial choices to put more explicit focus on some areas at the expense of others. They are linked to competitors' actions, funding opportunities and governmental control. A university may compete in some areas with other universities but build alliances with them in other areas. The research of Laudel and Weyer (2014) in Germany and the Netherlands and Silander, Haake and Lindberg (2014) in Sweden have provided novel insights about the interplay of top-down and bottom-up forces that drive the selection of research profiles. In Finland these preferred areas of research and education have been called (strategic) priority areas, focus areas or spearheads.

**The context**

The Finnish higher education system has been characterised as having 'strong' institutions and 'strong' government steering (Aarrevaara, 2012). In a comparative study by Huisman, Meek and Wood (2007) Finland was placed in the middle group in a comparison of the system-level diversity of different nations. Recent developments in Finnish higher education offer a unique opportunity to examine the reciprocal relationship between higher education institutions and the Ministry in the context of diversity and institutional positioning. Finland has a binary higher education structure of universities and universities of applied sciences that have distinct missions. Finnish universities provide the highest level of scientific education and research. The universities of applied sciences offer bachelors- and masters-level education and conduct applied research. Student numbers in both sectors are almost identical: in 2013 there were 113,618 full time equivalent students in 15 Finnish universities and 113,046 students at 24 Finnish universities of applied sciences (Vipunen, 2015).

The institutional positioning efforts of higher education institutions can be traced to the introduction of the structural development plan in Finnish higher education. The structural development plan aimed to enhance the competitiveness of Finnish higher education institutions and link them to European higher education development (Opetusministeriö, 2008a; Tirronen & Nokkala, 2009; Valtioneuvosto, 2005). The structural development plan has had wide-reaching effects on Finnish higher education. First, the plan led to reforms in both higher education sectors, establishing universities and universities of applied sciences as independent legal entities (Universities Act 448/2009; Polytechnic Act 932/2014). A new, more outcome-based funding model was also introduced in both higher education sectors. Second, the structural development plan has resulted in multiple mergers, decreasing the number of Finnish higher education institutions.

The increasing importance of institutional positioning can be regarded as the third major consequence of the structural development plan. Researchers have previously analysed the university reforms (e.g., Kauko & Diogo, 2011; Piironen, 2013) and mergers (Puusa & Kekäle, 2013; Tirronen & Nokkala, 2009), but institutional positioning has so far received less attention, with the exception of Pietilä (2014) and Vuori (2015). Pietilä (2014) analysed the conceptions of research profiling among academic managers from two

universities and identified two overlapping conceptions: profiling as an instrument of strategic management and as symbolic management. Vuori (2015) provided a case study on an institutional sensemaking process of a university of an applied science which had recently defined its own priority areas.

## Research approach and methods

This paper takes a qualitative approach by examining how the concept of institutional positioning has been constructed in the dialogue between Finnish higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education and Culture. Making meaning is an ongoing interplay of interpretation and action (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is a social activity that is triggered when something unusual, unexpected or important happens outside normal routine (Weick, 1995). This paper takes the view that institutional positioning is a socially constructed process that is made sense of in the interaction processes of actors. The documents in which the participants refer to university profiles and priority areas result from sensemaking processes and their meanings are constantly reconstructed in the dialogic process between the actors. University profiles and priority area definitions are considered non-routine actions that commence sensemaking processes within higher education institutions and the Ministry. Although documents always represent the social, political and economic contexts they have been written in, they also have an effect on the construction of later contexts (Fitzgerald, 2007). Therefore, although this study examines the dialogue that occurs between the principal actors, it is evident that the actions of other higher education institutions and the cross-national higher education influences also have an effect on how the meaning of institutional positioning is constructed within individual higher education institutions and in the Ministry.

Previous research has shown how institutional strategy has evolved in the sensemaking processes of organisational stakeholders (Frølich & Stensaker, 2012; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kezar, 2013; Kezar & Eckel, 2002), but in this paper the sensemaking framework is applied to the dialogic relationship between higher education institutions and one of their most influential external stakeholders, the Ministry of Education and Culture. Using the

framework of sensemaking, the research question that guided the analysis was 'how do the dialogic partners make sense of institutional positioning in the early stages of profile building in Finnish higher education?'

The data for this analysis consisted of the written documents related to the contract agreements of two recent cycles (2010-2012 and 2013-2016) and include Ministry's instructions, contracts between higher education institutions and the Ministry and Ministry's written feedback given in 2010 and 2011 (Figure 1). These documents were downloaded from the Ministry's website.

Figure 1 around here.

The data were coded with attention to the institutions' definitions of institutional profiles and priority areas and to all related comments in the Ministry's responses. The content analysis aimed to analyse the data matrix at the system level on a yearly basis and from the institutional level as a chain of actions. The original texts were in Finnish or Swedish and the quotations in the following are translations by the author.

**The trigger**

The preparation process for performance agreements between the Ministry of Education and Culture and higher education institutions involves multiple stages. The process starts with joint seminars for the higher education institutions, research institutes and the Ministry. In these seminars the joint objectives for the higher education sector for the next contract period are first introduced by the Ministry, then commented by the institutions and later agreed by all. After this, the Ministry meets with each higher education institution separately to discuss institutional-level objectives. The performance agreement is prepared using an electronic database and later signed by both parties. The higher education institutions report of their performance annually and are given feedback from the Ministry. (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2015.) The preparation process for the contract period 2010-2012 started with Ministry's instructions at the end of 2008

(Opetusministeriö, 2008b) and was followed by seminars in December 2008 and March 2009. The higher education institutions met with the Ministry in spring and autumn of 2009. The contracts were signed by the end of the year.

When the Ministry gave instructions for the contract period 2010-2012 it requested higher education institutions to submit 'proposals' for profiles and selected focus areas (Opetusministeriö, 2008b, p. 3). The Ministry specified that 'a profile may in different ways emphasise research, degrees, artistic function, lifelong learning, innovation and regional activities' (Opetusministeriö, 2008b, p. 2-3.) , but did not in these instructions give guidelines for higher education institutions how to define priority areas. The request for profiling was in line with the structural development plan of Finnish Higher Education (Valtioneuvosto 2005; Opetusministeriö 2008a) and Finnish development plan for education for 2007–2012 (Opetusministeriö, 2008c). These prior documents, however, introduced the idea of priority areas as a means for Finnish research to succeed in the international competition for research funding.

> The profiles of universities and polytechnics will be sharpened in the target and performance negotiations to highlight strategic priorities, which will facilitate targeted research funding and competition for international research funding. **Universities' research prerequisites** will be strengthened in the selected strategic priority areas and **especially in research-intensive universities**. (Opetusministeriö, 2008c, p. 34. Emphasis added)

**First responses**

The profile and priority area definitions higher education institutions defined for the performance agreements 2010-2012 were concise and expressed with short paragraphs or bullet lists linking the profiling statements with the mission statements. The profile statements of research universities were created in accordance with the Ministry's written instructions and accentuated research excellence, doctoral education, master's degrees, innovation, regional impact and the research-teaching nexus, among others. Ten out of 15 universities referred to internationalisation in their profiles. The profile statements can be compared to each other without significant difficulties, and could be placed within the dimensions of U-map/Multirank if needed.

The most important determinants of university profile are scholarship and internationalisation.
(University of Jyväskylä)

The university profiles itself as business-orientated university which focuses on internationalisation and regional interaction.
(University of Vaasa).

The profile descriptions of universities of applied sciences in 2009, however, had a much wider scope. Some profile statements were written in a similar way as research universities' statements; for example, Mikkeli University of Applied Sciences profiled itself 'as a lifelong-learning higher education institution and as a strong research, development and innovation institution'. There were, however, more distinctive ways of formulating a profile that do not seem to directly respond to the Ministry's instructions nor easily fit within the dimensions of U-map/Multirank. As the following examples illustrate, the term might have been understood to refer to the foundations upon which the higher education institutions' missions are built.

The mission of the higher education institution is based on: 1) internal, creative multidisciplinarity which supports activities that utilise competencies over traditional branch borders; 2) active cooperation in the Helsinki alliance; 3) the dynamics and decision-making power that are granted to us through Arcada foundations' focused ownership.
(Arcada University of Applied Sciences)

Active connections to the labour market; experimentation and implementation of new, versatile teaching methods; and sharing and disseminating best practices are central to Metropolia's teaching activities. Close contacts with employers have also been the basis of Metropolia's organisational structure. Basic operations are organised into clusters that reflect the structure of the industry in the region. Metropolia invests in the development of multidisciplinary learning and elective studies. The Metropolia higher education community and its partners meet in modern, barrier-free and community-based learning environments and networks.
(Metropolia University of Applied Sciences)

The profile descriptions of universities of applied sciences reveal an over-lap between the concepts of profile and priority area as illustrated in the following example.

> The profiles of JAMK are: 1) promoting growth entrepreneurship 2) strengthening internationalisation 3) flexible education solutions that apply new technology. (Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences)

The number of defined priority areas in the higher education institutions' institutional positioning strategies ranged from two to seven. The lists of priority areas indicate that some institutions tried to find common denominators for all existing educational fields or cover all possible research topics, for example:

> Priority areas: 1) developing students' thinking and learning abilities, 2) health and wellbeing, 3) climate, environmental development and natural resources, 4) culture and society.
> (University of Helsinki)

In contrast to the wide and general priority area lists, some institutions listed very specific areas as their priority areas, for example:

> The priority areas of TAMK are welfare entrepreneurship, environmental effects of facilities, culture export, services for the elderly, intelligent machines and entrepreneurial pedagogy.
> (Tampere University of Applied Sciences)

In general, universities of applied sciences indicated that the defined priority areas would cover both education and their research, development and innovation activities. The priority-area definitions of research universities, however, were vaguer in this respect. Only one university separated the priority areas of education and research, while the rest either combined them in one list or clearly indicated that the lists were for research priorities only.

> The university has defined the following as its central priority areas: 1) molecular bio sciences research, 2) the research of cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, 3) ecological interactions and ecological genetics, 3) learning and education research, 4) institutional design and social mechanisms and 6) futures research.
> (University of Turku)

It can be concluded that when the institutions defined their profiles for the contract period of 2010-2012, the interpretation of profiles and priority areas was more coherent in research universities than in universities of applied sciences, whose statements revealed that the construction of the term higher education institution profile had multiple interpretations at that stage.

**Steering in 2010 and 2011**

In between the contract periods of 2010-2012 and 2013-2016 the Ministry changed its former practise of meeting with each institution each year for follow-up and started to provide feedback in written form in the interim years between the contract periods. In 2010 the Ministry credited institutions whose profile and priority statements echoed the Ministry's preferred approach. Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences had, according to the Ministry, produced 'a comprehensive and clear strategy' and University of Eastern Finland was told that 'the approach and the measures aiming at internationalisation provide a good basis for strengthening selected research areas and their internationalisation'.

Also critical remarks were provided by the Ministry. These called for more focused profiling definitions. These comments were directed especially to universities of applied sciences, for example:

> The submitted strategy requires clearer definition of priority areas and profile. The institutions also needs to draft a concrete implementation plan which enables the follow-up and evaluation of strategic goals.
> (Ministry's feedback to Turku University of Applied Sciences)

The Ministry's responses indicate that it used the profiling and priority-area definitions to advance other goals set in the structural plan, such as closing locations and lowering student admissions in certain fields. This was accomplished by referring to the problems the higher education institutions had encountered and suggesting that higher education institutions make decisions that would favour their institutional positioning strategies. The tendency to combine weak progress and failure to meet graduation rate targets continued in the Ministry's comments in 2011.

It is also alarming that one of the weakest degree programme in regards to application rates is chemical technology which is one of the priority areas of region. Chemical technology as a priority area of the institution and region should be strengthened.
(Ministry's feedback to Central Ostrobothnia University of Applied Sciences).

The Ministry of Education and Culture sees that the focus of the university and research should be related to supporting the regional and industrial needs. The non-achievement of target of doctoral degrees is particularly alarming, because business studies is the largest educational field of university and profiles the university strongly in its relations to industry-
(Ministry's feedback to University of Vaasa)

The request for more specific priority area definitions was continued in the Ministry's comments of 2011. This time also research universities priority areas were taken under a critical scrutiny, for example:

The Ministry of Education and Culture sees that the priority areas have been defined on too general level. The critical issue is to which extent the priority area decisions direct allocation of resources and make the strategic development of its units possible.
(Ministry's feedback to University of Helsinki)

The Ministry continued to connect the other goals of the structural development plan to its comments for profiles and priority areas in 2011 and especially those directed at the universities of applied sciences, requesting them to build larger units and negotiate with other institutions s on mergers.

**The new contract period**

In its instructions for the new contract period of 2013–2106, the Ministry restated that the nation's 'higher education system consists of internationally viable universities and universities of applied sciences that have distinct profiles based on their strength areas' (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2011, p. 5). The Ministry critisised that the priority-area definitions of universities and universities of applied sciences remained too broad to distinguish differences on the national level. In the meantime, a plan to drastically reduce

the number of students in the universities of applied sciences had been introduced in relation to the structural development programme. These reductions, according to the Ministry, were to 'be implemented in a way that the profiles of universities of applied sciences will sharpen and the quality will improve' (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2012, p. 1).

In the performance agreement texts for 2013-2016 the higher education insitutions' profile statements had become more specific and structurally more alike in both sectors, which would indicate that the universities of applied sciences had also adopted a standardized view of the definition of a profile in institutional strategy. While some higher education institutions had narrowed down the number of priority areas and re-defined their scope, the priority-area lists of higher education institutions in both sectors, however, still exhibited a wide range of interpretation of institutional positioning and provided lists that could cover almost all possible research areas:

> The University has defined the following as its central priority areas: 1) The basic world structure, materials and natural resources, 2) The basic structure of life, 3) Changing environment – clean water, 4) Thinking and learning human being, 5) Welfare and security, 6) Clinical research, 7) Exact thinking, 8) Language and culture, 9) Justice in society, 10) Globalisation and change of society.
> (University of Helsinki).

> The priority areas of the institution are: bio competence and business know-how, applied ICT, wellbeing services in the life cycle, working-life based approaches to creative arts, marine environment and construction expertise and expertise in health care and medication.
> (Turku University of Applied Sciences)

The priority-area documents for the latest contract period reveal that the some institutions seem to have adopted the idea of institutional positioning as a strategic management tool by linking their institutional evaluation systems to the priority areas. For example, these institutions cited specific targets for research funding or number of publications in the priority research area, among others.

Follow-up Indicators:

[…]
4) Competitive research funding in profile areas (Academy of Finland
Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation, EU)
Outcome 2011: 21 Million Euros    Objective 2016: 25 Million Euros
(University of Tampere)

Follow-up indicators

1) Share of scholarly publications related to profile and strategic
spearheads ranked on level 2 or 3 by the publication forum
Outcome 2011: 10%                Objective 2016: 20%
2) Share of funding from Academy of Finland and Finnish Funding Agency
for Innovation related to profile and strategic spearheads
Outcome 2011: 30%                Objective 2016: 45%
3) Share of dissertations related to profile and strategic spearheads.
Outcome 2011: 40 %               Objective 2016: 45
(University of Lapland)

## Conclusions

This study has examined how the meaning making of position has emerged in the early stages of institutional positioning in Finland. It contributes to the emerging research interest in the study of positioning in higher education as a tool for tightening institutional strategic management and increasing the diversity in national systems.  The chain of profiling statements in the performance agreements for 2010-2012 and 2013-2016 indicate that the idea of the institutional profile differed in the first cycle, especially in the universities of applied sciences sector, but became more standardised by the second agreement period.  The diffuse use of profiling terminology has also been noted to take place in Sweden (Silander, Lindberg & Haake, 2014). The examination of the definition attempts of institutional priority areas revealed that despite the Ministry's requests to be more specific, the definitions of priority areas seem to be a task some institutions are unwilling to do. Yet, there are higher education institutions that seem to have adopted the Ministry's ideas and have established a system that clearly links priority areas with strategic objectives and assessment plans. These two types of institutions might represent what Pietilä (2013) regards as either symbolic or strategic management in terms of their perceptions of profiles. Grouping all existing educational fields or all possible research areas under suitable umbrella titles illustrates symbolic management and 'emphasises the ostensible adherence to the official national policy while concealing the untouched activities behind visible structures' (Pietilä, 2014, p. 312). The examination of priority

area definitions in the Finnish universities of applied sciences also showed that the idea of institutional priority areas is not restricted to research only but starts to make meaning in both educational and research activities .

In a similar fashion to other countries (Berkeens et. al., 2010; Coates et. al., 2013; Meier & Shimank 2010) the Finnish government has adopted profiling as an instrument for increasing diversity. The steering role the Ministry has assumed bears a close resemblance to the negotiating and compromising role that Klumpp, de Boer and Vossensteyn (2014) propose as one of the reasons the profile-building attempts of Dutch higher education institutions had greater success than the more top-down steering measures of German authorities. Commenting on the strategy choices of autonomous institutions is an art that needs to be practised with care. Within the time frame of this study, the Ministry has created meaning in the concepts of profile and priority areas in writing and has rewarded the successful profile builders with strategic funds. The Ministry has also used the terminology related to institutional positioning to point out development areas and to justify its structural development plans, such as mergers and decreasing the number of locations where instruction is offered. These actions have been very powerful methods of adding meaning to profiling, especially in the universities of applied sciences sector.

The documentary material that the analysis was based on offered advantages and limitations for the study. The openness and transparency of the documents on the Ministry's website offered a unique opportunity for a system-level examination and comparison of research universities and universities of applied sciences. The data made it possible to analyse positioning within a longer time-frame and as a step-by-step incremental process between main actors. Documents offer a voice of past events and activities (Fitzgerald, 2007) in a different way than qualitative interviews. Informants of qualitative interviews always make sense retrospectively whereas documents represent the sensemaking in that point they have been written in. Moreover, as a form of qualitative research, documentary analysis offers the advantage that documents have not been produced for research purposes. Compared to qualitative interviews where the interviewer always has an effect on the interviewee, in document analysis the researcher does not influence the content.

However, a researcher doing documentary analysis must be always acknowledge that of documents have been produced for some other reason than research (Bowen, 2009: Fitzgerald, 2007). In this case the documents were performance agreements and elucidate the research problem only in a limited way. Moreover, it is important to note that the oral discussions, seminars and performance agreement negotiations that may have included important triggers for sensemaking were not part of the research material.

The meaning making activities of the stakeholders within individual institutions were beyond the scope of this investigation. The same applies to the sensemaking processes of people within the Ministry. Therefore, case studies of the higher education institution's internal sensemaking processes of positioning and particularly studies on the execution of positioning strategies would offer an interesting avenue for further research for the discussion of whether positioning strategies lead to real changes in the relationship between a higher education institution and its environment.

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