



# From organised anarchy to de-coupled bureaucracy: The transformation of university organisation

Peter Maassen  | Bjørn Stensaker 

Faculty of Educational Science, Department of Education, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

## Funding information

Research Council of Norway, Grant/Award Number: 212422; University of Oslo

## Abstract

Based on key governance and organisational characteristics from the 1970s universities have been conceptualised as organised anarchies and loosely coupled systems. More recently, a number of studies have argued that universities have been changing their internal governance and organisational structures leading to tighter vertical steering and the emergence of more integrated organisations. In this article, it is argued that while tighter vertical integration indeed might be observed, this does not necessarily imply greater horizontal integration in university organising as well. By drawing on case studies of five research-intensive universities in five different countries, we discuss how strengthened hierarchical governance is driving increased organisational specialisation and professionalisation, but that this also may result in horizontal de-coupling within universities. The article ends by a discussion of the positive and negative implications of coupled, de-coupled and loosely coupled organisations.

## Sammendrag

Basert på organisatoriske kjennetegn fra 1970-tallet har universiteter ofte blitt beskrevet som organiserte anarkier og løst koblede organisasjoner. Mer nylige studier har imidlertid argumentert at universiteter har radikalt endret sin interne organisering noe som har bidratt til at de i dag fremstår som

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2019 The Authors. Higher Education Quarterly published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd

mer vertikalt styrte og langt mer integrerte organisasjoner. Denne artikkelen argumenterer at mens sterkere vertikal styring av universiteter kan observeres empirisk betyr ikke dette nødvendigvis at de samtidig er blitt mer organisatorisk horisontalt integrerte. Basert på fem casestudier av forskningsintensive universiteter i fem ulike land diskuterer artikkelen hvordan sterkere hierarkisk styring av universitetene driver frem økt intern spesialisering og profesjonalisering, der denne utviklingen samtidig kan resultere i sterkere horisontal fragmentering. Artikkelen oppsummeres i en diskusjon om positive og negative konsekvenser av koblede, de-koblede, og løst koblede organisasjoner.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

General changes in public sector governance approaches (Christensen, Lægread, & Wise, 2002; Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Pollitt, 2013; Vakkuri, 2010; Verhoest, Peters, Bouckaert, & Verschuere, 2004) have in many ways affected the relationship between the state authorities and universities (Capano, 2011; Maassen & Olsen, 2007; Maassen & Stensaker, 2011; Paradeise et al., 2009). In a continental European context, for example, transformations in the legal status of universities resulted in enhanced formal institutional autonomy (Christensen, 2011). One of the aims of enhancing institutional autonomy is to strengthen the formal competences of institutional leaders and allow for more hierarchical, top-down governance practices in universities. Hence, while in the 1970s and 1980s universities have been conceptualised as organised anarchies or loosely coupled systems (Clark, 1983; Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; Weick, 1976), more recently they are analysed from the perspective of complete organisations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000), characterised by strategic actorhood (Krücken & Meier, 2006), and penetrated hierarchies indicating that the environment is more and more directly influencing organisational life in Higher Education (Bleiklie, Enders, & Leppori, 2015; Ramirez, 2006). However, there is a real danger of overestimating the transformation of continental European universities into streamlined and rational organisations (Maassen, 2017; Stensaker, 2019). While there is certainly evidence for efforts to strengthen hierarchical governance in universities and colleges, this does not necessarily imply more and better intra-organisational coupling and coordination.

Taking these considerations as a starting point, in this article, our research questions are accordingly:

1. What are the main features of hierarchical university governance?
2. To what extent and how are vertical and horizontal coordination challenged in more hierarchical university organisations?
3. What are possible consequences of these coordination challenges?

Drawing on empirical data from five research-intensive universities located in different countries, the article contributes to our understanding of the complexities associated with university reform and how some of the traditional institutional characteristics of universities seem to persist even as serious efforts are undertaken to make the governance and organisational structures of these organisations more hierarchical.

## 2 | PERSPECTIVES ON UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE AND ORGANISATION

Organised anarchies (Cohen et al., 1972) and loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976) have been very powerful conceptualisations in the analysis of university governance and organisation. In their work on organisational choice, Cohen and his colleagues argued that from an organised anarchy perspective universities are characterised by three generic properties: they have problematic preferences, unclear technology and fluid participation by organisational members. The problem concerning preferences is associated with the mixture of social, cultural and economic functions of universities. The unclear technology is associated with the knowledge discovery and knowledge transmission, while the fluid participation is linked to the powerful position of academic staff and professionals in education and research work, leading to uncertain and changing unstable organisational boundaries (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 1). Weick's seminal article on loosely coupled systems was in many ways a response to the then dominance of rational choice perspectives in the organisational literature (Weick, 1976). However, as argued by Weick (1976, p. 1), for example, in educational organisations, it was very difficult to find those 'rationalized practices whose outcomes have been as beneficent as predicted, or to feel that those rational occasions explain much of what goes on within the organization. Parts of some organizations are heavily rationalized but many parts also prove intractable to analysis through rational assumptions'. Weick introduced the phrase 'loose coupling' to capture key characteristics of, for example, educational organisations. Loose coupling implies that 'coupled events are responsive, but that each event also preserves its own identity and some evidence of its physical or logical separateness'. Various scholars, including Simon (1969) and Clark (1983), have used the notion of building blocks when referring to loose coupling. In a university context, this notion can be applied to decompose university organisation into separate knowledge-anchored units, such as faculties and departments. Any of these units can be removed from the university without seriously disturbing the other units or the university as a whole.

In essence, many reforms witnessed during the latter decades aimed at modernising the organisation and governance of continental European universities were directly or indirectly addressing the three generic features identified by March et al. and return to the position criticised by Weick, that is, universities would be better performing as organisations with more rationalised governance structures and operational practices. In sum, the university reforms of the last decades intended to turn the university into a more tightly coupled organisation (De Boer, Enders, & Leisyte, 2007; Gornitzka, Maassen, & Boer, 2017; Maassen & Stensaker, 2011). For example, by introducing management by objectives and result-oriented steering techniques, the process of sorting preferences was meant to become easier (Aghion, Dewatripont, Hoxby, Mas-Colell, & Sapir, 2010; Egeberg, 2003; Enders, Boer, & Weyer, 2013; Larsen & Gornitzka, 1995). By introducing quality assurance procedures and various reporting schemes, the idea was that the technology of providing education and research should be systematically improved and accounted for (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013). By formalising and strengthening leadership and introducing new governance systems participation from organisational members was either reduced or made more predictable and consistent through increased formalisation (Ferlie & Ongaro, 2015; Teelken, 2015).

In describing the changes universities have experienced following the many reform attempts, most researchers agree that there is a clear tendency for strengthening hierarchical governance within universities, centralising strategic organisational decision-making, and formalising as well as standardising organisational management and administration (Christensen, 2012; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Maassen, Gornitzka, & Fumasoli, 2017; Ramirez, 2006). Studies from various countries around the world have interpreted the implications of these changes as universities becoming more managerial and bureaucratic, at the same time reducing the collegial influence in university decision-making (Sahlin, 2012). A key consequence highlighted in these studies is that overall university organisations have become more tightly coupled.

While many of these studies' conclusions are backed by empirical evidence, they also contain an implicit assumption that stronger hierarchy, more centralisation and more formalisation in university governance and organisation result in universities being more and better coordinated organisations (Stensaker & Vabø, 2013). One could

argue for such coordination while looking at the university strategies and the many ways universities are trying to brand and profile themselves towards their environment (Christensen, Gornitzka, & Ramirez, 2019). But having a strategy is not the same as implementing it, and the relationship between governance and strategy implementation is definitely more complicated than often assumed (Frølich, Christensen, & Stensaker, 2018; Seeber et al., 2015).

Over the last 10–15 years, various studies have been undertaken regarding the effects of governmental reforms on university governance and organisation in continental Europe. An important conceptual perspective applied in many of these studies is the work by Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson on complete organisations. These authors argue that recent public sector reforms can be seen as efforts to transform public entities, such as universities, into more complete organisations through strengthening organisational identity, hierarchy and rationality (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). These three key elements in constructing complete public-sector organisations are clearly identifiable in the university reforms implemented in continental Europe since the early 2000s. When it comes to strengthening institutional identity, university reform agendas aim, for example, at enhancing university autonomy and developing clear organisational profiles. University reform agendas are aiming at enhancing the second element, organisational hierarchy, through introducing or strengthening organisational central authority that steers the actions of the organisational staff members and strongly improves the internal coordination and control features of university governance. The coordination and control capacity of the central authority is expected to become more effective through moving the rationale behind academic activities from professional norms to organisational policies of the university as a whole. The third element, organisational rationality, is in line with Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000, pp. 727–728), assumed to be strengthened according to the university reform agendas by setting clear organisational goals, objectives, targets and preferences, that in many cases are intended to form the foundation for specific performance agreements between university and government. This is also accompanied by a stronger emphasis on measuring and accounting for organisational performance and allocating specific responsibilities.

An important organisational aspect of the university reform efforts is the increased emphasis on professional leadership, management and administration. A high level of professionalisation is, for example, argued to be a typical feature of a more tightly coupled (Weberian) type of organisation and is also a developing tendency within universities the latter decades (Christensen et al., 2019; Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004). Throughout the university sectors in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries tendencies towards increased professionalisation have been documented in a number of organisational areas, including research management, human resources management (HRM), intra-university funding models, communication and branding, legal services and fund raising (Christensen et al., 2019; Elken, Stensaker, & Dedze, 2018; Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Whitchurch, 2008). These tendencies can often be linked to external demands and developments resulting, among other things, in the emergence of new professional career tracks in universities (Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Whitchurch, 2008). However, the assumption that the three features of universities as organised anarchies can be radically altered by externally initiated reforms is, at least when it comes to continental Europe, seriously challenged by the before-mentioned studies (see, e.g., Maassen, 2017; Musselin, 2007; Seeber et al., 2015). This raises a number of questions the nature and impact of the more hierarchical governance structures and practices in universities. To what extent has the organisational loosely coupledness of universities been reduced through hierarchical governance? Have university preferences and objectives, as well as their technologies become clearer? To what extent and how has hierarchical governance stimulated better vertical and horizontal coordination and control practices in universities (Kraatz & Block, 2008; Rutherford & Meier, 2015)?

### 3 | DATA AND METHODS

This article draws upon data gathered and analysed in an international research project examining how research-intensive universities in eight European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland) and one Australian state (Victoria) have adapted to far-reaching changes in their political

and socio-economic environments.<sup>1</sup> The project addressed the relationship between governmental reform agendas of the last two decades, their underlying ideologies, and university practices, having special emphasis on the departmental level. The selection of countries and universities was based on comparing countries and institutions with comparable characteristics. Hence, all included countries are relatively small, quite resource rich, and with a well-developed university sector that during the last decades has been exposed to a number of governance reforms (Gornitzka et al., 2017). The universities included in the project were comprehensive, public research-intensive institutions, located in one of their country's largest urban areas.

The article draws upon data collected in five of the universities having most comprehensive data available (Australia, Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands and Norway). The five universities selected are all among the leading research-intensive universities in their country, having a long-standing tradition of international collaboration, and with considerable resources available to realise their institutional ambitions. The selected universities share a similar policy environment in which key national policy priorities in all the countries for some time have focused on education and research quality, internationalisation, international competition for funding and the contributions of universities to the national economy, including innovation and entrepreneurship. The institutional missions and key priorities of the selected universities reflect a strong focus on academic excellence, inter-disciplinarity and being part of various global university networks, alliances and arenas.

The data collected within the five universities took into account the disciplinary diversity within the institutions and systematically compared departments in four different disciplinary areas, that is natural sciences (chemistry), social sciences (psychology), medicine (public health) and educational sciences (teacher education). A number of interviews were conducted in each of the selected departments, including the heads of department, professors performing significant amounts of research, as well as administrative executives. Some interviews were also conducted with school and faculty leadership. As most of the executive positions were occupied by men, there are relatively few female respondents among the interviewees. The focus on executives and (experienced) professors also imply that younger staff are under-represented in the sample. In total, over 50 interviews were carried out on the topics of internal governance, strategy, research management, personnel policy and research-based teaching. For the purpose of the current article, the data were analysed focusing especially on issues related to university hierarchical governance, with an emphasis on coordination, collaboration and control as seen from the department level (see Teelken, 2015). Using the interpretations and experiences of the interviewees, in the next section we will start discussing the vertical challenges connected with hierarchical university governance, followed by an examination of the horizontal challenges.

## 4 | INTERPRETATIONS OF CHANGES IN UNIVERSITY ORGANISATION AND GOVERNANCE

### 4.1 | Vertical coordination and control challenges

In all five case universities, major organisational and governance changes have been introduced aimed at strengthening intra-organisational coupling, control and coordination. Even though several of these universities still have rather de-centralised governance practices (Gornitzka et al., 2017), the direction of how institutional governance has developed is in a number of respects comparable. In general, the interviewees frequently underline that the central university leadership and administrative level increasingly decides on the framework conditions, that is, rules, regulations and procedures with respect to the universities' primary processes of teaching and research.

An important challenge is that strengthened governance hierarchies regularly work in different ways than anticipated, not least if the responsibility for tasks and decisions is unclear, or involves several parallel hierarchies of leaders. It is also mentioned that it can sometimes be unclear when upward accountability ends, or, to put it differently, how much room to manoeuvre decision makers at various governance levels have within the universities. Hence, while the lines of reporting may be clear, it is not always transparent to those working at the department level what should be reported.

Strengthened hierarchical governance is also dependent on the organisational capacity to work properly. Such capacity would normally include sufficient staff capacity to analyse, follow up and plan for further actions and initiatives to be taken. However, such organisational capacity is reported to be lacking in several of our case universities, although not always in the same areas. One specific area where organisational capacity is argued to be lacking is HRM where a number of interviewees in both academic and administrative positions (especially in Belgium, Finland and Norway) identify shortcomings in their universities as acknowledged by a department head in the Finnish university:

We do not have any strong workforce planning capability at the moment, but the university is aware of that weakness and the faculty itself has employed a workplace consultant, if you like, to begin to work through with each of our schools...

A relevant issue referred to in the quote above is that new types of staff have been hired to solve some of the capacity problems identified. This example illustrated earlier observed trends of professionalisation and increased specialisation of various functions within universities. At the same time, increased professionalisation and specialisation also occur because of the difficulties universities experience in developing existing organisational structures and capacities. While all the analysed universities have experienced formal changes in their internal governance structures, our interviewees acknowledged that reformed structures are not always capable of changing in ways foreseen by the underlying reform. A number of the interviewees see this as a possible explanation for why external hiring is needed.

In more hierarchical organisational governance structures, the functioning of leadership and management actors and bodies are often seen as an important factor for achieving positive outcomes. A number of our interviewees—including those in leadership positions—reflected on how leadership and management practices currently function in their university. While one of the noticed effects of the changed governance structures and practices is more streamlined and faster decision-making processes, a professor from the Australian university also identified a possible trade-off between speed and organisational coordination:

I like that we can take fast decisions, not have a very bureaucratic system and be flexible and pragmatic. So I have supported ... processes that have been like that. That is probably my influence on it. I am perhaps not taking very strongly part in it (coordination) and perhaps that is a negative influence that I am a little chaos generator in the outskirts...

While one could argue that strengthening the formal competencies of university leaders and managers, and providing them with more room to manoeuvre is an intended effect of hierarchical governance, some interviewees (from the Netherlands, Belgium and Norway) also referred to other consequences, and not least of leaders that interpret their discretion as more limited ultimately leading to more constrained decision-making processes as underlined by a Norwegian professor:

So, there's all sorts of compliance methods with the funding body, with finance reports having ... to be sent back to the funding body on a regular basis. And they will go through each line of expenditure to make sure that there's nothing that contravenes to the rules. So, I think again there's those constraints there ... to answer your question, I do get the sense of the heads feeling that they don't have as much free capacity to make changes as they would like to do, I think.

Another interviewee reflected about the role of the leadership in the organisations, and while being quite positive with respect to the speeding up of decision-making processes, this administrative executive from the Dutch university also admitted that something may have been lost in the process:

I think we spend less time on it (decision-making), it is more efficient, but there is less ownership to the process. Despite attempts at creating ownership by having ... information meetings.

In general, interviewees—both administrative and academic—identified a number of effects of strengthened hierarchy, professionalisation and more specialisation for academic staff. These include more of their time spent on administrative issues and a lack of feeling of being involved in decision-making processes affecting them directly or indirectly. One administrative executive working at department level in the Belgium University described the situation for the academic staff in the following way:

Is this increasing burden of the administration on academic staff? So, on the one hand, they're encouraged to be creative and free thinkers and pursue their research. But on the other hand, there's more compliance, there's more paperwork, there's less professional staff offering that support. And that's what we're experiencing here, in my estimate anyway.

The quote illustrates another paradox concerning the organisational changes taking place nowadays within research-intensive universities: whether the changes towards more hierarchy, professionalisation and specialisation have increased overall organisational effectiveness. While one could expect that developing more hierarchical governance structures and practices were intended to create the most optimal conditions for increasing the productivity and quality of teaching and research, there is an acknowledgement among the interviewees that such optimal conditions are far from accomplished, as can be illustrated by the following quote from the head of a school in the Australian university:

I am not sure academic staff would say their needs are being met, you know, as we move more towards this specialization, and more standardization, it does not necessarily mean that this bit of service provided to the academic staff and then again this is what the biz consultants are here to improve for the university. We should be able to move towards a more centered approach but still have the capability to make the independent differences of certain people.

As illustrated by the quote, increased administrative standardisation may indeed improve administrative effectiveness while those in academic positions experience that their particular needs are more difficult to cater for when new rules and regulations are introduced.

At the same time, strengthened hierarchical governance has several consequences that interviewees in general regard as positive, not least with respect to HRM policies and practices, and how quality assurance procedures are built more into hiring and recruitment processes of academic staff. The following quote from an administrative executive at department level from the Finnish university exemplifies some of the procedures that one can find in the five case universities. In this case, staff recruitment process is initiated by the:

...department head. They would be the first in our H.R. process; they would be the first to sign off on that. It would then come through to our finance team here, who would say, yes, I confirm that you can afford that position and then it would be signed off by the faculty general manager or the dean in the academic.

## 4.2 | Horizontal coordination and integration challenges

As discussed in the previous section, the interviewees in our five case universities have in many ways experienced the effects of the efforts to create stronger vertically integrated organisations. However, in their interpretation,

these efforts are not always working according to the original intentions. Consequently, there are paradoxical side effects and unintended consequences of the governance changes introduced. When comparing the current situation with the situation before the reform efforts, it is difficult for the interviewees to state that organisational effectiveness has been improved. Some, in this case a professor from the Australian university, even interpreted the changes as having had a negative impact on the organisational performance:

I haven't experienced a big (organizational) change myself, but I heard from my colleagues that in 2010 when there was a big organizational reform of the whole university, things changed a lot and many colleagues say that they are more chaotic at the moment and that the systems before 2010 were clearer than they are now.

When reflecting on the factors that may have caused the transformation towards to a more complex and less transparent organisation, many informants in all five universities not only mentioned the problems associated with the new governance hierarchies, but also indicated factors that can be associated with a lack of horizontal coordination. Overall, the mandates, responsibilities and roles of new managerial functions, and administrative services and specialisations are not perceived as clear. A head of department from the Dutch university suggested that it is necessary:

...to take a deep dive into each of the services that are provided, whether that is finance, H.R., student recruitment and marketing and then define the roles within the university. As to who does not deliver what, who sets the policy and controls the border lines for us, because at the moment there is a strong sense of jeopardization.

Part of the perceived challenges with respect to horizontal coordination and control seems to be related to measures, which originally were introduced as instruments for improved coherence and coordination—especially when it comes to the use of digital technologies. While the introduction of organisation-wide digital information systems can be interpreted as a typical example of organisational standardisation, such standardisation seems to take place within specialised areas, and where data and systems—once established—are quite difficult to merge. The following quote from an administrative executive in the Norwegian university is illustrative:

So our data systems within the university do not really allow us to pool ... information quickly and nimbly, but we need to be able to do that for getting up-to-date information.

However, it should be underlined that the perceived challenges with respect to horizontal coordination are also related to the inherent characteristics of the core functions of the university—providing education and doing research. As administrative support tasks associated with educational delivery and research in the university are often taken care of by staff in specialised functions or units (quality assurance, research management, internationalisation, digitalisation, recruitment, etc.), the responsibility for the coordination and integration of tasks become blurred, at least according to a professor at the Finnish university:

There are now three of these groups that are concerned with research and management policy matters. But there are also faculties that are responsible for the (coordination of) teaching. It is a complicated and sometimes problematic structure because some of the mandates / responsibilities overlap or are unclear. What is a real change with the past is that in the 'old days' it was easier to get things done. There were always people to fix things. Now it seems that things are administratively better organised, but it is more bureaucratic (cumbersome). You come across rules you have never heard of. They are on websites and seem very strict.



A Belgium professor put it like this:

...In the current situation (...) research units and the teaching are organised in a not very organised way. Some research units are strongly linked to special tracks in teaching programmes. There is for instance the research unit 'education' and they also feel responsibility for the track. But there are also research units that are not 'directly' linked to parts in the teaching programmes. So, there is disagreement about where authorities should be laid down—faculty or research units—hopefully this can be solved.

The coordination challenges mentioned in the quote above seems to unfold both across and within organisational units in the case universities. Financial constraints and lack of organisational capacity are frequently mentioned as factors that add to existing horizontal coordination challenges. Those working in specialised administrative units and those in charge in faculties and departments are often well aware of overarching organisational strategies and objectives, but lack the capacity to address them as illustrated by an administrative executive located at the department level in the Australian university:

So, all of the departments, in my experience anyway, are all aligning with that (the triple helix idea), they have the three areas of focus ... but having said that ... the budgets are very tight, the department don't have a lot of discretionary funds for various things. So there's salaries and a little bit of extra for maintenance, so they're a little bit constrained in what they can do...

Based on the views from both academic and administrative staff interviewed in the five universities, several coordination challenges within the institutions can be identified—especially with respect to hierarchical control and horizontal coordination and integration.

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current research project took as point of departure that contemporary universities are undergoing an organisational transformation, including attempts to strengthen their hierarchical governance structures and practices (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2017). With this starting point, the study questions whether stronger hierarchical control necessarily implies strengthened organisational coordination as more governance hierarchies may pose a challenge to vertical control and horizontal integration. We explored this question by a qualitative analysis of how academic and administrative staff in five universities in five different countries have experienced the organisational changes that their universities have been going through. While our results have limitations as to their generalisation, the sample does carry weight as an indication of how organisational dynamics is playing out in contemporary research-intensive universities.

Our key findings can be summarised as follows. First, the analysis supports a range of studies underlining how research-intensive universities are strengthening their organisational governance hierarchies and that this transformation is often associated with increased professionalisation and specialisation with respect to managerial and administrative tasks and responsibilities (Christensen et al., 2019; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Ramirez, 2006). However, our analysis expands existing knowledge in that we also demonstrate how the strengthened governance hierarchies have dysfunctionalities with respect to their capacity to take on their expanded authority. This concerns shortcomings in digital control and reporting systems, in building effective administrative capacity at all governance levels, in economic resources enabling strategic actions, and not least, in how the institutional leadership take on their roles in the new governance system (see also Vakkuri, 2010). Interestingly, there is little discrepancy between perceptions held by academic and by administrative staff at department level—they both

seem to observe quite similar institutional coordination problems. While one might have expected some different views with respect to these two groups of informants, it is possible to argue that a reason for this convergence in perception is related to loyalty towards their own unit within the larger university (Teelken, 2015), or alternatively that we perhaps can see blurring identities—and more convergent world-views—emerging in modernised universities (Whitchurch, 2008). An additional finding concerns the identification of a number of horizontal coordination and integration challenges experienced by key staff members of the case universities. Here, our analysis confirms and further elaborated the findings of Maassen et al. (2017) when it comes to a possible trade-off between standardisation, professionalisation and specialisation of organisational management and administrative functions on the one hand, and the organisational flexibility, adaptability and integrative capacity needed to enhance organisational productivity and effectiveness of the universities' primary processes. Although our analysis has limitations as to provide solid insights into the significance of the country context, there is a tendency in the data that informants from the Australian university are actually reporting more horizontal coordination problems than their Western European counterparts. As Australia could be interpreted as a front runner of the five countries with respect to reliance on market mechanisms, managerialism and accountability in their reforms efforts (Christensen, 2012), thus having much potential to transform universities into more complete organisations (Ramirez, 2006), it could be argued that there might be a link between tight vertical control and horizontal coordination problems.

Theoretically, the findings are of relevance from the perspective of the classical conceptualisations of Higher Education institutions as being organised anarchies and loosely coupled systems (Cohen et al., 1972; Weick, 1976). Over the years, these conceptualisations have often been interpreted in ways that deviate from the original intentions, not least as the idea of being loosely coupled as an organisation has been associated with a total lack of coordination (Orton & Weick, 1990). As underlined by Orton and Weick (1990), being loosely coupled is not the same as being de-coupled—where tasks and issues are not coordinated at all. It follows from this that the idea of universities being loosely coupled is a characterisation of their difficulties in sorting out preferences, their unclear technology and their fluid participation (Cohen et al., 1972). Our findings can be said to be in line with previous studies about reform initiatives aimed at turning universities into more tightly coupled organisations through strengthened hierarchical governance structures and practices (Bleiklie et al., 2015; Krücken & Meier, 2006). At the same time, our analysis also points to one specific aspect of the universities governance paradox (Maassen, 2017), that is, more hierarchic governance is accompanied by horizontal de-coupling of managerial and administrative specialisation, formalisation and standardisation from the growing need for adaptability and organisational flexibility in academic activities.

From the theoretical perspective of complete organisations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson 2000) this paradox can be interpreted as universities having become more 'complete' with respect to the three identified key features, that is, organisational hierarchy, identity and rationality, but only in the administrative domain of the institution. Our findings strongly suggest that one of the key aims of the university reforms, that is, creating more tightly coupled organisations through moving the rationale behind academic activities from professional norms to organisational policies of the university as a whole, has been less successful. While, as indicated, the impact of the university reforms on the administrative support functions imply a shift towards specialisation, standardisation and formalisation of organisational rules, regulations and procedures, the productivity and quality of academic activities are still grounded in professional norms that require more flexibility and adaptivity, instead of rationality, in organisational procedures. Of relevance is that these professional norms are more determined in disciplinary arenas and networks than within university organisations.

One could theoretically argue that some flexibility could also be built into more hierarchically governed universities (Kraatz & Block, 2008). However, our empirical data show that the possibilities to build such flexibility seems currently insufficient due especially to a lack of staff capacity to take on vertical and horizontal coordination tasks required for more flexible governance and administrative practices in universities. Additional barriers are the characteristics of new and often digitalised information and management systems that are unable or at least have great difficulties in communicating with other systems, and the streamlining of leadership and management

decision-making procedures, which is based on assumed rationalisation processes within university organisations, instead of being embedded in, or at least coordinated with, professional norms and disciplinary dynamics.

What do the tensions between hierarchical governance and the lack of vertical and horizontal coordination, between administrative standardisation, formalisation and specialisation, and the continuous need for flexibility and adaptivity in academic activities mean for our understanding of the ongoing transformations of research-intensive universities in continental Europe? Our findings are in line with Gornitzka and Larsen (2004) in suggesting a general trend towards the professionalisation and bureaucratisation of university administration. However, the restructuring of the administrative functions, capacity and work force in universities has been a process that in many respects has taken place independent of the developments in the organisation and governance of academic activities within universities. While hierarchic governance is expected to result in more tightly coupled organisations, what we have observed in our case universities is the emergence a de-coupled university bureaucracy with its own professional norms, values and understandings of the functioning of universities. University leadership and management are expected to 'compensate' for the de-coupling of the university administration from its academic activities, but might lack the capacity to do so effectively. The latter is clearly visible in the horizontal and vertical coordination challenges our five case universities face. As a consequence, the observation by Weick (1976, p. 1) that 'Parts of some organizations are heavily rationalized, but many parts also prove intractable to analysis through rational assumptions' may still apply to research-intensive universities, despite several decades with reform initiatives aimed at increasing the organisational parts of universities of which the performance can be steered and judged on the basis of institutional policies, as well as rational assumptions, performance indicators and evaluations. While our research has not shed light on which issues and tasks that might be intractable, it does hint to the importance of institutional capacity to handle unforeseen consequences of organisational rationalisation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project from which the data used in this article were derived was funded by the Research Council of Norway, FORFI Programme (Knowledge Base for Research and Innovation Policy), Project 212422: 'European Flagship Universities: balancing academic excellence and socio-economic relevance' (2012–2015). In addition, the University of Oslo's rectorate, and four of its departments (Chemistry, Psychology, Public Health and Teacher Education & School Research) supported the project financially.

## ORCID

Peter Maassen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4275-0865>

Bjørn Stensaker  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2109-4902>

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the project, see Gornitzka & Maassen, 2017.

## REFERENCES

- Aghion, P., Dewatripont, M., Hoxby, C., Mas-Colell, A., & Sapir, A. (2010). The governance and performance of universities: Evidence from Europe and the US. *Economic Policy*, 25(61), 7–59.
- Bleiklie, I., Enders, J., & Leppori, B. (2015). Organizations as penetrated hierarchies: Environmental pressures and control in professional organizations. *Organization Studies*, 36(7), 873–896.
- Brunsson, N., & Sahlin-Andersson, K. (2000). Constructing organizations: The example of public sector reform. *Organization Studies*, 21(4), 721–746.

- Capano, G. (2011). Government continues to do its job. A comparative study of governance shifts in the higher education sector. *Public Administration*, 89(4), 1622–1642.
- Christensen, T. (2011). University governance reforms: Potential problems of more autonomy? *Higher Education*, 62(4), 503–517.
- Christensen, T. (2012). Global ideas and modern public sector reforms: A theoretical elaboration and empirical discussion of neoinstitutional theory. *American Review of Public Administration*, 42(6), 635–653.
- Christensen, T., Gornitzka, Å., & Ramirez, F. O. (2019). *Universities as agencies. Reputation and professionalization*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Christensen, T., Lægreid, P., & Wise, L. R. (2002). Transforming administrative policy. *Public Administration*, 80(1), 153–179.
- Clark, B. R. (1983). *The Higher Education System: Academic organization in cross-national perspective*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Cohen, J., March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. (1972). A garbage can model of organizational choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17(1), 1–25.
- De Boer, H., Enders, J., & Leisyte, L. (2007). Public sector reform in Dutch higher education: The organizational transformation of the university. *Public Administration*, 85(1), 27–46.
- Djelic, M.-L., & K. Sahlin-Andersson (Eds.). (2006). *Transnational governance: Institutional dynamics of regulation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Egeberg, M. (2003). How bureaucratic structure matters: An organizational perspective. In B. G. Peters & J. Pierre (Eds.), *Handbook of Political Administration* (pp. 116–126). London, UK: Sage.
- Elken, M., Stensaker, B., & Dedze, I. (2018). The painters behind the profile: The rise and functioning of communication departments in universities. *Higher Education*, 76(6), 1109–1122.
- Enders, J., de Boer, H., & Weyer, E. (2013). Regulatory autonomy and performance: The reform of higher education revisited. *Higher Education*, 65(1), 5–23.
- Ferlie, E., & Ongaro, E. (2015). *Strategic management in public services organizations: Concepts, schools and contemporary issues*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Frølich, N., Christensen, T., & Stensaker, B. (2018). Strengthening the strategic capacity of public universities: The role of internal governance models. *Public Policy and Administration*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076718762041>
- Gornitzka, Å., & Larsen, I. M. (2004). Towards professionalization? Restructuring of administrative work force in universities. *Higher Education*, 47(4), 455–471.
- Gornitzka, Å., & Maassen, P. (2017). European Flagship universities: Autonomy and change. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(3), 231–238.
- Gornitzka, Å., Maassen, P., & de Boer, H. (2017). Change in university governance structures in continental Europe. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(3), 274–289.
- Kraatz, M. S., & Block, E. S. (2008). Organizational implications of institutional pluralism. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, & R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 243–276). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Krücken, G., & Meier, F. (2006). Turning the university into an organizational actor. In G. Drori, J. Meyer, & H. Hwang (Eds.), *Globalization and organization: World society and organizational change* (pp. 241–257). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Larsen, I., & Gornitzka, Å. (1995). New management systems in Norwegian Universities: The interface between reform and institutional understanding. *European Journal of Education*, 30(3), 347–361.
- Maassen, P. (2017). The university's governance paradox. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(3), 290–298.
- Maassen, P., Gornitzka, Å., & Fumasoli, T. (2017). University reform and institutional autonomy: A framework for analysing the living autonomy. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(3), 239–250.
- Maassen, P. & J. P. Olsen (Eds.). (2007). *University dynamics and European integration*. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer.
- Maassen, P., & Stensaker, B. (2011). The knowledge triangle, European higher education policy logics and policy implications. *Higher Education*, 61(6), 757–769.
- Musselin, C. (2007). Are universities specific organisations? In G. Krücken, A. Kosmützky, & M. Torca (Eds.), *Towards a Multiversity? Universities between global trends and national traditions* (pp. 63–84). Bielefeld, Germany: Transaction Publishers.
- Orton, J. D., & Weick, K. E. (1990). Loosely coupled systems: A reconceptualization. *Academy of Management Review*, 15(2), 200–223.
- Paradeise, C., E. Reale, I. Bleiklie, & E. Ferlie (Eds.). (2009). *University governance. Western European comparative perspectives*. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer.
- Pollitt, C. (2013). 40 Years of public management reform in the UK central government—Promises, promises. *Policy and Politics*, 41(4), 465–480.

- Ramirez, F. O. (2006). The rationalization of the university. In M.-L. Djelic & K. Sahlin-Andersson (Eds.), *Transnational governance: Institutional dynamics of regulation* (pp. 225–246). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ramirez, F. O., & Christensen, T. (2013). The formalization of the university: Rules, roots, and routes. *Higher Education*, 65(6), 695–708.
- Rutherford, A., & Meier, K. J. (2015). Managerial goals in a performance-driven system: Theory and empirical tests in higher education. *Public Administration*, 91(1), 17–33.
- Sahlin, K. (2012). The interplay of organizing models in higher education. What room is there for collegiality in universities characterized by bounded autonomy? In B. Stensaker, J. Välimaa, & C. Sarrico (Eds.), *Managing reforms in universities: The dynamics of culture, identity and organizational change* (pp. 189–222). London, UK: Routledge.
- Seeber, M., Lepori, B., Montauti, M., Enders, J., de Boer, H., Weyer, E., ... Reale, E. (2015). European Universities as complete organizations? Understanding identity, hierarchy and rationality in public organizations. *Public Management Review*, 17(10), 1–31.
- Simon, H. A. (1969). The architecture of complexity. *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 106, 467–482.
- Stensaker, B. (2019). Socially embedded universities and the search for meaning. In T. Christensen, F. A. Ramirez, & Å. Gornitzka (Eds.), *Universities as agencies. Reputation and professionalization*. New York, NY: PalgraveMacmillan.
- Stensaker, B., & Vabø, A. (2013). Re-inventing shared governance: Implications for organisational culture and institutional leadership. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 67(3), 256–274.
- Teelken, C. (2015). Hybridity, coping mechanisms, and academic performance management: Comparing three countries. *Public Administration*, 93(2), 307–323.
- Vakkuri, J. (2010). Struggling with ambiguity: Public managers as users of NPM-oriented management instruments. *Public Administration*, 88(4), 999–1024.
- Verhoest, K., Peters, B. G., Bouckaert, G., & Verschuere, B. (2004). The study of organisational autonomy: A conceptual review. *Public Administration and Development*, 24(2), 101–118.
- Weick, K. E. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21(1), 1–19.
- Whitchurch, C. (2008). Shifting identities and blurring boundaries: The emergence of Third Space professionals in UK higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(4), 377–396.

**How to cite this article:** Maassen P, Stensaker B. From organised anarchy to de-coupled bureaucracy: The transformation of university organisation. *Higher Educ Q.* 2019;73:456–468. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12229>