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# **Strategizing Identity in Higher Education**

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# Strategizing Identity in Higher Education

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## Abstract

There is a growing body of literature shedding light on processes of strategy making within public universities. Yet, to date, only a handful of studies have analysed the role that organizational identity plays in such processes. This paper addresses this knowledge gap, by investigating how identity mediates processes of organizational change across two comprehensive universities based in Northern Europe. Our data and analysis reveal that identity has the potential to provide organizations, like universities, with substantial flexibility during strategic change processes, not only as a tool for legitimating change in the eyes of internal and external constituencies, but also as a strategic mechanism for coping with an increasingly turbulent and volatile external environment. The paper is part of recent re-discovering of the role played by the more tacit dimensions of organizations (culture, identity, logics, etc.) operating within highly institutionalised environments.

**Keywords:** higher education, organizational culture and identity, strategic management, organizational change

## Introduction

The environmental conditions under which public organizations operate have changed dramatically in recent decades. On both the regulative and operational fronts public

organizations have been given more autonomy to run their internal affairs, coupled with increasing demands for accountability (Christensen and Lægried 2002). This accountability pressure has affected public organizations in various ways, including on how: they adapt to global standards and routines (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000); internal reshuffling strengthens the role of management and leadership (Barnett and Finnemore 1999); and evaluation logics support a greater focus on the reporting of the results and outcomes of their activities (Power 1997). Public organizations have been forced to emulate key activities associated with private firms and businesses along many dimensions (Christensen and Lægried 2002). One such activity is *strategic planning*, whose primary output materializes into strategic plans.

Public universities have been exposed to these change processes as well (Marginson and Considine 2000), even though they have functioned without having any strategic plans for centuries. In this respect research has demonstrated that for universities, as well as for other public organizations, strategic planning may have an important accountability function (Hardy et al. 1983). Hence strategic planning can be seen as a way to strengthen the external legitimacy of universities by demonstrating that they are modern and responsible public organizations (Paradeise et al. 2009; Stensaker and Harvey 2011). These developments have led to a rise of strategic management regimes within universities (Toma 2010; Zechlin 2010; Keller 1983), which, some argue, are conducive to transforming universities into strategic organizational actors (Krücken and Meier 2006; Ramirez 2010). In line with this evolution, there is a growing body of literature shedding light on processes of strategy making within public universities (Fumasoli and Lepori 2011; Toma 2010; Zechlin 2010; Pinheiro and Stensaker 2013).

However, it is important to underline that strategic planning should not only be conceived as a symbolic process. Not least, universities have increasingly been challenged to develop distinct institutional profiles substantiated around a sense of a unique organizational identity (Fleming and Lee 2009). Such organizational identities have not traditionally been seen as playing a key role in university management. Rather, organizational identity has often been perceived as an

inherent characteristic of a given university, i.e. oriented towards the past and related to historical events, including its establishment, as well as to its public role and public reputation (Clark 1972, 1992). While the “management” of the reputation of a university can rank high on the institutional leadership agenda when reputational risks are identified, managerial initiatives are, for the most part, mostly targeted at “repairing” reputational damage by strengthening the existing organizational identity (Kirp 2003).

The pressure to strategically develop a unique institutional profile is associated with a high degree of uncertainty and risk (Thompson 1967). First, many sources of uncertainty can be found inside the university: teaching and research are ambiguous and unclear technologies, whose input-output process is difficult to disentangle and reproduce (Musselin 2006, Cohen and March 1986). Second, external demands towards higher education institutions have grown increasingly complex and contradictory, from societal relevance in terms of technology transfer and patents, to accommodating a growing and diversified student body, to a general requirement to contribute to socio-economic development in the context of a ‘knowledge economy’. Third, institutional pressures have affected the external legitimacy of the university and its original idea, reflecting on-going debates on education as an end in itself or as a means of preparing youth for the labour market (Maassen and Olsen, 2007). Fourth, another potential risk is associated with rapid changing environments and the possibility that current profiling activities may become ‘irrelevant’ if external conditions alter quickly and unexpectedly. Similarly, a stronger strategic positioning might lead to the loss of universities’ inherent characteristics as such (Marginson and Considine 2000).

Against this backdrop, while development and change can be seen as much needed and relevant, the university may still necessitate to take into consideration alternative scenarios, for instance if potential internal ‘failures’ or environmental shocks hamper intended change trajectories. In this respect, one could expect that, as a major communication tool for conveying agreed upon intents, the strategic plan will have to be rather broad, extensive and diversified enough to tackle the different challenges facing a given university. By analysing how a group of European

universities present themselves, their visions and their priorities in strategic plans over time, the current article aims at studying how uncertainty associated with strategic ambitions is dealt with by internal actors. More specifically, the paper explores the extent through which organizational identity can become a strategic instrument when it comes to universities' manoeuvring between expectations and demands (internal and external) for change, the potential loss of legitimacy vis-à-vis certain stakeholders, and the possible departing from deeply institutionalised internal values (Deephouse 1999). Against this backdrop, we ask the following research questions:

- *How is organizational identity constructed in strategic plans?*
- *How does it evolve over time?*
- *Which functions does organizational identity perform in strategic plans?*

The paper proceeds as follows. The analytical framework discusses the core concepts of organizational identity and strategic planning, it subsequently operationalizes the link between strategic plan and communicated organizational identity. The following section illustrates the four cases and discusses how university strategic plans articulate a coherent narrative simultaneously accounting for the rationale of strategic objectives whilst showing compliance to the demands of certain key constituencies and by paying respect to organizational values and features. The paper ends with a discussion on the nature of strategic plans and the implications for institutional leadership.

## **Strategic plans and organizational identity**

### ***Managing identity through strategic plans***

While strategic plans have traditionally been seen as an important instrument for positioning an organization in the market place (Chandler 1962), it is also common to perceive them as a form

of “auto-communication” (Broms and Gahmberg 1983) – an activity where the organization communicates to itself, to its employees, about “who we are” as an organization. The latter function points to the symbolic side of management, and to the possibility of using strategic plans as a tool for identity management (van Riel and Balmer 1997; Balmer and Soenen 1999).

The existing literature makes a distinction between two perspectives on how strategic plans can be used as an identity management tool (Balmer and Soenen 1999, p. 77). While several scholars highlight the importance of articulating a future ‘vision’ for the organization, under the auspices of central leadership structures (van Riel and Balmer 1997), others approach identity management as a process where the actual organizational identity is revealed (Albert and Whetten 1985). These two perspectives cater for a variety of understandings on how identity management can be performed through a strategic plan (Balmer and Soenen, 1999, p. 82). Whereas management can communicate the *actual identity* (what the organization is), it can also choose to emphasize the *communicated identity* (how the organization is perceived by outsiders), point to the *ideal identity* (the optimal position an organization may have in the market place) and/or underline the *desired identity* (the visions of the institutional leadership). In order to manage identity successfully, Balmer and Soenen (1999, p. 82) argue for the congruency between these four understandings of organizational identity. Further, they recognise the need for more research on how identity management takes place in practice against the backdrop of the challenge of bridging internal and external understandings of identity, and of past and future identities.

In general, one could argue that the main function of organizational identity, as articulated in strategic plans, is to provide internal and external legitimacy to the aims and objectives stated in such plans (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia et al. 1994). Having said that, this body of research appears to focus more on the “constructive” aspects of identity management, paying less attention to “defensive” features. The latter address the dangers involved in using strategic plans as a signal for changes in organisational identities: an obvious risk for those drawing up a strategic plan is that it might fail, i.e. the stated ambitions are not realised (Broms and

Gahmberg1983). Another challenge is that the external environment may change in ways that make 'bold visions' communicated through strategic plans somewhat irrelevant (Zechlin 2010) or even inappropriate. Hence, it is relevant to investigate the role played by organizational identity in strategic planning.

### ***Organizational identity – fixed, fluid and flexible***

In general the concept of organizational identity has been associated with central character, distinctiveness and temporal continuity (Albert and Whetten 1985, p. 265). This perspective assumes that organizational identity can be understood as 'fixed', essentialist, and attribute-based as it reflects an underlying, unique organizational character (Glynn 2008, p.416; see also Selznick, 1957). This distinct character is to a large extent dependent upon, and intertwined with, how internal actors perceive, feel and think about their organization (Hatch and Schultz 2002). While such perceptions may differ considerably between sectors and also between institutions within a given sector, research has suggested that actors within higher education institutions are, to a large extent, influenced by the norms and values of the specific university to which they are affiliated (Clark 1983; Tapper and Palfreyman 2011).

However, while a given strategy might strengthen or support internal loyalty towards a given organizational identity, one can also imagine that a radical institutional strategy might create new internal tensions in relation to an existing (well entrenched) identity (He and Baruch 2009). Such a situation is likely to emerge when the identity is challenged by: comparison with other organizations within the organizational field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), by the outcome of the interaction with other organizations, or by the influence of the broad institutional environment, i.e. laws, customs, norms, etc. (Hatch and Schultz 2002; Wedlin 2006). While many possible new identities can be imagined as stemming from environmental shifts, the overall (desired)

organizational identity can be seen as the ordering of these sub-identities into a hierarchical order where some identity-related features are allowed to dominate or are prioritized (Pratt and Kraatz 2009, p. 394). In this context, organizational identity is instrumental in legitimizing the need for change or adaptation. It may be used to reflect the need for securing a legitimate position in a developing or evolving organizational field (Czarniawska and Wolff 1998) and/or to show similarity to other (changing) organizations belonging to recognized social categories (Zuckerman et al. 2003). The latter approach shows how the concept of organizational identity can be seen as more fluid and dynamic (and even adaptive) to on-going changes in a given organizational field (see also Maassen and Potman 1990; Hsu and Hannan 2005, p. 475).

Characterizations of organizational identity as either *fixed* or *fluid* may be seen as mutually exclusive. Yet, some scholars contend that contemporary organizations need to (re-)define their identity as a *bridge* between the external position of the organization in the relevant environments and the internal meanings formed around cherished organizational norms and values (Pedersen and Dobbin 2006). This, in turn, suggests that the management of organizational identity is an important process whilst preparing for strategic change.

To sum up, there is much evidence showing that strategic plans are permeated by symbolic aspects that are closely linked to organizational identity. This includes, but is not limited to: the use of mission and vision statements (Dill 1996); how change can be legitimized (Johnson 1990); sense-making and sense-giving processes (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991); and, resorting to specific language that addresses the diverging interests and expectations of various stakeholders (Fiss and Zajac 2006). Here, organizational identity plays a key role through, for example, the creative re-interpretation of organizational “labels” for self-definition (Elsbach and Kramer 1996), the influence of internal and external audiences on such categories, as well as the meanings associated with each category (Huisman et al., 2002; Rindova et al., 2011). Hence, organizational identity is a flexible device characterised by a multiplicity of functions.



### ***Identity management as risk reduction?***

Our discussion so far has suggested that the role of organizational identity in strategic plans has largely been associated with legitimizing the need for change. However, as noted above, creative re-interpretations of organizational identity often involve risks for management while advocating for change. Against this backdrop, we want to explore to what extent organizational identity can also function as a risk-reducing device, i.e. as a means of reducing potential negative outcomes and perceptions derived either from possible failures in the implementation of the strategic plan or from the unforeseen effects accrued to environmental shifts.

In general, we would argue that organizational identity is likely to be more efficiently managed when it is accepted by both internal actors and external stakeholders. If, on the other hand, organizational identity merely reflects the views of internal actors it may not necessarily be seen as legitimate by outsiders, while, in turn, creative attempts to pay lip service to values and norms considered important by outsiders may lack critical support by internal actors. What is more, if organizational identity is to function as a risk-reducing device in a strategic plan two key elements need to be in place. First, organizational identity should be articulated in a broadly accepted fashion (in order to secure needed support) and, most importantly, be used as an explanation for both *stability and change*. Second, organizational identity should be framed in a way that makes it difficult to *systematically and analytically assess* (i.e. out of the narrative presented in the strategic plan) the organizational trajectory over time.

In order to explore these assumptions, organizational identity is observed by analysing its main components (below), which are more or less explicitly communicated in strategic plans (Hambrick and Fredrickson 2005):

1. *Mission*: the articulation and the purpose of organizational existence, for whom it exists, and the impact of its existence. It answers the question: “Who are we?”

2. *Values*: the core values and beliefs that drive an organization. They focus on what is most important in the ways that internal actors behave on a daily basis. The relevant question is “How are things done here?”
3. *Vision*: what the organization aspires to become in the near future. It is a statement of ambition and replies to “Where do we want to go?” It is the original declaration of intentions from which the objectives enunciated in the strategic plan derive from.

By undertaking a closer analysis of these three dimensions in strategic plans over a 10-year period, we illuminate how, across our selected case studies, organizational identity is strategically being managed (Suchman, 1995).

### **Design, methods and empirical setting**

Our research design is built around a multiple case study, a variant that includes two or more observations of the same phenomenon. This method has the advantage of enabling both *replication* - independently confirm emerging constructs and propositions – and *extension*, using the selected cases to reveal complementary aspects of the phenomenon being investigated. The result is a more robust, generalizable, and analytically sound account of events across a multiplicity of local settings and contextual circumstances (Santos and Eisenhardt 2004). We have selected four European higher education institutions in two small countries where higher education is substantially funded and where universities perform well in international comparison as of scientific productivity. In the period considered, between 2000 and 2010, both national higher education systems underwent significant reforms granting increasing autonomy to universities and enhancing more competitive funding schemes. All four higher education institutions carried out major organizational change in order to adapt to new environmental conditions, and various aspects of these changes have been investigated earlier (*references to be added if paper is accepted for publication*). Institutional cases, based on previous research by the authors, have been written for each university and can be made available upon request. These

institutional cases contemplate semi-structured interviews with institutional leaders, academics, representatives of the ministries and of broader society.

In order to triangulate data further, different sources have been considered, namely: documents – besides strategic plans, annual reports and evaluation reports -, and archival material – such as minutes from internal meetings. National databases by statistical offices regarding higher education have also been extensively consulted in order to provide background to our analysis and point to general indicators of universities' trajectories.

The issue of variety in our sample has been addressed by selecting four cases that display relevant differences as of institutional profile: a former college, a peripheral university, a technological institute, a research-intensive university. Since our core aim is to understand the purposive use of organizational identity, we therein expected to uncover commonalities in strategic plans across different institutional settings. Of particular relevance here is to investigate how university management (institutional leadership) attempts to implement strategic ambitions by initiating changes in symbolic meanings.

## **The Case Studies**

### ***Arianna University***

Arianna University is a mid-size public university whose historical roots go back to the mid-1800s with the creation of a teacher training college. Its organizational form stems from the amalgamation of six regional public high schools in 1994, as part of a far reaching reform effort culminating in the establishment of a binary system, i.e. an academic and a professional sector of higher education. In 2007 Arianna changed its legal status from a university college into a fully-fledged university. By the fall of 2011 the university enrolled about 9'700 students (approx. 10% of national university population) and employed close to 900 people, 60% of whom were

involved with core activities (teaching, research and outreach). Its academic activities span across five faculties: health and sport sciences, engineering and science, economics and social sciences, humanities and education, fine arts and teacher education. Given the change in legal status, research has become a key strategic priority. As a result, between 2009 and 2010 the scientific productivity increased by 152%.

The first strategic plan (early 2000s) provides a basic strategic framework that leads to the development or transition (as well as internal ambition) from a university-college into a fully-fledged university. The articulation of strategy and identity is shaped upon achieving academic legitimacy, both regionally and internationally. External recognition is sought through teaching and research culture, but also through an active relationship with industry and society. International recognition arises from teaching excellence, together with research-based education as a direct contribution to a “learning environment” through continued education and regionally-related research activities. The outreach mission not only focuses on the region, but also on national and international levels. Organizational identity has to combine the development of a shared (meta) culture, together with respect for the traditions of the individual sub-units. The presence of educational activities in three cities across the region is seen as a major element in the aspiration to attain university status in the near future. The multi-campus model is further pursued through the creation of a new campus in 2001.

**Table 1: Evolution of organizational identity at Arianna University**

	<b>Towards 2006: Strategic plan</b>	<b>Towards 2010: Strategic plan</b>
<b>Mission</b>	Teaching and learning, “knowledge development through research and service to society.”	Teaching, research and service to regional actors
<b>Values</b>	Openness and integrity in society relations and leadership	Quality, relevance and collaboration Interdisciplinary teaching

	<p>Efficiency of administration</p> <p>Flexibility and collaboration</p>	<p>Openness, respect, trust and responsibility in research</p> <p>Openness, staff loyalty, collaboration, pride of own and others' results</p> <p>Ethical conduct</p>
<b>Vision</b>	<p>"Arianna shall become an internationally recognized teaching institution, which actively contributes to a learning society. By focusing on professional-based and disciplinary education, research and research-based education, Arianna shall develop into a fully- fledged University"</p>	<p>"Arianna shall become an internationally recognized teaching and research institution. It shall contribute to the development of critical- knowledge and understanding amongst students and society as a whole."</p>

The second strategic plan (mid 2000s) is framed on an institution that is evolving or "under construction" and that aims at setting the overall direction in light of national and international developments. Its functions are, to a large degree, determined by governmental agencies and other independent bodies. The plan focuses more on the regional relevance, which relates to public authorities, industry and cultural agencies. Having said that, the importance of the international dimension is stated once again: for example, by highlighting multicultural dimensions and global problems across teaching and research, in addition to recruiting international students and promoting student and staff exchange. As for its distinct profile, rather than looking for inspiration at the traditional national universities, Arianna looks at recent entrepreneurial European universities that have close contacts with their localities and are rather innovative, particularly when it comes to pedagogical tools and methods. The plan presents the idea of a "learning organization" focused on a culture of change and innovative thinking, flexibility and the systematization of experiences across the board.

In conclusion, Arianna University's first strategic plan (2001-2006) highlights the road towards becoming a fully-fledged university and builds upon the concept of the "learning society". There is a strong focus on teaching, research and international dimensions all seen as key legitimating elements in the strategic goal of attaining full university status in the near future. The second strategic plan (2005-2010) is rather broad and provides a basic foundation for the further development of the university as a kind of "hybrid" organization involved with a variety of teaching and research activities in direct collaboration with regional actors like industry and the public sector. This can be interpreted as a functional compromise between traditional identities anchored around teaching and regional engagement and internal ambitions as well as external (field-level) requirements to acquire scientific legitimacy.

### ***Tero University***

Tero University was created at beginning of the 70s to address the increasing popular demands for accessing higher education and the lack of skilled professionals – medical doctors, dentists, teachers, lawyers. Three key aspects came to the fore at its creation: a strong democratic orientation, an inter-disciplinary and problem-solving approach, and a focus on the needs of the surrounding region and its various local actors. In 2009 a voluntary decision was taken to merge Tero with the local university college, thus creating a much larger institution. Following the merger Tero enrolled close to 9'000 students across its 6 faculties, and employed 2'500 staff members, 60 per cent of whom were directly involved with teaching and research activities.

The first strategic plan (late 90s) provides an overarching strategic framework for the 10 year period, 2000-2010. It strives to find an adequate balance between the expectations held by external actors (regional and national levels) and the requirements posed by an institution belonging to the international academic community – in other words, between the local relevance and the global or universalistic dimensions of excellence. The plan is organized around conflicting demands: profiling itself as locally embedded yet internationally oriented; responding to the needs of both public and private sectors; carrying out basic and applied

research. The plan aims at reconciling the (stylised) models of the “service university” as per external demands and the “research-intensive university” as per internal ambitions and field-level requirements. Moreover Tero has a special responsibility for the development of knowledge related to the exploration of natural resources and sustainable development, including the rights of indigenous peoples. In short, the first strategic plan paints a picture of Tero as going through a transition period, wishing to further expand its core activities and to project its profile internationally as a research-intensive university in selected fields.

**Table 2: Evolution of organizational identity at Tero University**

	<b>Strategic notes for the period 2000-2010</b>	<b>Strategic plan: 2009-2013</b>
<b>Mission</b>	Teaching, research and societal service	Teaching, research and service with regional focus
<b>Values</b>	Academic freedom in teaching and research Teaching-research nexus Research ethics and truthfulness	Openness, academic freedom, engagement, creativity and integrity
<b>Vision</b>	Tero is an institution that belongs to the international network of universities with high quality standards and the comprehensive nature of its teaching and research activities	Tero is a national and international engine for competence building, growth and innovation across the region

The second strategic plan (2009-2013) addresses the newly merged institution, based on the notion of a broad university combining traditional and professional studies with research and development activities across various subject areas. On the research front, the university is to take advantage of the new, funding opportunities brought by the national government’s strategy towards the surrounding region, by re-positioning itself as the leading player in the artic and

marine ecosystems, health and cultural research and indigenous people. External legitimation is addressed by allowing free and open access to knowledge and to the results of research activities, and by positively contributing to the broad cultural, social and economic development of society. The document tackles the need for a larger, more innovative and efficient university that is capable of responding to regional, national and international demands whilst developing a specific teaching and research profile in distinctive fields. Tero's institutional profile is composed of three core elements: broad educational offerings across traditional university education and professional training; a research-based orientation around a broad spectrum of disciplinary fields; and, active involvement with development of outreach activities. In short, Tero's two strategic plans delineate a trajectory of growth in terms of students and funding as well as its core functions or missions, thus consolidating the distinctive profile of a "globally-oriented but locally engaged" university operating across local, regional, national and transnational settings. This, in turn, implies being both relevant to the region (education and applied research) and developing global research excellence in selected niche areas. In many respects, the organizational identity builds on the initial vision of the university as an innovative and entrepreneurial entity *in and for* the region without being "locked" within it.

### ***Larissa University***

Larissa was an autonomous technological institute attached to the local university. In 1969 its oversight was transferred from the regional government to the federal government. Traditionally an engineering school, Larissa has undergone a major strategic repositioning by constructing and focusing on life sciences and by becoming a top international technological university. The school grew (also) by means of a series of acquisitions and, as a result, its organizational structure was reshuffled: from 12 departments (engineering with some natural sciences), four faculties were then created and an entirely new faculty (life sciences) was established. Today, Larissa enrolls about 8'000 students, a 50% increase since 2000. Its total



budget accounts for Euro 625 million (2011), rising by 75% since 2000. It employs 330 professors (from full to assistant professor), growing from 180 at the turn of the new millennium. External funding nearly doubled within a decade (2000-2010), accounting for more than a third of Larissa’s annual budget.

The first strategic plan (2000-2003) was drafted by the new central leadership, upon its arrival in 2000. Its aim was to re-position the institution from an engineering school to a life sciences oriented technological university based on interdisciplinary education and research. The rationale presented was that scientific and technological discoveries are best carried out at the interface between the natural sciences, engineering, and the life sciences. At the beginning of 2000, Larissa’s organizational identity was articulated with reference to: world-leading technical universities such as MIT and Caltech; global developments within the life sciences; and interdisciplinary collaborations. An intensive policy of recruitment of young talents has been carried out in order to attract the best promising scientists. Thus, since 2008 half of all professorial recruitments have been assistant professors on the tenure track.

**Table 3: Evolution of organizational identity at Larissa University**

	<b>Multi-annual plan 2000-2003 partial revision</b>	<b>Strategic planning 2008-2011</b>
<b>Mission</b>	Competitive school of engineering, present also in the natural sciences, in life sciences, as well as in humanities and social sciences.  It exists for students and their future professional life; for scientists and engineers, for industry.	Education and training, research, innovation and technology transfer  Education is the primary mission.  Impact on students, scientific community, industry, and society, local and national economy  Larissa is a major actor in the national knowledge economy
<b>Values</b>	Excellence in international comparison with	Excellence in world comparison with other

	other institutes of technology Inter-disciplinarity around life sciences	institutes of technology Trans-disciplinarity around life sciences
<b>Vision</b>	By looking at the best institutes of technology in the world, asserts itself as a selected scientific and technological partner internationally.	It strives to become one of the best technological universities in the world

The second strategic plan (2008-2011) highlights initiatives and successes contributing to Larissa's excellence status on the global stage. For example, focus is put on trans-disciplinarity (research centres and programmes) and the intention to build a "living campus" with close synergies to neighbouring towns and institutions. Moreover, the plan highlights that Larissa's trajectory needs to be maintained and further developed as to transform the university into a "world class" technological university. In general, the organizational identity underscores Larissa's role in the knowledge economy, acknowledging local and national stakeholders. Larissa's new campus is transformed "from a working campus to a living campus", aiming at: bridging the university with its broader community; preparing its students as future entrepreneurs; becoming a place of access to knowledge devoted to the scientific community, students and society at large. The new campus further aims at closely embedding Larissa with society, in particular when it comes to strategic partnerships with domestic industry. A chapter titled "Larissa evolution" treats past and recent times as well as the current situation in terms of critical achievements in the realms of students, research, external funding, technology transfer/innovation, visibility/brand image, and quality. As in the former plan, comparisons (benchmarking) with international leading, technological universities like MIT come to the fore.

In short, Larissa's two strategic plans strongly endorse the rationale for major strategic change, albeit the fact that the second plan appears to be more balanced directly addressing local and national stakeholders, who, as such, are invited to strategically engage with the university. In the same vein, commitment to the uniqueness of the university is displayed more thoroughly in the

latest strategic plan; for instance, by referring to its traditional values (related to its history as an engineering school) as key success factors.

### ***Batea University***

Batea is the oldest university in the country, established through papal bull in 1460. By the end of the 1990s the dispersed disciplinary subunits were reorganized into a single formal organization, which started to issue strategic plans, to control a global budget, and to apply overall accounting rules. Inter-disciplinarity was tackled in the education mission: Batea was among the first universities to introduce the Bologna reform and, in 2008, the university with the highest number of interdisciplinary degrees in the national context. By 2011 Batea enrolled close to 13'000 students, an increase of 66% since 2000. Its budget accounts for Euro 524 million, more than doubling in the period 2000-2011.

According to the first strategic plan (2001-2007), Batea aspires to integrate and link itself more closely to its scientific, politic, economic, cultural and societal environment. To support change, its mission, vision and values, dating back to 1993, require an update. Eventually the university is ready to provide an overarching strategic plan for the whole organization and not only for its subunits, i.e. faculties and institutes. All along the text, the issue of the university as a unitary organization emerges. For instance, the acknowledgement of an “environment” stems from the fact that Batea considers itself a formal organization and not anymore a collection of disciplines. It seeks a shared identity by framing its education and research activities into two headings: “culture” (grouping humanities and social sciences), related to the lively intellectual atmosphere of the city, and, “life” (grouping life sciences, medicine and natural sciences), connecting the university with the local pharmaceutical industry.

**Table 4: Evolution of organizational identity at Batea University**

	<b>Quality, Strength, Effectiveness. Batea University at the beginning of the 21. Century</b>	<b>Strategy 2007. On the development of the Batea University 2007-2013</b>
<b>Mission</b>	Education and research. “macro-priorities”: Life and Culture.	Education and research are linked. Innovation and technology transfer are part of the research mission It exists and impacts on its region “profiling areas”: Life Sciences and Culture
<b>Values</b>	Coherent and efficient Interdisciplinarity in education Research-friendly In relationship with its environments	Tradition and innovation Middle size allowing to conduct research and be strategic
<b>Vision</b>	Confirming itself as a regional/national player, able to attract students and funds	Becoming one of the best European universities Life sciences: remaining among the best universities in the world

The second strategic plan (2007-2013) takes into consideration changes in the task environment: while additional governmental funding is acquired from a newly participating local government, Batea seeks to anchor itself in an extended geographical area. Internal resource allocations have become “strategic” and are no longer guided by historical reasons (“natural growth”). As in the first strategic plan, the latest document is (also) a means of communicating Batea’s identity as a unitary organization. The struggle to reconcile life sciences and culture is detectable. Interestingly, in this respect quantitative research is claimed to be the common denominator where soft and hard disciplines can encounter, while translational research is considered a fundamental *modus operandi* to shape, intensify and

maintain university-industry relations within the life sciences. Real estate emerges as an issue, since Batea is scattered across more than 90 buildings in over 40 different locations. This brings both advantages (such as quality of life within the city) as well as disadvantages as research groups and activities become geographically dispersed, especially within the natural sciences.

The text of the first strategic plan is very short and concise. Broad strategic objectives are indicated and the need for Batea to act as a unitary and coherent organization is underscored. The second document is longer and more detailed and focuses on external stakeholders. Both plans are built on the previous documents, starting with a list of recent successes, explained through academic potential, political autonomy and administrative transparency. On the one hand, the strategic plans claim to federate disciplines under the two profiling sectors “culture” and “life sciences”, on the other hand they reflect the process of internal change, i.e. transformation into a formal organization.

### **Comparative analysis and discussion**

All four higher education institutions balance different scopes of their mission: local, regional, national and international. In doing so, the strategic plans address more external than internal stakeholders. Thus, compliance with institutional settings appears to be more prevalent than commitment towards organizational history or path-dependency. This finding supports earlier studies underlining the fact that in times of strategic change, legitimation and recognition are sought (more) externally - in the community, region, nation, and from outside stakeholders, including students and their families (Grant 2003; Fiss and Zajak 2006). This in itself is a quite natural organizational behaviour as major internal changes are required by new environmental demands, which, in turn, help ensure the long-term viability of universities by securing critical state support – funding and legal framework – as well as from the broader society. Hence, across cases, tensions emerge between internal ambitions towards excellence in the research realm

and societal relevance in terms of teaching and technology transfers. Such tensions are, to a large degree, bridged or negotiated through the articulation of internal (collective) values aimed at simultaneously achieving local relevance and global excellence (Perry 2012).

As far as mission statements are concerned, these are generally articulated around the three functions of 'teaching', 'research' and 'service to society', with the latter being differently defined as 'outreach', 'technology transfer', and/or 'contribution to knowledge and to the "learning society"' (Laredo 2007; Breznitz and Feldman 2012). In the cases of Tero and Larissa, the scope of services provided encompasses regional, national and transnational dimensions (Pinheiro 2012). An observation that can be made is that, across all cases, the second strategic plan tends to be longer than the first, addressing new topics and issues requiring strategic attention. While university identities have traditionally been embedded around teaching and research dimensions, new topics are brought to the fore in the second strategic plan, thus indicating the on-going mission extension of universities (Enders and de Boer 2009). In this situation, one could argue that organizational identity is used as an instrument to keep the university together, as internal and external forces *pull* and *push* the university in different directions (Albert and Whetten 1985; Olsen 2007).

As for organizational values, they tend to reflect a shared goal of being innovative and entrepreneurial universities, articulated around: new media and technologies (Tero); preparing students to become entrepreneurs (Larissa); innovation within the life sciences (Larissa and Batea); and inter-disciplinarity in education and research (all universities). The difficult balance between local and global orientations seems to coalesce around the distinctive characteristics of universities' campuses: Arianna has adopted a multi-functional multi-campus policy. Batea established a campus for life sciences and maintained scattered locations for humanities and social sciences. Larissa successfully attracted a large amount of funds from the public and private sectors in order to create a "living campus" connecting scientists and the local community around innovative knowledge.

An interesting feature of all the strategic plans analysed is how a careful distinction is made between values and the concrete activities related to those values. While the former remain stable throughout the period analysed, the latter are continuously re-defined, thus attaching new meanings to agreed-upon values (see also Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Jarzabkowski 2004).

As for universities' vision, we were able to identify claims concerning specific groups of universities which the four institutions aim at belonging to, acting both as benchmark and identity references: Arianna to 'innovative European universities'; Tero to the 'international community'; Larissa to 'world-leading research universities'; and Batea to 'world universities' (life sciences) and 'European universities' (humanities and social sciences). Organizational identity can thus be considered a commitment towards a specific line of action (Whetten 2006), reflecting the organizations' self-determined and self-defining position in the social space: "we are like some, unlike others" (Czarniawska and Wolff 1998; Gioia et al. 2010). Accordingly, these claims define also the arenas for coordination and competition (Porac et al. 1989), underlining the rather thin line between isomorphism (imitation) and polymorphism (innovation) within the field of higher education (Stensaker and Norgård 2001; Fleming and Lee 2009).

What is more, the evolutionary nature of the strategic plans reveals some common features. The first strategic plans (early 2000s) rationalize main future changes: a university college shall become a fully-fledged university (Arianna); a regionally-embedded comprehensive university shall broaden its transnational scope (Tero); an engineering school shall transform itself into a research-intensive technological university (Larissa); a loosely-coupled array of disciplines shall develop into a unitary organization (Batea). The second strategic plans build on the (partial) achievements of the changes initiated in the previous plan, and reinforce their legitimation (Suchman 1995) by *bridging* them with organizational identity (embodied both in historical and new attributes). For instance, Larissa's second strategic plan highlights the unique history of the university and builds on it, presenting strategic change as a legitimate trajectory aligned with its (actual as well as desired) organizational identity (Whetten 2006, p. 226).

In sum, we have observed that the strategic plans of the four case universities go to great lengths to articulate the rationale for major changes connecting both the ‘traditional identity’ of the university (e.g. ethnic minority culture at Tero) with the “unavoidable” new identity (e.g. Tero becoming the knowledge hub for an enlarged region), thus shedding light on the degree of congruence between past and present/future organizational identities (Ravasi and Phillips 2011). In this sense, strategic plans are instrumental (Olsen 2007) to the symbolic alignment of values within the university and, as such, function as *sense-giving* and *sense-making* devices whereby the central university leadership structures communicate the intended course of action to the various internal and external constituencies (Gioia et al. 2010; Ravasi and Schultz 2006).

One main issue emerges from this empirical study. The rationale for change is balanced by the articulation of arguments supporting compliance with various institutional settings and commitment towards organizational distinctiveness (Kraatz and Block 2008). The subtle mixes of these three elements – compliance, distinctiveness and change - we argue, are affected by: the type of change; the specific conditions under which universities thrive; and also leadership action. This basically means that the organizational identity portrayed in strategic plans is, first and foremost, a reflection and function of the objectives previously defined in the strategic framework of the university. Further, it is around these strategic objectives that the needs and expectations of external and internal stakeholders alike are addressed, as a means to align them (tight-coupling) to organizational goals. This, in turn, reveals the hierarchy of dimensions (priorities) articulated in the strategic plans as well as the mechanisms through which strategic purpose and identity formation gradually become embedded with, and constrain, one another.

## **Conclusions and implications**

This paper shows how the concept of organizational identity has been used in the strategic plans of four European universities over a ten year period. Our analysis found that, while organizational identity in general has been used as an instrument for providing sense to



strategic change to all relevant stakeholders, it can also be conceived of as a function of defending (potential) lack of change, thus supporting at the same time stability and continuity in organizational life (March 1996). In this way organizational identity, as presented in universities' strategic plans, functions as a "risk reducing device" accounting for possible (future) organizational failures or for factors that are beyond managerial control. In other words, according to these strategic plans, the university is able to account for elements of change or of stability while assessing results or organizational performance. There are several advantages of featuring organizational identity as a risk reducing device as a core component of a strategic plan. First, it provides those in charge of strategy design with a legitimate way to argue positively for any positive organizational outcome accrued to the strategic plan itself (see also Suchman 1995). In concrete terms this is possible due to the difficulties of assessing direct achievements in education and research, an aspect intrinsically linked to the uncertainty of future preferences and consequences as well as information asymmetries (March 1978). In other words, whereas *change* can be explained by a arguments describing a "transformed" (new) organizational identity, *stability* can be explained by a pointing to an "translated" (re-interpreted) organizational identity (Huisman et al., 2002; Maguire and Hardy 2005). Second, the concept of organisational identity downplays the focus on time, deadlines and milestones, and, in contrast, emphasizes the timelessness of change, accentuating process instead of results, thus enabling claims that "we are on a journey" and that, for complex organizations inhabiting a highly institutionalised environment such as universities (Musselin 2006; Olsen 2007), a long-term perspective is needed to ensure an understanding of institutional trajectories. Third, the cases shown here suggest that organizational identity can be instrumental to strategic change, particularly when framed within a context of increasing external pressures for greater rationalization (Whitley 2008; Ramirez 2010). While organizational identity is often perceived as posing constraints to organizational adaptation (Albert and Whetten 1985), our analysis reveals that identity has the potential to provide organizations with substantial flexibility during strategic change processes, not only as a strategic tool for legitimating change in the eyes of

internal and external constituencies (Suchman 1995), but also as a strategic mechanism for coping with an increasingly turbulent and volatile external environment. Future research inquiries, both within and beyond the organizational field of higher education, could take this discussion one step further by shedding light on the sets of internal tensions (e.g. cognitive dissonance) and (power) struggles underpinning processes of identity formation/adaptation in the context of strategic change within organizations.

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