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Blogging for Reputation
An analysis of how Swedish universities address different governing system via social media

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Abstract
Universities are exposed to a variety of external forces that influence the way they are managed and organized. In this paper we examine how these principles are given space in the way universities communicate. We do this by analyzing how the university management - in this case Swedish universities’ Vice-chancellors – describe, promote and explain their organizations via official blogs. The paper builds on a framework where university governance is understood as based on a relationship between state, profession and market, and as driven by three forms of social judgments - legitimacy, status and reputation. From a total of fourteen VC blogs, 1330 posts are analyzed according to three sets of arguments: 1) legitimacy arguments driven by political outcome; 2) status arguments driven by professional values and boundaries; and 3) reputation arguments driven by market consequences. The results reflect a dominance of reputation aspects, highlighting the centrality of market principles in communication and university governance.

Keywords: university governance, communication, legitimacy, status, reputation, social media, blog
Introduction
The field of higher education in Sweden, and elsewhere, has over the last couple of decades gone through stages of changes and reform - some more pronounced and having more impact than others (Mazza, Quattrone, & Riccaboni, 2008; Musselin, 2005; Wright & Williams Ørberg, 2008). With its focus on decentralization, simplification and reduction of governing and organizational structures trough for example privatization, deregulation, changes in decision-making processes, and a move from process to outcome control the reforms have left few aspects of universities and their activities unaffected (Paradeise et al., 2009; for an overview see Wedlin, 2011). Parallel to this wave of new public management (NPM) inspired policies there is also a considerable number of non-governmental models and norms for how universities as well as other public sector organizations are expected to be managed and behave (Ferlie et al. 2008). The most prominent in this context are models that recognize universities as professional (market) organizations, i.e. models that bring to fore expectations on universities to implement managerial practices and routines such as rationalization of administration, professionalization of support functions such as communication and marketing or standardization of performance evaluation (cf. Engwall, 2008a; Whitley, 2007). Expressed in terms of variety of international standards (and quality measurements such as rankings and accreditations, these models have become normative prescriptions in a variety of contexts and settings contributing to the on-going transformation of the university field (Wedlin, Sahlin, & Hedmo, 2009). Especially important seems to be the models that emphasize the value and use of auditing and evaluation mechanisms in order to increase transparency and accountability of the university management (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010).

One particular area reflecting such a focus on new models for university governance is the professionalization of universities’ communication (Engwall, 2008b). Universities as well as the rest of the academic field seem to invest heavily in establishing and promoting communication departments to manage different sets of relationships in their environment. A number of studies support the argument that the format and content of what is being communicated signal the main priorities that academic institutions ascribe their operations mainly as a reflection of external expectations and values (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2013; Rödder, 2009; Rödder & Schäfer, 2010). There is also evidence that communication - and media oriented activities in particular - transforms the very functionality and organization of university and research (Besley & Tanner, 2011; Rödder, 2011; Weingart, 1998). The constitutive role of communication (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Suddaby, 2011) thereby have a number of organizational consequences that are worth to be examined more closely – especially as the communication function is often changed or implemented rapidly and without previous experience (cf. Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). With assumed effects on for example the autonomy of teachers and researchers, collegiality principles in decision-making, peer-review based recruitment and resource allocation, we should be better informed about the ideas, values and priorities the university’s communication addresses and proliferates (Krücken, Kosmützky, & Torka, 2007).

Inspired by a more general question about the presence of different governance models and practices in the university, in this paper we seek to examine what dominant steering principles are given space in the way universities communicate. We do this by looking at how the university management - in this case the universities’ Vice-chancellors – describe, promote and explain their organizations. We depart our analysis from the discussion on university governance as based in relationships between state, market and profession (Clark, 1986) and as expressed in three corresponding forms of social judgments - legitimacy, reputation and status (cf. Bitektine, 2011; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Therefore, we seek to address universities’ communication by combining three sets of arguments: a) legitimacy arguments driven by political outcome; b) status arguments driven by professional values
and boundaries; and c) reputation arguments driven by market consequences. By analyzing how these arguments are inscribed in Vice-chancellors blog posts we aim at getting a better understanding of how universities, in this case Swedish universities, use communication to reflect complex and conflicting value systems and principles which their organizations are exposed to (cf. L. T. Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013; Fredriksson & Pallas, 2013).

Universities’ Communication in Political, Professional and Economical Contexts
As noted above, the university field is characterized by multiple modes of control where academic institutions express their identity differently depending on the context in which they operate. In literature on university governance we find a number of ideal-typical descriptions and conceptualization of what a university is and how it should be organized. A common point of departure in this literature regards the university as an independent institution where its operations are to be governed by following collegial values and preferences, i.e. a position that is challenged by new modes of governance where the emphasis on business orientation of universities and subordination to political agendas represent two dominant stances (cf. Clark, 1986; Olsen & Maassen, 2007). The universities seem to find themselves in a position where they need to respond to and act upon a variety of political, professional and economical pressures. That is to say, pressures that are not only conflicting at the level of governing principles and policies (as they invoke different sets of values), but also with respect to what actual activities and processes these pressures trigger in organizations (cf. Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).

In such a context we can expect that universities’ reliance on communication to signal responsiveness to receive acceptance and support by constitutive audiences to be substantial. In this paper we translate political (legitimacy), professional (status), and economical (reputation) pressures to create a tool for analysis of the arguments used in communication. Legitimacy, status and reputation are results of social constructions, however this paper does not analyze whether universities possess varying levels of these social perceptions, but how they align their communicative arguments along translations of these environmental forces.

Political Pressures and Legitimacy
State certification is an archetypical form of legitimacy with political antecedents and consequences guiding many organizations’ structures and form, and/or the communication thereof. Legitimacy is regarded as political as the outcome is a ‘basic right to operate’, which is closely linked to certification and authority. Ensuring social acceptance for an organization - to be legitimate or not - means ensuring perceptions of an organization to be in line with established expectations, often originating in state initiatives of regulation and certification. Legitimacy is described and defined as the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). By intentionally or unintentionally acting along socially accepted beliefs and ideas of how and what an organization is supposed to be, with less dependence on technical issues of productivity, organizations’ apparent rationality provides the right to operate, and also a buffer to protect against external forces (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). By arguing for similarity, organizations “buy in to” legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As legitimacy is not based on technical performance, concrete facts or numbers become less relevant, thus abstract reasoning and arguments is applied to signify adherence. Suchman (1995) present three types of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral and cognitive. These dimensions help understand the various antecedents of legitimacy, whether the state act as a regulator (pragmatic), societal norms establish ‘codes of conduct’ and procedures (moral), or how organizations act according to expectations and take-for-granted assumptions (cognitive) (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Legitimacy it is not a static concept, and as it changes, so must an organization adapt to new
pressures in order to ensure chances for survival. However, being a concept of acceptance and inclusion into a field of activities, legitimacy stretches no further than a dichotomous distinction of being or not being legitimate, without aspects of rivalry (thus being legitimate means being part of an established field), and makes organizations more similar - homogenizing them. For example, a university seeking legitimacy would compare itself to perceivably legitimate universities and structures within the field that it seeks to be established.

**Professional Pressures and Status**

Ideas originating in professions and professional practices are shared and variously applied among actors and organizations within occupations (e.g. communication professionals) and fields (e.g. higher education). Collegial decision-making has long been a central feature in university governance (Clark, 1986; Olsen & Maassen, 2007), and the concept of status is applicable to understand how professional ideas are shared, or approached by organizations and practitioners. Washington and Zajac, in line with M. Weber (1978), propose a definition of status as a “socially constructed, intersubjectively agreed-upon and accepted ordering or ranking of individuals, groups, organizations, or activities in a social system” (2005, p. 284). Thus, practices are accepted by stakeholders but defined in practice by professionals, unrelated to the performance and quality of products and services (Washington & Zajac, 2005). Members of high status groups are attractive and enjoy benefits by their privileged position, thus their professional values possess esteem among peers (M. Weber, 1978). It is an honorary membership, not based on quality, but professional peer approval by other organizations. As organizations in lower status groups strive ‘upwards’ in the hierarchy, examples of practices and organizational structures from the privileged models are copied and followed - or communicated to be followed - as integral parts of upward striving organizations. Status segregates between specific member groups within a field of operations, thus promotes a game of “copy and protect” of practices between groups, making it group-rival (Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008).

For universities this is, for example, visible in the perception of elite schools on the one hand, and the ones not regarded as elite on the other. Thus, stakeholders evaluate organizations based on inter-organizational relations and standings, meaning that being seen as having the “right” relations is a central feature of status (Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012). When stakeholders evaluate the status of an organization, their view on how a specific group of organizations (a status group) regard and hold esteem towards a particular organization is fundamental to the rewarded status (Podolny, 1994).

**Economical Pressures & Reputation**

A definition of organizational reputation presents it as a social perception that is the “collective representation of a firm’s past actions and results that describes the firm’s ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders” (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997, p. 10). It is an accumulated view of stakeholders’ experiences and perceptions of an organization’s past performance, and thus its future potential to satisfy and produce value (Deephouse & Carter, 2005; Rindova & Fombrun, 1999). Arguments of prominence and positive economical returns for stakeholders are central aspects of reputation, thus the relation to market pressures is apparent. To deliver advantages to stakeholders, reputation is basically competitive, it promotes unique skills and features of the individual organization. A good reputation may generate advantages in terms of high(-er) status, attract employees, higher return on investments, and a favorable position vis-à-vis competing organizations within a field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Reputation tends to be a zero-sum game where gain is made on the expense of another’s loss on a continuous scale (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Rankings and lists are two examples of how reputation is increasingly represented. As the competitive aspect tends to show uniqueness, technical performances, concrete results and numbers are characteristic of reputation arguments and presentations.
Translating Contextual Pressures into Analytical Tools

Our method is based on an operationalization of legitimacy, status and reputation as tools to understand and position the content and meaning of Swedish universities’ Vice-chancellors’ blogs posts in relation to political, professional, and economical pressures. The reflections of meaning in the empirical data are suited to be understood in terms of legitimacy (as it is political in its outcome, i.e. affects organizations in relation to regulations, certifications, and perceptions of behavior), status (as it tends to professional values, and is based on relations), and reputation (as it individualizes organizations by differentiation, tending to unique features and technical representations with economical outcomes) (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). The operationalization is applied in a qualitatively developed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; R. P. Weber, 1990). Content analysis lends itself to be used accordingly to what is being studied (R. P. Weber, 1990), thus it is an approach to analyze and understand textual content in its specific environments, in this case the underlying and explicit meanings in blog posts. Prior theory and research is used to develop and define coding categories, making the analysis structured in its approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Inspired by existing literature on social judgments of organizations we developed three categories: Relation, Motivation, and Mean – which in this section are elaborated to be applied to demonstrate the occurrence of legitimacy, status and/or reputation arguments (Bitektine, 2011; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Suchman, 1995). The summary in Table 1 presents the distinguishing and selected features of our proposed framework of how state, profession, and market principles and pressures are translated into Vice-chancellor blog arguments reflecting the ambition for support and acceptance in terms of legitimacy, status and/or reputation.

### Table 1. Operationalization and characteristics of legitimacy, status and reputation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Relations</th>
<th>Motivations</th>
<th>Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political (legitimacy)</td>
<td>Non-rival</td>
<td>Homogenizing</td>
<td>Symbolical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional (status)</td>
<td>Group-rival</td>
<td>Segregating</td>
<td>Honorific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economical (reputation)</td>
<td>Rival</td>
<td>Differentiating</td>
<td>Technical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Relations**

The first category is indicative of attitudes and a base for organizational relations and competitive inclination toward peers in the field. We translate relations as a category that distinguishes who benefits or loses, and whether the field, group or individual is in focus of the argument.

Legitimate organizations generate aspects of mutual good for all included in the field, thus there is no base for rivalry. Expressions of legitimacy include arguments of benefits or threats to the whole field, such as the influence of new university regulations or standards where the field of higher education is discussed, but without focus on particular universities.

Status is competitive between groups - hierarchical - thus creating clusters of members with closer or more distant relations. We expect arguments of group benefits or threats and why members of varying groups are to be separated as representative of status. It is similar to legitimacy, but limited to a defined group, e.g. “new universities”.

Reputation emphasize rivalry between all individual organizations, thus arguments are based on
gaining benefits on the cost of other organizations. Hence, organizations’ and Vice-chancellors’ arguments representing reputation in this category are expected to focus on the individual organization, and how it benefits, or loses, from certain arrangements or activities.

**Motivations**

Motivation represents organizations’ relational orientation in an explicit manner, and more specifically what is expressed, whether similarities, professional or group values, or differences. It is closely related to the previous category, however while the category relations is based on whom it relates to, motivations answers what relational outcome is sought and how that is done.

Legitimacy homogenizes as organizations seeking a basic right to operate (to become and also keep legitimacy) imitate successful structures and patterns into their own organization. The identifying aspect is then organizations displaying, or presenting arguments, of similarity, and further how they promote comparative aspects to peers (Suchman, 1995). For example blog posts containing stories of Vice-chancellors or managers describing their organization’s activities or performances in terms of being “just like the others”, or that “we also have *optional feature*”, preferably similar to a perceived successful examples.

In the motivation category, status is seen as segregating with an emphasis on group differences or similarities. Though, “segregating” may be perceived as an ambiguous word, its meaning in this work refers to displays of differences between groups, but also similarities with peers, thus exclusion by inclusion. Arguments of status in this category are for example expressions of similarities between group members or among members of higher status groups, based on professional values, ideas and practices. On the other side of the spectrum we expect to find how members of high status groups refrain from expressing friendly relations or adherence to values or organizations originating from members of groups lower down in the hierarchy.

Reputation differentiates, and organizations seeking to build or maintain reputation tend to emphasize unique abilities or features of the particular organization. Differentiation is attended and expressed even without real organizational differences - the issue being connected to rankings and public perceptions of “which is the best organization”. Arguments in this category emphasize unique features of an organization with the motivation to be exclusive and different from others.

**Means**

The last category corresponds to ways of presenting the desired state of being legitimate, having status, or being reputable – the means of presentation. The focus on how communication is presented, together with arguments from the political, professional, and economical field, is our third category.

As legitimacy is related the political sphere – in the meaning of having (authoritative) normative and regulatory pressures - arguments relating to field issues are of central interest. Further, the quest to obtain/retain a ‘right to act’ within a sphere of activities result in symbolical signaling and expressions, thus being part of an established and recognized field, without the competitive aspect, requires no specific numbers, but rather an abstract approach in communication. For example, blog posts may include normative discussions about the purpose of a university, or political rulings related to higher education.

Status reflects social esteem and values (Washington & Zajac, 2005), thus resulting in social privileges in relation to an organization’s group belonging in a hierarchical system, without being related to merits or performance, thus being honorific. In this category, relational links and the
professional values – vis-à-vis political initiatives or values held by peers – of the own organization are in the fore of the argument. The arguments then reflect the own organization in relation to aspects of higher or lower standing peers in a hierarchy and the values they express, or in relation to political interests.

Reputation is related to economic and organizational performances, consequences and opportunities. If an organization is perceived as prominent and well performing, economical favors may be easier to obtain. However, this category also includes un-favorable results and performances, as long as the individual organization is in focus. Thus, technical and concrete communication about economic aspects is more likely to be applied if seeking to build reputation. For example, communication that presents performance of features such as number admitted students, or how many (and where) articles by researchers at a specific university or research facility publish per year, are indicative of reputational aspects.

Summarizing the Operationalized Concepts
The operationalization of legitimacy is reflected in and represented by non-rivalry, homogenization and political/symbolical aspects; status reflected in and represented by aspects of group-rivalry, segregation, and professional values, and finally; reputation is reflected in and represented by rivalry, differentiation, and economical (technical) aspects. As legitimacy, status and reputation are social constructions, based on varying aspects, these translations are not to be interpreted as organizations being legitimate, having high/low reputation, or considered belonging to a particular status group, but as representations of organizations and their Vice-Chancellors’ communication of their universities vis-à-vis peers and various stakeholders, values, norms and ideas. Thus, this paper does not present how Swedish universities are perceived among stakeholders, but how they seek to be perceived and positioned in relation to varying pressures - intentionally or not.

Coding and Material
Official Vice-chancellor blogs are chosen to represent arguments, and thus governing principles, of a leading representative and her organization. Blogs are easy and quick channels for communication, and also accessible for potential readers. Hence, the blogs represent a material that possesses significant information about the organization, through the voice of a leader, accessible to an unlimited amount of readers.

The Swedish higher education sector consists of 50+ universities and university colleges (Universitetskanslerämbetet, 2013), but only 14 have some form of Vice-chancellor blog or other regular digital forum for communication (weekly letter and column) active in the end of 2012. Of these fourteen, only four blogs were active before 2011 (KTH, LU, Miun and SU). Most of the blogs are authored by the Vice-chancellors, however a few also include contributions from deputy Vice-chancellors and Vice-rectors. See Appendix 1 for a full list and short presentation of the included universities and their blogs. The limitation of the material in this study is made to include all posts made during 2011 and 2012. The total material consists of 1330 blog posts. The coding and analysis recognize all occurrences of the features in the above-defined categories of each blog post – making a total of nine variables available for coding in the posts. The coding was performed in alphabetical order on one Vice-chancellor blog at the time, form the first post made sometime during 2011 (some had not yet started their blogs in the beginning of the year), to the last in December 2012. We used basic descriptive statistic and Excel to analyze the material. Nine variables were available for coding and were accordingly recorded in Excel if existing within each post. A total of 2687 occurrences of our predefined variables were found in the material. We then compared the total spread of variables and also differences between universities. Further, the results are exemplified with texts excerpts to
illustrate the different categories and variables. The citations are translated from Swedish to English by the authors of this paper.

**Analysis and Results**

The analysis of the empirical data is made to present the results and to highlight which principles and value systems are signaled via arguments in Swedish universities’ Vice-chancellors’ blogs. Political, professional and economical are the three forces identified as influencing university governance. Within the 1330 blog posts, the analysis identified 2687 occurrences of the variables from the three predefined categories (each consisting of three sub-categories). Of the total identified variables 55% represent aspects of reputation, 27% represent legitimacy, and 18% represent status (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Spread of variables in Vice-chancellor blogs

Reputation aspects make up over half of the coded variables, thus reveals market principles to be the primary identified pressure along which universities and Vice-chancellors construct their arguments via their official blogs. Legitimacy aspects, which are a translation of state influence, field practices and political principles, make up just over one quarter of the present variables. Thus, aspects of state influence, legislation and field (higher education) is the second most prevailing category in the material. The field of higher education is talked about, but relatively few arguments regarding the field of higher education are made. Status, a translation of professional values and relational standings, claims less than one fifth of the total variables. This indicates a relatively low focus on relations to peers, group and professional values. Professional arguments are peripheral in the context of Vice-chancellors blogs and the arguments they form. Figure 2 displays the dominance of reputational aspects (in relation to legitimacy and status) and also show the spread amongst the universities. For the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) and Malmö University (Mah) 70% of the variables are represented by reputational features, closely followed by Mälardalen University (MDH) at 66%, and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) and the University of Skövde (HIS), both at 65%. Gothenburg University (GU) and Umeå University (UMU) present low numbers of reputation identifiers, the former 13%, and the latter 15%. However, GU and UMU represent the largest percentage of legitimacy indicators, but they are at the same time represented by a small numbers of blog posts, which raises questions of their significance (GU 7, and UMU 16 posts). Regarding status, an interesting notification is that UU and LU have the largest percentage of status indicators, both represented by over 25%.
When diving deeper into which features of the main categories of legitimacy, status and reputation that are most common in the material, the result show one major feature in each category to stand out (see Table 2). For both reputation and legitimacy, identifiers of the means category are most common. For status motivations is dominant. In reputation the feature technical represent 52% of all occurrences, hence being the major feature (Rival at 33%, and differentiating at 15%). This feature stands for a mean to represent the organization in a (explicitly) value free manner. These blog posts include, e.g., presentation of the daily work at the university, and present “objective” numbers about finance, students and other results. The market principles are thus translated into Vice-chancellors talking about the own organization and the daily routines and work that is performed in their universities, but also reports on numbers and results that are directly linked to the university. Three examples of texts with reputation aspects follow below. The first example present numbers of paying (foreign) students and how the numbers are surprisingly positive, thus coded as means: technical. The second blog excerpt is coded in relation to the focus on internal organizational processes and operations. The last text is coded as relations: rival due to the focus on the individual organization and how the organization is perceived as a strong brand.

"Last Wednesday the number of paying students were 63, a figure that may slightly increase during the coming days. It is a lot better than we first expected. I believe there are great possibilities in the coming years to substantially strengthen this recruitment." (KTH, 6 June 2012. Reputation – Means: technical)

“The Board will receive a presentation of the report with the two options: (1) The transfers of operations from Härnösand (2) Concentration of teacher training in Härnösand.” (Miun, 25 October 2012. Reputation – Means: technical)

“…emphasis in the rankings is put on reputation. Here, KTH has a strong brand.” (KTH, 15 October 2012. Reputation - Relations: rival)

Legitimacy is foremost represented by the feature symbolical (norms and rules), representing 64% of all occurrences in the category. This is a mean to engage in issues regarding the norms and the rules of the field. The Vice-chancellor talks about common issues, e.g., regarding general regulations, and what a university should be and/or do. Following are two excerpts from blogs posts containing legitimacy aspects where the coding of the first example refers to how examination as part of what a university does is discussed, but also the vague and symbolical language is indicative of means:
symbolical. The second citation argues for field-wide bravery when undertaking new research projects when discussing field norms and rules.

"A resource-consuming part of teaching is the examination. The examination is also part of a university’s authority. That it is done in a correct and accurate manner is a must for every teacher.” (KaU, 4 March 2012. Legitimacy – Means: symbolical)

"It is often said that there is too little bold research projects in Swedish research. Scientists are forced to secure projects that provide guaranteed and publishable results to ensure new funding after the current and common three-year grant periods.” (SU, 24 November 2011. Legitimacy – Means: symbolical)

The least represented category is status, and it is mainly represented by the feature segregating (50%). It regards explicit relational links and issues concerning a group. Lastly we present examples of texts containing features of status, where the first example represents motivations: segregating by the way Lund University is presented as having extensive relations with Canadian institutions, and by presenting these “attractive” universities by name. The second example is a coding of means: honorific by presenting rankings as an increasingly important aspect of being a university and what ways their organization is to approach that development.

"Anne Messeter from International Relations presented the collaborations that exist today between Lund University and Canada – and they are many. Many Canadian universities are highly sought after by our students for studies abroad. We have several exchange agreements, both for entire LU and various faculties, for example with Mc Gill, UBS, Ottawa.” (LU, 9 February 2011. Status – Motivations: segregating)

"At today’s Senate we debated ranking under the headline “Ranking – incentives or confusion”. An interesting introduction was made by Åsa Kettis and Hans Ellergren. How much should we consider and take into account regarding rankings? Who uses them and how? The discussion became much about both - we cannot ignore the rankings, but also not let them become too controlling. A healthy and critical approach…” (UU, 29 May 2012. Status – Means: honorific)

Table 2. Spread of features representing the three main categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Relations</th>
<th>Motivations</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political (legitimacy)</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>64% Symbolical</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-rival</td>
<td>Homogenizing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional (status)</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>33% Honorific</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group-rival</td>
<td>Segregating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economical (reputation)</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>52% Technical</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rival</td>
<td>Differentiating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion and Conclusion

The paper started by asking what dominant governing principles and values are given space in universities’ communication. By analyzing how the universities’ Vice-chancellors describe, promote and explain their organizations in terms of legitimacy, status and reputation we sought to illustrate the way in which Swedish universities give expression for the three forces traditionally understood as shaping the field of higher education – i.e. the state, the market and the profession (Clark, 1986). Based on the argument that the way organizations communicate 1) reflects values and priorities promoted in different institutional contexts; and 2) is constitutive for organizations’ behavior, and essentially also for structuring entire organizational fields (Suddaby, 2011), there is a reason to pay a
closer attention to how the universities via communication relate to the variety of political, economic and professional pressures permeating their environments (Whitley & Gläser, 2007).

Our results indicate that the three proxies (i.e. legitimacy, reputation and status) we used to identify the different governing systems are all present in the Vice-chancellors’ blog posts. However, the distribution of the arguments relating to the state, market or professional values and rationales is in favor for market and competition-oriented claims – i.e. a tendency supported by the existing literature (cf. T. Christensen, 2011; Engwall, 2007; Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2008). In the analyzed blog posts the dominance of reputation based communication – and the technical focus in particular - bears witness of market pressures such as competitiveness, performance measurements, accountability, quality indicators and branding (Burke, 2005; Hazelkorn, 2011; Weingart & Maassen, 2007). Further, blog posts that bring such aspects to the fore resonate clearly with the literature where handling reputational risks is a central activity for public sector organizations. Reputation-oriented communication in universities is to be understood as motivated by an ambition to avoid negative perceptions associated with qualities as ineffective organizations, mismanagement and lack of responsibility (cf. Power, Scheytt, Soin, & Sahlin, 2009).

Legitimacy arguments, and especially those emphasizing the universities’ commitment to their role as an executor of governmental policies and national goals for education and research, appear to play a less pronounced role in the analyzed material. The relatively low occurrence (approx. 1/4) of these arguments coincides with political ambitions to steer and govern the sector of higher education with “externally derived instruments and institutional arrangements” (Ferlie et al., 2008:326) where the focus has shifted from entry control to performance control (Engwall, 2007). The Vice-chancellors’ blogs here provide evidence of universities as not embracing and relating to – at least at the rhetorical level – the political preconditions and expectations to the same extent as is the case with the more market oriented principles and criteria. An important note is here that the legitimacy arguments expressed in the material relate to general – rather than specific – challenges and issues concerning the whole field of higher education. By way of such sweeping and rather symbolical expressive statements, the universities can relate to the growing and heterogeneous forms of regulations and policies (cf. Hedmo & Wedlin, 2008).

In the Vice-chancellors blogs even less space is given to status-oriented aspects of universities’ activities. As shown above, less than 1/5 of all coded aspects deals with professional values and perspectives concerning for example collegiality in decision-making or peer-to-peer quality assessments. The blogs give relatively little evidence of professional or honorific relations to peer organizations. In other words, our results offer a snapshot that can interpreted in the light of the ongoing de-professionalization of universities and its academic activities – a tendency described by among others Hasselberg (2013), Rider (2009), Rider and Jörnesten (2007), and Musselin (2007). Status and professional aspects are addressed by associating the particular university to similar and high performing academic institutions and groups – national as well as international. Noteworthy is the fact that the old universities (UU and LU) value the professional principles higher (>25%) than the rest of the organizations in our study – i.e. a result that goes hand in hand with the argument that we can mainly expect the peripheral field actors to be the source of (market) innovations (cf. Jonsson, 2009).

To sum up, our material confirms that the Swedish universities operate in and relate to a rather complex and conflicting governance system where a number of different and seemingly conflicting interests are expressed. Having limited our analysis to the three governing forces (state, profession and market) our result aims at market principles to be the main influence and source of motivation for the way universities communicate (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2013). We argued initially that
universities’ communication is not simply expected to reflect external pressures imposed on their operations by the different governing systems. There is also a reason to expect that the principles and priorities expressed via formal communication documents, platforms and channels have bearing on the content and quality on the very core of universities’ responsibilities (Ahlbäck Öberg, Bennich-Björkman, Karlsson, & Widmalm, 2013; Ahlbäck Öberg & Widmalm, 2012). In the light of our study it is relevant to ask how different aspects of the everyday operations of universities deal with the mix of principles that are played out in the Vice-chancellors’ blogs and elsewhere.

References


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