

## **Organisational boundaries and institutional change in higher education**

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### *Abstract*

This paper argues that the distinctive dynamics of boundary expansion and contraction provide insight in on-going change in higher education institutions. Organizational boundaries define authority and ownership, organize external relations, enhance capabilities, and foster identity. The tensions between boundary contracting and expanding are illustrated through the cases of (i) reforms granting higher education institutions institutional autonomy, (ii) patterns of university cooperation, (iii) differentiation of internal activities, and (iv) shifting contract relations. The implications for university functioning and sustainability are discussed and a research agenda is presented.

*Keywords:* organizational boundaries, institutional and organizational change, higher education

### **1. Introduction**

Many would agree that organizational boundaries are central in the debate on higher education, university functioning and change. Boundaries are an essential characteristic of organizations. Being a demarcation between the organization and its environment (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005, 491), they divide two different sets of social structures and patterns of interaction (Scott and Davies 2007, 152). Boundaries distinguish universities from their environments, separate persons, tasks, identities and organize interactions between the inside and outside of higher education institutions. However, the term is loosely used and referred to without an explicit and/or shared explanation with respect to its definition, characteristics and functions, as well as to the possible theoretical approaches, assumptions and expectations (Lamont and Molnar 2002, Tilly 2004, Santos and Eisenhardt 2005, Scott and Davis 2007).

In Weber's account, boundaries protect organizational rationality from other spheres of influence stemming from society. In this sense, boundaries shield the organization and allow it to achieve its objectives. The further conceptualization of organizations as open systems suggests additional functions of boundaries: they contribute to handle input-output transactions, internal interdependence and inter-organizational relations (Katz and Kahn 1966). Moreover, as there are different types of environments – technical and institutional – different types of boundaries are in place: technical, symbolic, cultural (Lamont and Molnar 2002, 168). Neo-institutionalists characterize boundaries as legal, normative and cultural-cognitive (Scott 2008). An essentialist view argues that boundaries are defined and characterized distinctively, while a relational approach contends that the dynamic processes underlining interactions across boundaries are the real object of analysis (Emirbayer 1997, 282). Finally, a realist framework would observe boundaries as they “actually” are in place, while a nominalist approach favours their definitions by relevant actors as socially constructed entities (Scott and Davis 2007, 153-154; Tilly 2004, 214).

The relation organization-environment can be conceived of from three different perspectives: it is partly shaped by environmental determination – reforms and environmental jolts; by strategic agency – managerial intentionality, planning, coordination and control; as well as by institutional and organized settings – identities, practices, roles and expectations (Olsen 2009, 2014). When looking at

boundaries it is thus important to examine external and cultural forces at work: while it is certainly a strategic issue how to design organizational boundaries (Foss 2001, Santos and Eisenhardt 2005), external influence and organizational robustness affect them. Boundaries are constantly re-elaborated within institutional and organized settings where cultures and identities of several actors are at play (Zietsma and Lawrence 2012). It is thus relevant to understand whether boundaries are established through an authoritative process, by environmental pressures or by adaptation (Aldrich and Ruef 2006).

Organizational boundaries of universities can thus be assumed to move over time. In Parsons and Platt's (1973, 349-351) view, universities constantly bundle diverse academic personnel and curricula, teaching and research, undergraduate and graduate students, as well as the teaching of professions. However others have argued that, since the 1970s and higher education massification, universities have been essentially deflecting their activities due to a general trend of decreasing state funding (Neave 2002, 160-161). From another perspective, Meyer and Rowan (1977, 347) point to the expansion of boundaries through the establishment of boundary spanning roles aimed to legitimate universities towards external stakeholders (see also Vakkuri, 2004).

We contend that whether organizational boundaries are expanding or tightening is an empirical question. What counts more is to observe the dynamics at play in relation to institutional and organizational change of higher education institutions and the evolution of their environments. Organizational boundaries of universities move in different (and possibly opposite) directions and we show this with four cases drawn from extant research: first, the recent reforms granting institutional autonomy, second, universities strategies in controlling resources, third, the increasing differentiation of internal activities, fourth, the shifting contract relations of academic staff. The next section presents the main approaches to analyse organizational boundaries. The third section reviews relevant empirical research. Finally, the implications for university functioning and sustainability are discussed and a research agenda is presented.

## ***2. Organisational boundaries: emergent or designed?***

### *2.1 Establishing authority and ownership*

Formal organizations are delimited by legal boundaries, which are legally defined and characterize ownership of material resources. Organizational boundaries are established in the pursuit of efficiency: thus firms exist because transactions are more efficient in a hierarchy than in a market (Coase 1937, Williamson 1985). A similar rationale towards efficiency, effectiveness and economy is aimed at by reforms granting institutional autonomy to universities (Fumasoli et al. 2014, Verhoest et al. 2004, Brunsson and Olsen 1998). By departing from the concept of being part of the public administration and becoming formal organizations, higher education institutions are supposed to act strategically, thus becoming more competitive and sustainable. The establishment of authority and ownership provides institutional leadership and other relevant actors leeway to decide on organizational characteristics such as structures, processes, internal rules and policies. Accordingly, boundaries contribute to maintain a balance between autonomy and interdependence of organizational subsets (Aldrich 1971, 280).

Universities' legal boundaries are established through national regulatory frameworks and may change through policy reform. In this sense the link to the public service can remain more or less significant in organizational, financial, personnel dimensions (Estermann and Nokkala 2011). Such legal boundaries can expand or contract through acquisitions, divestitures, and the establishment of new subunits: thus, for instance, a university can absorb a private research centre, get rid of a disciplinary field either in teaching or research, or create a new department.

Although these university boundaries are designed for efficiency reasons, other rationales may play a significant role. Legitimacy concerns with respect to internal and external stakeholders (e.g. academics, students, employers and the broader society), as well as organizational politics and power struggles, may affect whether boundaries expand or tighten. Accordingly, while shifting legal

boundaries of universities impact on internal functioning and actors' configuration (e.g. the rise of management and administrative functions), a more fine-grained analysis should take into consideration boundaries that are more informal, flexible but equally affecting university operations.

## *2.2 Coping with environments*

Universities have to cope with their dependencies and establish their influence by including components of the environments within their boundaries (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Such resources can be material or symbolic, as universities rely on financial resources, scientific staff, students, but also on their reputation as higher education institutions.

This view considers formal and informal boundaries: on the one hand mergers and acquisitions constitute important mechanisms to control resources. On the other hand, lobbying, partnerships and (even personal) alliances are equally relevant. Moreover, the establishment of university boards with external members aimed to co-opt representatives of societal sectors, can be instrumental to fostering the interests and future development of the universities (Vabø 2011).

The notion of the negotiated environment (Grandori 1987, 61) refers to the possibility of universities to engage with their external dimensions and affect them (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, Oliver 1991). Institutional leaders are progressively becoming the main actors, although this depends on governance arrangements specific to national higher education systems. Along this line, boundaries are expected to expand, as universities increasingly need material and symbolic resources to function and to legitimize themselves. Moreover, a logic of power might trigger further expansion of areas of influence, for instance through strategic alliances with other "like-minded" higher education institutions (e.g. the League of European Research Universities).

Internally, they experience uncertainty about future states in relation with their technology – teaching and research (Musselin 2007, Cohen and March 1974) – and with changing environments, e.g. increasing competition, economic crisis, universities create boundary spanning units, which are functional to the coordination with university-environment interdependencies (Aldrich and Herker 1975, Thompson 1967).

However, the highly institutionalized environments in which universities are located require the alignment on such moves by a large number of actors. One might expect that academics hold different interests, look differently at partnerships from institutional leaders and may have diverging ideas on strategic priorities. Also, funding authorities may pursue systemic interests that do not coincide with those of the single university. By implementing centre-periphery balancing policies, they may hamper the development of powerful organisations, like strong research universities. Finally, regulatory frameworks may not allow for specific strategies, such as a merger with another university.

## *2.3 Enhancing capabilities*

The literature on organizational capabilities highlights how every organization should be able to develop its distinctive set of competences (Teece et al., 1997; Grant, 1993) that provides it with a strategic advantage (Porter, 1990). Against this backdrop, organizational boundaries allow for the dynamic coupling of resources and market opportunities by establishing unique resource configurations that cannot be imitated by competitors (Penrose 1959, Chandler 1962).

Against ever changing environments, some argue, universities should become more entrepreneurial in order to constantly adapt to emerging opportunities and be ahead of the competition (Clark 1998, Navarro and Gallardo 2003). Boundaries should be expanded in order to create boundary spanning units that not only protect the core technology as above discussed, but also provide the necessary links to profit from opportunities (Clark 1998, 6). Hence boundaries should shift continuously, reflecting environmental changes, and expand or contract according to external conditions (Santos and Eisenhardt 2005, 498-499).

While capabilities as distinctive configurations of knowledge, resources and opportunities provide strategic advantage, resilience and robustness of universities' organisational settings can display inertia when change is required. Indeed universities are institutionalized organizations, i.e. they are infused with values beyond the technical requirements of their task (Selznick, 1957) and change by design might be constrained by path dependency (Stinchcombe, 1965). In this sense their resilience to external influences and their potential for endogenous change is shaped by their distinctive structures, routines and identity (Fumasoli and Stensaker, 2013).

#### *2.4. Fostering identity*

Organizational boundaries provide a space for coherence where organizational members share a common identity. Boundaries oversee entry (and exit) according to selection criteria, reward and control systems. By sharing specific training and by means of socialization, organizational members conceive of themselves as distinctive and separated normatively and cognitively from the environment (Scott and Davis, 2007; Lamont and Molnar, 2002). Along this line organizational boundaries are strategic because they allow the organization to assess its members against specific requirements and to steer members' contribution to overall performance. As has been argued above, enhancing coherent organizational behaviour fosters institutionalization beyond the technical dimension and infuses the organization with values that make it unique (Selznick, 1957).

By tightening its boundaries the university becomes more centralized, membership criteria are more severe and members become a tightly bounded core group, which is increasingly difficult to affiliate with from outside. Expanding boundaries means that the university integrates an increasing number of members and activities, thus including environmental contingencies within its perimeter (Aldrich 1971, Aldrich and Ruef 2006).

However, academics have multiple affiliations. They link to several reference groups related to the academic profession and to their disciplinary field. Their career, reputation and prestige are traditionally driven from outside the university (Clark 1983) and by their peers in the same department. Addressing the topic of professional autonomy in organizational settings, Gieryn (1983) speaks of boundary work, whereby academics demarcate the boundaries between science and non-science to protect their professional autonomy. However, Gieryn underlines the ambiguous separation between science and non-science (1983, 792): "The three examples illustrate several antinomies in the institution of science: scientific knowledge is at once theoretical and empirical, pure and applied, objective and subjective, exact and estimative, democratic (open for all to confirm) and elitist (experts alone confirm), limitless and limited (to certain domains of knowledge)". The admittance to the professoriate (appointment of special professors, honorary doctorates, etc.) suggests that universities are gradually "opening up" in terms of membership. This process could be further supported by recent debates on who is the expert (see Wikipedia). One could also argue that the boundaries between traditional science and applied research are gradually eroded through the development from mode 1 to mode 2 research.

### ***3. Multiple boundary dynamics in contemporary higher education institutions***

#### *3.1 Legal boundaries, authority and ownership*

It is reasonable to argue that one of the most significant changes in higher education in the last three decades has been the increasing institutional autonomy that governments – through policy reforms – has granted to universities (Neave and Van Vught, 1991; Verhoest et al. 2004). It should be noted however that the level of autonomy, particularly if more specific aspects of autonomy (financial, organisational, etc.) are analysed, may differ significantly and that there may be considerable differences between levels of autonomy across higher education systems (see Estermann et al. 2011). It appears that governments have not transferred full autonomy to their higher education institutions

and/or have asked – in exchange for more institutional freedom – the organisations to account for their activities and performances (Neave, 1998).

Various scholars of higher education have interpreted this development towards more autonomy as a political and societal demand to universities to become (and act) as proper formal organizations. Krücken and Meier (2006) stress the development towards organisational actorhood, emphasising strong(er) management and “real” organizations. An organisational actor is an “integrated, goal-oriented entity that is deliberately choosing its own actions and that can thus be held responsible for what it does” (Krücken and Meier, 2006, 241). Through deeming eyes we would agree with the developments towards actorhood. This reflects earlier (e.g. Amaral et al., 2002) and contemporary literature (e.g. Enders et al., 2008) arguing that higher education institutions have changed into “complete” organisations. In a similar vein, Bleiklie and Kogan (2007) suggest a development of the university as a republic of scholars to a stakeholder organisation, with a stronger role of central authorities and powerful managerial infrastructures leading to – amongst others – standardised working conditions. Explicitly there is reference in their work to higher education reform as “... a means to render higher education institutions efficient and accountable” and to “... university reformers have sought out to integrate universities, tightening the links between the different parts of the university organization ... “ (Bleiklie and Kogan, 2007, 480), suggesting the development towards strong(er) and complete organisations. There is also some empirical endorsement for increased professionalism, the strengthening of the core (see also Clarke, 1996) through the increase of a wide range of administrative and managerial positions at universities (see e.g. Gornitzka and Larsen 2004, Krücken, 2011).

That said, others argue that higher education institutions do and will not resemble ‘real’ organisations. Whitley (2008) puts forward that there is actually limited strategic leeway and scope for actorhood. These limitations are largely due to characteristics of the nature of academia, particularly its emphasis on teaching and research, inherently known for their uncertainties, ambiguities and contradictions. The nature of work requires the input of the organisation’s intellectual workforce, which is difficult to steer, manage and control. In other words, organisational capabilities for strategic action (as visible in many other organisations, particularly firms and businesses) are limited, because of the poor understanding of causal relationships in knowledge production, dissemination and transfer, including a lack of insight in how performances and outcomes should be judged. New knowledge stemming from research not necessarily lends itself easily to “useful” translation or application, neither is it evident that such usefulness is immediately visible, nor is it clear how it should be evaluated. A similar argument pertains the educational function. Higher education institutions are not clueless about relevant knowledge and skills that should be addressed in the curricula, but nevertheless cannot know for sure how relevant and important this knowledge in the broader context of the preparation of the student for work and citizenship. In Whitley’s (2008, 25) own words: “The ability of research organizations to: (i) determine collective objectives; (ii) organize the division of scientific labour; (iii) ensure collaboration and integration of work activities to achieve organizational goals; and (iv) evaluate work performance, is therefore highly constrained in the public sciences. As a result, they are unable to develop distinctive organizational capabilities on the basis of such collective co-ordination and direction”. Whitley claims that at most, university leaders/top management could be seen as portfolio managers and argues that many higher education institutions are actually ‘hollow organisations’, showing limited levels of discretion and high levels of fragmentation.

Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) argue (p. 725) that public sector organizations have increasingly been asked to define their environments and boundaries, e.g. in light of accounting for costs, revenues, assets and results. The latter would be difficult if boundaries would be fuzzy and ambiguous. Apart from such external demands, a strengthened identity (p. 723 and p. 731) furthermore suggests – with reference to the work of Meyer et al. (1987), see also Meyer and Jepperson (2000, 112) on agentic actorhood, stating that “[a]gentic actors at any level are to form clear boundaries and purposes, effectively integrated sovereignty, coherent control systems, and rational technologies” – that organisations having collective resources at their disposition and strong boundaries.

As said, it appears that the literature that speaks to strategic actorhood stresses mainly governance and management issues. The focus on governance is obviously related to the fact that the discussion on stronger agency stems from the ongoing analysis of higher education - state relationships (see e.g. Fumasoli and Stensaker, 2013). That is, organizational boundaries have been primarily observed on the one hand as a function of the degree of separation between university and state, on the other hand as purely formal components of the university (i.e. legal status).

However, universities relate to a broader environment beyond the strategic management and to an increasing number of stakeholders in order to acquire the resources they need. Hence, while financial resources still come mainly from public funding authorities within national higher education systems, human resources, students, but also reputation and legitimacy have to be acquired in several and increasingly competitive arenas (e.g. international rankings).

### *3.2 Handling external relations and acquiring resources*

To be able to carry out the organisation's core processes, resources are needed. In relatively stable environments, higher education institutions can be reasonably relaxed about this. Take the period of growth and massification in many Western European countries in the 1960s and 1970s. Governments were – generally speaking – willing to invest in higher education and with the increasing numbers of students, additional resources were allocated to the higher education institutions (Goedegebuure et al., 1993). As soon as the enrolment patterns stabilised (or even decreased) and the competition for the students intensified, higher education institutions realised that considerable effort would be needed to secure the survival of the organisation.

A similar argument pertains to the second core process: research. Increasingly, since roughly the 1980s, higher education institutions were confronted with the fact that resources were less readily available. First, higher education – using a larger share of public resources than it did earlier – had to compete with other public and semi-public services funded by the government. Also, either resources were allocated on the basis of competition for grants or based on performance indicators. Furthermore, the level of resources was often reduced with the argument that higher education institutions should look for other sources of income. Higher education institutions were expected to engage with private sector organisations and find resources for research projects that would be “directly useful” for business and industry. In order to deal with diminishing resources and increasing competition, boundaries have been expanded in several ways. In Finland and Denmark mergers have been triggered by state authorities. In other countries, e.g. Switzerland, a bottom-up process of reorganizations of the technical disciplines has been orchestrated by the federal authorities. In Norway mergers between universities and colleges have also taken place. These examples show how different actors and forces have affected boundary expansion.

In other cases, institutional leadership has played a central role: this is related to the increasing participation of universities in networks and alliances that have as a primary objective to lobby at the national and international levels in favor of their distinctive category (research university, technological university, university of applied sciences, flagship university, etc.).

However, such strategic moves have affected the academic workforce differently. First, when it comes to strategic alliances, a certain decoupling between organizational and researchers' objectives can be observed, as the distance between rectorate and academics may be perceived as quite high. Second, mergers and restructuring affect tasks, working organization, identities of academics that often resist such transformations. Third, academics have traditionally cooperated and built partnerships for their distinctive research and teaching purposes, thus connecting rather autonomously and individually to sub-units in other universities.

### 3.3 *Fostering and protecting core activities: expansion and porosity of boundaries*

Acknowledging we are painting with broad strokes and that patterns differ by country, the general conclusion of the above developments is that higher education institutions needed to meet the demands of a much more complex, multi-faceted and competitive environment. The research and teaching functions need to be canvassed in organisational structures that are sufficiently robust to survive the competition and leaner times. This realisation has significant impacts on the boundaries of the organisations.

On the one hand, boundary-spanning roles and units create interfaces between the organisation and its environments (see also Clark, 1998 on the extended developmental periphery, but note he looks at this from the perspective of the entrepreneurial university). Admissions, student information, marketing and public relations and alumni relations are all examples of services that were brought to the higher education institution or – if already incorporated – strongly professionalised to take care that the core educational processes continued to run smoothly. Regarding research, we saw the rise of technology and transfer offices, liaison offices, patents and licenses offices, etc. that would support and enable the cross-border cooperation between researchers and private and public organisations. In many respects these units and offices – both in the area of research and teaching – could be seen as functional, for they project and support the core activities of the organisation. More as a side line, it is important to note that many services that once were legitimate internal services (catering, printing, hospitality services, cleaning, etc.) have gradually been outsourced and are now performed by private organisations contracted by the higher education institution.

On the other hand, and somewhat paradoxically, alongside the emergence of boundary-spanning roles in charge of linking the university to its external constituencies, the boundaries for those involved in the core activities have become much more porous. That is, whereas in the olden days the researchers and lecturers could and would respond to external inputs, the closer connections with that external world – created and managed through the boundary-spanning roles – nowadays allow them to leave the organisation (temporarily), to go out in that environment and interact, collaborate with and offer services to external partners. In other words, the boundary-spanning roles on the one hand protect and secure the core activities, whereas they offer on the other hand many opportunities to those involved in the core activities to liaise with the environment (see also Slaughter & Rhoades, 1997). To illustrate this point, we make use of Hughes and Kitson's (2012) report on the "outgoing" nature of UK academics. They surveyed academics and mapped to what extent they had been interacting with an external organisation – i.e. business, industry, public sector, but not other academic institutions – in the past three years. The findings show that academics are involved in many of such interactions, ranging from community-based activities to commercialisation activities to problem-solving activities (in total 27 distinctive interactions were found). Apart from the breadth of interactions, it is interesting to note the magnitude of the interactions. Although the largest percentages were related to 'traditional' external interactions (attending conferences, 87%; giving invited lectures, 65%), large percentages could be found in the area of 'modern' interactions: e.g. 37% contract research; 43% consultancy services; 38% sitting on advisory boards; 49% joint research). The scope and intensity of interactions, led the authors to coin the phrase "the connected university". Deiano et al (2012, 534) conclude: "Knowledge processes that in an earlier period could be controlled inside individual universities, today rely to a much higher extent on cooperation and interactive processes involving a variety of actors across organisations, technological and geographical borders." The corollary – somewhat hidden – is that considerable management capacity is needed to steer and guide these knowledge processes. Or, in the words of Etzkowitz et al. (2000, 316), it "... requires an enhanced capacity for intelligence, monitoring and negotiation with other institutional spheres", as well as it requires the same or other capacity for internal coordination.

In all, the development over the decades shows an interesting picture. Through deeming eyes, it would appear to be a "simple" development towards the establishment of stronger and larger boundary-spanning units. But behind this picture, a lot of activities take place that actually hollow out the boundaries between the higher education institution and its environment. Moreover, to a considerable extent this has also led to the establishment of various organisational subunits at the fringes or just

outside the focal organisation, such as e.g. Technology and Innovation Centres (Goddard et al., 2012), and spin-off companies (sometimes owned by researchers, or them being key shareholders), signifying the increasing expansion of the organisational boundaries and the increasing numbers and types of autonomous parts carrying out core activities of higher education.

### 3.4 A space of coherence: Membership and identity

#### *Membership diversity*

If we look at universities from a membership perspective over time and compare the contemporary university with that of three decades ago, a couple of changes are striking. First, the membership is currently far more heterogeneous. The academic positions have possibly not changed radically, for we still recognize the hierarchy that was evident decades ago. We still have full professor, associate professors, lecturers, etc. in all higher education systems, even though the nomenclature differs significantly from country to country (and even within countries: e.g. some UK institutions stick to the traditional British titles of professor, reader, lecturer, whereas others have implemented US-style titles). That said, minor changes do take place, e.g. through the introduction of e.g. “teaching” and “research” professors. Put differently, whereas the previous hierarchy was mostly driven by rationales of research performance and seniority, nowadays we see more flexibility in that academics can be promoted on the basis of qualities and performances in areas other than research (teaching, third mission). The largest change, however, arguably took place in the area of the support services, both in the domains of the immediate support for the core functions (lab assistants, academic development staff, information and communication technology experts, HRM staff, quality assurance officers, internationalisation officers, student support office, etc.) and in the areas that are somewhat distanced from the core processes (sports facilities, catering, health and safety, etc.).

We do not dispute the apparent necessity that leads higher education to change the workforce composition and create flexible portfolios of professional tasks, but an important corollary of this is that such a highly diverse workforce requires considerable attention from the senior management. Using Mintzberg’s (1983) coordination principles to explain the tension, it implies that higher education institutions to a much lesser extent can rely on the coordination through the standardization of training. That is, the higher education institution cannot leave it solely to their academics to select a new staff member on the basis of his/her academic qualification and specific specialism. Considerable effort is needed at various levels of the organization to explore what kind of human capacity is needed to harness the institution for current and future challenges. Whitchurch and Gordon (2011) particularly refer to the challenge of achieving an overview of the interests of a wide variety of internal parties, and also to develop human resource policies that would enable the higher education institution to pursue their strategies. Maybe the lack of clarity and certainty over deciding on membership is the most significant characteristic of the human resource challenges universities face. It appears that boundaries in this respect have been considerably expanded.

#### *Nature of the contractual relations: length*

The increase of temporary staff in academic position is visible in many countries. This can be explained by the changing funding regimes, which require universities to be more flexible in order to manage externally funded research projects. This flexibility in personnel policies concurs in establishing two different groups of academics: on the one hand a core permanent workforce socialized in the university and contributing to its performance through a shared vision or distinctive competence, on the other hand a “buffer work force to absorb fluctuations in environmental demand” (Pfeffer and Baron 1988, 274 cited in Scott and Davis 2007, 170).

Ryan et al. (2013) report on casual staff in Australia, estimating that currently about 50% of the overall teaching load is now carried out by casual academics. Casual not only refers to the length of the contract (short-term) but also includes reference to (limited to no) employment protection. The authors warn for extensive workforce segregation and increasing quality and reputation risks. “We have a professional, sophisticated, knowledge-based industry that is export-intensive, yet it relies on

employment practices for casual academics that would be unacceptable in most other sectors of the economy” (p. 172). In a similar vein, Coates and Goedegebuure (2010) ask whether higher education institutions have sufficiently thought through the risk involved in having so many ‘temporary’ staff involved in core educational services.

Further exploration of the casualization of the academic workforce, leads us to hypothesize that it also has huge impacts on organizational identification. If half of the workforce has considerable uncertainty about their continuation of their contractual relation with the organization, what does that mean for their levels of organizational identification? Although we cannot give the definitive answer, He and Brown (2013) summarise that organizational identification has the potential of yielding important personal (organisational citizenship, creativity, satisfaction and well-being) and organizational outcomes (organizational performance). It follows – and this is in line with what Coates and Goedegebuure (2010) argue, but see also Perry et al. (2008) – that considerable effort of the senior management is needed to be able to manage the challenges and risks of involving, committing, motivating this crucial part of the institution’s workforce. It appears that, again, organisational boundaries have been expanded to include temporary staff with the encompassing threat of undermining a (coherent) organisational identity. At the same time, the strengthened university leadership is increasingly devoted to develop organizational identity and use it instrumentally to devise overall strategies and manage staff heterogeneity.

#### *Nature of the contractual relations: in or out?*

An increasing number of adjuncts and part-time workers are located at the organizational boundaries, and it sometimes difficult to assess whether they are “inside” or “outside”. Whitchurch (2008) discusses these ‘perimeter’ roles – e.g. in the areas of widening participation, academic development, business incubation, graduate employment. What all these roles have in common is that they are performing tasks that are not core to the traditional functions of higher education institutions: research and teaching, but are apparently increasingly important for the survival of present-day higher education institutions. Dowd and Kaplan (2005) describe boundaryless academics (termed mavericks, when in the initial stages of their career, and connectors in later career stages) as those whose identity is not derived from any employer, that manage their own careers, that are not loyal to any employer, that perceive themselves as mobile, and that are willing to take risks. If we extend such notions to the “new” professionals discussed by Whitchurch (2008), higher education institutions may be confronted with a rather volatile situation in which many employees are mavericks or connectors. For sure, we would agree that having some mavericks and connectors “on board” would be helpful (certainly to balance reliance on a potentially stifling share of probationers and conservationists), but the point is that they leave the management with many uncertainties about the commitment of these types of employees. Arguably, a much larger percentage of employees can now be characterized as being located very close to the organizational boundaries and hence – almost literally – it is only a small step to exchange the current employer for another, with serious losses for the knowledge-intensive institution. This trend has been intensified in Europe with the establishment of the European Research Council, whose grants to individual academics are characterized by mobility, i.e. they belong to the researcher and not to the institution.

Although we do not explore it in detail here, a similar argument can be developed for the increasing mobility of academics across national boundaries (see e.g. Richardson, 2013). With the increasing globalization, opportunities – accepting that boundaries are looming as well – to move to another higher education system are growing, with similar challenges as described above for the “host” higher education institution.

#### **4. Conclusion and discussion**

Different types of boundaries have been analysed, shedding new light on the persisting tension between the organization and its environment. We have seen that boundaries have been designed by policy makers and by university leaders in order to manage their relations with their environments and

foster organizational performance and efficiency. Academics do participate in the constant redefinition of boundaries, however their traditions, norms and identities do not necessarily coincide. Moreover, there are different motivations for both internal and external stakeholders to engage in “boundary work”. In this sense universities are constantly processing, enacting, and modifying their boundaries, resonating with the continuous reconfiguration of actors, processes and structures, as well as ideas. We have illustrated the dynamics of organisational boundaries looking at the boundaries from the perspectives of (a) changing institutional autonomy; (b) the control over resources; (c) the increasing differentiation of internal activities; and (d) the shifts in membership and identity. The exploratory empirical materials signal that boundaries are changing, but – importantly – boundaries may display opposing dynamics of expansion and contraction. For instance, formal boundaries may tighten (re leadership and authority), while membership criteria may expand. Thus pushing and pulling the organisation in different directions. Moreover, even within one particular domain push and pulls may be visible. Whereas indeed it can be argued that universities have become “stronger actors”, at the same time in some of the dimensions in which strength has been gained, we see blurring and softening processes taking place as well.

This leads us to formulating a few (preliminary) questions for further research. First of all, despite some empirical examples, we have seen very few studies that actually investigate how universities work on their boundaries (or how their boundaries are worked on). Second, it appears relevant to ask whether parallel expanding and tightening dynamics are functional or dysfunctional to university functioning. Examining the conditions under which boundary dynamics emerge is pertinent both for theory, policy and practice. While the conditions under which universities operate might be contingent and path dependent, it is reasonable to assume that boundary dynamics follow more general patterns and that mechanisms are available to universities in order to cope with such tensions. Third and finally, a multi-level approach should be used for further research (Brunsson and Olsen 1998, 27). How do boundary tightening and expanding relate to the dynamics at organizational and field level? It may be possible to understand better how convergence and differentiation in higher education systems are at play. Universities tighten and expand their boundaries in relation with the whole perimeter (e.g. in case of merger), with respect to specific sub-units (e.g. collaboration with research groups in other higher education institutions), and at individual level (e.g. academics’ multiple affiliations). It is thus significant to ask how these boundary movements are interrelated and how they affect external interdependences.

## ***References***