

**Stratified University Strategies:  
The Shaping of Institutional Legitimacy in a Global Perspective**

**Abstract**

Globalizing forces have both transformed and made the higher education sector increasingly homogenous. Growing similarities among universities have been attributed to isomorphic pressures to ensure and/or enhance legitimacy by imitating higher education institutions that are perceived as successful internationally, particularly universities that are highly ranked globally (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In this article, we compare the strategic plans of 78 high, low, and unranked universities in 33 countries in 9 regions of the world. In analyzing the plans of these 78 universities, the paper explores patterns of similarity and difference in universities' strategic positioning according to Suchman's (1995) three types of legitimacy—cognitive, pragmatic, and moral. We find evidence of stratified university strategies in a global higher education landscape that varies by institutional status. In offering a corrective to neo-institutional theory, we suggest that patterns of globalization are mediated by status based differences in aspirational behavior (Riesman, 1958) and “old institutional” forces (Stinchcombe, 1997) that contribute to differently situated universities pursuing new paths in seeking to build external legitimacy.

### Introduction

Are universities becoming more alike globally in their strategic plans, their publicly articulated strategies for advancing their position and legitimacy in the future? In the eyes of many scholars, globalization and internationalization have become the dominant narratives for how and why the higher education sector is changing (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014; Maringe & Foskett, 2012). Part of that change is seeing universities as “strategic actors in the [global] knowledge economy” (Deiaco, Hughes, & McKelvey, 2012). More than that, internationalization is often seen as the new benchmark and standard higher education institutions (HEIs) need to achieve in response to globalization (Maringe & Foskett, 2012). Indeed, Knight (1999) distinguishes the terms globalization and internationalization in a way quite relevant to the current study: “globalization can be thought of as the catalyst while internationalization is the response, albeit a response in a proactive way” (p. 14). For many HEIs, being seen as highly ranked internationally could serve as a source of external legitimacy. Such pressure makes it difficult to not take part in the aspirational game of improving institutional standing in global rankings (Foskett, 2012), especially if these institutions are also heavily dependent on external funding and resources (Stensaker & Benner, 2013).

One of the most prominent organizational theories in higher education research, neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), would suggest that the answer to the question we pose is yes, university strategic plans are becoming increasingly alike – reflecting an increased conformity in articulating the purpose and functions of higher education. Isomorphic pressures stemming from a globalized narrative about university excellence would be expected to lead to international patterns of similarity in various aspects of university functioning. Yet, there is also reason to believe that there might be important variations in the strategic plans of

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universities, within systems, and across nations. One of the precursors to neo-institutional theory, Riesman's (1958) concept of the "snake-like procession" suggests that institutions, which are differentially placed in the status structure, engage in distinctive strategic behaviors. Moreover, the "old institutionalism" (Stinchcombe, 1997), to which neo-institutional theory is partly a response, draws attention to internal and external political interests that both shape and lead to important variations in organizational behavior.

Below, we discuss some of the literature on the concepts and issues that surround our focus on strategic plans as public efforts of universities to advance institutional legitimacy. For now, we simply note that in the field of higher education, the matter of global patterns of imitation is one that has not undergone sufficient empirical study. Moreover, the substantive focus of the work we discuss below is relatively limited in scope, and concentrated on institutions and nations that enjoy relatively high status (inter)nationally. Much less attention has been given to institutions and nations occupying less favorable rankings in the race for reputation and international standing.

Hence, to advance the discussion of the impact of globalization on HEIs, there is a need for studies that include a broader range of countries and scope with respect to institutional diversity and profile. With that substantive aim, we undertake a study of 78 universities in 33 countries. Stemming from our overarching interest in how universities try to build legitimacy within a more globalized higher education sector, we investigate the similarities and differences in the legitimacy discourse of university strategic plans across different international standings and reputations.

### **Strategic Plans – A Tool for Building Legitimacy**

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Strategic plans have long been a management tool in higher education (e.g., see Hardy et al., 1984, Drori & Honig, 2013), enjoying substantial swings in popularity (Mintzberg, 1994), and with critical voices raised with respect to their impact (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Toma, 2010). However, in recent decades strategic plans have become increasingly prominent (Toma, 2010), especially in parts of the world such as Europe as a result of the devolution of campus leadership powers in ways that reflect the rise of entrepreneurial universities with strengthened steering cores (Clark, 1998; Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Renewed strategic planning has also increased as a result of increased political and societal pressure for external accountability and of internal academic capitalist moves such as expanding marketing to attract international students (Morphew, Fumasoli, & Stensaker, 2016; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014). In this perspective, strategic plans are ways to balance institutional ambitions and external expectations (Drori & Honig, 2013). While we acknowledge that the ambitions expressed in such plans may not necessarily be implemented in practice, we argue that strategic plans increasingly reflect external pressures for accountability (Fumasoli, et al., 2015) implying that they become a means to build and enhance institutional legitimacy (Birnbaum, 2000).

### **Globalization, Status Inequality and the Battle for Legitimacy**

While reputation and legitimacy can be obtained in a number of ways, global rankings are increasingly seen as a key mediator and distributor of international status and standing. As leading international scholars have noted, these rankings are often perceived as instruments that have the power to influence the higher education field (Kehm & Stensaker, 2009). This highlights the dominance of the idea of “world class” universities and the attempts by many universities to “catch up” to those who seek this status (Hazelkorn, 2015). Just as within countries, national ranking systems of universities, such as US News & World Report, can be a

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force encouraging mimicry (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010; Ehrenberg, 2003; Sauder & Espeland, 2009).

With universities facing status inequality and uncertainty, it is not hard to make the case for why mimetic isomorphic forces might shape an institution's strategic planning. The existence in the normative environment of dominant global metrics and neo-liberal narratives of entrepreneurial success (Clark, 1998; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) that define status and wealth would suggest that universities seeking legitimacy and enhanced standing would likely be influenced by these forces. Moreover, there is some evidence to support the idea that the organizational field of higher education is defined by increasing similarity in universities' public presentations of self, such as in their mission statements and in their webpages (Hartley & Morpew, 2008; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014), marketing the institution to external audiences. The neo-institutional story is the search for external legitimacy as a key driver of imitative behavior (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008).

However, the empirical support for the neo-institutional reading of the situation is at best incomplete. Clearly, imitation as an isomorphic behavior has been observed and documented in higher education (see e.g., Labianca et al., 2001, Hazelkorn, 2015). At the same time, although the powerful interests and state agendas underlying the rankings that help drive these patterns have been analytically unpacked, there is also some evidence of the significance of competing ranking systems defined by more public interest oriented values (Pusser & Marginson, 2013).

Nevertheless, with some important exceptions (e.g., see Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014) there is a relative lack of studies taking into account a broader scope of universities in different settings. The little work that exists suggests, perhaps somewhat surprisingly given the Western locations of most HEIs already studied, that there are interesting variations in the strategic plans

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of universities across regional settings (Morphew et al., 2016). If we find interesting divergences from a global isomorphic pattern in Northern European and North American universities, what might we find by exploring a larger range of more distinctive national and regional settings? Similarly, some work on less prestigious institutions also is suggestive (Stensaker & Benner, 2013). In studying HEIs that are less prestigious and located in resource poor environments, the authors explored the limitations of the dominant entrepreneurial university narrative that is at the core of the internationalizing higher education landscape. In short, a broader study of institutions by status and setting might reveal more differentiated patterns than would be predicted by neo-institutionalists.

### **Will seeking external legitimacy always drive homogenization?**

Consistent with neo-institutional scholars, Deephouse and Suchman (2008, p. 50) have defined legitimacy as cultural support for a given organization in its environment. The belief is that the existence, functions, and actions taken by this organization in relation to the norms defined as legitimate in that environment are desirable, proper, and appropriate. Legitimacy is, in other words, a relational concept, and can as a result not be controlled by the focal organization. It is basically controlled by the environment, although the organization may attempt to manipulate or influence the perceptions of key stakeholders (Scherer et al., 2015). Deephouse and Suchman (2008, p. 61) have also suggested that legitimacy is fundamentally a homogenizing force producing conformity.

In an earlier work, however, Suchman (1995) offered an important variation on the legitimacy theme that offers possibilities for exploring patterns not just of similarity but also of difference. He suggested that the concept of legitimacy contains different dimensions, pointing to

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the fact that “the environment” can be quite complex and that legitimacy can be obtained in a number of ways, including cognitive, pragmatic, and moral forms. The cognitive dimension is very much related to the – perhaps – taken for granted “global” narrative of how modern research universities should position themselves as world class and entrepreneurial, pointing to the potential homogenizing influence of rankings and other similar global artifacts. But the pragmatic and moral dimensions suggest that legitimacy can be secured and obtained in other ways than being designated “world class.” For example, the pragmatic form of legitimacy may be rooted in local contexts and based on the specific social and/or economic commitments of the focal university. The moral form of legitimacy is more rooted in claims about the public value a university may offer society, for the greater good, – although such moral purposes may address both national and/or global agendas.

In short, although these three dimensions of legitimacy are not mutually exclusive (Scherer et al., 2015), they do suggest that the organizational search for legitimacy will not necessarily drive homogenization in the larger organizational field. If some “wannabe” universities (Tuchman, 2009) aspire to move up the global hierarchy and in the process, evoke global cognitive narratives, others may try to build external legitimacy based on their reputation, or through pragmatic or moral narratives that underline the impact and relationships they may have with local industry and in serving the public good in their region. Some universities may even aspire to adapt to all three forms of legitimacy discourse. And such strategic choices may be structured by dimensions of organizational status and location.

### **Organizational status and location as resources for diversification**

Higher education is often seen as a path-dependent and highly institutionalized field (Washington & Zajack, 2005), due both to the inherent characteristics of how knowledge is

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produced in the field, and also to the organizational characteristics of the institutions (Clark, 1983). However, higher education is a diverse organizational field in terms of the age, size, quality, and economic and/or regulatory privileges of institutions occupying it, as well as of the settings in which they are situated, which have distinctive and varying resources. Some of these factors tend to be highly correlated with, and contributory to, organizational status and international ranking (Hazelkorn, 2015; Piazza & Castelucci, 2014; Washington & Zajak, 2005). Globalization, then, is a process that impacts this organizational field that is already highly socially stratified, nationally as well as internationally.

An early, astute observer of this stratification foreshadowed some aspects of neo-institutional theory in identifying differentiated segments of the American higher education status system. In referring to the “snake-like procession” of that system, Riesman (1958) distinguished between the head, body, and tail of the snake. Yet, in contrast to neo-institutionalists, Riesman suggested that each of the snake’s segments is characterized by its own pattern of behavior. Prestigious universities that constitute the head take the lead, and in some sense, are not modeling themselves on other parts of the system; instead, they are “academic tastemakers” competing with small groups of elite peers. Institutions that represent the body of the snake try to follow the lead of the head, but they also look backward with both pride and fear at the tail, and the patterns of their forward movement are such that they are always falling short of and missing the mark. And then, there is what Riesman refers to as the “torpor of the tail” (p. 60) of the snake, institutions that are not “eagerly attentive” to national models. Also of importance in Riesman’s analogy of the “snake-like procession” is how the tail cannot clearly see the head or its direction; and by the time the lower or middle section catch-up, the head has already shifted its trajectory.

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In other words, Riesman suggests that patterns of mimicry vary systematically by the position of the institution. That position partly has to do with the prestige hierarchy in higher education (Friedman 2018). But it also has to do with some institutions, particularly in the tail of the snake, being more driven by “local” constituencies, considerations, allegiances, resources, and models than “cosmopolitan” ones. In other words, the local and regional surroundings of universities can matter in terms of influencing their strategies.

Such a focus on “community ecology” is at the heart of the “old institutionalism” (Freeman & Audia, 2006). Whereas the neo-institutionalists defer to the global and the abstract in conceptualizing the “normative environment,” old institutionalists concentrate on concrete local, state, and regional communities, and on how the reciprocal relationships between the organizations and their communities create distinct values and norms. Attention is drawn to intentional networks and organizing activities and initiatives (Stinchcombe, 1997) that infuse the university’s strategic choices, and where legitimacy – especially for those institutions positioned in the head of the snake - is based on loyalty to the inherent values and norms, with less attention paid to conformity (Friedman 2018).

Some evidence exists of the significance of such specific institutional characteristics. Larger, comprehensive universities that offer a range of educational programs and have a diverse research portfolio employ various legitimizing strategies (Saichaie & Morpew, 2014) that are less likely to be found in smaller, more disciplinary profiled, and more geographically isolated institutions, which have a less resource rich and more specialized environment from which to draw (Stensaker & Benner, 2013). Further, the potential influence of historical and local commitments to public purposes among U.S. land grant universities can also affect the

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legitimacy discourse of their strategic ambitions (Morphew et al., 2016) that are more related to exploring strategic niches and responsibilities (Rhoades, 2007).

### **Methods**

Our research question was as follows: What are the various forms of legitimacy in university strategic plans across the rankings? Our methods for exploring the similarities and differences of strategic plans by institutional status (i.e., global rankings) necessitated a cross-sectional and comparative design. With regard to our cross-section of time, given our focus on internationalization, it is important to specify that the strategic plans we studied were developed either during or prior to 2017.

Our comparative case study design was constructed to analyze patterns according to vertical and horizontal stratification among universities. The vertical dimension refers to comparisons by the international standing of universities. For the purposes of this article, we use global university rankings as a proxy measure for international status. A university's ranking is highly related to historical reputational characteristics (Bowman & Bastedo, 2011) such that reputation can be operationalized as ranking, especially for those institutions at the top (Bowman & Bastedo, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2015).

In identifying universities' rankings, we considered three global ranking systems: The Academic Ranking of World Universities—ARWU 2016 (also known as Shanghai Jiao Tong ranking); the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2016/2017 (THE); and the QS World University Rankings 2016/2017 (QS). These systems were utilized because, despite ample criticism (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Dill & Soo, 2005; Ioannidis et al., 2007), they represent three of the most well known, publicized, and accepted instruments of global institutional status appraisal.

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Following Riesman's (1958) metaphor of the "snake-like procession," we focused on three categories of universities—highly ranked, medium-low ranked, and unranked. Highly ranked universities are defined here as those that appear among the top 200 in at least one of the three ranking systems; in Riesman's terms, they are the head of the snake. Medium-low ranked universities are defined as those that are listed in at least one of the three rankings anywhere below the 200th place; they are the body of the snake. The unranked universities are those that are not listed in any of the three rankings; they are the tail of the snake. Although institutions that fall near the cut-off points could be classified in the lower category, we were most interested in commonalities over any extraneous differences within categories. As such, the weight of the borderline institutions in identifying common themes was reduced.

The horizontal dimension of stratification on which we made comparisons refers to global regions. Our aim was to achieve global coverage, focusing on universities in nine regions that are inclusive of each of the world's six major inhabited continents. After reviewing organizational research on the significance of local ecology (Freeman & Audia, 2006), and higher education studies on the significance of local, national, and regional contexts (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002), we identified regions with similarities in the nature of their higher education systems and institutions—East Asia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, North America (excluding Mexico), Oceania, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

### **Data and Sample**

The data for this study were the institutions' strategic plans since they express university ambitions. These were downloaded from institutional websites (in a handful of cases, the

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institutions lacked strategic plans, per se, so we analyzed the discourse on their websites about the university's ambitions and).

In drawing a sample of universities for the study we aimed, where possible, to include institutions from each of the three status groups—high, medium-low, and unranked—in each of the regions of the world we considered. As shown in Table 1, within each region we also sought to compose a status, geographical, and governance mix of institutions. For example, we included countries with tight ministerial control over higher education (Russia, China, Scandinavia) alongside countries with more decentralized systems (US, Australia). Finally, although our primary focus was on status and geographic location, we also aimed for a balanced sample of universities in terms of ownership (public or private) and type (research, comprehensive, technical).

[Insert Table 1]

### **Data Analysis**

Data were collected and analyzed by an international team of graduate students and professors. The team reflects our interest in having broad international participation not only in our data but also in our research team, which included people from six different nations and with considerable experience in the regions included in the study. The team met once every other week for a total of 16 weeks to collect and analyze the data for this study. The initial phase of the study included establishing a list of countries, and then a list of institutions, from each region. Where possible, upon identifying for each country a private (ranked/unranked) and public (ranked/unranked) institution, each researcher was assigned to analyze the strategic plans by country.

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The institutional documentation recovered from each institution's website was coded using a variety of first and second cycle methods (Saldaña, 2016). The first cycle codes were descriptive, looking for patterns that emerged from the strategic plans. After each researcher coded the information collected from pilot institutions, the findings were shared and discussed among the group. We then moved to theoretical codes based on Suchman's (1995) conceptual framework of organizational legitimacy, described below. Those second cycle codes were worked through in team meetings in which strategic plans and codes were discussed to sharpen and elaborate the coding of the legitimacy narratives. In addition, we looked for patterns by institutional status and geographical region, following the theoretical underpinnings of the study, as further discussed below. Given the exploratory nature of the study, despite entering the field with some a priori codes, our analytical strategy also involved making both constant and theoretical comparisons to understand the similarities and differences of each institution by status and region (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Suchman's (1995) framework guided the analysis of the plans as each was coded by the dimensions of the framework—cognitive, pragmatic, and moral. We took the “cognitive” code to refer to a global, neo-liberal, and academic capitalist narrative (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) about universities, a narrative that includes a focus on universities as independent entities, on excellence, on status and being seen as a leading, global university, on engaging in strategic partnerships with leading universities in the dominant national systems, and on STEM fields (Deschamps & Lee, 2015). Thus, references to “world class” universities and/or to rankings (whether of being or seeking a high ranking), featuring partnerships with prestigious universities in the U.S., U.K., and Europe, foregrounding projects and prominence in STEM fields, were all taken as evidence of a neo-liberal, cognitive, global narrative. We took the

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“pragmatic” code to refer to a locally focused narrative that is specific in nature, a narrative that includes a focus on local industry or regional needs more than on the global, on particular local strategies or projects or needs, and on teaching and service, especially in relation to local students, businesses, locales, and communities. The “moral” code was split into two forms; a welfare state narrative reflecting the national boundaries to which the university is embedded and the specific societal challenges and issues that might be present in some countries, and a generic public good narrative that focus on solving grand challenges of global interest in health, safety, education, and energy, for instance. Thus, public roles, responsibilities and/or benefits of universities were analyzed according to whether they addressed national and/or global collective needs.

The analysis was framed according to our overall question of how institutions will adapt to the pressure to internationalize in response to globalization. Two theoretical frameworks informed our working propositions. On the one hand, neo-institutional theory would suggest that the pressure of globalization is difficult to resist for any university and that universities in general, regardless of their status or location, will signal strategic ambitions of becoming “world class” and pursue a cognitive legitimation strategy. On the other hand, Riesman’s (1969) conceptualization of the “snakelike procession,” combined with “old institutional” theory would suggest that there will be variations by institutional status and reputation. One set of variations would stem from the highly stratified nature of the higher education sector—the head, body, and tail of the snake are expected in these conditions to move differently. The highly, and especially, the medium-low ranked universities would be expected to be more subject to and likely to articulate the cognitive neo-liberal narrative of globalization. The highly ranked “top-elite” institutions are also expected to reflect their own identity and status, which may or may not

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mirror global trends (Friedman, 2018). By contrast, the unranked institutions are not in the game, and therefore are less likely to articulate this narrative. Moreover, the unranked universities are likely to be more subject to internal, old institutional pressures, and to various local, state, and national stakeholders. The two theoretical frameworks should not be seen as mutually exclusive, especially since they can be said to address different parts of the snake-like procession, opening up for more agentic innovative strategies at the head and tail, while more emulative strategies are expected by the body.

Neo-institutional theory, then, would lead us to expect a globally dominant narrative that overrides status and geographical differences. By contrast, Riesen and old institutional theory would lead us to expect that globalizing influences, as they are reflected in university legitimacy discourses in their strategic plans, are mediated by institutional status, inherent values, and strong institutional identities.

### **Findings: International Status and Legitimacy Discourses**

In presenting the findings on similarities and differences in the strategic plans and legitimacy discourses of universities with different statuses, we organize our results by the three categories of institutional status—highly ranked, medium-low ranked, and unranked. Findings reveal different aspects of legitimacy are emphasized based on the three categories as shown in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2]

#### **Highly Ranked Institutions**

**Cognitive.** Highly ranked institutions share a prevailing, broad vision that invokes a cognitive discourse of legitimacy, evoking the neo-liberal global narrative of the world-class university. The rankings and ambitions of the universities are consistently and prominently articulated. Almost all of the highly ranked universities position themselves as established

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universities within their regions and as thriving within global rankings. Highly ranked institutions achieve collaborations primarily through faculty. In their strategic plans, these institutions link their cognitive goals with the talents of their distinguished faculty. The majority of the top ranked institutions emphasize that they are host to the world's most distinguished faculty as indicated by their numbers of Nobel laureates and Pulitzer Prize winners amongst other prestigious awards.

Another consistent pattern in the legitimacy discourse of the highly ranked universities is that they emphasize strong Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) programs. Although there are some subtle differences in the particulars, the general pattern is to emphasize STEM. Most highly ranked institutions tend to emphasize that their research agenda prioritizes "pure scientific questions." For instance an institution in Hong Kong offers several degrees within the science fields to create "high-impact and leading-edge research within and across disciplines." Similarly, a university in Japan aiming to promote scientific research wants students to "utilize the outstanding research capabilities that the University possesses in every field." An exception was found in Chile, where a university states one specific strategy to "value arts and humanities...[as a response] to the shared diagnosis in the academic community that there is an imbalance in relation to the recognition that is made of scientific technological activity."

In addition to STEM, another striking contrast to the medium-low and unranked institutions is that highly ranked institutions emphasize interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary research. A top ranked institution from China stresses that STEM and interdisciplinary research are their academic priorities. Such universal fields may reflect the homogenizing ambitions of being world-class. For instance, top ranked European universities tend to stress that their

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longevity lies in the development of “cross-disciplinary cooperation” and that “strengthening collaborations worldwide” (UK) are key to maintaining their global appeal and relevance. A top university from the US points out that it is through the collaborative efforts of their diverse faculty and students that they create interdisciplinary research. Such practice enables the university to be a “catalyst for the movement of talent worldwide.” Similarly, an institution in Colombia also identifies interdisciplinarity as “a means to add value and to innovate.” In Canada, to be among the world’s best universities, an institution focuses its efforts in “promoting interdisciplinary, interdepartmental and interdivisional collaborations.”

Along with interdisciplinarity, international collaboration is featured as key towards being a global top-tier university. In China, highly ranked institutions collaborate with international partners to advance their science, education and cultural agendas. One such institution states that it “needs to increase the number of international faculty, students and native students with international experience and improve research output based on international collaboration.” Such international research collaborations often lead to presentations at academic conferences and the securing of competitive international research funds. For instance, a leading institution in Russia showcases the total number of presentations that faculty and students, from each discipline, have delivered at international conferences. Others, such as an institution in Germany, go even further by leading and housing international research networks, consortia, and alliances. Building collaborations was also cited by a university in Saudi Arabia which sought “[b]uilding bridges among [university] constituencies and externally with local and international groups.” These collaborations are signaled as being valued by institutions that wish to foster “a culture and climate that seeks, welcomes, and advances talented minds from diverse backgrounds” (Qatar).

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Another institution in Chile included as a part of its internationalization strategy a desire to “[p]osition ourselves as a reference in the formation of people and research in the region, enhancing our presence and interaction with major university actors and research centers.” A US university recognizes that their strong regional positioning is what enabled their expansion to operating overseas branch campuses, and thus, increasing their global networks. In Canada, in an effort to manage shifts in public policy and governmental resource supports and remain regionally competitive, a top ranked institution partnered with other top research centers and universities to improve their position. They also focused on applying innovation globally so as to be leading pioneers in specific fields of study. In another instance, a leading university from Australia placed an emphasis on embedding “innovation and entrepreneurship into research” so as to bring together “industry, small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs), entrepreneurs, investors and policy-makers from around the world” to their university for further collaborations. The cognitive narrative also involves foregrounding strategic partnerships with other highly ranked institutions in dominant higher education systems internationally. For instance, the plan of a leading university in Singapore emphasized global alliances with several other world-renowned institutions such as a US Ivy League and leading UK HEIs. Such partnerships allow the institution to maintain their “growing reputation as a premier tertiary institution.” It is through such partnerships that they provide students with “the world’s finest professors” and “educate citizens of the world” (Singapore). Others sought prestige by seeking partners in new markets. One such university in the UK stated their commitment when it comes to collaboration was to create and sustain “partnerships with allied institutions in emerging areas of the world.” Another institution places extensive emphasis on global collaborations by stating that it is a “prerequisite for enabling the university to carry on world-leading research” (Sweden). That

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university maintains international partnerships with other top ranked institutions in every continent to meet research goals, provide students and faculty greater global access and a sustained comprehensive educational environment.

**Moral.** Yet, there are some examples of moral legitimacy discourses being articulated among the highly-ranked. Such references are sometimes in the form of short clauses embedded in a cognitive narrative. For instance, a highly-ranked university from Denmark states that its vision is to be, “An internationally recognized multi-disciplinary university with emphasis on basic research to find solutions to global challenges.” As demonstrated here, the “public” in this case is actually a global audience. Similarly, one of Japan’s leading institutions’ plans indicated that its “aim [is] to be a world-class platform for research and education, contributing to human knowledge in partnership with other leading global universities”; and “to nurture global leaders with a strong sense of public responsibility.” One institution in Singapore stated its mission as being, “a leading global university centered in Asia, influencing the future” and their impetus for global collaborations are fueled by the desire for the “free exchange of ideas, pluralism, and respect for diversity.” In contrast, there is little mention of the local community context, with a few exceptions. All these examples illustrate a moral obligation beyond national borders. However, moral obligations sometimes reflected national welfare state needs, such as when a university in Israel states as a vision “the creation of knowledge and the development of human capital and leadership, for the advancement of the State of Israel”. A US institution states as its priority the “economic and social benefit of the local...community” with a particular emphasis on progressing minority and indigenous populations. Some universities seems to go for a “think global – act local” strategy. One of the most distinctive variations along these lines is a highly ranked institution in Mexico that articulated in its plan a strategy for “the promotion of human

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development, the full and equal enjoyment of all fundamental rights and freedoms, promoting respect for personal dignity to ensure harmony and plurality...for the benefit of training and exercise of citizenship.” A university in the UK had extensive plans for creating a more environmentally conscious and “sustainable future.” They stated explicit goals of reducing their carbon footprint, instituting campus-wide recycling initiatives and green transportation options for their faculty and students. Another UK institution positioned itself as a “great civic university” and articulated their intention to contribute both to their region and to the world in a “socially responsible” way.

There was little evidence in highly ranked institutions of any specific, pragmatic discourse. The overriding emphasis was on cognitive narratives, with occasional underlying invocations of moral narratives - mostly linked to global terms.

### **Medium-low Ranked Institutions**

**Cognitive.** While the highly-ranked institutions prominently featured their accomplishments in at least one of the global rankings, medium-low ranked institutions emphasized global rankings as an aspirational goal. Also, ensuring a top 100-place in the global rankings was highlighted as a strategic aim supported by several measures such as international student and staff numbers, outgoing exchange students, English medium programs, international partnerships and agreements, and publication indexes. For example, a Mexican institution had the goal to improve its research output with the key performance indicator measuring their advancement being their institution’s “overall position in the QS World University Ranking.” Similarly an institution in China indicated that within “the next five years, [we] intend to establish ten English-medium master programmes; and to make the ratio of international students in the campus to reach 15%.” They emphasized internationalization with the aim to “become a

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world-renowned university within 10 years and a world-class university in the mid 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

A university in Jordan set a “quest for global recognition...transforming into a university with international stature.”

Some differences among medium-low ranked institutions can also be seen through the tools employed for building international reputations, globally and regionally. Institutional networks were particularly emphasized. For one medium-low ranked institution, it was “key to seek international alliances with prestigious universities, through the Groups and Associations in that the [name of the university] has already integrated (Coimbra Group, Grupo Tordesillas, Ibero-American Graduate University Association (AUIP), European University Association (UAE), International Association of Universities (IAU), etc.) or new networks are in the process of being incorporated” (Spain). In a similar fashion, an institution in Costa Rica declares its goal to “establish international cooperation and exchange networks that consolidate the university's position in the international academic scene.”

**Cognitive/Pragmatic.** Like the highly ranked, the medium-low ranked institutions also invoked a cognitive narrative but, somewhat differently, they also included a more pragmatic narrative. In contrast to highly ranked HEIs' emphasis on global relevance, the major similarity among medium-low ranked institutions was situating their ambitions within the region. For instance, a university in Australia sought to “enhance [their] engagement with the Asia-Pacific region, and to consolidate [their] reputation as one of [country's] most Asian-engaged universities.” They also included that they recognized the “[university's] commitment to engagement with the Asia-Pacific region through most areas of the University's research and teaching.” Similarly, a South African university indicated their intention to promote themselves “as a vibrant and supportive intellectual environment that attracts and connects people from all

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over the world and advances the status and distinctiveness of scholarship in Africa.” In India and in Morocco, medium-low ranked institutions’ goals emphasized research in specialized scientific disciplines to support “regional development” goals. A Brazilian university strategized focusing their mobility programs and agreements on Latin America and the Americas in general. For medium-low ranked institutions generally, internationalization was linked to meeting the needs of the region. As opposed to institutions that were more highly positioned regionally, medium-lower ranked institutions showed ambitions of becoming well positioned in both the global and regional contexts. An example from Egypt showed an institution trying to establish itself as the “destination of choice in Egypt and the Middle East for students and faculty from around the world” and to become “Egypt’s global university.” Overall, however, the extent of regionalism as a strategy varied depending on the level of saturation of ranked institutions within the region.

**Cognitive/Moral/Pragmatic.** Nation building among the medium-low ranked was also emphasized and linked to the cognitive, moral, and pragmatic dimensions, which, in this case, are closely interlinked. Some strategic aims related to national development within the cognitive and pragmatic discourses are evident in a statement by a Russian institution: “The groundbreaking cutting-edge research conducted by the university, the high level of qualified personnel training rooted in the research, as well as the innovative developments, will ensure the growth of the country’s competitiveness in the areas of economic modernization.” A Malaysian university focused on the pragmatic and moral dimensions by “empowering students to enhance future leadership talents to build a human capital that is holistic and sensitive to social issues and global changes in the process of nation building.” In Indonesia, one institution established its goals in line with the country’s Pancasila ideology (Esposito, 2018) and set as its mission “[t]o carry out education, research and community service as well as [the] preservation and

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development of knowledge that is excellent and useful for society.” Universities in Latin America also displayed constant emphasis on national development within a pragmatic and moral discourse, for example, a Chilean institution stated as a strategy “[e]nsure training with social responsibility, in line with the country's development strategy.”

Aside from producing human capital, advancing university management systems and investing in facilities are also listed by medium-low ranked institutions as goals, which can be viewed as a pragmatic priority. An institution in Costa Rica established a strategy in its plan the “[i]ntegration of university activities with the main development needs of the country.” In another instance, a university in Saudi Arabia stated how “provid[ing] our people and our research partners the opportunity to conduct experimental research in an empowering environment with exceptional facilities, equipment, and support staff” is the best path to allow them to grow and support nearby regions. One institution from the US showed subtle differences in this regard by placing an emphasis on their local community and not the region by stating that they aimed to impact the “lives of people in [state’s name].”

### **Unranked Institutions**

**Moral.** Like the preceding groups, unranked institutions also invoked a moral narrative, but there was almost no invocation of cognitive values. Global rankings were not usually mentioned (except one case in Turkey). In one Nigerian case, a cognitive value was closely coupled with the moral dimension, as that HEI stated the desire to be “the university of first choice and the nation’s pride.”

More commonly, there were many moral accounts stemming from public good statements that sought to “strive for greater social commitment in various forms” (Sweden), to “promote social development, cultural prosperity” (China), to dedicate themselves to “scientific,

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social, and ethical values” (Turkey), to emphasize their “sensitivity and responsiveness to societal needs and the right of every person to knowledge” (Kenya), or for the “protection of natural resources and the environment [as] are our major considerations” (Japan). In the US, non-ranked institutions strove to support those who serve their community by focusing their programs on life-long learners who will continue to give back.

**Pragmatic.** The unranked institutions generally also valued internationalization but for different purposes. The unranked focused much more on students within the context of internationalization and globalization. Almost half of the unranked institutions discussed internationalization as a way of offering their students global experiences through a variety of different partnerships and mobility programs. One Brazilian university specifically stated that increasing their numbers exchanges among students and faculty, as well as an increase in the number of partnerships with international universities, was a key goal. Some of the unranked HEIs focused on positioning themselves internationally and used internationalization as a benchmark for recognition and standardization with frequent mention of “high quality education of international standards” (South Africa), a focus on “developing new programs through international standards” (Turkey), and a mission “[t]o provide and develop international-standard education” (Indonesia). This focus on meeting international standards may be seen as a way of to gain recognition so that these institutions could foster new partnerships in the global market. Some of the universities gave very specific examples of how they would like to internationalize their institutions, through “participation in international conferences” (Morocco), “recruitment of Chinese teachers” (Kenya), and “focus[ing] on international student recruitment” (Turkey). In terms of collaboration with partner institutions, one distinctive feature of unranked universities is an openness to partner with other domestic institutions. For example, an institution in Norway

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discussed their intention to “increase collaboration with [names of two Norwegian peer institutions status-wise], particularly developing the subject areas of education, health and welfare.” Similarly, an Indian institution highlighted its mission to advance knowledge for the “betterment of society” and that they would serve as a “centre for fostering co-operation and exchange of ideas” by organizing “exchange programmes with other institutions of repute in India”.

Compared to the other categories, unranked institutions showed the most evidence of pragmatism, with the major trend being a focus on infrastructure, and promotion of national or regional development, such as in “strengthen[ing] the sector that links the University with High Schools of the region” (Italy), “communicat[ing] better who we are and promot[ing] awareness of ourselves in the area around the university” (Italy), and “be[ing] the choice provider [in country] of education and training” (Singapore). An unranked institution from Malaysia stated that their objective was to produce well-rounded graduates who are creative and innovative with the potential to become leaders of industry and the nation. Similarly, an unranked university in Thailand had a strategic initiative of “producing graduates with the requisite knowledge and moral values to form the backbone of the nation both in the present and in the years ahead.”

Overall, there is considerable variety among the unranked institutions and, despite shared intentions of focusing on internationalization and partnerships to benefit their stakeholders, achieving greater international exposure in terms of global rankings seems less of a goal as opposed to the other categories. This may be because most of these universities are young (established in 1960 or later with a handful of exceptions) and are still trying to establish themselves locally, regionally, and nationally. Their youth and unranked status likely allows them the freedom to explore and then determine what they want their niches to be, whether it be

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a focus on humanities (Italy); the environment (Japan); social development (Sweden); or the industrial sector (Turkey).

### **Similarities and Differences Between Universities across Institutional Rankings**

Across ranked categories, a clear pattern of aspirational emulation emerged (unranked towards medium-low ranked; medium-low ranked towards high ranked), and yet the unranked still did not closely resemble the highly ranked. As shown in Figure 1, the themes suggest a “snake-like procession” (Riesman, 1958): The dominant themes among the highly ranked emphasized global rankings, inherent status, regional positioning, and international collaboration, whereas the medium-low ranked highlighted their ambitions towards the achievements of the highly ranked. For example, while the highly ranked touted their global rankings and regional positioning, the medium-low ranked emphasized these as future aspirations. Whereas the highly ranked emphasized their global reach in international collaborations, the medium-low ranked situated themselves within existing international networks. The unranked, on the other hand, discussed internationalization the rhetoric of global standards. They also had aspirations that followed the medium-low ranked. While the medium-low ranked discussed nation building in broad terms, the unranked tended to focus on strengthening concrete areas such as infrastructure. The unranked tended to avoid goals of becoming globally ranked. Just as described by Riesman, the snakelike diagram also represents the role of the institutions in the head as defining the course and their inability to see what is happening at the end of the procession; likewise, while the tail may be able to see the direction towards where the top institutions are headed, they are either not in a position to follow suit, or trying to find alternative directions.

[Insert Figure 1]

**Discussion: How Do Institutions Try to Build Legitimacy in the Era of Globalization?**

The starting point for our study has been to investigate the assumption that globalization influences higher education institutions regardless of their status across geographical locations. Hence, we developed expectations that status matters as to how institutions try to build legitimacy as expressed in their strategic plans. As the findings show, the general expectation that cognitive strategies would dominate the institutional strategies and the ways institutions try to build legitimacy is not confirmed. In accordance with one of our alternative expectations, we have found that cognitive strategies dominate among institutions that are highly ranked in global ranking systems, but also that some of the very highly ranked institutions try to carve out strategies based on moral legitimacy claims tightly interwoven with their reputations or inherent identities, indicating a strong commitment to public good purposes of solving global grand challenges associated with food security, health, and sustainability issues, etc. Still, highly ranked institutions tend to display strategies that are often associated with the global script of the “world class university” (Salmi, 2009), emphasizing excellence and competition, prioritizing STEM subjects, and promoting strategies influenced by the identified need to attract high quality students and staff.

In accordance with our expectations, our findings also showed that unranked institutions displayed strategies closely associated with moral and pragmatic forms of building legitimacy. Among unranked institutions, we found strategies that were more oriented towards national and local needs, and that were often quite explicit about how they intended to develop their collaborations with industry, public sector organizations, and other local actors. While one could argue that these strategies to build legitimacy are more of a necessity for the unranked (Stensaker & Benner, 2013) – that they are ‘forced’ to become pragmatic due to a lack of viable

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alternatives, and that they emphasize their local public good mission (moral) only as a reflection of their current status and position – it is also possible to argue that these institutions do have more ‘freedom’ from globalized narratives. For those institutions that are medium-low ranked, our results show that they opt for a more diverse approach on how to build legitimacy, where cognitive, moral and pragmatic dimensions are sometimes highlighted in parallel. It is tempting to suggest that this rather ambiguous strategy reflects their ambiguous strategic position; they have some status as ranked institutions and are expected to be part of the internationalization race while at the same time they share a number of characteristics with unranked institutions, including their local embedding and more limited academic and economic resources.

Our study suggests that the globalization narrative certainly has limitations, and that institutional status, reputation, and local trajectory mediates the ways institutions try to build and strengthen legitimacy in the era of globalization. Clearly, some universities are bucking the trend and are seeking to build institutional legitimacy in ways other than through reflecting cognitive claims and beliefs, a finding that questions the idea that legitimacy is all about conformity. For those institutions that lack the status associated with being globally ranked, or those that are ranked the middle or bottom of the pack, moral and pragmatic strategies are more dominant. On the one hand this can be said to reflect more uncertainty concerning their futures (Hardy et al., 1984; Fumasoli et al., 2015), while on the other hand this demonstrates they can potentially maintain institutional diversity that rankings often are accused of destroying (Hazelkorn, 2015). Even for some highly ranked institutions, examples can be found of universities which are prompted by their reputations and identities to build profiles that seem to extend existing globalized ideas of what it means to be a “world-class university.” Hence, contrary to the idea of legitimacy driving conformity, while acknowledging that cognitive, moral, and pragmatic forms

of building legitimacy should not be seen as mutually exclusive (Piazza & Castelucci, 2014), we contend that the different forms of legitimacy offer possibilities for pursuing strategic niches (Rhoades, 2007), producing more diversity within the global higher education landscape.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

While we acknowledge that analyzing strategic plans does not necessarily reflect actual institutional behavior and outcomes, we maintain that strategic plans are important sources for understanding how higher education institutions currently try to build legitimacy. Based on our analysis we can conclude that globalization indeed is a force that is mediated by institutional status, and responses to it are highly influenced by geographic, cultural, and institutional path-dependency. While high status universities are more inclined to reflect and adapt to the globalization narrative and apply cognitive legitimation strategies, institutions with lower or unranked status display a tendency for highlighting more moral and pragmatic forms of building legitimacy. However, in general, high, medium-low, and unranked status institutions tend to draw upon a range of legitimizing arguments, and as such, we have demonstrated that even in the era of globalization, institutions may have a variety of ways to develop legitimacy, although we acknowledge that for those institutions with less status, the ‘freedom’ to choose a legitimation strategy imply options they can hardly reject.

While our study has not had a focus on global rankings per se – we only used global rankings as a proxy measure for institutional status – some implications of our study may be linked to the ranking phenomenon. The fact that we found more cognitive legitimation strategies applied by ranked institutions than by unranked institutions is an indication of how rankings impact institutional behavior (Hazelkorn, 2015). The fact that many rankings are in the process of expanding their coverage of institutions outside the current ranking limits may imply that

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more institutions will adapt cognitive legitimation strategies in the future, potentially reducing room for institutions to strategically maneuver . At the same time, it is also possible that the tendency applied by some high-ranked institutions to emphasize moral legitimation strategies alongside cognitive ones is a sign of a transforming globalization narrative where public good aspects are more prioritized than in the past. Whether this coming together of cognitive and moral legitimacy strategies is a mostly symbolic move or a more novel way for high status institutions to further differentiate themselves is a question for further researchers to explore.

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