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Ideologies shaping university competition

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual study explores the dominant ideologies influencing the economic governance of higher education (HE) and shaping competition within the sector and among universities. It delineates and contrasts four key ideological positions – neoliberalism, managerialism, shareholderism, and stakeholderism – and outlines four corresponding types of university competition: signaling, intraorganizational, interorganizational, and priority competition. The paper contributes to the discourse on university competition as a macro trend in HE by examining its ideological underpinnings. Notably, it observes that real-life outcomes often diverge from the idealized visions these ideologies promote. The study concludes by illustrating how these four types of competition coexist in HE and discussing how shifts in coordination or decision-making mechanisms can influence which ideology gains prominence in shaping competition.

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Introduction

Competition plays a significant role in the governance and management of higher education (HE; Hart and Rodgers 2023; Marginson 2006). Creating and increasing competition is believed to improve various aspects of the HE sectors at all levels, from national systems to individual universities and smaller academic units – by promoting efficiency, quality, and innovation (Krücken 2019). For ministries of education and leaders of HE institutions (HEIs), competition represents, depending on one's position and associated interests, a governance instrument, strategic tool, and purpose (Madsen 2021; Musselin 2018).

In this paper, we examine the ideological underpinnings of university competition, which are pivotal to understanding the deeper motivations and dynamics shaping modern HEIs' competitive behaviors. More precisely, we are interested in how salient economics and business-related ideologies – neoliberalism, managerialism, shareholderism, and stakeholderism – shape university competition.

In the social sciences, ideologies are considered structured systems of beliefs, values, and ideas that form distinct worldviews and outline the ideal society (Lodge 1975). They describe the fundamental principles of how economic, political, and social orders should be established (Enteman 1993). Although 'ideology is the most elusive concept in the social science' (McLellan 1995: viii), different ideologies provide unique lenses to understand and shape society (Freeden 1996; Heywood 2017). Ideology is a particularly useful concept in examining power structures and the concealed 'interests of those who profit from the prevalent material practices' (Delmestri

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2009, 100). Thus, ideology encompasses exercising, explaining, and justifying authority (Bendix 1956) and links material life, its symbolic constructions (Friedland and Alford 1991), and power interests in the study of the governance and management of organizations, including publicly funded universities.

Although ideology is not a new concept in HE studies, the term is often used to illustrate the business interests and capitalistic underpinnings of government reforms, macro-level trends, and meso-level transformations in universities. Umbrella terms, such as new public management (NPM; Musselin 2018), neoliberal university (Rhodes, Wright, and Pullen 2018), academic capitalism (Slaughter and Leslie 2001), marketization (Alajoutsijärvi, Alon, and Pinheiro 2021), and market university (Berman 2007), are frequently used to conceptualize the hybridized governance logics of modern universities and the mixing of traditional academic logics (e.g. collegiality and collaboration) with ubiquitous, business-motivated, and competition-emphasizing agendas (Kettunen et al. 2022). Less systematic attention has been paid to the ideological level (for notable exceptions, see Shepherd 2018) and the analytical value of ideology in unpacking universities' transformation into competitive actors based on belief systems related to (macro-level) power structures and social arrangements (Rabovsky and Rutherford 2016).

Ideologies influence university competition in at least two ways. First, the recommendations of transnational organizations (e.g. the EU and OECD) and the HE policies of nation-states are largely shaped by dominant ideologies. Second, ideologies directly affect university governance through management theories and fashions (Gibson and Tesone 2001). By examining the core premises of these ideologies, we can reveal the power dynamics and identify the groups that either benefit from or are disadvantaged by specific policy changes – whether formally organized or not, these groups share common interests. Different forms of competition help illustrate how HE systems and institutions are dominated by particular interest groups.

In this conceptual paper, we identify and compare the key ideologies – neoliberalism, managerialism, shareholderism, and stakeholderism – that shape economic governance and competition in HE. We outline four types of university competition that emerge from these ideologies: signaling, intraorganizational, interorganizational, and priority competition. The paper concludes by discussing how these types of competition coexist in HE and how shifts in coordination (market vs. management) or decision-making (top-down vs. bottom-up) can influence the dominance of particular ideologies in organizing competition.

Competition in higher education

Competition in contemporary HE has become such a pervasive phenomenon that envisioning a university or an academic community unexposed to any kind of competitive pressure seems an improbable task. In contrast, universities worldwide are vying for reputation, financial resources, student enrollments, academic rankings, and accreditations. This competition extends beyond institutions to include nation-states competing to build world-class universities (Alajoutsijärvi, Kettunen, and Sohlo 2018; Alajoutsijärvi, Kettunen, and Siltaoja 2022; Alajoutsijärvi, Juusola, and Kettunen 2023) and individuals striving for reputation and career opportunities (Musselin 2018). Hence, the term 'competition' can appear rather vague, and its widespread use often obscures the specific conditions under which universities actually compete (Bloch and Mitterle 2017).

This paper relies on Simmel's (2008) classical sociology of competition, which identifies a type of competition in which a *third party* determines the winner. Indeed, in HE, competition typically arises when two or more universities in the same field pursue conflicting objectives, with a third party, such as a student-customer or funder, controlling the outcome (Easton and Araujo 1992). Under these circumstances, the actors compete for something that cannot be shared (zero-sum game), but one party's gain directly leads to the other's loss (Simmel 2008). Consequently, this type of competition is essentially a struggle to win the favor of that third party, whose interests are then served by fostering competition among institutions (Arora-Jonsson et al. 2021; Kettunen et al. 2022; Werron 2015).

Furthermore, as stated by Musselin (2018), government policies implemented since the 1980s in HE have also played significant roles in transforming universities into competitors by empowering university leaders to become active proponents of this type of zero-sum game.

Ideology provides a valuable tool for studying competition in HE because it helps uncover the underlying beliefs, values, and power dynamics that shape how competition is perceived, structured, and enacted in this sector. In other words, studying the ideological foundations of university competition can shed light on the above-described third-party dynamics and the guiding principles according to which the interests of these third-party actors in HE (such as ministries of HE, funding agencies, students) are determined. Thereby, ideology may help explain the different underlying economic and managerial beliefs driving the different competitive practices to which universities are exposed.

Ideologies in higher education governance

The concept of ideology is well-established in the study of HE policy and governance. Previous literature identifies several ideologies, particularly neoliberalism, managerialism, and their hybrids – academic capitalism and New Public Management (NPM) – as key influences on competition in HE (Deem and Brehony 2005; Mintz 2021; Shepherd 2018). These hybrids apply business principles to HE, such as commercialization and market orientation, and emphasize efficiency and accountability in public institutions (Hood 1991). Though often seen as administrative philosophies, academic capitalism and NPM are deeply rooted in neoliberal and managerial ideologies, shaping HE governance through their views on markets, management, and competition.

Neoliberalism assumes market perfectivity and all-healing competition, which leads to the satisfaction of sovereign student-consumers and advances the competitiveness of nation-states. Following Darwinian underpinnings, proponents of neoliberalism believe in the coordination of an ‘invisible hand’ that optimally steers the market and eliminates inferior service providers by favoring the survival of the fittest and producing the common good (Klikauer 2013). Thus, neoliberalism involves democratic, bottom-up enablement characteristics due to its emphasis on decentralization and the reduction of top-down (e.g. state and management) interventions in favor of consumer-based mechanisms. Under neoliberalistic ideals, student-consumers ‘vote’ by making purchasing decisions in the perfect-assumed HE markets. The key managerial issue thus revolves around effective information sharing and marketing communications to engage this audience.

Managerialism refers to an ideology that promotes managers and management concepts as a universally applicable coordination mechanism across all fields and industries, including HE (Enteman 1993; Klikauer 2013). Central to managerialism is the idea of the ‘visible hand’ of managers who are given the right, authority, and ability to manage (Shepherd 2018, 1675). Under managerialistic ideals, managers play a proactive, directive role in steering activities, resources, and people toward the strategies and goals set by them. This leads to the emergence of hierarchies and the marginalization of other parties from decision-making roles and a decrease in the power of labor unions and collegial governance bodies (Deem and Brehony 2005). In HE, managerialism has been witnessed to result in increased managerial control and the proliferation of an audit culture via performance measurement (Salemans and Budding 2024; Shepherd 2018).

It is noteworthy that in the real world, neoliberalism and managerialism are often observed in parallel; NPM, for example, is known for advocating market-oriented, competition-promoting reforms in the public sector (neoliberalism) and for simultaneously implementing these reforms *within* public organizations by borrowing managerial functions and management practices from private sector companies (managerialism). In other words, despite both ideologies dealing with economic governance, neoliberalism gives ‘thicker’ prescriptions at the level of society and HE policy. Managerialism, on the other hand, appears ‘thinner’ in its policy-level guidelines but thicker in how it dictates the internal life and order of organizations (Heywood 2017, 13; Klikauer 2013, 5).

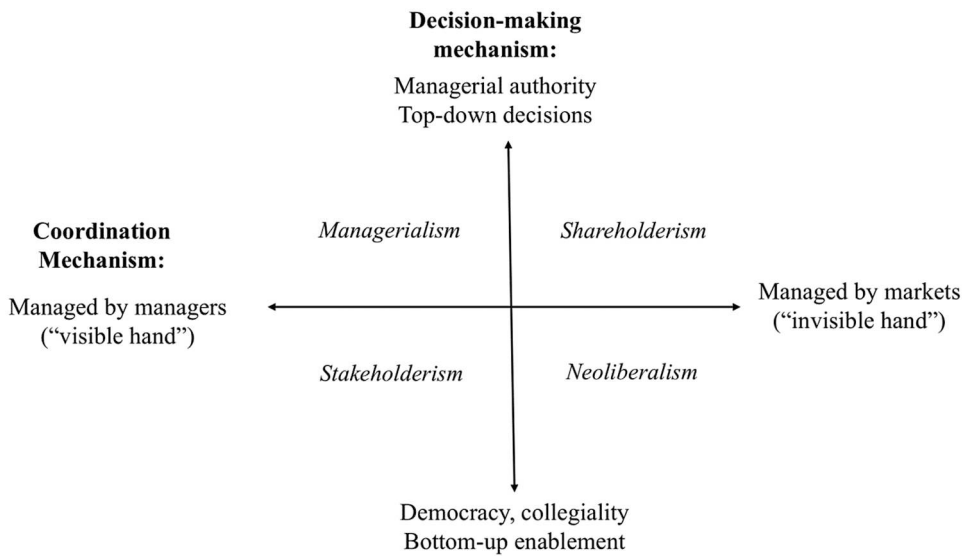


Figure 1. Ideologies and their suggested mechanisms for coordination and decision-making within HE.

Figure 1 illustrates the distinctions between neoliberalism and managerialism in terms of coordination mechanisms (X-axis) and decision-making processes (Y-axis). We further explore and elucidate two additional, though less commonly identified, ideologies – shareholderism and stakeholderism – influencing HE governance and management by examining them as combinations of specific types of decision-making and coordination mechanisms.

Shareholderism is rooted in the mid-1970s economic crisis and the critique of inefficient managerial elites that followed in the aftermath of the depression. The problem of managers supposedly prioritizing their own interests over those of the shareholders (the principal-agent problem, Jensen and Meckling 1976) was proposed as a solution that soon came to redefine the purpose of modern corporations and their management – tying management’s incentives directly to share prices (Khurana 2007). Under shareholderistic ideals, financial markets operate efficiently with perfect information and transparency. Managers are still needed; however, their role is defined as being the ‘hired hand’ (Khurana 2007) of the shareholders, whose value (e.g. stock price) is to be maximized. Refined in the 1980s (Ezzamel, Willmott, and Worthington 2008), the idea of modern shareholderism aligns with neoliberal principles by emphasizing the guiding role of financial markets and prioritizing the interests of owners and investors (‘Wall Street’) over those of everyday consumers (‘Main Street’). Translated into the context of HE, shareholderistic HE governance stands for the increased control of the owner (ministries of HE, private owners, and foundations) and top-down management to reach policy goals (Pinheiro et al. 2019). In contrast to managerialism, managers in shareholderism are perceived as having less strategic leeway and more pressure to comply with owner-defined goals and priorities.

Stakeholderism emphasizes the interconnected relationships between an organization and its various stakeholders – customers, suppliers, employees, investors, and communities. Instead of focusing solely on shareholders, stakeholderism advocates creating value for all these actors to achieve long-term success (Freeman 2010). This approach inherently contrasts with the belief in ‘faceless markets’ as the preferred coordinating mechanism (as in neoliberalism and shareholderism). In stakeholderism, power and influence are distributed across different levels of the organization and community, allowing for meaningful feedback and bottom-up engagement. Managers play a crucial role in balancing and aligning the diverse, and often conflicting interests of different stakeholders. In HE, the principles of stakeholderism are best manifested in collegial decision-making bodies and structures at

Table 1. The four ideologies impacting the economic governance of HE.

	Neoliberalism	Managerialism	Shareholderism	Stakeholderism
Idealized world view (desired end)	Perfect markets (invisible hand) that regulate themselves	Organizations led by managers (visible hand) for greater efficiency and productivity	Managers (visible hands) serve and are accountable to multiple stakeholders' interests	Managers (visible hands) serve and are accountable to multiple stakeholders' interests
Principles of governance and management (means to desired end)	Competition, deregulation, cost efficiency, free markets, privatization	Rationality, managerial authority and control, performance management	Shareholder primacy, maximizing shareholder value, economic returns on investment	Democratic accountability, corporate responsibility, balancing a variety of interests
Third party (primary beneficiaries)	Consumers/ customers	Management/ managers	Shareholders	All stakeholders and society at large
Core theory (intellectual proponents)	Perfect market theory (Friedman and Hayek)	Management principles (Taylor and Burnham)	Principal-agent theory (Jensen and Meckling)	Stakeholder theory (Freeman)

universities. It could be argued that, given its public nature, HE has always been subject to stakeholders' scrutiny and accountability requirements (Neave 2002). These tendencies, however, have been reported to have amplified during the past decades as a response to the changing social contract between HE and society that requires HEIs to align more closely with societal goals and economic priorities (Alajoutsijärvi, Juusola, and Kettunen 2023; Maassen 2014).

Table 1 summarizes the core ideas, principles, and beneficiaries of the four ideologies and their manifestations in the HE context.

Four types of university competition

Ideologies offer idealized worldviews (desired ends) and delineate the governance and management principles that are aligned with these ideals (means to the desired ends). Despite relatively clear prescriptions given concerning the efficient organization of HE markets, management, and competition by each ideology, their real-world applications and manifestations often appear significantly different (if not completely opposite) from what was intended, resulting in an interesting co-existence and interplay of the different ideologies. We move on to delineate and discuss the different types of university competition that emerge from the four ideological stances presented.

Signaling competition (neoliberalism)

Attempts to implement neoliberal policies in HE have rarely (in the context of public universities) been witnessed to lead HEIs to compete openly and solely on price (Musselin 2018). Under imperfect market information, neoliberal policies aimed at market deregulation have led to *signaling competition* (Musselin 2018). Signaling competition refers to a form of competition in which universities strive to convey certain qualities or attributes to external observers to gain positive perceptions and judgments. Signaling is particularly prevalent in markets characterized by information asymmetry (such as HE), where the true quality or value of a product or service (such as education) is not immediately apparent or observable to third parties (student-customers) (Engwall 2007; Spence 2002). In this context, reputation and status, as perceived by the third party, quickly become decision-making factors that lead to the emergence of status hierarchies (Bloch and Mitterle 201). HEIs that succeed in signaling high status and prestige through ranking performance, accreditations, branding, and investing in state-of-the-art facilities will appear most attractive in the eyes of student-customers. This, in turn, allows HEIs to select students with the greatest potential to develop into future leaders and elite members of society (Schofer, Ramirez, and Meyer 2021). Somewhat

paradoxically, the consumer-democratic idea of students ‘voting’ for the best universities has contributed to the birth of university competition where the appearance of excellence often takes precedence over genuine quality.

Intraorganizational competition (managerialism)

Counterintuitively, managerialism does not inherently generate external competition between universities; rather, it cultivates structures and practices that amplify *intraorganizational* competition among faculties, departments, and individuals. This intraorganizational competition is a central feature of the managerialistic ideology implemented in the HE context. Although the rhetoric of this approach aligns with neoliberal ideals of perfect competition and student satisfaction, free competition is often perceived as a limitation on managerial power and authority. Consequently, rather than engaging in direct competition, managers and business strategists often find it more advantageous to circumvent competition altogether, moving away from perfect competition toward Microsoft-like monopolies (Magretta 2002, 80–1).

When applied to universities, managerialism replaces the traditional principles of shared governance and collegiality with managerial practices focused on performance management and internal accountability (Bleiklie 2018). This shift aligns with the interests of university managers and stakeholders who prioritize streamlined processes, measurable outcomes, and a hierarchical governance structure. The transfer of authority from academics to managers weakens the professional status and power of academics, leading to a scenario in which administrators with managerial inclinations increasingly determine the strategic priorities of universities (Pineiro et al. 2019). Common expressions of intraorganizational competition include internal funding grants, faculty promotions and tenure, teaching awards, and competition for leadership roles.

Interorganizational competition (shareholderism)

Interorganizational competition is a defining feature under shareholderism, where educational ministries act as ‘owners’ or shareholders of public universities and vice-chancellors and presidents of universities are increasingly viewed as top executives, compensated similarly to corporate managers (Essaji and Horton 2010). Similar to shareholders in a corporation, ministries of education exercise ownership control by setting clear goals and specific performance indicators for university top management, who are appointed either directly or indirectly by these ministries. (Pineiro et al. 2019). The ministries’ annual budget allocations to public universities typically rely on models based on specific key performance indicators (KPIs). University top management then applies this funding allocation formula to the faculties, which pass it on to their departments. The more closely a university adheres to the ministry’s framework internally, the more ‘shareholderistic’ the system becomes, with the idea of serving the owner’s interests permeating the entire HEI at all levels (Arora-Jonsson et al. 2021).

The above-described funding model fosters a competitive environment where outcomes are visible, accessible, and comparable, thereby heightening interorganizational competition among universities (Marginson 2006). In this context, universities endeavor to distinguish themselves as superior to their rivals, resulting in a zero-sum game due to the constraints of limited annual state budgets (Kettunen et al. 2022). A prime example of this interorganizational competition is seen during annual budget negotiations in which universities strive to present their previous year’s KPIs in the most favorable light.

Priority competition (stakeholderism)

Finally, stakeholderism creates *priority competition* – a struggle for power, influence and authority to shape and control the content, direction, and strategic priorities of a university and its key

Table 2. Four types of university competition.

University competition	<i>Signaling competition</i> (neoliberalism)	<i>Intra-organizational competition</i> (managerialism)	<i>Inter-organizational competition</i> (shareholderism)	<i>Priority competition</i> (stakeholderism)
Key participants (roles)	Universities (suppliers) and students (consumers)	University rectors (top managers), department/unit heads (middle management), academics, and administrators (employees)	Ministries of education (owners) and universities (profit units)	University management, faculty, staff, and students (internal stakeholders), and regulators, funders, media, alumni, community, etc. (external stakeholders)
Locus of control and governance (third party)	Student–customers (third party) make decisions freely in unregulated markets	Centralized to university top management (third party) with decision-making authority	Ministries of education ‘owner’ (third party) exercises control legitimized by the State	Inclusive and decentralized decision-making within university, meritocracy, representative democracy (third party varies)
Primary objective (scarce resource)	Attract and satisfy student–customers (tuition fees and fee-paying students)	Gain a larger share of internally allocated resources (proportion of funding)	Gain larger share of externally allocated government resources (proportion of funding)	Find balance between various stakeholder demands and expectations (mutually rewarding win–win relationships)
Competitive actions and rhetoric (means and rules)	Signaling ‘value for money’ (branding, accreditations, top rankings, luxury student facilities and career opportunities)	Performance in areas defined by internal KPIs (publications, degrees, external funding)	Performance in areas emphasized in the funding model and external KPIs (degrees, external funding, publications)	Negotiation, direct and indirect influencing (public endorsement, lobbying)

stakeholders (Falqueto et al. 2020). Universities operating under stakeholderism resemble the traditional collegial governance model of public institutions, where the mission encompasses fulfilling multiple societal functions and serving a diverse range of stakeholders (Neave 2002). Collegiality involves consensus, shared power, consultation, and collective responsibilities (Fleming and Harley 2024). Indeed, externally imposed targets and quantifications challenge trusting relationships and professional autonomy (Kligyte and Barrie 2014). Moreover, managerial interventions are often labeled ‘uncollegial,’ which hinders peer-to-peer self-governance (Fleming and Harley 2024).

This traditional view of university governance is often criticized for creating mission overload and goal ambiguity (Enders and De Boer 2009). NPM reformers saw this as a significant weakness of ‘old’ stakeholderism, arguing that the lack of clear accountability made universities inefficient in spending taxpayers’ money. More recently, stakeholderism has evolved to emphasize social impact, requiring universities to demonstrate diverse societal values, particularly in areas such as sustainability (Alajoutsijärvi, Juusola, and Kettunen 2023; Chankseliani and McCowan 2021). Typical manifestations of this emphasis on priority competition and stakeholderism include inclusive yet time-consuming decision-making processes, extensive lobbying efforts, attempts to align curricula with industry and community needs, and initiatives centered on social responsibility and sustainability. Table 2 outlines the different types of university competition promoted by the four identified ideologies.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to shed light on the often-overlooked influence of underlying ideological dimensions in previous studies of universities’ transformation into competitive actors and the rise of competition in HE. Synthesizing the discussion on ideologies impacting HE from literature on HE policy and governance, as well as from studies of economics and management, we have constructed and conceptually explored four distinct ideological world orders prevalent in HE. Based

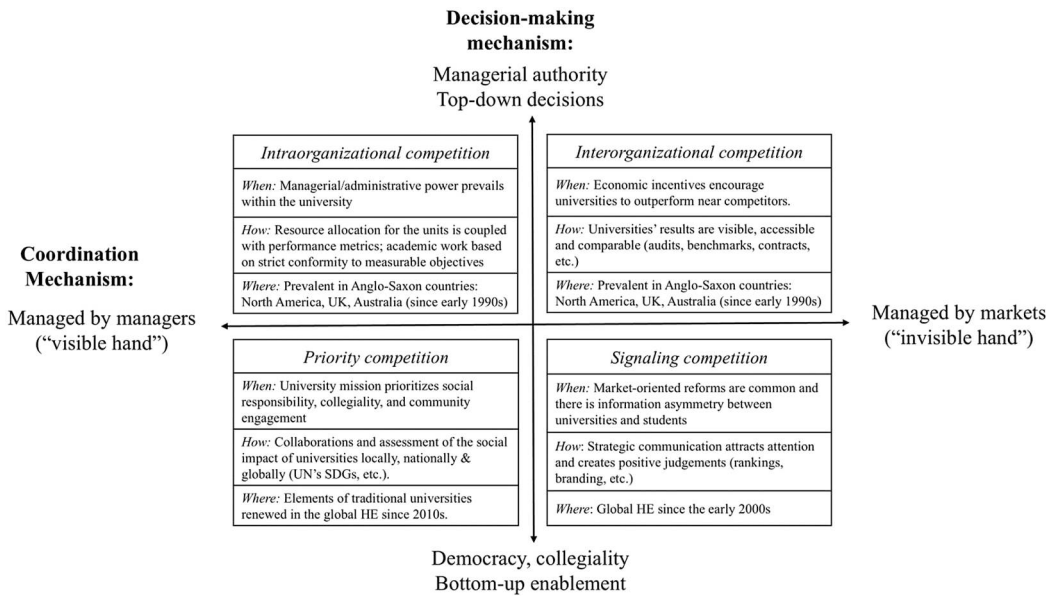


Figure 2. Four types of university competition, their co-existence, and contextual factors in the HE.

on this, we identified and discussed the four types of university competition shaped by these ideologies.

Universities are complex hybrid organizations shaped by diverse historical contexts; they encompass a spectrum of ideologies, policies, and strategies impacting their governance and management on an everyday basis. The purpose of constructing 'pure' configurations is not to reduce these real-life complexities into simplified typologies but rather to offer useful heuristics for comparison and enable answering to fundamental questions, such as 'How, why, and about what do universities compete for?'

Figure 2 offers a summary of our findings, presenting the four types of competition that emerge and become emphasized under the influence of different ideologies. Furthermore, it includes a brief description of key changes in both coordination and decision-making mechanisms that have occurred in the HE field since the 1990s, giving rise to the identified, ideology-shaped competitions between universities. These competitions are predicted to co-exist in the HE field, however, changes in either the coordination (market vs. management driven) or decision-making (top-down vs. bottom-up driven) mechanisms may lead to a certain ideology and its proponents to gain a larger foothold in organizing for competition.

We propose that the ideologies underpinning HE policies and university management generate opposing forces that cater to the interests of various groups: student-consumers, top management, government (and its agencies), and societal stakeholders. For example, while Nordic universities have traditionally been characterized by stakeholderism, they are increasingly influenced by shareholderism through their respective ministries of education, despite a rhetoric emphasizing autonomy and neoliberal principles (Pinheiro et al. 2019). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, efforts to create a cost-efficient, market-driven HE sector have led to rising tuition fees and an increase in the positions and salaries of university leaders (Musselin 2018). Interestingly, we have observed that despite the eager implementation of ideology-driven principles in HE governance to foster competition, real-life manifestations of the idealized world often appear significantly different – if not the complete opposite – of what was initially desired. We hope that future studies, ideally comparative and longitudinal in nature, can shed needed empirical and conceptual light on such types and the related processes.

Disclosure statement

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