Inter-institutional differences in defensive stakeholder management in higher education: the case of Serbia

Jelle Mampaey, Jelena Brankovic & Jeroen Huisman

Published online: 27 Nov 2017.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Inter-institutional differences in defensive stakeholder management in higher education: the case of Serbia

Jelle Mampaey[a,b], Jelena Brankovic[b,c] and Jeroen Huisman[b]

[a]Faculty of Management, Science and Technology, Open University, Heerlen, The Netherlands; [b]Department of Sociology, Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium; [c]Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany

ABSTRACT

In contemporary higher education, stakeholder management is increasingly important given the growing number and complexity of stakeholder groups. Defensive stakeholder management (DSM), defined as verbal responses of universities to stakeholder criticism, is a largely neglected topic in the higher education literature. Drawing from a combination of theoretical perspectives in the organisation science literature, we explore how three Serbian universities engage with DSM (in relation to allegations of academic misconduct). We focus on the antecedents of inter-institutional differences in responses to stakeholder criticism and its antecedents, in particular, decision-making structures and core missions. Our findings suggest that different universities do respond differently to the same type of criticism and as such this is an important contribution to the debate on DSM in higher education and beyond.

Introduction

Stakeholder management has been identified as a core organisational practice in contemporary higher education (e.g. Jongbloed, Enders, and Salerno 2008; Mampaey and Huisman 2016). Contemporary universities are increasingly confronted with a multitude of internal and external stakeholder groups including, for example, academic staff, administrative staff, students, governmental agencies, accreditation bodies and employers, which is related to the expansion of higher education and its increasing worldwide importance. Following this, universities are under increasing pressure to 'manage' the relations with stakeholders in their quest for legitimacy and long-term survival.

Recently, a distinction has been made between proactive and defensive stakeholder management (DSM) (e.g. Mampaey and Huisman 2016). The former refers to substantive practices underlying stakeholder management aimed to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relations via, for example, entrepreneurial activities in cooperation with business and industry, while the latter is related to the verbal responses of university spokespersons to stakeholder criticism. Proactive stakeholder management has been investigated extensively, but DSM has been largely ignored in the context of higher education. This neglect is problematic given that organisational scholars have demonstrated that a combination of proactive and defensive strategies is necessary to sustain organisational legitimacy and long-term survival (see e.g. Elsbach 1994). Accordingly, in this article, we explore DSM by investigating (1) *how universities respond to stakeholder criticism* and (2) *how inter-institutional differences can be accounted for*. We specifically investigate the relation between universities' organisational characteristics (i.e. organisational decision-making structures and core missions) and inter-

---

CONTACT Jelle Mampaey ✉ jelle.mampaey@ugent.be

institutional differences in DSM. Our contribution is twofold. First, we add to the emerging higher education literature that deals with strategic responses of higher education institutions (e.g. Fumasoli and Huisman 2013) – and also contribute specifically to the DSM literature, by arguing that responses not only depend on the nature of the challenge, but also on organisational characteristics (even if the organisations belong to the same field).

Empirically, we conduct a multiple-case study of three Serbian universities and focus on their responses to stakeholder criticism with regard to plagiarism of doctoral dissertations awarded to three notable political figures in the country. By selectively zooming in on these three cases, we aim to maximise their comparability. Plagiarism is a relevant topic, for academics and other constituencies in higher education will be in agreement on the idea that appropriating other people's intellectual work is considered a grave violation of a core professional norm (Clark 1983). When such practices are exposed, the legitimacy of the universities involved is challenged. Instances of plagiarism signal weakening of academic integrity, a cornerstone of both professional behaviour and of the core beliefs of what 'proper' scholarly research is about. In such situations, universities are pressured to take a stance on the issue and to offer a response in their defence to repair legitimacy (Suchman 1995).

This paper is structured as follows. First, we present the theoretical framework, from which we develop expectations, which we later empirically address. Second, we set out the research design. Third, we present the data on three Serbian universities accused of plagiarism. We conclude the paper with a reflection.

Inter-institutional differences in DSM: theoretical framework

Following organisational institutionalism, we conceive of universities as embedded in their environment and thus carriers of its norms and values (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In order to survive, universities need to demonstrate that they adhere to these norms and values and in doing so comply with pressures coming from their institutional environment. One of these norms is academic integrity, the empirical focus in this paper. A breach of academic integrity is a form of non-compliance with institutional norms and plagiarism is one specific example of academic misconduct, which is widely conceived of as an ethical abuse (Macfarlane, Zhang, and Pun 2014). As a violation of a fundamental professional and ethical norm and of a hallmark of the academic fabric (in light of, for example, the independent search for truth), plagiarism is expected to induce stakeholder criticism. Accordingly, it is argued that universities that are accused of plagiarism are pressured to respond to criticism to repair relations with stakeholders.

But which responses are most adequate? The literature does not give unambiguous answers to this question and does point at the difficulty to simultaneously appease all stakeholders (e.g. Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997). That said, much of the conceptual thinking (e.g. Freeman 1984) and actual research suggests that organisations should engage with their stakeholders and relate to their views (both the positive and negative) and that communication is key in this engagement. In an important contribution to the discussion on organisational legitimacy, Elsbach (1994) argues that acknowledgement (versus denial) is important in light of its potential to reduce conflict and its ability to repair stakeholder relationships. Using examples from Elsbach, a denial would be to, for example, argue that the organisation was not involved, or that the criticised event did not take place. Acknowledgements contain elements of recognition of (or excuses to) the stakeholder's concern but also attempts to attenuate negative perceptions. Acknowledgement does not mean agreeing with the criticism, but implies that one responds and does so in a timely matter. It is difficult to exactly define 'timely', for this is to a large extent subjective (see e.g. Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997, for a similar argument on stakeholder urgency), but this does not take away the point that an unwarranted delay in responding goes at the cost of the criticised organisation's legitimacy. Likewise, genuine engagement with the stakeholder's criticism means the response should be as coherent as possible. Again, full coherence may be untenable in light of the variety

of the stakeholders, but a lack of coherence will likely affect legitimacy negatively. This leads us to posit that an 'ideal-type response' to stakeholder criticism should be timely, acknowledging of the criticism and coherent.

However, this is not to say that all organisations confronted with a similar critical challenge respond in the same way. Universities have strategic leeway to respond, so deviations from the ideal-typical response are to be expected, also in light of the different perceptions of the nature of the criticism. We, therefore, expect that universities will differ regarding (1) the time they take to respond (some universities will be quicker than others), (2) the coherence of the response (some universities will speak with one voice, others with multiple, potentially contradicting voices) and (3) the acknowledgement of the response (some universities will acknowledge the stakeholder criticism, others will ignore or deny it and hence refute the concerns).

We argue that organisational decision-making structures and core missions are important determinants of (differences in) stakeholder management. For sure, there are likely other organisational and extra-organisational characteristics that may affect the process and outcome, but as a first exploration, these two characteristics are deemed salient. Various higher education scholars have argued and shown that decision-making structures (and, more generally, governance structures) and goals of the organisation (missions) affect organisational behaviour (e.g. Clark 1983; Frølich and Caspersen 2015). First, we posit that decision-making structures matter. Universities are often categorised as professional bureaucracies with the operating core of universities being run by professionals who have considerable control over the work they do, as well as over how the organisation is managed. Organisational decision-making in universities is commonly decentralised and often collegial in character, which implies that power within the organisation is spread across the community of peers, organised around disciplines, rather than concentrated in the hands of few individuals (Clark 1983). Even though there is evidence that universities are changing in this respect, largely due to the diffusion of alternative models of organising (De Boer and File 2009), academic professionals are still powerful and certainly so in the Serbian context. An important corollary is that decision-making processes are slowed down given the multitude of actors involved in these processes, who have to reach consensus before the final decision is made. Relatedly, inconsistent responses are more likely, especially when these actors struggle to reach consensus. Accordingly, we expect that higher levels of decentralised and collegial decision-making are related to more delays and inconsistencies in the responses to stakeholder criticism. Turning the argument around, our first expectation is that *more centralised and hierarchical decision-making is related to quicker and more coherent responses to stakeholder criticism*.

Second, we also expect that missions matter. In many higher education systems, differences have been identified between the core missions of older, research-intensive universities on the one hand and younger, teaching-intensive institutions on the other (see e.g. Scott 2006). From a legitimacy perspective, it is expected that universities will be more inclined to come up with the ideal-type response when stakeholder criticism concerns the core mission of the universities in that they have much more to lose if this is the case (see e.g. Deephouse and Suchman 2008, on status and legitimacy). Hence, we expect that *an ideal-type response to stakeholder criticism is more likely when the core mission of universities is threatened*. Accordingly, older, research-intensive universities will more likely respond ideally when the research mission is challenged, compared to younger teaching-intensive institutions.

Case, data and method

We carried out a multiple-case study (Eisenhardt 1989) of the allegations of plagiarism and responses of three universities in Serbia. In June and July 2014, these universities were accused of academic misconduct, having awarded PhD titles based on plagiarised doctoral dissertations to three politicians in power.

Our corpus of data consisted of several types of documents: (a) daily newspaper and magazine articles, (b) universities' official statements related to the issue in question, (c) publicly accessible minutes of meetings held by relevant university bodies, (d) internal university regulation and other sources detailing their organisational decision-making structure and core missions, (e) state-level

regulation on higher education detailing formal rules and (f) secondary sources documenting the dynamics of the broader field environment. The documents used, with few exceptions, were in Serbian. We grouped the data in two categories: data to reconstruct events and data to interpret the events. We analysed the data by balancing between an inductive and deductive approach (Langley 1999), drawing on our theoretical framework as a lens to code and interpret our data.

With regard to the data needed to reconstruct event history, we started our analysis by creating a list of key events (based on media articles, university statements, public minutes) for each of the three universities, making sure to grasp them as objectively as possible by triangulating whenever possible (e.g. by using multiple sources in which a statement was reported). With regard to media articles (a), we collected 163 media articles covering the three cases since the first accusation was raised (1 June 2014) until the end of October 2015. We searched online archives of the news agents that covered the cases most actively: the internet portal of *B92* media house (43 items), *Blic* (29 article items) and *Politika* (12 items) dailies. We complemented this with articles from other daily newspapers (14 items). These data were also used to document statements of other actors, such as the accused individuals, other members of the academic community, the government, including the ministry and other governance bodies, etc. In addition to these, we searched the internet archives of the internet portal *Peščanik* (36 items) where the original accusations were raised and where numerous opinion pieces on the issues were written. Finally, we have collected a number of articles from international media sources (15 items). Universities' public statements were obtained from their websites and from quotes (of, for example, Rectors) in newspaper articles. Sometimes different newspapers would report slightly different versions, yet the differences were more complementary than contradictory in nature, or simply different in style.

Analysis

We start our analysis with sketching out the higher education field in Serbia, followed by a more in-depth look at the organisational characteristics of the three universities and we focus on aspects which we identified earlier as potentially playing a role in responses (i.e. decision-making structures and core missions). We proceed with a description of the events and their interpretation.

The institutional environment and organisational characteristics of the universities

The higher education field in Serbia

The field of higher education in Serbia is a relatively small one and comprises universities and non-university higher education institutions, both public and private. Within the university sector, it is the public–private divide that plays an important role in shaping the institutional environment. These two categories of universities differ in that that public ones are older, larger (the universities enrol about 70% of the country's student population), more internally complex and are more research-focused than their private counterparts.

The University of Belgrade (UB) occupies the central position in the field. It is the oldest, largest and the most comprehensive of its universities. It enrols about one-third of the country's student population and is by far the one with the largest research output in terms of publications. With its 31 faculties and 11 scientific institutes, it covers a broad range of disciplinary fields both in teaching and research. Its constitutive faculties enjoy legal and financial autonomy and little accountability to the central level. In this and other ways, the UB is a true flagship university, and as such the one of its kind in the field. When it comes to the private sector, it is altogether more peripheral than the public one. In general, compared to public universities, private ones are less complex, smaller, younger, tend to be more focused when it comes to their disciplinary coverage, are more teaching oriented and more focused on applied fields. Accordingly, the public universities tend to have a core mission centred on traditional academic values, including knowledge

production and dissemination via basic research. The mission of the private universities is rather centred on teaching.

Decision-making structures and core missions of the accused universities

The three accused universities were the UB, Megatrend University[1] (MU) and Union University (UU). With regard to governance and internal power distribution, UB stands out when compared with the two others. Its constituent units – faculties and institutes, enjoy a great degree of autonomy with little accountability to the university level. This feature has long been a well-guarded feature of this and other public universities in the country. This leaves the university-level governance structures, such as the Rector, Senate, disciplinary and scientific areas councils, as well as the University Council, with very little power over university affairs, despite the fact that all these bodies are run by academics delegated by faculties or institutes.

MU and UU are private, younger, smaller and less comprehensive than UB. They also have less complex internal structures and decision-making processes. However, this appears to be more the case with MU than UU. This can, to some extent, be explained by their different ownership structures. While MU has a de facto owner, who was at the time also its Rector and the person behind all important university decisions, UU operates in a more collegial manner. Here, its founding faculties (three out of five in total) have a central role in university decision-making. MU can be characterised as the least complex one, but also as the one in which collegial decision-making is the least visible at the university level (see Table 1).

Table 1. Internal governance (2014; source: universities' statutes).

University Sector	UB Public	MU Private	UU Private
Decision-making bodies	*Leadership*: Rector, pro-rectors; Rector's Collegium: (Rector + pro-rectors); Extended Rector's Collegium (Rector's Collegium, Faculty Deans, Institute Directors and Presidents of disciplinary councils) *Governance*: Council (majority appointed by the four disciplinary councils – 20/33) *Professional bodies*: • Senate (Rector, pro-rectors, faculty deans, presidents of disciplinary councils, directors of research institutes) • Disciplinary councils • Council of the Institutes • Committee for Professional Ethics • Councils for scientific areas (e.g. Council for Legal and Economic Sciences) • Quality Committee • Council for University-level Studies • Statutory Committee • University Ombudsman • Committee for Honours *Student Parliament*	*Leadership*: Rector, pro-rectors *Governance*: Council (majority appointed by the Senate – 11/17), President, Secretary General *Professional bodies*: • Senate (Rector, pro-rectors, deans and directors, two academic staff members appointed by each faculty) *Student Parliament*	*Leadership*: Rector, pro-rectors; Rector's Collegium: (Rector + pro-rectors); Extended Rector's Collegium (Rector's Collegium, faculty Deans, student representatives) *Governance*: Council (majority appointed by the four founding faculties – 18/23) *Professional bodies*: • Senate (faculty deans) • Committee for the Assessment of Study Programmes • Committee for the Adequacy of Doctoral Dissertation Topics • Scientific-research and Art Centre • Committee for Multidisciplinary Projects • Quality Committee • Other professional bodies *Other bodies*: • Committee for Standardisation *Student Parliament*
Power concentration in decision-making (authors' interpretation)	Bottom (faculties)	Top (university leadership)	Mixed (founding faculties and leadership)

Plagiarism accusations and organisational responses

Accusations

In June 2014, an article titled 'Getting a PhD in Serbia: the case of minister Stefanović' appeared on the Serbian internet portal *Peščanik*. The article was authored by three academics of Serbian background affiliated with higher education institutions in the UK.

The main part of the article was the authors' analysis of the doctoral dissertation which had been successfully defended by the Serbian Minister of the Interior at MU in 2013. Apart from listing instances of plagiarism, the authors also stated that the dissertation 'doesn't even meet the minimal technical standards' and 'falls far below standard concerning both its content and scientific contribution'. The authors closed the article by stating that individuals who plagiarise their academic work were not fit for holding public office and called for Minister's dismissal from public office.

About a month later (5 July 2014), the doctoral dissertation of the President of the New Belgrade municipality suffered the same fate. The dissertation had been successfully defended at UU. The authors stated that in this case plagiarism was 'more serious, extensive and shameless', supporting their allegations with evidence. The authors concluded the text by, among other things, inviting the university to revoke the doctorate and, in determining the validity of the dissertation and the raised allegations, secure impartiality by involving external professors.

Finally, two days later, a roughly similar exercise was performed in the case of the Belgrade Mayor, concluding in the same way with regard to plagiarism, only in this case the doctoral degree was awarded by UB. After providing an extensive analysis of the dissertation, the author asserted that the responsibility lied also with the members of the doctoral committee and, i.a., called on UB to revoke the doctoral title.

All three events happened in the course of five weeks. They were all initiated by individuals affiliated with universities from abroad. They all acted in personal capacity, although the fact that they were members of the academic profession was by no means an irrelevant fact. It added to the seriousness with which the allegations were received by the universities and general public. All three accusations targeted plagiarism of doctoral dissertations, meaning that they were thus concerned with research – a core university activity. Finally, in all three cases, the individuals accused were political figures in high positions in the country. Hence, crucially, we consider the cases highly comparable.

Given that the accused were holding important public offices, the cases triggered considerable attention of the media and general public. The stories were also covered by international media, such as *BBC*, *Der Spiegel* and *Times Higher Education*. Social media were widely used for sharing and discussing the cases, with notable critical stance towards the accused, the universities, as well as the Serbian academic community as a whole. Intellectuals and notable public figures, journalists and other individuals wrote and appeared on television programmes to comment and criticise. Political parties of the opposition also took a critical stance. The events further led to online petitions, open letters, requests to the ministry to take a stance and the universities to declare the dissertations invalid. The events, evidently, generated considerable pressure on the individuals accused of plagiarism and the implicated universities.

Responses to plagiarism accusations

In the description of the responses, we have looked at three elements of the response that universities offered to the accusations, namely, (a) content of the response (*what did the university say?*), (b) who spoke on behalf of the university (*who was the university?*) and the internal processes leading to the response (*how did they come to the decision to say what they said?*).

The response of MU. On behalf of the university, the Rector, who was also the de facto university owner and the supervisor of the said minister, responded first. He and the rest of the doctoral committee denied instances of plagiarism. The Rector denounced accusations as politically motivated and

directed against the state, while also attacking the individuals who raised the issue ('those quasi experts deliberately fooled the public', *24 sata*, 3 June 2014) and threatening with pressing charges against them.

Two days later, MU decided to address the allegations formally. On 5 June, MU Senate established a committee to look into the dissertation and allegations of plagiarism, mandating it with 'the assessment of the justification to initiate the process of PhD degree annulment'. The committee was an internal one, comprising professors from MU only. A week later, MU published an announcement on its website, accompanied by the full report of the committee, stating, i.a., the following:

> In a detailed 12-page report, the Committee analysed the process of obtaining a doctorate, specific objections of the opponents of the dissertation, its scientific and methodological basis, the content of the dissertation, and other remarks stated in public. The Committee unanimously proposed to the Senate, taking into consideration both substantive and procedural elements, that there is no basis for disputing the originality of the doctoral dissertation of Nebojša Stefanović. MU Senate, at its meeting held on June 11, accepted the Committee's conclusions and agreed that the candidate Nebojša Stefanović submitted the topic, produced and publicly defended his doctoral dissertation in line with the regulations of MU and that, therefore, there is no reason to initiate the process for the annulment of the PhD diploma.

However, the report itself does identify instances of plagiarism, yet it denounces them as such. To illustrate, on page 7 it says 'Sentences were not copied, but similarly formulated, perhaps paraphrased, while it is entirely possible that the similarity is accidental.'

After this one, MU Senate established the second, so-called independent committee, comprising three professors from public universities: one from the University of Novi Sad and two from the UB (Faculty of Law and Faculty of Political Sciences) (August 2014). This committee was mandated with the same task: 'the assessment of the justification to initiate the process of PhD degree annulment'. About a month later, this committee came out with the report in which it confirmed most of the conclusions of the previous one: the law and other regulation had not been violated and there was no reason to initiate the annulment. The committee also stated that they did not question the good faith of the authors behind the accusations and that they, too, shared their concern with regard to the state of science in the country.

No further action on the issue of plagiarism was taken and the university remained firm in its decision not to revoke the title. Thus, at the end of the period covered by this study, the accused politician still held the doctorate (as well as the public office of the Minister of the Interior).

The response of UU. In the first reaction, the Rector stated that the university had 'no interest in protecting plagiarists' and that it would look into the case, while promising full transparency of the process to the public.

At the UU Senate meeting held only several days after the accusation, the Rector, as also asked by the individuals behind the accusation, proposed that an independent committee be established. Thus, UU opened the call and specifically invited professors from the public sector universities, expecting that such a committee would be more objective and more legitimate. Yet, within a week after the allegations first appeared in the media, UU stated that it was not able to form an independent committee due to the fact that no professor from the public sector responded to the call. They, the statement said, contacted about 80% of the professors in the country who had the expertise in the area of marketing (the topic of the dissertation). Responding to this, the UB Rector stated that their regulations did not prevent any individual from that institution to be in such committee.

It was not until December that year (2014) that the Senate appointed the committee, although not an independent one as initially intended: two of its members were from UU, while the third one was from a private higher education institution in Slovenia. The committee was mandated to determine whether the allegations were justified and was given 60 days to produce the report. The committee decided to split the dissertation in three with each member analysing a different part. In their preliminary reports, two committee members concluded that 66% and 73% of dissertation sections they analysed, respectively, was plagiarised, while the third member found only 0.4% (a UU professor

himself). The last one appeared implausible and the UU secretariat was asked to verify this, which then found that the percentage was much higher. As the committee did not finalise its report by the deadline in February 2015, the Senate decided to discuss the three preliminary individual reports on the meeting held in the same month. Given the discrepancy in findings, the Rector proposed to the Senate that the committee member who reported what was believed to be unlikely percentage of plagiarism be dismissed and another one appointed in his place. The Senate did not adopt the proposal and postponed the deadline for the committee to submit the final report until 1 March 2015. The committee, however, disapproved of the fact that its work was discussed before official submission and, by the end of February, it decided to collectively resign. At this point, it was expected that the Senate would appoint another committee. However, only several weeks later, the Senate decided to remove from its agenda the item in which further steps with regard to the issue were to be discussed, with four votes in favour and three against. The Rector, who was among the three against the removal of the agenda item, stated this brought the issue to a standstill and that the chances for the process to continue were slim. Such developments clearly indicated the existence of an internal conflict, between the Rector and some of the faculties, a dynamic not seen in the case of MU. It is worthwhile noting that the details of this process were provided on the university website, written by the Rector himself and updated as the events unfolded, which speaks of the Rector's intention to ensure some degree of transparency of the process.

Soon after, at the beginning of April, the Faculty for Business and Industry Management (at which the accused politician produced his doctoral dissertation) ceased to be a member of UU. No explanation for this decision was provided on the university website. Thus, at the end of the period studied, UU was technically on a standstill, having failed to respond as an organisation with one voice.

The response of the UB. The last university to be implicated was the UB. Unlike the other two universities, it was not the university leadership which responded first, but the one of the faculty behind the dissertation, which was not a surprise given its internal structure. On the same day the allegations appeared in the media, 9 July 2014, the Dean of the Faculty of Organisational Sciences stated that the dissertation was scientifically valid and that it had been produced and defended in accordance with the regulation. Still, the Dean requested from the supervisor of the said dissertation to look into the case. The following week, the Dean addressed the University Senate and stated the following, i.a.:

> It is certain that the assessment made on the *Peščanik* website about the dissertation of Siniša Mali's contribution is tendentious, yet I can say that the use of literature was incomplete and inadequate. When it comes to the scientific contribution which has been made by his dissertation, it is the Faculty Senate which will have its say on it. (B92, 16 July 2014)

Meanwhile, the supervisor produced his own analysis, which was in the same month adopted by the Faculty Senate. The Senate took the analysis as the basis for a report it would submit to the Council for Legal and Economic Sciences – the UB council responsible for the disciplinary field of the dissertation, and the Rector. The faculty used the occasion to assert that it fully adhered to the regulation in place in conducting its research, teaching and other activities.

Yet, two months later, the faculty still did not submit its report and the Rector stated that UB could not take an official position until the Faculty's report was discussed by the University Senate. The Rector pointed out that in the absence of the designated procedure for such cases, the university had no other choice but to follow the procedure for evaluation and defence of the doctoral dissertations, which in this case meant that the report of the committee was to be considered by the Faculty Senate, Council for Legal and Economic Sciences and finally the UB Senate. Here, the Rector clearly marked the faculty as an entity beyond the responsibility of university leadership, while pointing out that the university itself was an organisation which conformed to the regulation.

Finally, in October, the faculty report, including the defence committee report, was published. The report stated that the dissertation was 'an original contribution to science' and also stated the following:

> Certain sources which pertain to the literature review were not referenced, yet their content was not relevant for the hypothesis building and the proposed restructuring model, and thus also not relevant for the scientific contribution of the dissertation.

In the conclusion, the doctoral committee reiterated that it stood behind the dissertation and that 'the scientific contribution of the dissertation could not be questioned by the way literature was used'. Thus, effectively, the doctoral committee acknowledged plagiarism, yet justifying this conclusion by denouncing the instances as of minor importance and not relevant for the dissertation's alleged 'scientific contribution'. In the statement accompanying the committee report, the Dean summarised the course of events and concluded that 'the candidate fulfilled all the criteria for defending the doctoral dissertation' and that 'this is still the case'.

Two months later, in December 2014, the faculty report found itself before the Council for Legal and Economic Sciences. The Council, however, failed to adopt it (11/23 present voted in favour), of which it notified the Senate.

The Extended Rector's Collegium asked the Faculty committee to provide additional information in the report. Furthermore, referring to the fact that the German publishing house *De Gruyter*, in whose journal *Organization and Management* one of the articles on which the doctoral dissertation was based was published, issued a retraction note due to plagiarism, the Rector asked that this issue be also addressed in the new report. The committee obliged (March 2015). However, a month later, it informed the University that the retraction note had been revoked and that the article was back in the journal. Following this, in June 2015, the Extended Rector's Collegium asked the Council for Legal and Economic Sciences to address the issue again, taking into account the new evidence. To this, the Council responded that it had already made its decision about the case and that it would not do it again. On the same occasion, the Council decided that it would refrain from discussing similar issues in the future and proposed to the university that a regulation establishing a responsible body, procedure and method to deal with plagiarism accusations in the future be adopted soon.

In sum, UB did not deny the accusation of academic misconduct, but it also did not unambiguously acknowledge it. And like UU, it did come to a standstill, yet a different one in its nature. However, while UU appeared to have exhausted their options and its last statements did not suggest any further steps, UB seemed to still have been somewhere in the process of coming to what it could for it be an – albeit delayed – organisational response.

Reflections

With respect to inter-institutional differences, we now reflect on the responses along the three dimensions which we identified in the theoretical framework (timing, coherence and acknowledgement). In contrast to UU and UB, MU stands out as the quickest and most consistent in its response. This is primarily reflected in the time they took to generate an organisational response. MU closed the case within several months, UU reached a standstill about 9 months after the allegations had been raised, while UB (at the moment of finalising the data collection – 16 months after it was accused) seemed to still be somewhere in the process. The coherence of the response varied across the three universities with MU being firm in its denial. It denounced accusation by claiming that it had not broken any formal rules, without further engaging with the issue. Unlike the other two, from the point of view of an outsider, or member of general public, MU appeared as one organisation, speaking with one voice throughout the process.

The internal structure of the universities clearly seemed to matter for the time it took to respond as well as for coherence of the response. Our analysis suggests that the more decentralised and collegially organised the university, the higher the likelihood for internal divisions over the way the issue should be approached, which also increases the time to respond. MU was the only to act quickly and to speak with one voice. Unlike UB, the faculty at which the dissertation was produced was hardly even mentioned in the media, and unlike UU, its struggle, if it had any, was not marked by internal

conflict among its units or bodies. On the other hand, the more compartmentalised and collegial nature of UB, and even UU, resulted in a higher degree of dissonance. Even more so, UU failed to close the case due to an internal disagreement among the faculties and the Rector, where, after the committee resigned, four out of seven members of the Senate de facto thought that UU should not pursue the matter further. Similarly, even though UB had not closed the case until the end of 2015, the refusal of the Council for Legal and Economic Sciences to adopt Faculty's report is indicative of the internal division within the university, where other faculties, and especially those represented in the Council, refused to stand behind the accused one.

In sum, we found evidence for our first expectation: more centralised and hierarchical decision-making is related to quicker and more coherent responses to stakeholder criticism. For the second expectation, we found partial support in that stronger acknowledgement of stakeholder criticism could be identified when the core mission of universities is threatened (following Deephouse and Suchman's argument). Compared to UU and MU, UB seemed to take accusations of plagiarism most seriously in that this university did not deny stakeholder criticism by merely refuting it. Quite on the contrary, after the accusations, UB did not denounce the allegation with such ease as, for example, MU. The UB's Faculty of Organizational Sciences did acknowledge that the dissertation had plagiarised parts, yet it also downplayed the accusations by insisting that those parts were not relevant for the contribution of the dissertation, which could be interpreted as a justification or an excuse. For UB, it seemed that there was much more to lose when it was accused of plagiarism, in that their core mission is strongly centred on traditional academic values including academic integrity. The accusations challenged the core mission and were taken rather seriously. It appears, UB's responses were largely driven by legitimacy concerns (fitting institutional theory), but that the process was hampered by problematic and complex decision-making. Given that basic research is not the core mission of UU and MU, the latter has much less to lose when they respond to stakeholder criticism by denying it. They are less pressured to defend their research mission, given that the teaching mission is much more salient in these universities. However, it should also be noted that in the case of UU, even though it did not come out with the final response, plagiarism was confirmed by two out of three members of its committee, hence this university balanced between denial and acknowledgment.

Conspicuously, although the core mission of the university was threatened, UB did however not come up with the ideal-type response (i.e. quick and coherent acknowledgement). In UB, it seemed that the decision-making structure inhibited an ideal-type response and rather led to slow and incoherent acknowledgment. Therefore, our second expectation is only partly confirmed.

Conclusions

In this paper, we were interested in DSM in higher education. We intended to explore a topic not much addressed in the higher literature and argued that organisational characteristics affect the way universities deal with stakeholder criticism. Our findings indicate that indeed there is a relationship between the organisational decision-making structures and its response. The larger, more decentralised and collegially organised universities took more time to produce a response. The specific organisational context resulted in dissonant voices and even failure to offer an official organisational response. Universities' core missions also matter significantly. Here, our findings pointed out that the research-intensive university was especially inclined to acknowledge stakeholder criticism targeting actions pertaining to their core mission (even though an ideal-typical response was not observed). Analogously, the teaching-intensive universities were less inclined to acknowledge stakeholder criticism which, in their case, did not target their core mission. Our focus on core missions links to a broader theme, namely organisational legitimacy. In the initial stages of this study, we considered taking organisational legitimacy as an important antecedent. However, the literature on this theme is less clear on whether high levels of organisational legitimacy (which would be the case for UB) would be related to stronger or weaker responsiveness to stakeholder criticism. Some studies reveal that low

(er) levels of legitimacy are associated with low(er) levels of responsiveness to the external environment (e.g. Quirke 2013). Other research suggests low(er) levels of responsiveness of organisations with high(er) levels of legitimacy (e.g. Mampaey and Huisman 2016). Our findings suggest that high(er) levels of organisational legitimacy (UB) relate to slower and less coherent responses and low(er) levels (MU) relate to quicker and more coherent responses. One possible interpretation of our findings is that low(er) levels of legitimacy require prompt responses to secure a baseline level of legitimacy.

Nevertheless, we were not able to identify the ideal-type response to stakeholder criticism in either of the cases. In UB and UU, the decision-making structures inhibited quick and consistent responses. In MU and UU, the misfit between the core organisational missions and the stakeholder criticism was associated with less willingness to acknowledge stakeholder concerns. That we did not find ideal-typical responses is very likely due to the rather limited set of cases. As such, we must admit that through this study – in the empirical sense – we have only made a small step forward, but that the interesting findings call for broadening the empirical base on research on DSM. Importantly, what we have found is that organisations of the same type – universities – when confronted with the same type of problem and the same type of criticism, respond differently and as such we believe this to be an important contribution to the DSM debate.

Note

1. Megatrend University is the former name of University 'John Naisbitt.' This name change took place in April 2015. In this article, we use its old name, that is, the name it had when the accusations were raised.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Clark, B. R. 1983. *The Higher Education System: Academic Organization in Cross-national Perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

de Boer, H., and J. File. 2009. *Higher Education Governance Reform Across Europe*. Brussels: ESMU.

Deephouse, D. L., and M. Suchman. 2008. "Legitimacy in Organisational Institutionalism." In *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, edited by R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, R. Suddaby, and K. Sahlin, 49–77. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

DiMaggio, P. J., and W. W. Powell. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields." *American Sociological Review* 48 (2): 147–60.

Eisenhardt, K. M. 1989. "Building Theories from Case Study Research." *The Academy of Management Review* 14 (4): 532–50.

Elsbach, K. D. 1994. "Managing Organizational Legitimacy in the California Cattle Industry: The Construction and Effectiveness of Verbal Accounts." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 39 (1): 57–88.

Freeman, R. E. 1984. *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Boston: Pitman.

Frølich, N., and J. Caspersen. 2015. "Institutional Governance Structures." In *The Palgrave International Handbook of Higher Education Policy and Governance*, edited by J. Huisman, H. de Boer, D. D. Dill, and M. Souto-Otero, 379–97. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Fumasoli, T., and J. Huisman. 2013. "Strategic Agency and System Diversity: Conceptualizing Institutional Positioning in Higher Education." *Minerva* 51 (2): 155–69.

Jongbloed, B., J. Enders, and C. Salerno. 2008. "Higher Education and Its Communities: Interconnections, Interdependencies and a Research Agenda." *Higher Education* 56 (3): 303–24.

Langley, A. 1999. "Strategies for Theorizing from Process Data." *Academy of Management Review* 24 (4): 691–710.

Macfarlane, B., J. Zhang, and A. Pun. 2014. "Academic Integrity: A Review of the Literature." *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (2): 339–58.

Mampaey, J., and J. Huisman. 2016. "Defensive Stakeholder Management in European Universities: An Institutional Logics Perspective." *Studies in Higher Education* 41 (12): 2218–31.

Meyer, J. W., and B. Rowan. 1977. "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony." *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (2): 340–63.

Mitchell, R. K., B. R. Agle, and D. J. Wood. 1997. "Toward a Theory of Stakeholder Identification and Salience: Defining the Principle of Who and What Really Counts." *Academy of Management Review* 22 (4): 853–86.

Quirke, L. 2013. "Rogue Resistance: Sidestepping Isomorphic Pressures in a Patchy Institutional Field." *Organization Studies* 34 (11): 1675–99.

Scott, J. C. 2006. "The Mission of the University: Medieval to Postmodern Transformations." *Journal of Higher Education* 77 (1): 1–39.

Suchman, M. C. 1995. "Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches." *The Academy of Management Review* 20 (3): 571–610.