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# Policy reform and academic drift: Research mission and institutional legitimacy in the development of the Swedish higher education system 1977-2012

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## Abstract
20th century *massification* of higher education and academic research led to mission diversification and structural diversification of national higher education systems, but also a tendency of non-university colleges to seek to develop into full-scale universities by the emulation of practices of established academic organizations, a tendency that has been called *academic drift*. The drift as such can have multiple causes, and in this article, we relate academic drift to the concepts of institutional logics and isomorphism from neoinstitutional organization theory, delineating policymaking, norm shifts and organizational action in response to uncertainty as three component processes of academic drift. Using the case of the organizational field of the Swedish higher education system and its recent 35-year history, we draw both empirical and theoretical conclusions, and demonstrate the weight of the research mission in the building of institutional legitimacy for university colleges.

## 1. Introduction
European academia transformed profoundly in the twentieth century, expanding both in education and research, and undergoing a democratization by enlarging its mission beyond the interests of a narrow elite. This has been named *massification* and brought steep growths in student numbers as well as research volume. It had deep consequences for academia globally, diversifying its tasks and creating confusion over its core missions and how it could accommodate the growing demands and expectations of its sponsors, i.e. governments and ultimately taxpayers and society at large.

As a result , the landscape of academic institutions in (Western) Europe diversified into national *higher education systems* (henceforth HESs) with some division of labour between organizations providing higher education, most typically old full-breadth universities strong

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in both education and research; vocationally oriented non-universities (e.g. polytechnics); and smaller regional providers of lower-level tertiary education (Kyvik 2004; Hazelkorn and Moynihan 2010; Hazelkorn 2005, 2012; Vaira 2009; Geuna 1998; Scott 1995). This has been described as a desirable restructuring that allows higher education (and research) to serve society in a more democratized way (Birnbaum 1983; Santiago et al. 2008), but it appears also to have been countered by the tendency of the newer, specialized non-university colleges to strive for a research mission similar to the larger universities. This tendency has been called *academic drift*[1] and is the topic of this article.

The organizational field of higher education providers in Sweden was thoroughly reformed in 1977 when non-university colleges were created to help accommodating vastly increasing student numbers and bring larger segments of tertiary education (including vocational training) under the umbrella of higher education. The *system* inaugurated in 1977 was legally uniform and levelled but in practice binary: The new colleges (henceforth the *newcomers*) had a restricted role as suppliers of education on basis of reproduced curricula from the faculties in the universities, who retained exclusive rights to first-stream research funding and to award doctoral degrees. Since then, many newcomers have improved their standings and have closed the gap to the universities by building up research activities of their own, first on the basis of third-party grants and later also governmental first-stream research funding. Some have reached formal university status and others have obtained rights to award doctoral degrees. By analysing the transformation of the system from 1977 and on, with focus on the newcomers, we chronicle the Swedish HES as an organizational field and analyse the causes and mechanisms of academic drift. With the aid of neoinstitutional organization theory, we delineate transformative processes in the Swedish HES: The impact of governmental policymaking, field-level changes in norm systems, and the (strategic) responses of organizations to changes in their field. We thus identify academic drift as multifarious institutional change, keeping the analysis on the level of the organizational field, to draw conclusions about long-term developments of a national HES in a transformative period of European higher education and academic research.

Sweden is well suited for this, given its manageable size (approximately thirty universities and colleges) and its formal homogeneity: Until the mid-1990s, all organizations providing higher education were governmental and uniformly governed and organized – some have even called the system the "University of Sweden […] composed of local campuses" (Elzinga 1993, 191).

Previous empirical studies of academic drift have focused on bottom-up processes, identifying newcomers' entering into advanced level education as a key process in such drift (Morphew 2002; Jaquette 2013; Morphew and Huisman 2002; Huisman and Morphew 1998), and while such developments are visible among the Swedish newcomers, it is clear from previous studies that the quest for status and recognition of newcomers in Sweden is associated with the building of research activities. While this has previously been isolated as "research drift" (Jaquette 2013), we choose to use the term *academic drift*, because it signals a reorientation of the (perceived and actual) *academic culture* of the organizations in question from a focus on (vocational) education to a more complete academic organizational identity that involves research activities of a certain volume, and ambition of competing in research on

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[1] 'Academic drift' has several synonyms in the literature, and similar trends have been discussed with the use of the word 'drift'; e.g. 'epistemic drift' (which is a wider and deeper drift of the criteria for ex ante and ex post evaluation of scientific activities; see Elzinga 1997) and 'research drift' (e.g. Jaquette, 2013), see further below. In the United States, the preferred term is 'mission creep' (Gonzales, 2012), which is not limited to academic contexts but denotes gradual alteration of identities and missions in any type of organization.

a national (and possibly international) arena.

In the next section, we review the concept of academic drift and combine it with the conceptual framework from neoinstitutional theory. Thereafter, we give an account on the history of the Swedish HES from 1977 and on, with focus on policy developments and field-level institutional change. In a final section, we discuss the findings, and draw conclusions about the impact of policymaking, norm shifts, and organizational behaviour on field level as composite processes of academic drift.

## 2. Academic drift and institutional isomorphism

Academic drift has a heterogeneous set of impetuses. The coining of the concept is credited to Neave (1979), who assumed that there is a hierarchy of different processes in the drift, so that e.g. policy measures induce organizational restructuring at the level of universities and colleges, which creates behavioural changes at the level of individuals, or the other way around. Kyvik (2009) has added that academic drift can be induced simultaneously by mechanisms on different levels and that these can reinforce each other and create a self-sustaining process.[2]

Theoretically, we relate academic drift to *neoinstitutional theory* (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Zucker 1977; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott 2008), where the key level of analysis is *organizational fields*; i.e. assemblages of organizations with a common area of operation that define their activities similarly (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 148; Wooten and Hoffman 2008). Key to neoinstitutional theory is that organizations in such fields tend to develop similarities in their norms and practices and grow increasingly alike, by *institutional isomorphism*, despite competition between them and despite rational reasons for specialization – isomorphism is driven by the need for organizations to establish *legitimacy* for their activities, which is expected to secure their long-term survival. o gain legitimacy, organizations typically incorporate various institutional elements specific to their organizational field (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 352), but legitimacy is institutionally conditioned and its content varies between different fields (Suchman 1995, 574), which makes fields different but the organizations within increasingly alike.

We identify academic drift as a form of institutional isomorphism specific to the organizational field of (national) HESs and use the concepts of academic drift and institutional isomorphism to explain the tendency of universities and colleges within the same HES to grow alike.

While earlier neoinstitutional theorists emphasized an organization's compliance with pre-existing social institutions, and also singled out symbolic adaptation to these in parallel with an uninterrupted continuation of an organization's ordinary activities ("loose-coupling") (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Zucker 1977), more recent contributions view organizations as less separated from the organization field and rather active in sustaining and reinforcing the legitimizing institutions (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Lawrence 2008; Wooten and Hoffman 2008). But recent neoinstitutionalists have also shown that organizations may act on basis of their interests or by the input of e.g. policy reform, especially so in the face of uncertainty, which means that it is not possible to neglect the autonomy of organizational actors from social structure (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012). Therefore we emphasize the relationship between institutional factors, organizational autonomy and direct steering through policymaking, by the use of the concept of *institutional logics* (Friedland and

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[2] Since the level of analysis is the organizational field, we avoid analyzing ambitions of individual academics as a composite mechanism of academic drift (Lepori and Kyvik 2010; Neave 1979) or a primary driver behind it (Griffioen and de Jong 2013; Morphew 2000), which would requires a study with another focus.

Alford 1991; Thornton and Ocasio 1999).

Institutional logics are the "organizing principles" for organizations in the same field, and these are "available to organizations and individuals to elaborate" (Friedland and Alford 1991, 248). Scott (2008, 51ff) has defined institutions as composed of three overlapping elements: *regulative* (formal rules and policies), *normative* (environmental demands and expectations) and *cognitive* (established or successful models), corresponding to the original three mechanisms institutional isomorphism *coercion*, *normative pressure*, and *mimesis* (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Treating these not as mutually exclusive and distinct but as integrated parts of the *institutional logics* that structure organizational behaviour and evolution within a field, we can use them as a heuristic to delineate forces behind academic drift. This is done bearing in mind that change on field level is normally brought about by a combination of policies, decisions and institutional drift processes that are not typically possible to fully identify or distinguish. Thereby, we also escape the operationalization of coercive, normative and mimetic isomorphism as three symmetrical forces that act alongside each other.

Several studies of universities and HESs have used neoinstitutional theory in analysing aspects of how universities and colleges build legitimacy and adapt to change (Frølich et al. 2013; Rusch and Wilbur 2007; Morphew 2002; Maasen and Potman 1990), and the theory has also been applied in a study of the Swedish HES (Sköldberg 1991). Few have, however, connected isomorphic change to the concept of academic drift to analyse how the development of HESs may be shaped by policy, shifts in norm systems, and uncertainties caused by e.g. internationalization or changing demands of societal relevance of education and research and how thesecan transform a whole organizational field of universities and colleges. Stensaker and Dahl Norgård (2001) call for a more heterogeneous analysis of organizational behaviour that acknowledges isomorphic change where appropriate but also highlights factors such as institutionalized room for manoeuvring combined with "innovativeness" – which is reasonable in the academic sector which maintains strong values of academic freedom and is built on the ideal of continuous intellectual renewal. In a sense, this article follows in their footsteps, although since we remain on field level, we are less interested in contrasting institutional isomorphism with epistemic renewal or managerial autonomy.

In the current context, *coercive isomorphism* is identified as the impact of legislation and regulation by government, parliament and their authorities; i.e. what Neave (1979, 155) names *policy drift*. It may take the shape of direct regulation, in which case it does not signal a desire (on behalf of decision makers) to make the newcomers become alike the older universities, but rather their failure to recognize and cultivate other ambitions and rationales because of strong heterogeneity in the norms that guide the organizational field and the policy field (cf. normative isomorphism). There is reason to believe that the rise of academic 'excellence' gold standards, mostly inspired by ideals of elite institutions in the US or Western Europe, has had increasing impact on policy drift and might bolster coercive isomorphic change in HESs. *Normative pressure* is consequently identified as the proliferation of those norms, values and rules applied by professional expertise, including recent 'excellence' norms. Regardless of whether research activities have their home at old universities or at newcomers, they tend to conform with established standards and to universities as primary hosts of disciplinary development and academic authority, it is natural that university research environments become role models for non-university research. The reduction of norms to catchphrases such as 'excellence', accentuated by university rankings (Hazelkorn 2011; Kehm and Stensaker 2009), may create or facilitate normative pressure. Legitimacy can also be sought by shallow imitation of ranking research centres and established academic institutions (cf. "loose

coupling", above) (Geuna 1998; Morphew 2009), but there are examples of newcomers who seek to establish their own niches and build legitimacy according to different ideals (Hallonsten 2012; Lepori and Kyvik 2010; Hazelkorn 2005) that connect to the stated mission of many regional newcomers to interface with local and regional enterprise (Kyvik 2004; Vaira 2009) and their heritages as vocational schools (Lepori and Kyvik 2010; Hazelkorn and Moynihan 2010).

The seeming coexistence of conflicting norms and policies lead us to identify *mimetic isomorphism* as an organization's solution to uncertainties regarding what route to take at a given point in time. The building of research activities is a risky venture, especially in early phases (Hazelkorn 2004). Profound changes to society's demands and expectations on science, and an increasing global competition in HESs, has created uncertainties regarding the missions, goals, and quality standards for academic science, and thus its norm systems. A typical response to uncertainties is mimetic adoption of (what is interpreted to be the) established practices in the organizational field (that are viewed as having been) proven functional and strengthening legitimacy in those organizations in the field that are identified as role models (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 150).

In the next section we analyse the development of the Swedish HES since its inception in 1977. In order to identify the more direct effects of policymaking (coercive isomorphism), we use the method of process-tracing (George and Bennett 2005, 205ff). Shifts in national and global standards on field level (normative isomorphism) are more vaguely described but similarly builds on an evaluation of broader processes by the aid of secondary literature. Since the analysis remains on field level, we avoid studying the direct actions of specific colleges, but analyse shifts in the composition of the field partly through the lens of organizational action in response to environmental uncertainty (mimetic isomorphism).

**3. The Swedish higher education system 1977-2012**
The Swedish HES has a history quite typical for Europe. In the early twentieth century, higher education was an elite privilege, offered by eight universities (see table 1) located in the three most populated urban areas Stockholm-Uppsala, Gothenburg and Lund-Malmö (Hallonsten and Holmberg 2013, 575). It would take until the 1960s and 1970s before new institutes were founded, and it was then a direct consequence of massification which began after World War II and meant a thirty-fold increase of the number of enrolled students between 1940 and 2012 (Andrén 2013, 15). Before 1977, all newly founded academic organizations received *university* privileges either at their inception or shortly after, whereas when the single largest expansion occurred in 1977, the 14 newcomers founded all became non-university *colleges* ("högskolor")(with one exception, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) (see table 1). These newcomers were all founded by reorganization of regional branch campuses of the old universities (established earlier as relief in times of steep growth in student admissions) and several vocational schools (health care and teachers colleges, etc.), and the 13 new non-university colleges essentially became regional providers of education (Hallonsten and Holmberg 2013, 575; Premfors 1979, 92). Seven more similar colleges were founded throughout the 1980s and 1990s (table 1).

The 1977 expansion was a policy reform with roots in a 1968 review of post-secondary education aiming for a socially equal industrialized society by developing an integrated and uniform HES (Askling 1989, 289). The system inaugurated was legally uniform and levelled with centralized authority (Elzinga 1993, 191). All organizations providing academic and vocational education on post-secondary level were included in the HES and had the same legal status and admitted students through a central national authority (Askling 1989, 294).

Nonetheless, there was significant built-in heterogeneity: The established universities kept their status as full-breadth research and education institutions, whereas the newcomers took the role of serving their regions with educated labour, with little or no research activities of their own, but rather reproduced curricula from the universities and the education programs inherited from the previous vocational schools. The eleven universities (the old eight and the three founded in the 1960s and 1970s) plus the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (also founded in 1977) had an exclusive formal right to discretionary research funding, and so the practical effect of the 1977 reform was the creation of a *binary* or *two-tier* Swedish HES (Hallonsten and Holmberg 2013, 580; Askling 1989, 295; Ruin 1983, 120; Sköldberg 1991).

Another consequence was a functional and financial separation of education and research. Funding for research and education became separate budget posts in governmental appropriations, and within the universities, responsibility for research and education was divided between internal governing bodies (Berggren 2012, 69). This division weakened the links between research and education, and it was further accentuated by the fact that the newcomers were not endowed with discretionary research funding, which kept them as essential education institutions. Although the functional division had its origin in the introduction of specific teaching positions (without a research assignment) in the 1950s (Andrén 2013, 159-161), the separation was cemented by the 1977 reform and created a structural disconnect between academic research and higher education which is still criticized as inappropriate and harmful especially to the education side (Berggren 2012, 13; Bienenstock et al. 2014).

To some extent, the 1977 reform can be explained by its historical context: it came in the midst of a re-evaluation of research policy priorities in many countries, whereby the old 'social contract for science' that emphasized autonomy of universities and trust between them and their state sponsors was being replaced by a new arrangement that put pressure on publicly funded research organizations to compete for resources and demonstrate direct contributions to economic and societal benefit (Vavakova 1998; Elzinga 1997). This development is not normally interpreted as originating solely in new demands on the policy side but also in changed internal understandings of the role of universities in society that took away emphasis from the Humboldtian ideal of close ties between education and research, and far-reaching academic freedom, and laid legitimacy and prestige rather one-sidedly in the realm of research and especially research with demonstrable benefits to society (Etzkowitz 2003; Jacob 2009). In Sweden, one implication of the 1977 reform was increased uncertainty regarding the nature of the research mission of the higher education sector: education and research became separated but the demands of linking education to research to ensure high quality were not weakened but reinforced, and it was unclear how this link should be kept intact on an organizational level, given the limited research resources.

While the 'first tier', comprising of the universities, was kept intact for the coming couple of decades, the group of newcomers without university status was gradually expanded in the 1980s (table 1). Calls for greater institutional independence and self-governance for the newcomers were heard from both outside and inside the sector and met by reforms that granted them some autonomy in planning and organizing education and also organize and fund research (foremost eligibility for third party grants). Also student numbers grew throughout the decade, and these developments have been described as causing a "breakthrough" for the newcomers in the late 1980s (Benner 2008, 111). In the governmental research bill of 1990, the newcomers were also endowed with their own research funding, although minuscule in comparison with the established universities, whose faculty boards retained formal control over the funding stream to the newcomers (Benner 2008, 113).

**Table 1: The Swedish higher education system and its development 1977-2012**

| Old and semi-old full-breadth universities | Founded | University status |
|---|---|---|
| Uppsala University | 1477 | 1477 |
| Lund University | 1666 | 1666 |
| Stockholm University | 1878 | 1904 |
| University of Gothenburg | 1891 | 1907 |
| Umeå University | 1958 | 1965 |
| Linköping University | 1965 | 1975 |

| Specialized institutes with university status | Founded | University status |
|---|---|---|
| Karolinska Institute | 1810 | 1923 |
| Royal Institute of Technology | 1827 | 1927 |
| Chalmers University of Technology | 1829 | 1951 |
| Stockholm School of Economics | 1909 | 1909 |
| Luleå University of Technology | 1971 | 1971 |
| Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences | 1977 | 1977 |

| New universities | Founded | University status |
|---|---|---|
| Karlstad University | 1977 | 1999 |
| Örebro University | 1977 | 1999 |
| *Växjö University* | *1977* | *1999* |
| *(Merged with Kalmar College in 2010, forming Linnaeus University)* | | |
| Mid Sweden University | 1993 | 2005 |
| Linnaeus University | 2010 | 2010 |

| Colleges with research area | Founded | Research area |
|---|---|---|
| Jönköping College | 1977 | 1995 |
| Mälardalen College | 1977 | 2000 |
| *Kalmar College* | *1977* | *1999* |
| *(Merged with Växjö University in 2010, forming Linnaeus University)* | | |
| Blekinge Institute of Technology | 1989 | 1999 |
| Malmö College | 1998 | 1998 |

| Colleges with rights to grant doctorates | Founded | Right |
|---|---|---|
| Borås College | 1977 | 2010 |
| Dalarna College | 1977 | 2011 |
| Gävle College | 1977 | 2011 |
| Skövde College | 1977 | 2010 |
| Halmstad College | 1983 | 2010 |
| West College | 1990 | 2010 |
| Södertörn College | 1995 | 2010 |

| Other colleges | Founded | |
|---|---|---|
| Kristianstad College | 1977 | |
| *Östersund College* | *1977* | |
| *Sundsvall/Härnösand College* | *1977* | |
| *Gotland College* | *1998* | |
| *(Became a subsidy of Uppsala University in 2013)* | | |

The next major reform came in 1993, when a centre-right government made an effort of renewal and streamlining, with the goals of decentralizing decision making and increase institutional autonomy, regionalize and redistribute resources to thinly populated areas, and create new governance and steering procedures based on managerialism and economic incentives including resource allocation schemes based on performance and throughput

(Bauer et al. 1999, 254; Engwall and Nybom 2007). Partly echoing international developments (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007; Schimank 2005), these reforms cohered with the intensified restructuring of the role of higher education and research in society in Europe and North America, which had its origins in governance reforms induced by policymaking but also a redirection of priorities inside the sciences that brought an import of quasi-market logics and an orientation towards problem-solving and closer relationships between universities and industry (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons 2001; Lam 2010). This shift in norms has been shown to resonate well with the build-up of research activities in newcomers where researchers with anchoring in local and regional industrial clusters and alternative scholarly identities found new ways of combining their interests with the opportunities opened by the expansion of HESs into areas previously occupied by vocational schools (Boyer 1990; Hallonsten 2012; Hazelkorn 2004).

Organizationally, the newcomers were significantly strengthened by the 1993 reform and by two additional policy decisions in 1994. The first was the launch of a strategic research funding body, the *Knowledge Foundation* (*KK-stiftelsen*), with the mission of building research capacity in the non-university colleges and strengthen their collaboration with industry. The legal status of this organization as a public research foundation with a large capital (of approximately 400 million Euro) ensured its long-term function as supplier of research funds to the newcomers (Holmberg 2012, 47-62). The second important 1994 policy reform was the transfer of authority to make professorial appointments from the government to the universities and colleges, which included the newcomers and gave them the right to appoint professors (Benner 2008, 116). Aconsequence was the creation of several *de facto* doctoral training programs at the newcomers, in practice entirely run by the new professors in the colleges and not seldom funded by the new foundation's generous grants, but with formal responsibilities, including awarding of degrees, at any of the established universities who still had the exclusive formal rights thereto (Hallonsten and Holmberg 2013, 581).

By mid 1990s, therefore, with doctoral training, professorships, a powerful separate funding source, and even some governmental base grants for research, the newcomers had started to compete for resources and recognition in research. The idea had also started to spread that an *institutional career path*[3] for the newcomers should be opened so that they would be enabled to improve their education and research activities and reform their organizations to reach a position where they could obtain university status and privileges. This career path was gradually opened in 1996 and 1997, when the social-democratic government gave the newcomers the opportunity to apply for one or several *research areas* (which meant rights to award doctorates in any field within the area in question, the areas being the natural sciences, technical sciences, medicine, and humanities/social sciences). The government also opened the door for the newcomers to file applications for university status (Sjölund 2002, 175), which would come with the right to a larger base grant and the full freedom to establish new fields for doctoral training within those *research areas* that were attached to the university upgrade. Correspondingly, on the education side, the newcomers were given the opportunity to apply for rights to grant degrees (up to advanced level) in new subject fields and professional training programs. This had the effect that education and research became even further separated as activities, and this time also with respect to building of institutional legitimacy: Accreditation in the area of research and in the area of education became subject to different processes with different logics.

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[3] This term, although in Swedish ("institutionell karriärväg"), has been used, quite accurately, to describe the policy-enabled academic drift process among newcomers in Sweden in the 1990s (Benner 2008, 116; Holmberg 2012, 117).

In 1997, four colleges applied for university status, and in 1999, Karlstad University, Växjö University and Örebro University were founded, despite unfavourable outcomes for the latter two in the review conducted by the National Agency for Higher Education (Sjölund 2002, 174-178). Four newcomers, Mälardalen College, Kalmar College, Blekinge Institute of Technology and Malmö College applied for and was granted research areas in 1998-2000 (see table 1). At the same time the general level of research funding income among the newcomers increased significantly, mostly by endowments and grants from local and regional stakeholders, but also government funding. In 2005, the Mid Sweden University was founded as the fourth new university. It has been argued that the execution of the institutional career path was insufficient, not least was the guaranteed first-stream research funding attached to the formal university status kept at significantly lower levels than what the older universities received (Hallonsten and Holmberg 2013, 581), and also, it has been argued, significantly lower than what would be required to build up durable and resilient research activities (Benner 2008, 115-116). In general comparisons with the old universities, the new ones have been criticized for weak performances in both research and education.

The 2004 governmental research bill marked a break with previous national policy, identifying the need for strategic system-wide prioritization of resources and efforts and introducing the first excellence initiative funding programs (Hallonsten and Silander 2012, 373-374). This resonated with international trends of excellence initiatives and the crystallization of elite universities within national academic systems which often embodied a disconnect between the desire to reap (demonstrable and quantifiable) benefits from university research for the economy, and the intensified focus on internal scientific criteria for judging quality and excellence (through foremost publication and citation counts) (Wildavsky 2010; Münch 2007). In Sweden, the policies seem to have partly been built on a bias in favour of the old universities and a direct neglect of the attempts of some newcomers to develop research activities with connections to local and regional enterprise (Benner, Stensaker, and Unemar-Öst 2010; Hallonsten 2012; Hallonsten and Silander 2012).

The career path for the newcomers had in practice already been closed from 2002 and on – several colleges (including Malmö, Södertörn, Skövde, Halmstad, Gävle, Jönköping, Borås and Dalarna) submitted formal applications for university status in the years 2002-2005 but all were turned down by the government. In the spring of 2006, the Minister for Education clarified that there would be no more new universities in Sweden, thus formally closing the career path (Holmberg 2012, 138). The excellence programs and the strategic prioritization in governmental research funding have since been expanded by funding programs that either are exclusive to the old universities or indirectly disfavour the newcomers (Hallonsten and Silander 2012; Hallonsten and Holmberg 2013). In 2008, the allocation of the governmental base grant funding for research was changed so that 5% of it was distributed on basis of research performance on university/college level (publications, citations and volume of external funding), and in 2012, the share was increased to 10%. This reform appears to disfavour the newcomers (Sandström and Sandström 2009, 246). In 2008, the right for colleges to apply for *research areas* was abolished and replaced by a possibility to apply for the right to award doctoral degrees in specific disciplines. Contrary to research areas, the right to grant doctorates come with no discretionary funding, but on the other hand, the right is awarded in subject fields significantly smaller than the broader research areas, and therefore easier to attain. As a result, it can be said to have lowered the barriers for entry into research for newcomers and to have allowed them to build research activities step by step. In 2010, seven colleges applied for, and attained, rights to award doctoral degrees.

Since 2006, the government have also encouraged collaboration and mergers between

universities and colleges. Although rumours of several such plans have circulated, only one merger and one annexation have materialized, namely the fusion of Växjö University and Kalmar College into the Linnaeus University in 2010, and the incorporation of Gotland College into Uppsala University in 2013. The mergers/annexations are not driven by the government but are clearly encouraged.

## 4. Concluding discussion

The 35-year history of the Swedish HES shows a number of important changes in the institutional logics of the field. In the specific case of the newcomers, several changes have occurred that follow the pattern of academic drift.

On a general level, we can identify a long-term shift of policy from the late-1970s model of uniformity and central control, to the current model of autonomy and goal orientation. This shift follows international patterns (e.g. Elzinga 1997; Jacob 2009), and it has led to increased autonomy also for the newcomers. Thus it can be identified as a (rather weak) process of coercive isomorphism that has put newcomers more on par with the old universities in terms of autonomy. Stronger coercion is identifiable in the newcomers' work to gain institutional legitimacy by building research activities, and those developments that can be identified there. The expansion of research funding for the newcomers has enabled them to increase their research capacity gradually since 1990. From the opening of the institutional career path in 1996/1997 to its closing in 2003, the facilitating of academic drift by policy-making and legislation was strong. Both trends are identified as coercive isomorphic change processes, as is the governmentally encouraged consolidation of the HES from 2006, with a few mergers.

But also normative pressure and mimesis are visible. We have identified a functional and financial division of education and research at system level and organizational level since the 1970s, resulting in weak connections between research and education and an alleged continued devaluation of education (Bienenstock et al. 2014; Berggren 2012). As Jacob (2009: 502-503) has noted, the differentiation of education and research as different realms of building legitimacy and prestige on the globalized academic market is mainly due to a long-term shift in norm systems and institutions, which means that it is a potentially forceful cause of normative pressure. In Sweden, the weak link between education and research is especially noteworthy given the fact that the HES is  home to most publicly funded research and has a monopoly in higher education – although institutionally merged, the two are oddly separated, as noted by Bienenstock et al. (2014). This is important because it partly explains why the search for institutional legitimacy among newcomers in Sweden, and thus academic drift, has a strong focus on research: the education mission is not charged with a similar prestige. This also connects to another change in norm systems internationally: Increased focus on measurable benefits to society was seen in the late-1970s and on, and was paired with policy reform towards strengthening of the organizational autonomy of universities and colleges, and goal-oriented steering models, in the 1980s. Both trends were echoed in Sweden, in governmental reform (coercion) and by seeming drift processes, which then translates to normative pressure. Especially the recent emphasis on excellence in research and the crystallization of a few elite universities to distinguish themselves in relation to the broader (national) HES are internationally visible norm shifts that have echoes in Sweden.

However, although we can identify some mobility in the system the last decades, the governmental policy shifts seem not to have had full impact – in some cases this appears to be due to a too short 'window of opportunity' before policies have been reversed (such as encouragement of newcomers in the mid-1990s and on, and corresponding discouragement in the early 2000s), or ambiguity in the practical implementation of follow-up of reforms

(such as with the institutional career path). None of the colleges created in 1977, not even the four new universities of 1999 and 2005, have managed to take the full step into the exclusive club of old universities. Also as a group, the newcomers are comparably weak: only about 12% of the annual total governmental research funding goes to the sixteen colleges and new universities – the eleven pre-1977 universities (plus the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) share the rest, i.e. 88% (Hallonsten and Holmberg 2013: 585-586).

Therefore, in line with our proposition that neither institutional logics nor their corresponding isomorphic change processes cannot be entirely analytically delineated, we conclude that while it is tempting to simply identify policy drift with coercive isomorphic change, we cannot rule out the works of normative pressure and mimesis, not least since the policy reforms appear to have been comparably weak and necessitated the newcomers themselves to act (to install professors, instate doctoral training programs, and eventually to apply for university status/research areas) in order for academic drift to actually occur. Not even in the case of the new universities, the government coerced anyone; all four applied themselves. Similarly, while the 1994 creation of an exclusive funding source for the newcomers (the Knowledge Foundation) can be interpreted as a case of strong policymaking in their favour, it has proven to be an actor with a rather opaque role, balancing between a substitute for substantial institutional block grants, council-like project funding and large strategic support programs for innovation and regional development, itself subject to forces of normative pressure and mimesis (Holmberg 2012). This apparent chronic opacity of policy decisions is testament to the relative importance of normative and cognitive institutional forces in the development of the system, over the purely regulative. Likewise, there is a discrepancy between the ambitions of policymakers and their ability to reform the system. The formally uniform system inaugurated in 1977 was strongly stratified by default – politicians may attempt to create a "University of Sweden" (Elzinga 1993, op. cit.) all they want, or award universities to sparsely populated regions out of ambitions of regional politics, but there are competing institutional logics in the national HES and the organizational field of universities and colleges (cf. "loose coupling", above). In addition, international norm systems are strong in academia due to its realm of self-organization and the logics of its internal reward structure built on peer review which extends to the level of organizations and their legitimacy and prestige. In recent years, strong norms have proliferated that are covered in catchwords such as excellence, innovation, and the emergence of a globalized knowledge-based economy. Academic drift seems to be one key outcome of this.

Hence, it would appear as if also mimetic and normative isomorphism have been strong in the history of the newcomers in Sweden. One telling example is the rapid founding of *de facto* doctoral training programs, several of which also eventually led to the granting of formal rights to award doctorates in specific areas. Since neither of these doctoral training programs came with any discretionary funding, their motivation was likely more related to legitimacy than prospects of increased financial stability. The same can be said about the flood of applications for university status in the early 2000s (which were all turned down). It is reasonable to conclude that normative pressure and/or mimesis was a key mechanism at play. This assumption clearly finds support in neoinstitutional theory. On theoretical level, we are ready to draw the following conclusion: While coercive isomorphism in the shape of policy-induced change in the field is comparably easily identified, it is clear that normative pressure is significantly harder to distinguish. Nonetheless, it occurs. Furthermore, and this is where our moderate contribution to theory-building is made, policymaking and norm shifts are sometimes in conflict and also in cases when they are not, especially newcomer organizations in the field of the Swedish HES are caught in a situation of confusion over what course of

action to take in order to maximize their legitimacy. Mimesis, i.e. the replication or emulation of established behaviours and formal procedures of the older organizations in the field, is a typical response. It is less distinguishable since it occurs without processes traceable in the same sense as policymaking (George and Bennett 2005: 205ff), but it is our contention that it has some significance as partial explanation for academic drift in Sweden.

In our account, Swedish research and higher education policy appears to drive functional specialization in some periods and homogenization in others, leaving especially the newcomers with an opaque mission and in a state of build-up with confusion on what they should bet on in their strategic work. This makes them exposed to forces of mimetic isomorphism, which we defined as occurring in response to uncertainty. However, while norm systems have a stabilizing function that might provide a counterforce to governmental policy which appears fickle, it must be noted that the building of comprehensive research activities is not a quick-fix to gain legitimacy, quite the opposite. There are potentially huge transaction costs in connection with academic drift – the building of research activities is a very time- and resource-consuming exercise (Hazelkorn 2008, 166), and this relates not only to goal fulfilment but in worst cases to goal displacement. Therefore, although it might work to push newcomers towards established norm systems and proven organizational models, academic drift may also be a threat to newcomers as well as to broad layers of entire HESs, if it is not matched by adaptation of resource allocation and proper rearrangement of priorities. Here, policy obviously has a role. While we have shown that academic drift can be understood as isomorphic change in the specific organizational field of national HESs, and thus both natural and likely unstoppable, the responsibility of policymakers to counter academic drift or drive it in desirable directions, deserves further discussion in higher education studies and research policy studies.

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