How do meta-organizations affect extra-organizational boundaries?

The case of university associations

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ABSTRACT

How do organizational associations affect extra-organizational boundaries? This chapter addresses this question by looking into the long-established practice among universities to form associations. In order to examine how associations delineate boundaries in universities' institutional environment, the chapter draws on the scholarly work on categories and conceptualizes associations as meta-organizations. The chapter finds that category-based identities, and other organizational characteristics, enacted to demarcate members from non-members play a central role in this process. In following these lines of demarcation on a sample of 185 national and international university associations a typology emerges, accompanied by a global diffusion pattern. Three sets of institutional conditions are then identified as being conducive to this process: (1) the twentieth-century university expansion and the consolidation of national higher education fields, (2) the intensification of cross-border interaction and the advent of international institutions, and (3) the formation of a global field and the rise of competition as an ideological imperative.

KEYWORDS: Boundaries, categories, identity, meta-organizations, organizations, universities

Introduction

Throughout history, universities have come together for various reasons: to cooperate, to exchange knowledge, to defend their right to autonomy and freedom of teaching and research, or to stand for the principles that go beyond concerns of purely academic nature, such as human rights or democracy. Sometimes, these collective ventures would be of ad hoc nature, created to seize a one-off opportunity or head off a temporary threat. On other occasions, collective ventures take a more permanent form. The subject of this paper – university associations – are exactly such ventures.

That universities form or join associations is not a new phenomenon. A European country would, as a rule almost, have at least one such association – often called rectors' conference¹ – some of which date back to the nineteenth century. Typically, their purpose is to facilitate cooperation between member

universities and to voice their joint interests before third parties, especially the state. Comparatively, cross-border associations are of more recent origin, with their number increasing dramatically only in the past several decades (Beerens, 2004; Knight, 2008; Teather, 2004). Overall, both national and cross-border associations around the world have been on the rise throughout the twentieth century, a trend also noted in other sectors (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012).

Associations of organizations have two important features to consider. First, they bring together organizations which share some characteristics, such as belonging to the same category of organizations (e.g. universities, youth organizations, banks, etc.). We can think of them, in plain terms, as groupings of similar organizations across social space. Second, the boundaries of these associations are relatively crisp; organizations can be either in or out, or, in some cases, partly in, but in nonetheless (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). These boundaries are maintained by enforcing certain inclusion/exclusion criteria upon membership, thus demarcating organizations members from outsiders. Considering these two features in light of the trend of expansion of associations over the past century – within or across national borders – allows us to conceive of the social space as being continuously charted by organizations establishing new or joining existing associations.

This chapter investigates this phenomenon in the university sector. To this end, it primarily draws on the literature on categories and boundaries thereof (e.g. Hannan, 2010; Negro, Koçak, & Hsu, 2010). It conceptualizes university associations as *meta-organizations*, that is, organizations characterized by having other organizations as their members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Gulati et al., 2012). The chapter argues that meta-organizations represent, and in some cases even epitomize, efforts to create, maintain or disrupt boundaries in the institutional environment. The institutional environment is here conceived of as a set of interrelated organizational fields (W. R. Scott, 2013; Wooten & Hoffman, 2008), located *within* national borders or *spanning* them. This chapter is, therefore, in agreement with the argument of Hüther and Krücken (2016) that European universities display multiple-field embeddedness, whereby the distinction can be made between the global, European and several national, state and regional fields.

Empirically, this chapter analyses 185 national and international university associations established since the end of the nineteenth century. Based primarily on their membership criteria, the chapter develops a typology of university associations, traces each of the types historically and discusses the way they affect within-field and cross-field categories and boundaries thereof. Their emergence and evolution are analysed along the following, partially overlapping, phases, each arriving with a distinct set of institutional conditions giving rise to a new type of association: (a) the twentieth-century university expansion and the consolidation of national higher education fields, (b) the intensification of cross-border interaction and the advent of international institutions, and (c) the rise of competition as an ideological imperative. The paper closes with a discussion of the implications for the study of extra-organizational boundaries.

Meta-organizations as extra-organizational environment

Much like organizations, associations of organizations, or meta-organizations,² can be viewed as products of accelerated cultural rationalization: attempts to simplify, systematize and introduce order in a field as a means for pursuing greater social purposes (Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Jepperson, 2002). Such attempts may come from organizations themselves, in their effort “to eliminate part of their environment” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, p. 62), but also from the authorities seeking to have a little more organization under their jurisdiction. Either way, both for focal organizations and third parties, once-established, associations are, on the one hand, expected to decrease uncertainty and complexity in the organizational environment, and, on the other, increase control and predictability (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Gulati et al., 2012).

One important source of stability in the environment would be the institutionalized categories of organizations that inhabit it. We can think of them as formal and otherwise taken-for-granted classifications or socially legitimated groupings of perceived similar entities (Hannan, Pólos, & Carroll, 2007; Sharkey, 2014). Often, these categories are sector-specific and can refer to groups of organizations classified as, for example, banks, retail companies, sports clubs, universities, civil society organizations, and so forth. It is not uncommon for a country to have associations comprising members of a designated industry, whereby boundaries of these associations are frequently aligned with boundaries of well-established categories (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). For example, the cooperative banking sector in Germany is represented through the National Association of German Cooperative Banks (BVR), which brings together *all* cooperative banks in the country. Such ventures can span national borders. The said BVR is also a member of the European Association of Co-operative Banks (EACB). Such spanning of national borders, while remaining within categorical boundaries, is, in fact, frequently found – and increasingly more so – in other sectors (Gulati, 1995). And so we have international associations of, for example, automobile manufacturers, national trade unions, chambers of commerce, business schools, national and regional professional associations, and so forth. These categories and their respective boundaries are often deeply institutionalized and for the organizations belonging to them it seems almost “natural” to (strive to) belong to the shared meta-organization (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008).

It is generally acknowledged that categories shape organization’s *identity*, inform it on what action is expected and appropriate and help it identify rivals and potential partners (Negro et al., 2010; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Joining or establishing a meta-organization formed around a category can thus be seen as “a self-categorization process, whereby the organization’s membership in identity categories or groups are declared” (Whetten & Mackey, 2002, p. 398). When meta-organizations are established by third parties (e.g. the state, international organizations or the law), the categorization and the identity of the meta-organization are also externally assigned and members are then expected to subscribe to it in order to secure or maintain legitimacy. In either of the scenarios, one role of linkages which are then established between the meta-level and its respective member organizations would be to channel the identity between these two levels, in both directions, effectively shaping both.

Essentially, meta-organizations bring together organizations which share some characteristics that simultaneously separate them from other organizations. These characteristics may flow from a well-established cultural category, although not necessarily: organizations which are of the same status are more likely to form a tie (Podolny, 2010). In looking at hospitals, D’Aunno and Zuckerman suggested that those similar in, for example, the types of the services they offer are “likely to face similar patterns of resource dependence and, as a result, have similar problems to solve” and are therefore more likely to establish formal links (1987, p. 539). Category-related or not, these shared characteristics lay down the groundwork for the identity of the meta-organization. For members of an association of, for example, Christian colleges in Latin America, being Christian would be one of the central elements of the shared identity. But so may be the fact that they all share a Latin American cultural heritage or speak languages which place them in the same linguistic family. Or, that they claim to be of high status, rather than of low status; colleges and not universities. By extension, all those marked by the absence of some or all of these characteristics are in principle excluded. Associations, therefore, play a role in bringing to the fore the multiple identities its member organizations carry, but they also create boundaries between these and non-members along those very same identity lines. The aforementioned BVR suggests an idea of an organizational field in which there is a clear boundary between cooperative banks, on the one hand, and other types of banks, on the other, whereby each member shares defining features of a cooperative bank and identifies itself as one.

Although organizational identity is confirmed or claimed by affiliating with similar others – effectively reinforcing boundaries towards dissimilar others – we should not think of the identity of an association as simply an aggregate of identities of its individual members (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Rather, the essence of the shared identity carried by the association flows from one or a set of shared characteristics

or purposes which bring the organizations together in the first place (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; D'Aunno & Zuckerman, 1987; Podolny, 2010). Members of BVR may be very different organizations, but what brings them together is a set of shared characteristics constituted primarily – but not exclusively – in the category they claim to occupy. Identity of the meta-organization could be perhaps better described as the common denominator of organizational identities of all its members.

Ahrne and Brunsson (2008, 2011) argue that, unlike networks, meta-organizations have clear boundaries, given it is clear who is a member and who is not. However, as meta-organizations may have different types of membership, such as full membership, candidate or observer membership, we could think of those boundaries as permeable to a varying degree. Boundaries of a meta-organization which only allows full membership would then be less permeable than those of the meta-organization which also has partial membership, such as candidate or observer members. In this way, an organization which has some of the characteristics necessary to be a member, but not all of those required, may be given the status of a candidate (until it fulfils the requirements for a full membership) or of an observer. At the same time, partiality of membership and the related permeability of boundaries of associations may also be a function of the degree of fuzziness of the category boundaries which lends itself to the meta-organization as the main membership criterion and a source of shared identity of its members (Hannan, 2010). Unlike crisp boundaries, fuzzy ones allow partial membership, whereby membership in a category is seen in degrees. For example, compared to Oxford University, Ostwestfalen-Lippe University of Applied Sciences can be seen as a less typical member and therefore partial member of the category “university” (Hannan, 2010). Membership of such partial category members in a category-bound association may therefore be contested.

Scholars often assert that the institutional environment exerts pressure on organizations, creating expectations from them to conform to institutionalized norms, standards or taken-for-granted understandings of appropriate behaviour. Organizations, in turn, respond in various ways, whereby these responses are typically contingent upon a host of, often context-related, factors. Creating or joining meta-organizations is merely one way of responding, although such response may feed directly into the institutional latticework which constitute the said environment, effectively “eliminating” parts of it, as Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) aptly put it. Even when meta-organizations are created by third parties, the outcome may be the same, although its genesis would be different. For all the parties involved, and in this case for the organizations in question and the said third parties, such change is expected to decrease uncertainty and complexity, on the one hand, and increase control and predictability, on the other. We could as well imagine that such redrawing of boundaries may increase or decrease the room for manoeuvre for some organizations, with or without affecting that of other field members. To further investigate how this “elimination” of the environment looks like in the higher education sector, and particularly how it affects boundaries *between* organizations, I start with taking stock of its organizational associations.

Researching meta-organizations in the university sector: sources and data

The database of meta-organizations analysed in this paper has been compiled from existing sources using manual nonprobability sampling technique. This has been done in the following steps. First, a definition of a university association (given in the next paragraph) was developed. Second, existing databases, repositories and other sources containing relevant information on university associations were located. Two main sources have been used: (a) the public database of the International Association of Universities (IAU),³ from which 77 national and international associations have been identified as matching the definition and (b) the Open Yearbook of the Union of International Associations (UIA),⁴

in which 54 such international associations have been identified. In addition to these, another 54 national and international associations, from various sources, have been included. The database, including relevant quotes from associations' websites, was last updated in April 2017.

In deciding whether an association would be included in the sample, the following criteria have been applied. First, the association had to be primarily a meta-organization, that is, an organization of "multiple legally autonomous entities," established without an expiration date (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; König, Schulte, & Enders, 2012, p. 1325). Associations which also allowed for individual membership along the organizational one were included as long as they were *primarily* organizations of organizations. Some of the associations in the sample are meta-meta-organizations, or both meta- and meta-meta-, which means that they have both universities and other university associations as members. Second, each association in the sample had to have universities (or non-university higher education institutions) as its members, not governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations or other types. Exceptionally, when an association would also allow these as members, while still primarily being an association of universities, it would be included in the sample. Third, the sample included only national level and cross-border associations, leaving out those which cover a specific region within a country. The reason for excluding them was mainly of practical nature, given that few were found in the sources listed above.

The database was further expanded with the following information on the associations: (1) foundation year,⁵ (2) number of member universities, (3) whether it operates at a national, (cross-border) regional or global level, (4) if national, the country, (5) if regional, the geographical area covered, (6) whether it is intra- or cross-continental, (7) membership criteria, (8) institutional affiliation (e.g. UNESCO), if any, (9) descriptive data related to the associations' goal and mission, and (10) the web page, when available, used to complete and cross-check the information.

A number of limitations of this approach should be highlighted. First, the conclusions drawn are within the limitation of the sampling method which implies that the size of the population is not known. Another weakness of this approach is that even though we can document the emergence of associations longitudinally, based on the year of foundation, we cannot tell anything about their membership composition over time, the historical change in their purposes and related. Thirdly, this data are largely self-reported, which comes with usual limitations. On the other hand, self-reported data are considered adequate when analysing how organizations signal their identity, social role and appropriateness. Overall, although the external validity of such a strategy may be put to question, it is considered sufficiently reliable to address the research problem, and despite these limits, the database compiled is considered a valuable resource given its uniqueness and the fact that it is tailored for the questions herewith addressed.

University associations: the variety and a typology

A surface look at the data reveals that there is much variation among university associations with respect to their size, categories they subscribe to, when they were founded and by whom, membership criteria, rationale for their establishment, and not least to the level at which they operate. Some comprise universities from a single country; others are cross-border ventures and essentially operate in the international domain. Some are more than a century old, others are more recent. Some have large membership and comprise all universities in a geographically designated area; others are exclusive and restricted to universities of a particular kind, even regardless of geographical or political borders. Some are voluntary, yet membership in others is legally binding. And so on.

By looking at the geographic span of the associations sampled, a distinction emerges between (1) the associations operating within the borders of a single country, (2) cross-border associations linked to a

specific geographic region (such as Europe, Commonwealth, and Arab countries) and, finally, (3) cross-border associations without a geographic reference, normally spanning two or more continents. These three types are treated as operating at distinct levels of organizational fields, that is, national, cross-border (regional), and global, respectively, whereby each is expected to represent a distinct institutional environment.

Fig. 1. University associations by field-level and decade established ($n = 175^5$)

The number of associations at all three field levels has been on a steady increase, especially since the 1970s (Fig. 1). The exponential growth roughly followed the general trend of organizational expansion (Bromley & Meyer, 2015), the expansion and “massification” of the higher education sector in the decades following the WWII (Schofer & Meyer, 2005; Trow, 1973), and more intense cross-border interaction which was gaining momentum in the same period (Altbach, 2013; P. Scott, 1998).

The analysis of membership criteria reveals two primary lines of inclusion/exclusion (Table 1). The first group of associations draws its inclusion/exclusion criteria from (1) category membership, that is, their boundary is aligned with that of the category “university.” These associations are hereby called *generalist*. Their membership criteria typically draw boundaries between universities and other types of organizations, such as trade unions or banks. Italian Rectors’ Conference, European University Association or Community of Mediterranean Universities would be examples of this type. This type of associations makes up almost half of the sample (47%), and it is mostly found in national fields (53 in count or 61% of all generalist associations are national).

Table 1. Types of university associations ($n = 185$)

Category	Generalist (University)			Specialist (University + attribute)					
Boundary	Sectoral			Intra-sectoral, horizontal			Intra-sectoral, vertical		
Membership criterion	Category			Specialization			High status		
Typical membership characteristics	Category membership			Category membership + presence of a pre-determined <i>attribute</i>			Category membership + <i>high-status</i>		
	e.g. <i>Universities Australia</i> ; <i>European University Association</i> ; <i>International Association of Universities</i>			e.g. <i>Mexican Federation of Private Higher Education Institutions</i> ; <i>Association of Christian Universities and Colleges in Asia</i> ; <i>International Association of Maritime Universities</i>			e.g. <i>Group of Eight</i> ; <i>League of European Research Universities</i> , <i>International Alliance of Research Universities</i>		
Count and share in the sample	87 (47%)			75 (41%)			23 (12%)		
	National	Regional (cross-border)	Global	National	Regional (cross-border)	Global	National	Regional (cross-border)	Global
	53	33	1	23	31	21	9	11	3

The second group is reserved for those associations which draw boundaries around (2) sub-category membership and associate along similarities *within* the category “university”. They are further divided into two sub-groups. The first sub-group of associations draws its boundaries along some specialization or characteristic such as ownership, religion, language, discipline and mission and they are called *specialist-horizontal*. Typical examples of a specialist-horizontal association would be the Rectors’ Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences, Asian Association of Agricultural Colleges and Universities, or the International Association of Buddhist Universities. They come together not only as universities, but as a particular kind of universities, that is, of applied sciences, agricultural, and Buddhist, respectively. Specialist-horizontal associations form the second-largest type and make up 41% of the sample. More than two-thirds (69%) of these are international.

Fig. 2. University associations by type and decade established ($n = 175^5$)

Finally, the second sub-group draws its membership criteria from status distinction and it is hereby called *specialist-vertical* or simply *elite*. Examples of it would be the Australian Group of Eight or the

League of European Research Universities (LERU), both claiming to be primarily associations of “top” or “leading” universities in their respective fields, therefore excluding all those which are considered not to be top or leading. With 12% of the share in the sample, this is by far the smallest of the three types.

Similar to the distribution across field levels, the number of associations of different types has also been increasing over time (Fig. 2). Here, it is worth noting that the status-driven associations, or the elites, seem to have picked up momentum at the turn of the century, with more than a half of those sampled established since 2000, at more or less equal pace in national and cross-border fields. This supports the often-made claim that status is becoming increasingly important for universities, as well as that the environment – nationally or internationally – is being more perceived as competitive (Brankovic, 2018; Marginson, 2006).

The twentieth century university expansion and the consolidation of national higher education fields

That academic organizations from the same region or country come together in order to pursue a shared goal is not a new thing. According to some historical accounts, it was not uncommon for European universities in the Middle Ages to defend the collective interests of both students and professors before municipality, crown or church – all of which had their own expectations from and authority over the universities in their domain (Berman, 2009; Rüegg, 2003). Given that in those times it was rarely the case that there was more than one university on a territory ruled by one sovereign, formal associating as an organizational form of the kind that existed in, for example, trading, simply was not a practice for universities. Universities back then were, after all, a different sort of establishments (Frijhoff, 2003). In fact, medieval and early modern universities were actively striving to maintain monopoly over what they deemed was their territory by using resources to prevent potential rivals to emerge or become fully-fledged universities (Frijhoff, 2003; Rashdall, 2010; Rüegg, 2003). The expansion of the university, however, continued throughout the early modern period, although it was not until the nineteenth century and the rise of the nation state, and the subjugation of the university to its authority, that the universities under a single jurisdiction approached collective action more formally.

Among the group of the oldest ventures of the kind would be the present-day Universities UK (formerly the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom⁶) – the umbrella association of all universities in the United Kingdom, formally established in 1918. According to its own account, the roots of the association “lie in the 19th century when informal meetings took place involving the vice-chancellors of a number of universities and principals of university colleges.” Other associations established around the same time were the Swiss Rectors’ Conference (established in 1901), Universities Canada (1911), the Association of American Colleges and Universities (1915), and the Association of Indian Universities (1925). Over the subsequent decades, the practice of forming such associations within national borders spread across the globe and today we can find them in any corner of the world. We could even say with considerable certainty that university associations of this type are today an expected part of a university field environment. The fact that almost all countries of the former Eastern Bloc established their own university associations within several years after the collapse of the Soviet Union (or even some years before) attests to this.

Typically, the role of these associations is to represent interests of all universities in their respective countries, primarily before the state – which is the principal “rule-maker,” as well as a key provider of vital resources in most countries. They also commonly commit to a similar set of principles, such as defending the autonomy of academic enterprise and freedom of research and teaching, but also to

upholding the role and defending the interests of university in society, both as an institution and as a category of organizations. They typically engage in internal, but also in public debates about the nature and purpose of higher education and science, as well as about their place in society and relationship with other sectors. In some countries, these associations are foreseen by the law and sometimes have a formal say – as the “voice” of all universities – in regulatory decision making (Stöber, 2013). In some countries they even have a direct or indirect role in the process of accrediting universities and therefore the influence on deciding which higher education establishment is worth the licence and which is not. Effectively, as a collectively of all (or most) universities on a designated territory, university associations of this type stand as guardians of categorical boundaries of university as an institution in the most universal sense.

Although these associations are to represent all universities, in some countries not all universities can actually be members. For example, (some) private universities in Poland and Portugal cannot join. Such cases testify to the fuzziness and the contested nature of the category in these countries and membership in these associations is reserved for universities which fulfil certain criteria, such as issuing doctoral degrees. These universities would then be “proper” or “real” category members due to some property, such as comprehensiveness, ownership structure, the abovementioned accreditation, etc. Such generalist yet exclusive associations are an example of efforts to maintain category integrity by not allowing “outsiders” in, which would carry the risk of “diluting” (the meaning of) the category.

The twentieth-century expansion of higher education and the changing needs for skilled labour led to the upgrade of post-secondary schools to higher education institutions in many countries, typically into some form of polytechnics or, later, universities of applied sciences (Kyvik, 2004; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). In many countries traditionally dominated by public universities this was followed by the emergence and expansion of private higher education and institutions thereof (Altbach & Levy, 2005). These developments gave rise to the first national associations of these institutions, alongside the existing university ones. A country with a so-called binary higher education system, in which there is a clear boundary between two sub-categories of higher education institutions (i.e. university and university of applied sciences/polytechnic), would often have one association for each sub-category. This we find in, for example, Croatia, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Serbia. Some countries, on the other hand, have different dimensions of horizontal specialization and corresponding field boundaries, also reinforced by a formal categorization and (at least) one association for each category. For example, in Japan, there are four associations: one for national universities, one for public and two for private (Yonezawa, 2012). In Brazil, on the other hand, a distinction is made between federal universities, state or municipal universities and community universities, all of which have their own association (de Magalhães Castro, 2004). The mere existence and not least the active functioning of such associations implies, to some extent at least, that their respective categorical boundaries and corresponding identities are being maintained by their members or, when these are legally mandated, by the authorities.

Although the higher education expansion is commonly associated with the twentieth century and especially the post-WWII period, in some cases these university associations of the specialist-horizontal type date further back. For instance, the oldest such associations in the sample are the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (1887) and the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (1899), both in the US. Yet, much like in the case of the polytechnics and applied sciences decades later, or any other national field featuring any kind of specialist-horizontal associations, the US field in this case also had to undergo a prior expansion and organizational diversification, thus allowing for the (sub-)categorization implied in these associations to develop.

Beyond national borders: the intensification of cross-border interaction and the advent of international institutions

The first university association to span national borders was established in 1913 and named the Universities Bureau of the British Empire, today known as the Association of Commonwealth Universities. However, given the historical circumstances of the day, it is debatable to what extent this association was truly considered international at the point of its foundation. Perhaps a better vantage point for exploring the border-spanning associations in regional contexts are the Central American University Council, established in 1948, a year younger Association of the Universities of the Latin America and the Caribbean, the 1955 Association of European Universities (merged in 2001 with the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences to form what is now known as the European University Association (see Nyborg, 2014)), the Association of Arab Universities (1964) and the Association of African Universities (1967). These associations⁷ were mostly established in effort to strengthen formal cooperation between universities and reach out in a common voice to international organizations.

Some international associations, on the other hand, were initiated by international organizations, which in pursuing their own agendas, sought to bring universities together. The International Association of Universities (IAU), founded in 1950 by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is one such example. Today it gathers more than 600 universities from about 120 countries which together aim at "reflection and action on common concerns" of all universities around the world. Similar to these, only at the sub-category level, would be the international associations of the universities of applied sciences, public or open universities, which exist in some regions or, like IAU, at the global level.

These associations characteristically emerged against the backdrop of political integration in their respective regions and are, if not established, then certainly endorsed by inter-governmental institutions. For instance, the Association of African Universities was founded following the recommendations made by UNESCO. The Federation of the Universities of the Islamic World works within the framework of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO). The Association of Arab Universities, on the other hand, works within the framework of the Arab League. Southern African Regional Universities Association brings together all public universities located in the fifteen countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Europe alone features a number of regions which emerge from its cross-border associations, such as the Alps Adriatic Region, Baltic Sea Region, Carpathian Region, Danube Region and Upper Rhine, each with its university association. Some of these, such as the European Confederation of Upper Rhine Universities, emerged from an international project consortium funded by the European Union. European University Association, for instance, is considered the voice of European universities and as such it is regularly consulted on policy matters by European institutions. To some extent, all the cross-border associations mentioned in this section thus far operate similarly as national ones of the same, generalist, type. Boundaries-wise, much like their national counterparts, their role is to maintain the integrity of the category and sub-category, only at another field level and spanning the boundaries of nation-states.

Apart from the associations which form around well-established (sub-)categories, the ones spanning national borders are also often formed along some specific rationale, or specialization, such as a confession, mission, or cooperation for the sake of it. If not the largest, then certainly the oldest group here would be confessional associations, namely those gathering universities which identify as, as per sample, Buddhist, Catholic, Christian, La Salle, Methodist, the Society of Jesus, and St. Thomas Aquinas. In a way, this is not surprising given that the categorization of universities along confessions and particularly Christian denominations dates far back in history. The following excerpt speaks of this:

With respect to the spread of university models imitated by newly founded universities, there is a marked trend in the early modern period towards what might be called confessional families of universities, Lutheran, Calvinist or Catholic, and within these, of national subfamilies. Sixteen-century universities usually copied an older model (such as Paris, Bologna or Oxford) but themselves became models (in a form suited to the conditions of the time) for new foundations of similar confessional allegiance in the same country. (Frijhoff, 2003, p. 52)

Similar to other cross-border associations mentioned above, the confessional ones also maintain ties with instances of authority in their domain. For example, Latin American Organization of Catholic Universities is affiliated with the International Federation of Catholic Universities, itself created by a Papal Decree. This, in turn, strengthens the legitimacy of the association, and by extension that of its members, as members of the family whose boundaries are here aligned with the sub-category “Catholic universities.”

Sometimes, associations gather around a specific field or discipline, whereby they typically accentuate the importance of the contribution of those disciplines to society, in their respective regions or beyond. Examples here would be the Association for European Life Science Universities, Latin American Association of Universities of Public Relations Programmes, International Association of Maritime Universities or the International Association of Universities and Colleges of Art, Design and Media. These associations may render boundaries between members and non-members more visible by potentially implying that, for example, the life science universities located in Europe which are not members of the Association for European Life Science Universities are not as legitimate or “life science enough” as the association’s members. That this association established an international agency for accrediting European life science universities clearly signals its efforts to establish and standardize “life science university” as a sub-category of university in its own right.

Another group of cross-border associations would be those which joined forces to address regional or global issues and challenges. Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture is an association of African universities set up to strengthen agricultural research and agricultural training in Africa, as part of a broader agenda to engage these universities with regional development. Consortium of Universities for Global Health, which sets its mission to “support the university as a transforming force in global health” would be another such association. It is difficult to say whether or to what extent such associations manage to create new categories, yet what they certainly do is broaden the scope of identity claims for their members. We could easily imagine King’s College London, a member of the Consortium of Universities for Global Health, seeing itself as a socially engaged university and even as a part of the “transforming force in global health” due to its membership in the said association.

Finally, some associations are primarily cooperation networks, typically committed to improving quality of their work through exchange or simply to “internationalization,” itself considered something valuable to pursue. For example, the International Network of Universities stands for “higher education institutions that actively seek international partnerships and experiences, create innovative programming and delivery methods, and embrace the internationalization movement.” Their specific identity is not category-bound and we cannot say that these associations result in any new categories being established, nor that they necessarily affect the meanings of existing ones. This, however, might as well change, should the efforts of these associations, or third parties, lead to the institutionalization of a new category around their core – yet innovative – identity claims.

Going global: the rise of competition as an ideological imperative

In addition to the types of associations hitherto described, a third one merits a separate treatment. Unlike the associations which seek to reinforce their categorical or some other kind of specialist category

membership and identity, these associations claim membership to the category of high-status universities and identify as such. They are, in other words, status-driven and characterised by high status of their members, claims to superiority in terms of their quality, and – typically – high exclusivity when it comes to membership, often based on some sort of performance criteria. In recent years, this particular type of university associations has been gaining in prominence, both in national contexts and internationally. With the exception of the Association of American Universities, which was established in 1900, and the 1985 Coimbra Group, the remaining 21 associations in the sample categorized as status-driven were established after 1991.

Three such national associations were established in the 1990s: U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities (originally the Group of Ten), Russell Group in the UK and the Group of Eight in Australia. The original goal of these associations was to represent the mutual interests of their members – seen as different than those of other universities – primarily to their national governments. During the 2000s, two such national associations, Japanese RU11 and Chinese C9 League, were established by their national authorities in response to global competition. The Japanese RU11, for example, argues in its mission that “Japan must have pre-eminent research universities in the world to survive against international competition.” The most recent example of such national association in the sample would be Germany, which in 2012 established its own exclusive club of fifteen “internationally regarded” universities, “highly reputable for excellence in research.” In fact, U15 is not the only one such association in Germany. TU9, the association of “the nine most prestigious, oldest, and largest technical universities in Germany” and EAS7, “a strategic alliance of seven leading German Universities of Applied Sciences committed to excellence in teaching and research” are two other, and even earlier, examples. Indeed, unlike U15, the other two would be sub-types of specialist-vertical, given that they are associations of high-status specialized universities (technical and applied sciences, respectively).

The 1990s also gave rise to several international status-driven associations: Europaeum, Association of East Asian Research Universities, Association of Pacific Rim Universities, and the first world-wide one Universitas 21. These were followed by the European LERU and the International Alliance of Research Universities, established in 2002 and 2006, respectively. Only in the past three years, five new ones were established: Young European Research Universities, the Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, African Research Universities Alliance, Asian Universities Alliance and Aurora. All of these associations stress the importance of “excellence,” in research in particular, and a “world-class” status, for which the position in global rankings is commonly taken as a proxy. Young European Research Universities, for example, states as its main membership criterion to “have been included at least for one year, in the QS ranking Top 50 under 50 or the *THE* ranking 100 under 50.”

The use of superlatives in reference to their members’ qualities or their performance is one of the features that sets status-driven university associations apart or, for that matter, what brings their members together (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015). Australia’s Group of Eight is “leading excellence, leading debate,” Coimbra Group strives to be “a reference of academic excellence in Europe,” the Chinese C9 league is “committed to world-class excellence,” African Research Universities Alliance are “region’s leading universities,” while UK’s Russell Group are “24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector.” Aurora speaks of its members as “leaders in academic research, within the top 250 in the world,” although, curiously enough, it does not want to be seen as a status-driven association:

While other university networks come together to further their individual status, we are committed to working together to find solutions to globally relevant problems, in areas such as sustainability, climate and energy, digital technology and human life and health.

Concerns with broader social issues is sometimes found in their missions and self-descriptions, although these tend to be pursued indirectly through their primary activities – outstanding performance in teaching

and especially in research. For example, the Association of East Asian Research Universities is committed to “cultural, economic and social progress in the East Asian region.” LERU “strongly believes that basic research plays an essential role in the innovation process and significantly contributes to the progress of society.” Commitment to broader social purposes is, after all, integral to modern actorhood and therefore fundamental for securing legitimacy (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000).

The Global Council of Research-Intensive Universities, which would be a “global umbrella” of some of these status-driven associations, is one of the latest additions to the club. In its form, the Council is strictly a meta-meta-organization and the only one of the kind in the sample.⁸ It meets annually since 2013 and on those occasions it issues statements in which it declares its position on various matters, such as the general state of scientific research, funding, and so on, globally. For example, in their Hefei Statement they “announce” what they claim to be “the ten characteristics of contemporary research universities,” the first being – somewhat unsurprisingly – “the pursuit of excellence across all its operations.” This is in accord with the evidence scholars have recently provided on the emergence of what appears to be a new sub-category of universities, commonly referred to as “world-class university,” “global research university,” “research-intensive university” (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Mohrman, Ma, & Baker, 2008; Robertson, 2012). The efforts of status-driven associations to establish themselves as representatives of a distinct and superior sub-category are evidently directed at strengthening of the boundary between the “world-class” and everyone else, within or across national borders. After all, categories, like organizations occupying them, may have a certain status which, then, affects the status of their members (Jensen, Kim, & Kim, 2011; Kovács & Hannan, 2010).

The growing attention universities pay to status signals could be attributed to an increasingly more accepted notion that competition is intensifying, which seems to be gaining the status of a “global fact” and thus of an imperative requiring an organizational response. Certainly, global and other university rankings play an important role in leading universities to believe that they are, in effect, competing with each other (Brankovic, Ringel, & Werron, 2018), but so do competitive funding schemes and not least government policies and those of international organizations which, today more than ever, champion the (global) competition narrative. If we take that status flows through exchange relations (Podolny, 1994, 2010), the expansion of status-driven affiliations of universities over the past decade, taking a form of meta-organization or otherwise, is little surprising.

Discussion and conclusion

Much like in other sectors, association as a form of high-grade organizing has been expanding among universities too, although, as a phenomenon, university associations have been around for at least a century. We should not lose out of sight, however, that the expansion of association went in parallel with the expansion of formal organization. This somewhat suggests that the early associations – much like their member universities at the time – were likely not as “organized” as contemporary ones; their structure was probably not as elaborate, there were probably fewer roles to occupy and probably fewer non-academic professionals around. In all likelihood, they did not worry as much about having mission statements and strategic plans.

Apart from going hand in hand with the global expansion and institutionalization of formal organization, the diffusion of associations also went hand in hand with the global expansion of university and higher education, but also with the twentieth-century intensification of cross-border interaction and the consolidation of regional and global fields. However, the diffusion of meta-organization as a form of organizing among universities has been, at best, uneven. A country could have one or several associations, depending on various contextual factors, such as the size of its higher education field, categories of higher education institutions, legal framework, cultural specificities, etc. National

associations of universities of generalist type, for instance, are a common phenomenon in many countries. Other types, on the other hand, emerge only in certain contexts and under certain conditions. Governments, national policies and international organizations play a role in this, but so do broader trends and the narratives constituting them such as competition and internationalization. Even pressures on universities to differentiate from one another, while maintaining categorical allegiances, have been noted as a driving force in the process (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015).

Paradoxically though, while associations may be interpreted as efforts to reduce complexity by “eliminating” the environment, to use Ahrne and Brunsson’s (2008) way of putting it, they may as well be seen as adding to the complexity of the environment. This we could especially argue for the increasingly dense network of international associations, but also of some national contexts, such as the UK one, in which the number of so-called “mission groups” (universities grouped along shared interests or missions) has been on the rise since the 1990s. Such an environment may appear to a university as a more complex one or as exerting more pressure, compared to the one in which there would be no meta-organizational formations of such kind.

The notion of multiple-field-embeddedness (Hüther & Krücken, 2016) suggests an image of organizational associations as links between different fields, nested or partially overlapping. A university – as many in fact are – can thus simultaneously be a member of a national generalist association, several European ones and a global one, and see itself as an actor in a national, European (or even some region within Europe) and a global field. A national university association can even be a member of an international one, like some are members of the IAU. In this way, for a German university, becoming a member of a European association could mean strengthening its European identity. In the same way as membership in the Consortium of Universities for Global Health could strengthen its identity as a global, but also as a socially engaged university. Therefore, to extend the argument of Hüther and Krücken (2016), the membership in several associations pertaining to different fields allows us to conceive of the focal organization as a site of convergence of these fields’ meaning systems, but also as a site where the identities derived from their membership may “cross-fertilize,” bringing new identities to life and effectively shaping the university’s organizational agency.

Boundaries between organizations emerge, consolidate and expand. We could think of them as virtual lines of demarcation on a world map following categories and identities, and so transcending national, cultural, linguistic or any other borders. Or help maintain them. University associations certainly play a role in this. However, this is not to say that categorical boundaries do not exist or cannot be maintained without associations, but it is to say that once a category-bound association is in place, categorical boundaries may be more visible and perhaps more resilient. This arguably renders organizational associations a source of stability in organizational fields, which may be another explanation as to why they are so often resorted to nowadays. At the same time, as the cases of elite associations or European life science universities show, associations can also actively work towards the construction, institutionalization and diffusion of new categories or towards altering the meaning of existing ones. From this viewpoint, meta-organizations may as well be seen as agents of institutional change.

Notes

¹ Although called “rectors’ conferences,” they typically have universities as their members, rather than individuals (see Nyborg, 2014 for a historical explanation).

² Following Ahrne and Brunsson (2011), I conceive of meta-organization as a type of partial organization. Ahrne and Brunsson defined partial organizations as based on at least one of the five elements which characterize “complete” organizations. These elements are: *membership* (a right to decide who its members are), *hierarchy* (a right to oblige others to comply with central decisions), *rules* (a right to decide on its rules), *monitoring* (right to monitor compliance with rules) and *sanctions* (right to “punish” or reward members based on their performance or acts). Because meta-organizations do not meet all of the five criteria (e.g. they can rarely oblige members to comply, sanction or even monitor them), they are considered organizations only partially. However, in this paper I refrain from using the term “partial organization” in order to avoid potential confusion with the notion of “partial membership in categories,” as defined by Hannan (2010). These two kinds of partiality are entirely unrelated.

³ International Association of Universities, Members. Last retrieved on 5 April 2017 from <https://iau-aiu.net/Members>.

⁴ Open Yearbook. Last retrieved on 5 April 2017 from <http://www.uia.org/ybio/>.

⁵ For 10 associations the foundation year could not be determined.

⁶ Changing the name of the association appears not to be so uncommon. For example, the Association of Indian Universities was established as the Inter-University Board, Universities Austria used to be called Austrian Rectors’ Conference, the Association of Swedish Higher Education used to be Swedish Academic Rectors’ Conference, and so on. Although these historical changes are not systematically studied in this paper, it is important not to lose them out of sight when considering the “evolution” of associations as part of the broader organizational expansion.

⁷ The sample contains 33 cross-border associations operating within specific regions (Table 1).

⁸ Other meta-meta-organizations also have individual universities as members and they are in this sense both meta- and meta-meta-. The Global Research Council is only meta-meta-.

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