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Rationality and legitimation in a national system of universities: a critical examination of the rhetoric of Finnish university strategies in the mid-2010s

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Rationality and legitimation in a national system of universities: a critical examination of the rhetoric of Finnish university strategies in the mid-2010s

Abstract

Addressing those interested in the efforts of the universities to influence their future, in this article rhetorical *topoi* of classical types are examined. First, *topoi* representing these types are traced in research literature on universities, and next, the *topoi* are examined in mid-2010s strategies of Finland's all 15 universities. According to the results, *topoi* of university autonomy and liberal learning abound in fully-fledged multi-faculty universities, and *topoi* of more limited aspects and functions in more specialized universities, whereas *topoi* of social functions and comparative *topoi* and *topoi* of change are distributed more evenly. The results support the neo-institutional theoretical expectation that institutional elements enhancing rationality and legitimation co-exist in complex ways, and convey the message for practice that university strategies would enhance only rationality or only legitimation. The results also suggest future studies with domestic longitudinal and international comparisons of university strategies. Interpreting the 2015 collapse signs of the external political legitimation of Finland's universities facing deep cutbacks announced by government, the most critical thrust of the article is situated at its very end.

Keywords: Higher education; strategic management; university strategy; rationalized myth; politics; Finland

Introduction

From 1900 until 2000 the global number of higher education students increased from 0.5 to 100 million (Schofer & Meyer, 2005), and they may number 262 million by 2025 (University World News, 2014). In this article higher education is examined following a certain orientation of neo-institutional research (for this orientation, see Meyer & Rowan 1977, 1978; Meyer et al., 2007; Krücken & Drori, 2009; Schofer et al., 2012).

In the neo-institutionalist orientation indicated, two foremost elements of institutionalization can be discerned. The former element comprises institutional *rationality* with such characteristics as efficiency, implementation capacity, high goal achievement, stability, resilience, and growth. The latter element comprises institutional *legitimation* emphasizing appropriateness according to prevalent conventions and values only with a contingent concern with rationality, and the capability of decision-makers to justify their plans, policies, successes and failures before their audience whether or rationality is actually achieved. An analogy prevails between the juxtaposition between rationality and legitimation and the classical rhetorical juxtaposition between two types of argumentation. The former argumentation utilizes logical syllogisms, which receive their justification from their logical advancement from premises to conclusions. The latter argumentation utilizes rhetorical syllogisms, which are incomplete, and for which those who use them have to seek legitimation in front of the audience they try persuade by various rhetorical means (Aristotle, 2006: 1402a–1403a, pp. 334–343).

Many universities prepare strategies, formalize these strategies in writing, publish the strategies for their internal and external audiences, and devise new strategies once their predecessors have become outdated. For this article, neo-institutional and related previous research on the rhetorical aspects of strategies is important, both in general (Vaara et al., 2010; Suddaby et al., 2013; Flyvholm Jørgensen & Isaksson, 2015) and as concerns the universities (Hamilton, 2005; Morphey & Hartley, 2006; Vitullo & Johnson, 2010; Uzuner-Smith & Englander, 2014). To empirically examine the mid-2010s university strategies in Finland three research questions are asked:

1. What classical types of sources for legitimating arguments, *topoi*, does research literature on the universities indicate in view of the utilization of these *topoi* in legitimating university strategies?
2. How are *topoi* of classical types as indicated in the research literature examined distributed in the Finnish university strategies?
3. Which similarities and differences prevail among the Finnish universities as concerns *topoi* in their strategies?

In the next two sections the conceptual background, the research approach, the procedure and the research material are introduced. Subsequently follows reporting on the empirical results and last, the conclusions and implications. The foremost critical thrust of the article is situated at its very end. This was made necessary by the abrupt symptoms of the external political legitimation of the Finnish universities collapsing in 2015, as the newly nominated government announced drastic cutbacks in the resources allocated to the universities.

Understanding university strategies theoretically: at an intersection of institutionalization, strategizing, and legitimation

University strategies comprise institutional elements commonly represented as contributions to rationality, such as admitting the best applicants, excelling in teaching, ensuring learning and the completion of academic degrees, turning out employable graduates, attracting funding, and accumulating global, national and local reputation. However, besides or instead of enhancing rationality, many an institutional element may comprise a ‘rationalized myth’ of legitimation (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer & Rowan, 1978; Meyer et al. 2007; Schriewer, 2009). Like many other conceptual elements of neo-institutional research (Powell & Colyvas, 2008), the notion of rationalized myth has roots in classical sociology. Émile Durkheim (2008, p. 267) wrote that the ‘moral efficacy of the rite, which is real, creates belief in its physical efficacy, which is imaginary’, indicating that

constantly enacted rituals, despite lacking apparent rationality, may contribute to the legitimation of social relations and to social cohesion.

An institutional element may become a rationalized myth on certain conditions: actors promote the element and convincingly argue that it enhances rationality; these actors successfully argue that the element has virtuous origins in exemplary top institutions or in the writings of charismatic academic authorities; and loose coupling of the element prevails with rationality or the element is fully decoupled from rationality, immunizes it against empirical testing. Accordingly, university strategies either rationally help deliver what they promise, enhance legitimation by means of promising rather than delivering rationality with loose coupling with or decoupling from rationality, or deliver and promise rationality in various combinations (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Vitullo & Johnson, 2009). Well-functioning rationalized myths buffer the sensitive institutional core of the universities comprised of research, learning, and teaching from encroachments from the institutional context (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, 1978; Sauder and Espeland, 2009; Mingers and Willmott, 2013). However, the institutional buffering may become too strong, enhance irrationality by means of legitimating permanently failing institutions, and prevent or postpone their deserved collapse (Meier & Zucker, 1989).

The utilization of neo-institutionalism in critical research does not require the distinction of dominating and dominated actors or the disclosure of bias in the distribution of power and the allocation of benefits and burdens. Such utilization exposes what can be likened with ideological ‘false consciousness’ built into institutional elements and practices that fail to deliver what their legitimation rhetoric promises and therefore deceive both the apparently dominating and the apparently dominated actors.

Approach, research material, and procedure

Deriving an approach from classical rhetoric

To derive the approach, it is only necessary to cover the confined fraction of classical rhetoric that covers phenomena called in classical Greek *heuresis* and in Latin *inventio*, comprised of efforts of language users to find or construct material to justify their point of view before their audience. *Topos* and *topoi* in Greek and *locus* and *loci* in Latin, literally ‘place’ and ‘places’, comprise the sources from where rhetorical language users fetch their arguments. *Topoi* are commonly examined in modern critical discourse studies (van Dijk, 2001), critical discourse analysis (Clarke et al., 2012), corpus studies (Cornut et al., 2012), and big data and machine learning studies (Newman et al., 2014). However, preferring the original to modifications in resemblance with certain authors in present-day political science (Charteris-Black, 2013; Finlayson, 2013; Palonen, 2014), in this article a classical understanding of rhetoric is retained.

According to Aristotle (2006: 1402a–1403a, pp. 334–343), certain *topoi* receive their justification by means of logical syllogisms. However, *topoi* rather find their justification by means of incomplete syllogisms, also known as rhetorical syllogisms. Aristotle’s rhetorical syllogisms include the ‘enthymeme’, resemblance, likeness or likelihood; *epagoge*, classical induction; and *semeion*, ‘sign’, which embodies that which it signifies, comprises its index, or offers a representative example, *paradeigma*, ‘paradigm’. Rhetorical syllogisms are used to one-sidedly accentuate the language user’s point of view but subject to the rule that rhetoric shall not be used for lying (Aristotle, 2006, 1355a, pp. 11–13). The one-sided accentuation, *auxesis* in Greek and *amplificatio* in Latin, relies on hyperbolic figures of language to exaggerate the strengths and understate the weaknesses of that which the language users advocate, and understate the strengths and exaggerate the weaknesses of that which that the users repudiate (Skinner, 2003, 2009).

Topoi comprise ideational places from where language users fetch arguments to accentuate and defend their point of view (Aristotle, 2006, 1397a–1400b, pp. 292–325). Depending on the subject matter and the context, the language user may employ *topoi* invented by others and sedimented into a tradition, modify these *topoi*, or construct new *topoi*. General *topoi* apply, in principle, in any context and situation, whereas specific *topoi* comprise those of given contexts and situations (Aristotle, 2006,

1397a–1400b, pp. 29–325). It would be possible to envisage any frequent and long-lived commonplace as a general *topos*. However, classical general *topoi* characteristically comprise definitions, divisions of phenomena according to similarities and differences, indications of causal and logical relationships between phenomena, modalities of phenomena such as possibility, impossibility and necessity, testimonies of authoritative persons, institutions and documents, and precedents. Modifications of this classical understanding of *topoi* and their types comprise the origin of the classification of *topoi* throughout this article.

The research procedure, the research object, and the research material

The first stage of the research procedure is comprised of modifying the classical understanding of *topoi* types to derive an analytic framework of *topoi* from present-day research literature on the universities. Is there anything that ensures that the final set of *topoi* is comprehensive enough? Extracting the *topoi* belong to what Popper (2002, pp. 7–8) called the ‘context of discovery’, which has no *ex ante* justification, but may receive *ex post facto* justification insofar as the examination bears fruit. On the contrary, the Popperian ‘context of justification’ relies upon definite *ex ante* criteria of assessment, such as formal rules guiding quantitative analysis, or informal but nonetheless effective conventions of traditional humanistic or modern qualitative analysis.

Once a framework of *topoi* representing classical *topoi* types has been derived from research literature on the universities, this framework is applied to examine the 2015 strategies of Finland’s all fifteen universities (Table 1). Only one of these universities, the National Defense University, is part of the national government and its administration, has a dedicated budget post in the government budget, and employs civil servants. All other fourteen universities are independent legal subjects under public law and independent economic entities with their own equity, with the right to borrow, with the right to buy, own and sell property, with the right to establish joint-stock companies, and with the risk of liquidation if it financially fails. Two of the fourteen universities are formally organized into public sector foundations and twelve into a form of public sector organizations of which these

universities are the only representative. No differences that count in the examination delivered in this article evolve from the different organizational forms of the Finnish universities.

Despite that the fourteen universities indicated are independent legal persons and economic entities, they are crucially dependent upon general grants allocated by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. According to the grant criteria first applied in 2015, these universities receive 47 per cent of their grants on the basis of their quantitative educational output such as fulfilling their Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degree output targets, 13 per cent on the basis of academic publications graded according to a government-confirmed classification, 9 per cent on the basis of project funding from governmental and other project sources, 25 per cent on the basis of government-confirmed strategic criteria, and 6 per cent on the basis of other criteria. Neither undergraduate, graduate nor doctoral students pay tuition or fees. All Finnish universities compete for external research funding that the two foremost government funding organizations for research award. The remaining ten per cent of the domestic external funding of the Finnish universities derives from contracts with domestic business companies. Only a small fraction of the project funding of the Finnish universities derives from EU sources or foreign commercial or non-profit sources.

To attain good comparability between the strategies examined and for better focus, it is motivated to examine only their established core parts. According to an established classification, these parts are comprised of the mission statements, the values statements, and the vision statements (Collins & Porras, 1996).

TABLE 1

Most of the strategies examined were available in university web pages in English of variable quality, but a few strategy texts had to be translated into English either from Finnish (LUT, 2015; UA, 2015) or Swedish (ÅA, 2015; HSE, 2015). First, an empirical overview is offered, attained with the support of coding procedures (Saldaña, 2009) that enable indicating the presence or absence of the *topoi*

examined in the fifteen university strategies. Next, the empirical results proper are derived from textual passages of with rhetorical *topoi* in university mission, values and vision statements. The reporting of these results delivers direct citations in quotes without page numbers, as these numbers were not used in many enough documents to make their indication contrived in the remaining cases.

To go substantially beyond mere description and obtain the respective validity of the analysis, a framework of *topoi* representing classical *topoi* types is extracted from research literature on the universities, and this framework is used to examine the mission, values and vision statements in fifteen Finnish university strategies of 2015. Reliability is sought by means of indicating previous studies that are paradigmatic in providing representative examples of the utilization of given *topoi*. Only the minimum number seen as necessary of these paradigmatic studies are indicated in the text.

The study reported in this article had to be prepared while balancing between two extremes. The one of these is comprised of the purposeful and therefore unacceptable selection of previous research to support a subjective point that the researcher wants to expound. To avoid this extreme, unlike the many previous studies that have examined universities in one dimension only (but for an exception see, for instance, Olsen 2007), literature from several research fields representing different research traditions was examined. This gives the additional benefit of addressing not only one or only a few but several important current global debates on the universities and bringing them to bear in this study. Moreover, modifying *topoi* types distinguished since ancient rhetoric were given emphasis in examining the previous research (see the end of the above section ‘Deriving an approach from classical rhetoric’). The other extreme to avoid is comprised of indicating such a volume of previous research that the author becomes rightfully suspect of disbelieving his or her research cause. To avoid this other extreme, the number of references has been reduced to the minimum, as indicated. Moreover, the framework of *topoi* is pervasive, but concise statements of university strategies are examined, which adds to the transparency of the research procedure.

Derivation of university *topoi* from research literature on universities

Applying and modifying the understanding of classical rhetoric concerning *topoi* types, five types of *topoi* were extracted from literature concerning the universities and labeled ‘comprehensive’, ‘aspect’, ‘function’, ‘comparative’, and ‘change’, and moreover, the comprehensive, aspect and function *topoi* were subdivided (Table 2). In terms of classical rhetoric, the first, fourth and fifth *topoi* are general rather than special, but the subdivisions of the second and third *topoi* have special rather than general characteristics. Further *topoi*, such as ‘managerialist’ *topoi* or ‘ethical’ *topoi* declaring university commitment to specific general values were not examined, as they were only weakly contextualized in respect to the universities, and moreover, seriously burdened with jargon, fashion, and hype (Birnbaum, 2001).

TABLE 2

General topoi: comprehensive topoi of form and content, comparative topoi, and topoi of change

Tapping current research debates on universities, the first *topos* that can be distinguished emphasizes first and foremost university *identity*. The respective ‘formal’ comprehensive university *topoi* emphasize some, and in principle just any, specific interpretation of the identity of the university as an institution, the identity of a given university type, or the identity of an individual university (Table 2; Stensaker 2014). Any university identity presupposes boundary drawing between the institution of the university and the outside world, between universities of different types, and between an individual university, other universities and the broader context (Ran & Golden, 2011). In the light of present-day understanding formal university *topoi* are about nothing but university identity, which universities may try to explicitly create insofar as they find themselves lacking (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009).

It is possible to understand comprehensive university *topoi* with a ‘content’ emphasis to vest the formal identity of the university with some given substantive content. Many other content *topoi* of the university could be envisaged in principle, but the Western traditions of the university direct attention to those content *topoi* that ascribe the university *intrinsic value as an institution* that has only loose

coupling with instrumental purposes, or is decoupled from such purposes. The respective *topos* continues to be strongly present in current scholarly debates on the universities.

In countries influenced by the German university tradition, such as the German-speaking countries and the Nordic countries including Finland, *Bildung* including *Selbstbildung* – ‘self-formation’ of the members of the academic community – comprises a constituent of an entrenched content *topos* as concerns the universities (Koselleck, 2002). The self-governing institution of the *Bildungsuniversität* in the Humboldtian model (Humboldt, 2015/1810) allows internal autonomy to its units to cultivate well-formed persons in each domain of higher learning.

An analogy to the Humboldtian *topos* originating from the English-speaking world comprises the *topos* elaborated by John Henry Newman (1907/1852). He explicitly acknowledged rhetoric as the foremost classical practical art of deliberating on alternative courses of action (Miller, 2007). Citing a certain translation of Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric* (different from, for instance, the translation in Aristotle, 2006, 1361a, pp. 50–51), Newman (1907, p. 109) derived the origins of his notion of ‘liberal learning’ as follows:

Of possessions those rather are useful, which bear fruit; those liberal, which tend to enjoyment. By fruitful, I mean, which yield revenue; by enjoyable, where nothing accrues of consequence beyond the using.

Two further general *topos* types concerning universities present in current research debates can be distinguished. Some of the *comparative* university *topoi* (Table 2) may have empirical characteristics, such as in Karran’s (2007) study on the statutory extent of academic freedom in Europe, or in the synthesis of studies on the universities that Olsen (2007) elaborates. Some of the comparative university *topoi* are normative, such as those used in evaluating alternative models of the university (Barnett, 2013). Benchmarking studies of universities in respect to those universities used to provide

the models and ideals are also normative (Krücken & Meier, 2006), and so are many studies on university rankings (Sauder & Espeland, 2009).

Studies that employ *topoi* of *change* (Table 2), such as elaborating normative ideals of the university, or developing arguments to criticize university changes, rely upon teleological reasoning of one or another kind. Some other studies neutrally deliberate *pro et contra* the trends of university change (Neave and Amaral, 2008), or no less neutrally consider the general contingency of this change (Barnett, 2013). *Topoi* of change proliferate also in longitudinal studies on universities (Rinne, 2010), and in studies that simultaneously employ *topoi* of change and *topoi* of comparison (Ramirez and Meyer, 2013).

Special topoi: aspect topoi, function topoi, and their subtypes

Special types of *topoi* are no less present in current research debates on the universities than the general *topoi* types. A common *topos* of the *aspect* type (see Table 2) projects characteristics of business enterprises onto universities, either using the trope of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ (Clark, 1999) or without using this trope but considering universities in markets or an analogy to markets (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Further *aspect topoi* derive from the history during which the academic ‘estate’ of the early universities received privileges from rulers or won privileges in struggle with the other estates, marking the universities with *aspect topoi* of the ‘corporatist organization’ (Perkin, 2007). In the 1970s, many countries supplemented the corporatism with internal decision-making councils with quotas for students, professors and other academic staff, and, possibly, administrators (de Boer and Stensaker, 2007). Another group of *aspect topoi* has its origins elsewhere rather than in the European Continent, putting the supreme decision-making of the university in hands external rather than internal to the university, or a combination of external members and representatives of the university community. These are *topoi* of the university as a ‘stakeholder organization’ (Bleiklie and Kogan, 2007).

From among the *topoi* representing the *function* type (Table 2), those of ‘functional position’ indicate hierarchies or universities (Moodie, 2009), such as dual schemes separating university-level institutions and non-academic polytechnics, or defining layers of universities with a higher and lower standing. Other function *topoi* separate liberal and professional education or indicate efforts to combine these two aspects (Labaree, 2006). *Topoi* of the ‘external policy functions’ of the universities may emphasize, for instance, the intensive utilization of university research in public policy-making and for the benefit of the research and development activities of business companies (Eklund, 2007).

The professional education of medical doctors, lawyers, and the clergy at medieval universities comprises an ‘external social function’ *topos* of the universities (Table 2) *avant la lettre*. Newer social function *topoi* of the universities include, for instance, the worldwide diffusion of their ‘third mission’ (Laredo, 2007) and their ‘corporate social responsibility’ (Nejati et al., 2011). ‘External political functions’ *topoi* of the universities emphasize the enhancement of democracy by means of critical research (Fallis, 2008), and the active participation of scholars, teachers and students in public political deliberation (Hikins & Cherwitz, 2010).

***Topoi* in the mid-2010s Finnish university strategies**

In Table 3, the *topoi* examined in the strategies of Finland’s universities are outlined. The outline indicates the presence and absence of these *topoi* and qualifications if any as concerns the strength of their presence.

TABLE 3

Table 3 offers no more than a rough empirical outline. In the next sections the empirical results proper of the study are delivered, originating from the examination of the Finnish university strategies with the support of direct citations from strategy texts. In the empirical examination proper, a differentiation between the universities examined became evident, which is why the results are

presented in the order of *topoi* proliferating in fully-fledged universities, those that abound in more specialized universities, and those that are spread out over all of the universities.

Topoi of liberal learning and other topoi at fully-fledged multi-faculty universities

In their strategies, Finland's nine fully-fledged multi-faculty universities (Table 1) employ *topoi* of university autonomy and liberal learning (Table 2) only with two exceptions (ÅA, 2015; UV, 2015). Employing rhetorical figures of exaggeration for emphasis, the University of Helsinki (UH, 2015) eloquently cultivates this *topos*:

The core value of the University of Helsinki is the quest for truth. The primary aim of research and teaching is to seek truth and new knowledge. Knowledge is a value in itself. Researcher-driven basic research ensures the continuous renewal of scholarship... The basic characteristic of an academic, whether a researcher, teacher or a student, is a critical mind.

External political functions *topoi* (Table 2) are present at other universities, but the strongest emphases exist at the University of Helsinki (UH, 2015): 'The University must continuously reassess... the foundations of society.' For balance, this is the only university forcefully utilizing a business enterprise *topos* (UH, 2015): 'Researcher-driven basic research... supports profit-oriented applied research.' With further rhetorical exaggeration and a comparative *topos* (see Table 2), the same university sheds modesty (UH, 2015):

The University of Helsinki is the most comprehensive research institution of higher education, edification (in Finnish, *sivistys*, derived from the German *Bildung*) and intellectual regeneration in Finland.

The University of Jyväskylä states as its aim (UJ, 2015) ‘to seek out truth, to produce and disseminate new knowledge, and to enhance and renew the cultural heritage.’ The other multi-faculty universities more modestly employ *topoi* of university autonomy and liberal learning, with aims towards ‘providing critical knowledge’ (UTA, 2015), enhancing general ‘criticality’ (UT, 2015; UL, 2015), and maintaining ‘academic freedom’ (UTA, 2015), ‘free research’ (UO, 2015; UT, 2015), the ‘freedom of science’ (UEF, 2015), and ‘interest-free basic research’ (UO, 2015).

Six of the nine fully-fledged universities barely employ ‘formal’ comprehensive *topoi* that generally elaborate the university identity, or *topoi* of the ‘functional position’, ‘functional orientation of education’ or ‘external policy functions’ of the university (Table 2), whereas these *topoi* constitute complex compounds in the remaining three fully-fledged universities. The University of Oulu indicates focusing upon its ‘sphere of influence’, evolving as ‘an expert of Northerness’, and participating in the ‘innovation alliance of the Oulu region’ (UO, 2015). The University of Vaasa reminds that it is the ‘only independent university in the area of three [regions]’, and ‘takes part in developing the[se] region[s]’ (UVA, 2015). Åbo Academy University (ÅA, 2015) announces that it seeks to ‘provide for the education needs of the Swedish-speaking and bilingual population’ in Finland, and to bear ‘a broad Swedish-speaking responsibility in Finland’, thus combining ‘corporatist’ and ‘stakeholder’ *topoi* with a ‘formal’ comprehensive university *topos*, and *topoi* of its ‘functional position’ and its ‘orientation of education’ (Table 2).

Topoi at more specialized universities

Three of the six more specialized universities (see Table 1) employ the *topos* of university autonomy and liberal learning (see Table 2), although with generally weaker emphases than the fully-fledged universities, and declare a ‘passion for exploration’ and the ‘freedom to be creative and critical’ (AU, 2015), ‘critical thinking’ (HSE, 2015), or the cultivation of the ‘free arts’ (UA, 2015). This *topos* is notably absent in the strategies of the two focused technological universities (TUT, 2015; LUT, 2015; DU, 2015). One of the six specialized universities employs a political function *topos*, indicating its

participation in the hard-to-translate activity called *yhteiskunnallinen keskustelu* (literally, ‘societal discussion’) (LUT, 2015). With another political function *topos*, the University of the Arts announces to ‘challenge... existing institutions’ without confining itself to the arts sphere (UA, 2015).

Resembling three from among the nine fully-fledged universities (UO 2015; UVA, 2015; ÅA, 2015), in all six specialized universities compounds of comprehensive *topoi* of the ‘formal’ subtype and ‘function’ *topoi* abound (Table 2). The Aalto University of technology, business and industrial arts indicates a functional ‘national mission... to... contribute to Finnish society... and ... the welfare of its people’ (AU, 2015).

One of the two focused technological universities utilizes *topoi* of the functional orientation of education and external social functions, indicating aims of turning out ‘graduates who enter careers in the different sectors of society’, maintaining ‘high ethical standards... for the benefit of the environment, Finnish society and humanity as a whole’, and ‘promoting the well-being of humanity and sustainable development’ (TUT, 2015). The other focused technological university employs *topoi* of external social functions and stakeholders, announcing ‘to build Finland’s welfare and sustainable competitive advantage’, to pursue ‘cooperation with business’, to maintain ‘trust in the internal and external stakeholders’, and to take ‘responsibility of ourselves and the surrounding society’ (LUT, 2015).

National Defense University employs coordinated *topoi* of identity, stakeholdership, functional position, the functional orientation of education, and external policy functions. It aims ‘to produce skillful and motivated officers both for times of war and peace for the defense forces and the frontier guard’, ‘to carry out research that advances the defense of the country’, and to attain an ‘esteemed position’ among its stakeholders (DU, 2015).

One of the specialized universities explicitly underlines that it is Swedish-speaking and a business university at the same time (HSE, 2015). It commits itself to ‘raising the level of know-how both in business and in society as a whole’, maintaining the ‘high-quality... economic relevance’ of its research and education, bearing its ‘statutory responsibility for the education of graduates with Master

of Economics and Business degrees who are well-versed in the Swedish language’, giving ‘continuing and lifelong education with significant influence upon business practice’, and executing its ‘social responsibility’ (HSE, 2015). At this university, *topoi* of identity, stakeholderhood, functional position, functional orientation of education and external policy functions intertwine in analogy with the National Defense University. In its turn, the University of the Arts (UA, 2015) generally indicates its weaker functional subordination in its strategy than the other specialized universities.

Topoi spread over all universities

Topoi of the external social functions of the universities (Table 2) are frequent both at multi-faculty and more specialized universities (Table 4). Specialized rather than fully-fledged universities introduce the entity ‘society’ in their *topoi*, whereas the fully-fledged universities rather utilize the adjective ‘social’. The Universities Act of Finland (2009) prescribed the universities their third mission besides teaching and research comprised of their obligation to ‘interact with the surrounding society’. For instance, one university interprets this mission to comprise the attainment of a ‘societal impact’ (UJ, 2015), and another indicates that it engages in intensive ‘social interaction’ (UV, 2015), an activity that might be better worded in English as ‘societal interaction’.

TABLE 4

Academic literature on derivatives and translations of the Latin word *societas* in the vocabulary of the Finnish language indicates a traditional collectivist vocabulary layer with presuppositions of a national common interest (Kettunen, 2000; Pulkkinen, 2000). However, the literature also discerns a liberalist layer, juxtaposing ‘society’ and ‘state’, equating ‘society’ with ‘free markets’, and representing the ‘state’ as a force hostile to ‘society’. These semantic complications must be taken into account in interpreting the *societas* vocabulary in the university strategies (Table 4). The adjective ‘social’ rather than the noun ‘society’ can be found in the strategies of several fully-fledged

universities (UH, 2015; UJ, 2015; UTA, 2015; UV, 2015). It is as if these universities, all strong in social research as broadly taken, were indicating their philosophically nominalist reluctance to consider ‘society’ as a thing rather than a mere attribute.

Comparative *topoi* (Table 2) abound in the Finnish university strategies. The University of Helsinki announces itself to be the ‘most comprehensive... institution... in Finland’ in its domain, and also indicates its specific target rank, fifty, in the global university rankings (UH, 2015), although without indicating the very ranking in the terms of which it wishes to excel. In their references to internationalization, the Finnish universities hope to be ‘internationally recognized’ (AU, 2015), ‘internationally attractive’ (UTA, 2015; UEF, 2015), ‘with a clear international profile’ (UL 2015), known for ‘research of the international level’ (ÅA, 2015), and, in one case, ‘Finland’s ... most international technology-oriented community of students and scholars’ (TUT, 2015). *Topoi* of international and national comparison coincide with aims to maintain ‘high quality... in internationally evaluated focus areas’ (UO, 2015), to be ‘internationally ... recognized in... areas of strength’ and ‘nationally, among the top universities’ (UT, 2015), to be ‘internationally and nationally successful’ (UV, 2015), or to occupy an ‘esteemed position... both nationally and internationally’ (DA, 2015).

No more than two universities include an explicit European emphasis in their comparative *topoi*, stating that the ‘core competencies of the university represent the European spearhead’ (LUT, 2015), or indicating an aim to make the university a ‘European forerunner’ (UA, 2015). Two other universities employ comparative *topoi* more modestly, wishing to evolve as a ‘leading... business school in Northern Europe’ with ‘programs that are internationally competitive’ (HSE, 2015), or to become ‘one of Finland’s... most successful multidisciplinary research universities’ and ‘a place of study... among the most desirable’ (UJ, 2015).

Topoi of change commonly overlap with other *topoi*. The University of Helsinki announces its aim to be a ‘pioneer and a builder of the future’ (UH, 2015). From among three other universities, one ‘acknowledges its responsibility for the future’ (TUT, 2015), another wants to build ‘the competence

base of the future' (UEF, 2015), and a third one aims to carry out 'research... orient(ing) itself towards the future' (DA, 2015). One university sees itself as a 'European forerunner' (UA, 2015) and another wants to evolve as a 'forerunner in innovation' (UO, 2015).

At three universities, *topoi* of change are too implicit to examine (HSE, 2015; UL, 2015; UV, 2015). One university modestly aims to 'retain its position' (ÅA, 2015), whereas two others aim at 'enabling renewal' (UA, 2015) or specific 'pedagogical renewal' (UJ, 2015). A further university indicates the ambitious aim to 'make the world a better place to live' (LUT, 2015), another wishes to become 'increasingly respected' (UJ, 2015), and a third one wants to win a position 'among the top universities' (UT, 2015). Optimistically, the newest university, created in a merger in 2013, intends to turn into 'Finland's most interesting university' (UA, 2015).

Conclusions, discussion, and critical postscript

Some of the claims concerning the contributions of this article build on the answers received to the research questions. To answer the first question, five types of *topoi* indicated by classical rhetoric were extracted from research literature to examine the Finnish university strategies. The examination of the second research question indicates a concentration of *topoi* of university autonomy and liberal learning in fully-fledged multi-faculty universities, *topoi* of more limited aspects and functions in more specialized universities, and the distribution of *topoi* of the social functions, *topoi* of comparison and *topoi* of change over all universities. The answers received to the third research question indicate a dividing line between the characteristic strategies of fully-fledged multi-faculty universities and more specialized universities.

Theoretically, the results conform to the neo-institutional expectation that institutional elements enhancing rationality and those enhancing legitimation co-exist. Some of the rationality-enhancing elements effect a thick contextualization of the Finnish strategies in the linguistic, regional and other specific circumstances of the respective universities, many of which are specialized rather than fully-fledged multi-faculty institutions. Some other legitimation-enhancing elements mobilize classical

topoi of university autonomy and liberal learning, which occurs especially at fully-fledged multi-faculty universities with a characteristic loose coupling with or decoupling of these elements from the actual operational enhancement of rationality. The foremost theoretical contribution claim of this article builds on the utilization of *topoi* types that have their origins in classical rhetoric from research literature on the universities, and using this framework to examine the core parts of the strategies of the Finnish universities. Moreover, a methodological contribution claim derives from the article joining previous studies that have combined classical rhetoric with modern qualitative textual analysis (Potter, 1996; Winton, 2012).

For practice, the results advise against expecting that many university strategies either enhance rationality or support legitimation. People with participant experience of strategy preparation may defend the unyielding rationality of the outcome. However, even the most rational strategy fails if its implementation is lacking. In their turn, people excluded from strategy preparation may see the strategies as mere rhetoric of legitimation. However, all published strategies comprise public statements that, in principle, oblige their makers and their universities.

In this article a cross-sectional study of all fifteen Finnish university strategies of 2015 has been presented. Extensions can be envisaged both towards examining Finnish university strategies historically, and continuing the examination once the universities will have replaced their mid-2010s strategies. Moreover, the Finnish case offers itself as a springboard to examine university strategies and their rhetoric in other countries, and for comparative studies on the strategies and their rhetoric in different countries.

In this article criticism towards the state of affairs prevailing in Finland and its universities has been subtle, implicit and academic rather than sharp, explicit and political. However, an abrupt transformation necessitates a postscript with a pronouncedly critical thrust. While the university strategies examined in the article have remained in force, the political legitimation of the Finnish universities showed serious signs of collapse in 2015, as the government unexpectedly announced drastic cutbacks in its university funding. For instance, the University of Helsinki, the only Finnish

university regularly making it among the top 100 of the world's universities in university rankings (Kehm and Erkkilä, 2014), immediately announced plans to lay off 1,200 of its faculty and staff of about 8,000 (Myklebust and Dobson, 2015). The established image of the benevolent state of a universal Nordic welfare ensuring the sufficient funding of the universities faded away almost overnight.

The collapse symptoms of the external political legitimation of the Finnish universities were too recent to allow for systematic analysis in this article. The provisional neo-institutional conclusion is that the universities had become nothing but failing institutions (for this neo-institutional notion see Meier and Zucker, 1989) from the viewpoint of the three political parties that formed the 2015 Finnish government coalition, the civil servant advisors of the government, and the business and agricultural interests that the coalition represents.

The collapse symptoms of the external political legitimation of the Finnish universities put the strategies of these universities into quite a new light. Notably, no single university was saved from the cutbacks except for the minuscule National Defense University. The longer-term impact of the transformation upon the social equalization effected for decades by means of tuition- and fee-free university education and a regionally dispersed network of the Finnish universities (Jalava, 2013) cannot be examined soon. However, before long strategic alternatives pointing towards a brighter future for the Finnish universities might appear and offer themselves to research no less than the crisis verging a catastrophe of 2015.

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Table 1. Universities in Finland, 2015.

University	Type	Distance	Units	Language	Students
1. University of Helsinki (UH)	MFU	0	11	F, S	36,500
2. University of Turku (UT)	MFU	150	7	F	20,200
3. Aalto University (AU)	MSU	10	6	F, S	19,700
4. University of Oulu (UO)	MFU	540	9	F	16,000
5. University of Eastern Finland (UEF)	MFU	380	4	F	15,400
6. University of Tampere (UTA)	MFU	160	9	F	15,200
7. University of Jyväskylä (UJ)	MFU	230	7	F	15,000
8. Tampere University of Technology (TUT)	SU	160	4	F	10,300
9. Åbo Akademi University (ÅA)	MFU	150	3	S	6,500
10. University of Vaasa (UV)	MFU	420	3	F	5,000
11. University of Lapland (UL)	MFU	700	4	F	5,000
12. Lappeenranta University of Technology (LUT)	SU	200	3	F	4,800
13. Hanken School of Economics (HSE)	SU	0	5	S	2,400
14. University of the Arts (UA)	SU	0	3	F	2,100
15. National Defense University (DU)	SU	12	0	F	850

Note: MFU, multi-faculty university, MSU, specialized multi-function university, SU, specialized university. Distance is expressed in kilometers between Finland's capital city, Helsinki, and the main location of the university. The number of units includes faculties or schools but no departments within faculties or schools, special institutes, or regional university branches. F indicates Finnish and S Swedish as the statutory medium of instruction. The student numbers are totals without conversion into the lower full-time equivalent figures.

Table 2. Outline of rhetorical *topoi* in research literature on universities.

Types of <i>topoi</i>	<i>Topoi</i>	A single example (for more, see text)
Comprehensive <i>topoi</i>	Form: University identity	Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009
	Content: autonomy and liberal learning	v. Humboldt, 2015/1810
Aspect <i>topoi</i>	Business enterprise	Clark, 1999
	Corporatist organization	de Boer & Stensaker, 2007
	Stakeholder organization	Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007
Function <i>topoi</i>	Functional position of the university	Moodie, 2009
	Functional orientation of education	Labaree, 2006
	External policy functions	Eklund, 2007
	External social functions	Laredo, 2007
	External political functions	Fallis, 2008
Comparative <i>topoi</i>	No subtypes discerned	Karran, 2007
Change <i>topoi</i>	No subtypes discerned	Ramirez & Meyer, 2013

Table 3. Outline of *topoi* in the strategies of Finland's universities, 2015.

<i>Topoi</i>	Subtypes of <i>topoi</i>	UH	AU	UJ	UTA	TUT	UO	UT	UV	UEF	ÅA	HSE	UL	LUT	UA	DU
Comprehensive <i>topoi</i>	Form: University identity	-	-	-	x	-	x	x	X	x	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Content: autonomy, liberal learning	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	-	X	-	x	x	-	X	-
Aspect <i>topoi</i>	Business enterprise	X	x	x	-	-	x	-	-	-	-	x	-	x	-	-
	Corporatist organization	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-
Function <i>topoi</i>	Stakeholder organization	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	x	-	X	-	X
	Functional position of the university	X	-	x	-	-	X	x	X	x	X	x	X	x	X	X
	Functional orientation of education	-	-	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	X	X	-	-	x	-
	External policy functions	-	X	x	x	-	x	-	X	X	x	x	X	x	-	X
	External social functions	X	x	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	x
	External political functions	X	x	-	x	-	-	-	-	x	x	x	x	x	X	-
Comparative <i>topoi</i>		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Change <i>topoi</i>		X	X	x	X	x	x	x	-	x	X	x	-	x		x

Note: UH, University of Helsinki, AU, Aalto University, UJ, University of Jyväskylä, UTA, University of Tampere, TUT, Tampere University of Technology, UO, University of Oulu, UT, University of Turku, UV, University of Vaasa, UEF, University of Eastern Finland, ÅA, Åbo Akademi, HSE, Hanken Swedish School of Economics, UL, University of Lapland, LUT, Lappeenranta University of Technology, UA, University of the Arts, and DU, National Defense University. In the table, 'X' signifies the presence of the *topos* in the strategy, 'x' its qualified presence, and '-' the absence of the *topos*.

Table 4. *Topoi* of external social functions at Finland's universities.

	Fully-fledged multi-faculty universities	More specialized universities
	<i>Topoi</i> of social functions	
'society'	'competence... available to society as a whole', 'justice and equality in society', 'helps... societies' (UJ, 2015); 'collaboration with society' (UT, 2015)	'contribute to Finnish society' (AU, 2015), 'benefit of the... Finnish society' (TUT, 2015), 'significant role in developing society' (UA, 2015)
'social'	'responsible social force' (UH, 2015), 'sustainability with regard to... social... development', 'improve... social... well-being' (UJ, 2015); 'social mission', 'social responsibility' (UTA, 2015), 'social interaction' (UV, 2015)	'social responsibility' (HSE, 2015)
'societal'	'major societal impact' (UJ, 2015)	
	Universities without <i>topoi</i> of external social functions	
	Three universities (ÅA, 2015, UEF, 2015, UO, 2015)	Two universities (DU, 2015, LUT, 2015)