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To cite this article: Juha Tuunainen, Kari Kantasalmi & Sari Laari-Salmela (05 Nov 2023): Emergence of a potentialising organisation in University self-governance: temporalisations in strategies, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, DOI: 10.1080/1360080X.2023.2276786

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2023.2276786
Emergence of a potentialising organisation in University self-governance: temporalisations in strategies

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ABSTRACT

Referring to failures in policy-driven public governance research this paper looks at strategising in higher education. It expands horizons for understanding university strategies in a more nuanced way than hitherto has been done. Deploying systems theory, it shows how different temporalities co-exist in strategies and how their change reflects the university’s capacity to meet future contingencies. Extending the current research on strategising, the paper uses the present’s past, the present’s future, the future’s present and the future’s future as temporal categories to understand strategies. It shows how strategies evolve from traditional linear planning orientation to a novel potentiality-seeking mode with unique meanings attached to unknown futures. It claims that universities develop such responsive contingency awareness to construct a leeway for their self-governance in the face of unexpected future conditions. This change is characterised by the emergence of a potentialising organisation seeking to turn indeterminant futures into its developmental resources.

KEYWORDS

University organisation; strategy; systems theory; temporalisation; potentialisation

Introduction

Public aspirations for steering national higher education systems and universities have undergone dramatic changes within their increasingly complex societal environments. For example, the rise of more globalised competition with mass media coverage (Friedrichsmeier & Marcinkowski, 2016), and the increasing importance of multilevel governance (Jungblut & Vukasovic, 2013), have brought forth growing concerns about how to better understand transformations occurring in this domain (Ferlie et al., 2008; Kickert, 1995). Amidst these developments, the narratives of the evolving public administration understood either in terms of political steering or a more cooperative, non-hierarchical modes of governance (Mayntz, 2016), have altered.

Moreover, the increasing complexity of society has fertilised discussions of moving, first, from governing to governance and, second, from governance failures, i.e., failures to politically redefine objectives regardless of disagreements about their validity, to meta-
governance, which refers to creating conditions for self-organisation within society (Dunsire, 1996; Jessop, 2010). Finally, much of the governance research inspired by political science has deviated from simplistic linear models of moving from politics to policy while recognising the importance of strategic communication as a part of the new governance approaches in different sectors of society (e.g., Crozier, 2008). In higher education, these changes have been reflected in terms of reforms aiming at decentralising discretion and responsibilities to individual universities via negotiation mechanisms to support their development into complete organisations with strategic goals and managerial capacities (Bleiklie, 2018; Bleiklie et al., 2015).

However, the assumption of an overarching rationale, either politically state-driven or economically market-oriented, for an all-encompassing societal steering has been underlying in the higher education literature (e.g., Bleiklie, 2018). In this article, we deviate from this tendency. Our scepticism about the possibility for causally effective external steering of universities stems from recognising the current society as being composed of functionally differentiated and operationally closed communication systems, such as science and education, that reproduce themselves and can fulfill their societal functions only through their focused systemic competence (Brans & Rossbach, 1997; Dunsire, 1996; Luhmann, 1997b; Schirmer & Hadamek, 2007). From this standpoint, there exists no overarching rationale for societal steering that could be arbitrarily claimed, e.g., for politics or economy. Consequently, the challenges of governance unfold via such functionally differentiated communication media that define the rationality of the corresponding social systems (Esmark, 2010, p. 97; Luhmann, 2012, pp. 214–15; Pfeffer & Stichweh, 2015).

Thus, to understand problems encountered in universities’ governance attempts attention needs to be paid to the interdependencies between the co-evolving systems of education and science, and the ways in which their performances are observed through other functional rationales, such as economy and politics. In this regard, strategies become an interesting, shared instrument for university’s self-governance used within the space of its ‘embedded steering’, which means that decision making considers the embedded functional rationales (Buchinger, 2007, p. 173).

As the challenges of societal integration intensify, the political system tends to become overloaded with expectations to facilitate binding decisions for sectorial policy coordination. Consequently, discussions in higher education policy research concerning new forms of public governance of universities have arisen. However, as far as societal systems of science and education are reproduced by unique forms of structural couplings within the university organisation, it becomes essential to shift attention towards the novel forms of governance attempts in terms of ‘embedded steering’ (Buchinger, 2007, p. 173) rather than presuming effective external steering via policy programmes. Ultimately, the issue boils down to the self-governance of the university in making decisions on science and higher education. Moreover, as the growing expectations for societal engagement have heightened the decisional complexity of universities, for instance, in the form of embracing the so-called third mission services to society, the significance of strategies within the self-governance of universities is receiving increasing attention both in research and practice (Stolze & Sailer, 2022).

To better understand universities’ self-governance and the role of written strategies in it, we approach the university organisation as a self-referentially orientating social system
reproducing its decisions about scientific research and education in a variety of programme forms (Baecker, 2010; Stichweh, 2005). We follow Luhmann’s (1997a, pp. 367–368) view of systemic steering as an ‘intention for change of specific differences’, including those between past and unknown futures, in the course of temporalising the situational complexities of the continuously changing present. Thus, we argue for explicit theoretical consideration of temporal focus in strategising and aim at providing nuanced empirical descriptions of how different structurally conditioned temporalities (Luhmann, 1976) co-exist and change across a research university’s strategy documents. By so doing, we add an important dimension of potentialisation (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2020) into the discussion on temporality in university strategy as it is played out in the context of the evolving public administration.

**Temporality in strategies**

Previous research on strategies in universities’ self-governance emphasise the universities’ positioning in their operating environments (Fumasoli et al., 2020) and highlight their concerns about organisational identities (Morphew et al., 2018) in the context of external pressures affecting their operations (Dowsett, 2020; Frolich et al., 2013). Also, the contents of university strategies have been addressed (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011) as well as the role of various actor groups in formulating and implementing these (Davis et al., 2016; Goodwill, 2012). Additional consideration has been offered to strategic management tools and procedures, such as management accounting (Agasisti et al., 2008), tenure track systems (Pietilä & Pinheiro, 2021) and performance dialogues within departments (Takala & Keskinen, 2014).

While the existing research in higher education mostly considers strategies deliberately planned, i.e., future-oriented documents drafted prior to their implementation (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011), strategies are also viewed as open and emergent (Doyle & Brady, 2018), based on organisational history (Frolich et al., 2013; Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011). Further, Marginson and Sawir (2006, p. 344) observe strategies both as planned and open, and consider them to be tools to manage the organisation’s potential futures, meaning ‘the ensemble of possibilities within reach of the university’. Thus, the university’s strategic openness is conceptualised in terms of its ability to manage its limited resources and changing situational specificity. Typically, however, strategic planning by managers is seen to be orientated towards the future, while other members of the organisation are seen as carriers of the past, both connecting to the challenges of the present. Whereas interconnectedness of different temporalities seems to remain implicit in these studies, we investigate here how strategies temporalise problems and challenges perceived by the university.

Systems-theoretical organisation studies have considered strategy documents as central decision premises (Seidl & Becker, 2006) that both constrain and enable an organisation’s decision-making (Luhmann, 2018, p. 187). While an organisation’s past cannot be changed and its assumed futures remain unknown, decision-making on scientific research and teaching—the university’s constitutive structural anchors within the societal environment—must persist. Furthermore, these anchors explain the organisations’ material existence, whether secured by the public budgetary authorities or the university’s clientele for its services. Therefore, adjusted with the new
forms of public governance, academic communications continue by framing the operative decisions through preparing and deciding on the university’s strategies. Time is involved here in the presence of decisions as ‘the interpretation of reality with regard to the difference between past and future’ (Luhmann, 1976, p. 135), wherein the most important planning resource ‘supplied by the future is its being unknown’ (Luhmann, 1997a, p. 368).

As formal decisions, strategy documents are distributed to the members of the university as well as to the concerned public. They can be understood as self-descriptions of the university, providing conclusive announcements about the meaningful processing of the organisation’s understanding of its current state and envisioned futures, i.e., the multiple assumed future options and projections available to it. These decisions then inform subsequent decisions. From the viewpoint of public governance attempts and the actual self-governance of the university, it is important to analyse how such documents temporalise the irritations garnered from both the organisation’s societal environment and its own members.

In this sense, strategies reduce the complexity of both the organisation’s societal environment and the psychic environment of its members. In other words, strategies contribute to the generation of order from noise. The strategy documents are formulated by being aware of the difference between the organisations’ self-description and its external descriptions, such as observations of the university performance from the viewpoints of economy and politics. Along with the internal differentiation of society into functionally differentiated communication systems, greater selectivity is required, and the rationality coded within each system provides enhanced selective capacity. In the systems theoretical perspective, the communication medium of a system (such as truth in science) relies on opposing values (e.g., true and false), where the positive side indicates the preferred value for the system’s rationality, thereby indicating its steering function (Esmark, 2010, p. 97; Luhmann, 2012, p. 217). Furthermore, each societal subsystem also provides a temporal horizon of its own, which contributes to the framing the university’s internally specialised administrative decision-making (Tuuinainen et al., 2021; Tuuinainen & Kantasalmi, 2023).

The approach employed here enables us to explore how the structural notion of time enters strategy decisions that are always made in the present by drawing on the organisation’s memory—namely, the ways of remembering or forgetting past decisions—and by oscillating between future projections. This empirical focus provides insights for better understanding of the interplay between public governance attempts and university self-governance in the communicative space termed as ‘embedded steering’, inspired by Buchinger (2007, p. 173).

Drawing on Luhmann (1976, p. 135), time ‘as the interpretation of reality with regard to the difference between past and future’ involves selecting between two conceptions of the present: first, the continuously passing present, where current events constantly become the past; and second, ‘the durative present’, which keeps access to the future open (Baraldi et al., 2021, pp. 142–143). The first option, the passing present, is observable in strategic decisions that reduce alternative futures into options, while the durative present is exemplified by strategy texts that defer decisions by keeping the alternative solutions open. This conception of time allows us to analyse, first, how organisations perceive and shape their futures, which is reflected through different temporal
dimensions in a university’s strategy texts, and second, how the relative importance of these changes over time.

A useful schema for identifying different temporal dimensions in the strategy texts and interpreting shifts in their relative importance within the wider governance problematics is provided by Åkerstrøm Andersen and Grønbæk Pors (2016, 2017) in their study of public welfare administration in Denmark. They differentiate between various layers in the historical development of public administration, namely, formal administration, sectorial planning, strategic supervision, and potentiality-seeking administration. Within each of these, temporality is considered differently when observed using Luhmann’s notion of time: 1) Formal administration focuses on the present’s past, which refers to previous decisions that form the basis of present ones. 2) Sectorial planning orients towards the present’s future, thereby considering the future in terms of analysable and foreseeable movement in a particular direction, which renders itself for rational and calculable decision-making, as in traditional strategic planning (e.g., Mintzberg, 1990). 3) Strategic supervision emphasises the future’s present and opens many alternative future horizons (also Heger & Rohrbeck, 2012) that constitute risk considerations in the organisation’s present decision-making space. Finally, 4) potentiality-seeking administration portrays the potential futures as something that are indeterminate, difficult to describe and even impossible to outline from the present perspective, thus making the organisation expect the unexpected, i.e., the future’s future (Åkerstrøm Andersen & Grønbæk Pors, 2016, 2017).

Data and methods

Our data comes from the University of Helsinki, Finland, which is an example of a research university oriented towards high scientific ranking, while simultaneously sustaining an organisational identity as a Humbolditian Bildungsuniversität (Ahonen, 2016). The University is an apt case example to elaborate upon the changes in the strategising orientation of Finnish universities, as it has aligned itself with the new public management-oriented forms of self-governance in the context of several legislative reforms and changes in the public funding procedures, as referred to below (Tuunainen et al., 2021; Tuunainen & Kantasalmi, 2023).

Strategising was gradually integrated into the planning communications of Finnish universities during and after the 1990s. Inspiration for this was initiated as early as 1981–86 through the so-called universities’ development act, which aimed to secure public funding by increasing the level of accountability regarding universities’ academic performance. This law also paved the way for the further development of performance-based funding models and inspired universities to develop a more strategic orientation in terms of both public governance attempts and university self-governance. The development continued with the legislative change of 2010, which inspired alterations in the universities’ decision-making structures, intensified their societal engagement expectations and stimulated their fund-raising to complement state financing. The reform also aimed at aligning Finnish universities with the global trend of new public management (Donina & Paleari, 2019) by complementing the existing administration procedures with intensified expectations for evolving novel managerial techniques (Kallio et al., 2020), including emphasis on organisational strategies.
The University’s strategy documents investigated here are conceptualised as the organisational self-descriptions (Åkerstrøm Andersen & Grønbæk Pors, 2016) by means of which the University constructs its history, analyses its present and anticipates its potential futures. Covering the years 2007–2030, these documents (University of Helsinki, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2016, n.d.) offer a perspective on the University’s strategic self-understanding both before and after the legislative reform of 2010, which changed its status from a state accounting office to a legal person. In this study, we consider the strategy documents to form a sequential chain of decisions (Besio & Pronzini, 2011) that constitute an evolving narrative of the University’s organisational identity vis-à-vis its operational environment (Lenartowicz, 2015).

We adhere to systems-theoretical guidance and methodology of content analysis (Besio & Pronzini, 2011). The coding of strategy documents draws upon four possible perspectives on the unfolding of the unchangeable past and unknown futures as was mentioned earlier. These perspectives are the present’s past, the present’s future, the future’s present and the future’s future (Åkerstrøm Andersen & Grønbæk Pors, 2016, 2017). We utilise these temporal insights as analytical categories to discern how the University observes and temporalises itself in relation to its self-constructed environments, and how its emphasis on different temporalisations change during the analysed time period.

In practice, the first author of this article read the strategy documents and segmented their text into coherent meaning units, each comprising a series of sentences or paragraphs. The meaning units were then coded based on the temporal references observed within them. Table 1 provides explanations of these analytical categories, accompanied by illustrative examples extracted from the data.

**Results**

Our analysis revealed significant changes in the ways the University of Helsinki’s strategic plans temporalised the issues they addressed. The plans for 2007–2009, 2010–2012 and 2013–2016 used temporal orientations in a manner that closely aligned with traditional planning documents of public sector administration. However, the way in which possible futures were strategically envisioned in the 2017–20 strategy changed remarkably. It depicted the future as an imagined discursive space outlining key societal concerns and broad images of the risks the organisation had to adapt to.

Further, in the 2021–30 strategy, the temporalising logics shifted towards what could be interpreted as an emerging ‘potentialising organisation’ (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2020, p. 69). References to various possible futures were left without a clear developmental trend characterisation. This strategy, devoid of the organisation’s history and analytical descriptions of its societal context, emphasised the unexpected futures to which the organisation needed to adapt while remaining an active and flexible societal service provider. Next, we offer a more detailed description of the continuities and changes regarding temporalisation logics in the case of the University’s strategy development, as manifested in the analysed documents.
Table 1. Categories of temporality, their definitions, and data examples (adapted from Åkerstrøm Andersen and Grønbæk Pors, 2016, 13–21).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of temporality</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Data example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present’s past</td>
<td>Strategy text, which references decisions previously made and uses these as premises for subsequent decisions.</td>
<td>The University of Helsinki is the oldest and most multidisciplinary university in Finland. It was established in Turku in 1640 and was transferred to Helsinki in 1828. There are 11 faculties on four campuses: theology, law, medicine, arts, science, pharmacy, biological sciences, behavioural sciences, social sciences, agriculture and forestry, and veterinary medicine. Additionally, the University has 20 independent institutes (University of Helsinki, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present’s future</td>
<td>Strategy text, which analyses the past or present to determine a particular future scenario for organisational adaptation.</td>
<td>Finland’s economic development is uncertain because the recession in the world economy caused by the global crisis in financial markets is having an effect on the economic prospects of Finland. The population structure is becoming unbalanced, and as is the case in the rest of Europe, the nation is ageing. On the other hand, the number of immigrants will grow, especially if the predicted labour force shortages occur in the coming years. Besides maintaining their competitiveness, universities will have to increase society’s understanding of the impact of environmental and social change, develop new social and economic action models, and present morally and economically credible options for societal choices (University of Helsinki, 2009).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future’s present</td>
<td>Strategy text, which presents an unknown and/or risky future the organisation must adapt to.</td>
<td>Research and teaching have become increasingly technology driven and therefore dependent on systems and equipment. This entails a risk of costs increasing to the extent that we cannot maintain our pioneering role. The development of research infrastructures, in particular, must be secured (University of Helsinki, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future’s future</td>
<td>Strategy text, which presents future as something that cannot be described but that may be used as a resource.</td>
<td>The University serves society, and our operations are largely based on public funding. We will manage our assets carefully through long-term investment activities, with the aim of securing a good return from responsible investments that will grow in value over time. (…) To safeguard favourable conditions for operations and reform, we will continue to ensure that our finances rest on a solid foundation through responsible and profitable financial management (University of Helsinki, n.d.).</td>
</tr>
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**Persistence of traditional public sector planning orientation**

During the first three strategy periods—2007–09, 2010–12 and 2013–16—the University’s strategy was dominated by a mode characteristic of traditional planning orientation of sector administration (Åkerstrøm Andersen & Grønbæk Pors, 2016). In each strategy document, a brief historical account (the present’s past) was followed by an analysis of the University’s operational environment. This was succeeded by the definition of its mission and values, which formed the basis for identifying strategic objectives and describing more specific developmental areas.
Regarding the present’s past, the University’s reconstructions of its history typically depicted the past in terms of a series of decisions that had led to the current state as exemplified in the following paragraph:

The University is bilingual, and besides operating in Helsinki, it operates in 20 locations around Finland. The number of students is 35,000, and there are 8,000 staff. The number of degrees awarded annually is 5,000, of which 470 are doctorates. Every year, a total of 60,000 students participate in the Open University or in continuing education studies. (University of Helsinki, 2009)

Such descriptions of the past characterised certain factual states of affairs as resulting from the previous decisions, for instance, in terms of the operative sites and performance evidence. In addition to such descriptions of the present’s past, all three strategies engaged in extensive planning of the University’s near future. Such planning conception, typical of sector administration of the 1960s and 1970s (Åkerstrøm Andersen & Grønbæk Pors, 2016, p. 16), defined calculable future scenarios for subsequent organisational adaptation based on the analysis of the past and current state of the system. Such descriptions of present’s future covered 68–84% of all coded text segments in each strategy document. The following excerpt, which places qualitative emphasis on transparent quality criteria, network relations and faculty profiling, exemplifies this category:

The results of the international assessment of research and doctoral education will be taken into account in the University’s operational and financial planning. The University will establish transparent quality criteria for allocating research resources to relevant areas. Networks related to research focus areas will be increased across faculty boundaries. Departmental and faculty-level profiling will be used to increase investment in top-quality research. (University of Helsinki, 2012)

The strategies for 2007–09, 2010–12 and 2013–16 also described the unknown futures’ potential risks from the viewpoint of the future’s present. The University’s strategic task was seen to be in the anticipation of the possibly intimidating future circumstances. The following quotation is a case in point:

The present level of public funding is under severe pressure, and its future remains an open question. Even the University of Helsinki Funds is threatened by the international financial insecurity. (University of Helsinki, 2012)

In summary, the temporal mode of the present’s future dominated the first three strategies, indicating the persistence of a traditional public sector planning orientation (Åkerstrøm Andersen & Grønbæk Pors, 2016, p. 16). This orientation involved analysing the past and present to delineate future scenarios for adaptive purposes. Additionally, the strategies included historical accounts of the University—referred to as the present’s past—presented in narrative form, unveiling chains of major decisions.

Along with the present’s future, the temporal orientation of the future’s present, which portrays the future through unknown and risky contingencies, was observable but infrequent. This orientation foreshadowed the forthcoming strategy period of 2021–30, where the University’s temporal orientation would significantly change with emphasis put on future’s future. In contrast to it, the first three strategies analysed in this section tended to portray the University as a professionally responsible organisation seeking to fulfil its functions in the wider society (Åkerstrøm Andersen & Grønbæk Pors, 2016, p. 91).
**Growing importance of strategic orientation**

The strategy for 2017–20 continued the temporal orientation to the present’s future, but excluded the historical accounts of the University while increasing the prominence of the future’s present. During this transitional ambiguity, the University still described itself in terms typical for traditional public sector administration, i.e., characterising the future in terms of strictly defined scenarios for organisational adaptation (present’s future). Thus, it analysed the past and present to determine a route it should follow in the future, thereby narrowing down the leeway for its options. At the same time, however, it started to acknowledge that the possible futures also posed risks and challenges for its adaptation thus restricting the room available for its subsequent manoeuvring (future’s present).

In the following excerpt, the University first describes the present with a factual statement underlining the importance of multi-disciplinary problem settings for advancing science and its social impact. Thereafter, the description shifts to a future-oriented mode, including a clear definition of the future combined with a set of actions designed to meet expectations, thereby indicating temporal orientation of the present’s future:

Multi-scientific setting of problems and collaboration between units will increase effectiveness both in the advancement of science and renewal of the society. Utilisation of research results will be encouraged and professionally supported. At the university level, the standard of research will be monitored regularly by means of international comparisons. (University of Helsinki, 2016)

As already explained, the strategy document also observed the future’s present, meaning a strategy text that depicted an open future and considered it as a source of challenges to be solved during organisational adaptation. The following statement is a case in point:

In the middle of great changes and challenges, the political and societal expectations for the universities increase. Education must be better developed to meet the competence and working-life requirements of the future, although their forecasting is difficult. Impact and proposed solutions are expected from the universities even stronger than before. (University of Helsinki, 2016)

This excerpt illustrates the University’s temporal orientation towards dealing with an uncertain and risky future for which the organisation is unable to define clear measures, therefore illustrating the category of the future’s present. As the strategy for 2017–20 comprises almost solely temporal conceptions categorisable as ‘present’s future’ or ‘future’s present’, it corresponds to the then ongoing organisational changes where the University was gaining space in terms of its embedded steering inspired by the altered legislation. This marks the gradual shift from traditional public sector administration to a strategic orientation. This transformation of the temporalisation in strategy documents becomes even more prominent in the next phase where the past loses its importance vis-à-vis the present and future, the latter becoming conceptualised in terms of contingency rather than a clear set of scenario expectations for a controlled adaptation.

**Potentialisation orientation in strategising**

The strategy period 2021–30 witnessed the University’s move towards considering the open and contingent futures not only as being filled with uncertainties that
required risk analysis, but also as a resource for organisational development. This view of the future was evident in the sharp increase in the strategy text, which presented the future as indescribable but simultaneously as possibly advantageous, suggesting that unknown futures were reflected as resources, i.e., in terms of potentialisation, which seeks to grasp ‘the horizon behind the horizon and thereby producing new possibilities not yet expected, not yet imagined, not yet thinkable’ (Åkerstrøm Andersen & Gronbaek Pors, 2016, p. 20). This type of orientation is remarkable in a sense that it allows decisional leeway for new forms of societal engagement for the University, while simultaneously alleviating the governance failure experiences encountered by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The following excerpt illustrates how the strategy text acknowledged the difficulty of definite planning, thereby indicating the change in the temporalisation modes of the strategy:

Right from the beginning of their studies, students will be actively involved in all activities of the University community, including research, the development of teaching and community relations. The University will support students’ working life skills (…) by improving related education and intensifying cooperation with relevant partners. We will encourage students to actively engage in cultural and civic activities and to explore the international labour market. (University of Helsinki, n.d.)

In this quotation, the analysis of the present situation – ‘teaching is based on high-quality research’ – forms the basis of developmental measures designed to integrate the students into ‘the University community’ and support their ‘working life skills’. In contrast to such planning of the near future, the strategy also included text that depicted the future as something that exceeds the University’s clear ostensive capacity, thereby exhibiting it in an open manner, i.e., as assets for mobilising potential, such as in the following quotations:

Openness is a fundamental precondition for the implementation of our core duties. Open science and open-access data will promote the development of research and make research-based knowledge available throughout society. An open operational culture will boost public engagement, create a community that values diverse encounters and provide an environment that helps individuals develop the skills required for ethical, critical and responsible reform. (…)

Open publications and materials that are made openly available will advance the development of science and bring research extensively at the disposal of our partners and the whole of the society in the form of a shared knowledge capital. We will increase our impactfulness by producing and using research knowledge and expertise in ways that advance openness in collaboration with business life, public administration and the third sector. (University of Helsinki, n.d.)

For the strategic period of 2021–30, the University oriented itself to the future in two distinct ways. First, it made use of the traditional public administration perspective through which it analysed the past or present to delineate clear avenues for future development (present’s past). Second, and of greater significance, it abstained from characterising the past and instead portrayed the future as a realm of open contingencies to be harnessed for the organisation’s benefit (the future’s future). This temporal orientation expanded the organisation’s room for
subsequent strategic manoeuvring and offered a partial remedy to the challenges posed by external governance of universities through policy programmes.

Conclusions and discussion

In this article, we contributed to the problem of grasping how problems and challenges observed by the university are temporalised in organisational strategy documents. From the systems-theoretical viewpoint, we dissociated ourselves from the much-deployed views that emphasise the possibility of direct external steering of the university. Using the new forms of communicative means, such as negotiations, governments in different countries have inspired universities to develop their accustomed planning practices to a more strategic orientation in order to increase their capacity for self-governance.

The discussion about governance failures (Dunsire, 1996; Jessop, 2010), i.e., difficulties to politically redefine societal objectives regardless of disagreements about their validity, inspired us to adopt Luhmannian (1997a) systems-theoretical view with the help of which we analysed how the university organisation creates decisional conditions for its self-reproduction by using strategies. By conceptualising strategy documents as formal decisions containing the university’s self-descriptions, we were able to analyse how such documents temporalise issues the university seeks to communicate to the concerned public as well as its internal members. By doing so, we offered a new problem horizon for other researchers to use when investigating the role of strategies in the embedded systemic steering of the university organisation.

Theorising temporality from a systems theory viewpoint allowed us to unfold interesting changes of emphasis in the strategic orientation of the University of Helsinki. To begin with, the different ways to conceptualise temporality allows for arguing that the long-term transformation of the public administration found in the Danish welfare state context (Åkerstrom Andersen & Grønbæk Pors, 2016) might help understanding the role of strategies in the decision making of the Finnish universities, especially in terms of the broader historical transitions taking place in the public administration of higher education. The switches in the temporalisation modes deployed in the country’s premier research university’s strategic self-descriptions suggest that the University has developed a capacity to sensitise its strategising to much more nuanced conceptions of time than previous research in higher education strategies has reported for any university (Frølich et al., 2013; Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011). Adopting more open modes of decision-making, rather than sticking to the traditional public sector planning with definite future scenarios (Dowsett, 2020; Lynch & Baines, 2004), has improved the University’s self-governance in a way that provides support for the public governance attempts concerning coordinating efforts among organisations that compose the national system of higher education.

In our case university, the improved strategic contingency awareness seems to inspire it to develop capacity to secure decisional leeway for attempts to gain future-oriented operative resilience under the conditions of ever more complex societal environments. The qualitative changes in the strategic temporalisation confirm the limits of the traditional linear planning perspective as a form of encountering the university’s developmental challenges. Further, the more general discussion on the failures in the external governance seems to justify the
correspondence between the new forms of public attempts for dialogical ‘steering at distance’ (Kickert, 1995) by means of inspiring universities to develop strategies as part of their self-governance in the communicative space of ‘embedded steering’ (Buchinger, 2007, p. 17). In our understanding, the switches in the modes of temporalisation in the strategic self-descriptions of the university suggest reconsid-ering planning as flexible ‘decisions on decision premises’ (Luhmann, 2018, p. 187) in the evolving forms of managerial communication in the higher education sector.

This major shift makes the University of Helsinki to turn to strategic projections made into the future. It also leads to learning via reflexive processing of meanings that deal with contingencies only to recognise the illusion of strict managerial control of challenges present in the organisation’s societal environment. Further, it leads to the deployment of meanings that conceptualise contingencies as resources for identifying the organisation’s potentials in encountering future challenges. For us, this indicates a change through which organisational decision-making starts to depict uncertainties instead of aiming at absorbing them (Åkerström Andersen & Grønbæk Pors, 2017), thereby illustrating a possible shift towards an intentionally open and emergent strategy, reminiscent of the view previously discussed by Doyle and Brady (2018). In the interpretative frame of systems theory, this observation suggests that research should focus on the novel forms of arrangements universities use in their twofold societal anchorage both to scientific research, which moves the frontiers of knowledge, and education customised to anticipate unpredictable changes in labour markets.

The analysis of the University of Helsinki’s strategy documents also gives rise to practical considerations. First, strategies are key tools to articulate organisational identity, i.e., texts that concern what the given social collective is and what it does (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Thus, they provide mechanisms by which university members as decision makers reflect about their organisational attachments. Strategies, therefore, possess the capacity for universities to improve their ‘organisational actorhood’ (Hasse & Krücken, 2013, pp. 190–193) in the current context of embedded steering. This gives strategies a formative role in improving universities as entities capable of operating as collective actors in society instead of understanding themselves as mere platforms for internally competitive individual or group-based activities only. Second, by reconsider-ing organisational identities and actorhood via reflexivity focused on temporal dimen-sion, universities might learn to unlearn some of their old habits and unleash their capacity to oscillate between different futures understood as resources. Such processing of meanings may, for instance, provide better opportunities for attaching universities to policy programmes by alleviating structural knowledge deficits of the political decision making.

Finally, the present analysis is not void of limitations. First, it is based on evidence, which comes from a specific kind of a public research university located in a Nordic country, Finland. It therefore suffers from the breadth of evidence that would be obtained by means of studying a more extensive sample of different types of university organisa-tions, such as private universities and universities of applied sciences. Second the study is limited in terms of its context specificity. Being a study conducted in a single country setting the results cannot be readily extended to other national contexts as such. Because higher education systems considerably vary from one country to another, it would be
valuable for future research to deepen the results achieved here to open a novel horizon for understanding university strategies in various kinds of contexts wherein self-governance becomes materialised.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank participants of the 38th EGOS Colloquium Sub-theme 63: The Organizing of Academia for constructive discussion and feedback.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

The work was supported by the Academy of Finland [Grant number 316545].

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