

## Coupling and Decoupling in Education

*Raimund Hasse and Georg Krücken*

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**Abstract:** Education as a societal field is a prominent topic in both new institutionalism and systems theory. Based on general insights from both theories concerning this field, the chapter examines the reasons for diverging patterns of organizational development in schools and universities. Conceptually, the notion of decoupling in new institutionalism and the concept of structural coupling in systems theory are of pivotal importance for explaining these diverging patterns. According to the authors, both types of organizations are subject to new regulatory pressures and management ideas. Yet schools appear to maintain a rather diverse set of organizational responses, while universities increasingly seem to constitute a globally structured and more homogeneous organization field. The authors identify the ambiguous role of universities as both educational and scientific institutions as one of the main reasons for this difference.

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### 1. Introduction: Organization and world society in education

Education has attracted the attention of the social sciences from the very beginning. In sociology, particularly Émile Durkheim considered education as a precondition for overcoming fundamental problems of “The Social Division of Labor” that accompanied industrialization processes in 19th century-Europe (Durkheim 1933). In the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Daniel Bell put similar emphasis on education when outlining “The Coming of Post-Industrial Society” (Bell 1973; cf. also Drucker 1969). With knowledge coming to be considered as a main resource of contemporary society, the appreciation for education has only increased. It is therefore hardly any surprise that today there is a broad consensus that education is crucial for both individuals and (national) societies or regions. As a consequence, families and policy makers are willing to invest huge resources in education.

The high values attributed to education and the widely shared belief that education can be a means to a broad range of ends has also resulted in many reforms aimed at improving educational attainment. Most of these reforms are related to organizational issues, and are directed towards both schools and universities as the most prototypical and important of educational organizations. As these organizations and the broader contexts in which they are embedded are shaped by different logics and path-dependencies, such reforms have resulted in very heterogeneous outcomes. Although these reforms have only rarely led to the intended effects, they have nonetheless become an integral part of the ongoing process of institutional change in education.

In this paper, we focus on education and its organizational forms in order to address theoretical issues of change and heterogeneity. In so doing, we refer to two macro-sociological theories, both of which have extensively dealt with issues of education. For the systems theory, which is predominantly based on the writings of Niklas Luhmann, education is a social system that fulfills societal functions and provides services to other societal systems such as the economic and political system (Luhmann 2002). In the new institutionalism as put forward by John Meyer and his collaborators, education is primarily seen as a societal sector based on core values of contemporary society (Meyer 1992; Meyer et al. 2007; Meyer and Ramirez 2012). According to this perspective, education represents the broad cultural accounts of rationality on the one hand, and fairness on the other. John Meyer has also emphasized how, due to the ideal of meritocracy, education is crucial in legitimating inequality in contemporary society. (Meyer 2001).

Though both theories differ so sharply in their basic theoretical tenets that it is hardly possible to integrate their research programs within one conceptual framework, they nevertheless share two striking features that may be utilized to discuss theoretical issues of organization and society from a comparative perspective (cf. Hasse and Krücken 2005a). First, both approaches consider society as a whole, whose appropriate level of analysis is that of one world society. In so doing, these theories can be distinguished from concepts of globalization that have come to dominate the social sciences, particularly in sociology, political science and economics. It is also important to note that while globalization theories take national societies (respectively national political systems or national economies) for granted and, against this background, discover the strengthening of international ties and interpret them as a trend toward globalization, systems theory and new institutionalism identify national (and regional as well as other) specifications against the background of an all-encompassing world society.

The second common ground is that both systems theory and new institutionalism highlight the formation and reproduction of formal organizations as a core feature of modern society. In Luhmann's theory, three different kinds of social systems are distinguished: societal systems, organizational systems and interaction systems (Luhmann 1982, 1995, 1997). At the societal level, modern society can only be reconstructed as a multidimensional and horizontally differentiated project. That type of societal differentiation, which has substituted vertical, i.e. hierarchical stratification as the dominant mode of differentiation, is called "functional

differentiation”, as societal systems are considered to fulfil functions that cannot be substituted for by other systems. From this point of view, societal systems such as education, politics, religion and science, for example, are distinct societal systems with characteristic rationalities that cannot be subordinated to the logic of other systems. At the organizational level, different types of formal organizations based on membership can be identified. In addition, there exist social systems that are based on face-to-face interactions. These systems are more ephemeral compared to organizations and, in particular, societal systems. In his work, Luhmann focused on the historical co-evolution of societal systems on the one hand and the emergence and spread of specific organizations such as schools, parties, congregations and universities on the other (Luhmann 1981). He has also emphasized the significance of organizations for countervailing the strength and rigidities of functional differentiation, which he considered as a main driving force for societal evolution (Luhmann 1994). For Meyer and his collaborators, organizations express core values of modern society, on the one hand, adapting to and incorporating standards in order to gain legitimacy and to cope with uncertainty. On the other hand, some organizations translate societal expectations from the world society level and posit them on to the level of organizations, nation states and individuals (Meyer et al. 1997). In this respect, nonprofit organizations, professional associations, scientific experts and consultants are particularly important as they determine to a large extent the degree to which organizations such as, e.g. in education, universities, schools and regulatory agencies, accord with cultural norms and values of modern (world) society (Strang and Meyer 1993; Schneiberg and Clemens 2006).

How can we relate the concepts of these grand theories to empirical research in a fruitful way? Whereas both macro-theories tend to be criticized for being too abstract and too static to take into account differences and changes across time, most empirical research is interested in variation – either across time (i.e. change), space (e.g. with respect to national contexts or regions) or fields (respectively systems or sectors). In what follows, we will approach the empirical example of educational reform with both theories, developing a theory-based comparative perspective on schools and universities.

In contrast to our previous work comparing systems theory and new institutionalism (Hasse 2005; Hasse and Krücken 2005a, 2008), we will focus here on how to conceptualize aspects of change and heterogeneity in education according to both theories. In so doing, we will distinguish between schools (primary and secondary education) and universities (tertiary

education). Before focusing on recent trends and persistent variations of educational organizations, we will thoroughly explore the concept of coupling, as this concept significantly contributes to an understanding of heterogeneities and changes. It will be shown that both systems theory and new institutionalism have developed an understanding of coupling and decoupling that can easily be – and actually has been – related to educational organizations. Concepts of coupling can thus be utilized as a starting point for developing a comparative perspective.

## **2. The concept of coupling in new institutionalism and systems theory**

As education appears to be a segment of society characterized by an ongoing search for improvement and reforms on the one hand, and rather inert features on the other, it is no surprise that the new institutional notion of decoupling, which focuses on such discrepancies, has become a broadly discussed core concept in education research (Meyer and Rowan 2006; Hallett 2010). However, the precise meaning of the concept is still rather unclear. Decoupling may alternatively refer either to a broad range of phenomena or at times simply serve as an empty signifier (Orton and Weick 1990). In this section we will examine the concept with respect to both systems theory and new institutionalism. This basis will allow us first to put current transformations of schools and universities into perspective, and second to relate the two theories to each other.

### *New institutionalism*

In new institutionalism, decoupling is a core issue in the seminal article of Meyer and Rowan (1977). However, the authors did not invent the concept of coupling. Their findings could thus be related to other prominent contributions to organization sociology of that time. In particular, contingency theory (Perrow 1972) and sense-making approaches (Weick 1976) had advanced their understanding of coupling, both maintaining that coupling signifies the degree to which components of an organizational system are linked to each other so that changes of any of these components determine changes in others. Against the background of such an understanding, the new institutional notion of coupling can be characterized as follows:

First, decoupling in the sense of Meyer and Rowan (1977) strictly refers to formal and visible organizational structures and processes that can be decoupled from each other and/or from organizational practices and work activities. In contrast to practices and work activities, organizational structures and processes are assumed to be responsive to expectations in the

institutional environment (Scott 1983; Meyer, Scott, and Deal 1981). The main argument is: As the institutional environment is characterized by reforms and expressions of new demands, organizations tend to change their structures and processes, but not their work activities. As a consequence, change is predominantly related to formal and visible structures and processes. When competition is weak and efficiency is hard to measure, such adaptation and conformity is assumed to guarantee legitimation and resources. Public service organizations, bureaucracies, and schools thus served as prototypical examples for decoupling, while organizations embedded in a competitive environment with an easy efficiency measurement were assumed to be less sensitive to institutional forces because, in such cases, an organization cannot afford to decouple its structures and processes from work activities (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Second, decoupling may occur only when a certain organizational characteristic is fulfilled. According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), decoupling is based on an organizational culture characterized by confidence and good faith. Confidence and good faith, on the one hand, require that organizational units and members symbolically comply with societal norms and regulations regardless of the degree to which they can – or want to – practically apply them. Managers and supervisors, on the other hand, need to put trust in their practitioners – and, in so doing, avoid looking for deviance and non-compliance. Due to this dual requirement, decoupling can be seen as a fragile arrangement that can be questioned by both management and practitioners. In order to decouple, a facades need to be set-up and maintained not only at the interfaces with the external environment, but also internally.

Third, it is important to note that Meyer and Rowan discuss alternative responses to societal expectations, which are not in line with established practices. Decoupling, thus, is not the only possible response to those institutional expectations, that do not match internal requirements (Meyer and Rowan 1977: 356). First, organizations may simply resist conforming to institutional expectations; second, they can cut off some external relations and isolate themselves from those environments that express problematic expectations; third, they can cynically acknowledge the decoupling of their practices and work activities; and, fourth, they can admit their deviance and promise reforms in order to improve the situation in the future. These alternatives, however, are discussed as “partial solutions”, because any of them could produce severe problems in the long run. Promising reforms and cynically acknowledging non-compliance both sabotage the legitimacy of an organization's actual situation, while

cutting ties to external relations as well as resisting change are likely to have negative effects on resources. Thus, decoupling often appears to be the most viable solution.

It should be noted that any of these three specifications can be – and sometimes have been – understood as being based on a binary scheme: (a) the relevant environment of a focal organization is either technical or institutional, (b) there either is a culture of confidence and good faith or one of control, evaluation and distrust, and (c) the response to new expectations is either decoupling or one of the alternatives mentioned above. However, although such binary schemes may be helpful for analytic purposes, they neither cover the complexities of empirical realities nor do they provide a good starting point for understanding the heterogeneities and changes we are interested in (Orton and Weick 1990). It is thus important to recognize that any organization is embedded in both institutional *and* technological environments, rather than simply one or the other (Hasse and Krücken 2005b). On that basis, new institutionalists assumed that any organization (including business firms) can be characterized by decouplings. More recent research has developed a similar perspective for decoupling and its alternatives. According to this perspective, organizations respond in various and sometimes contradictory ways to new demands, so that coupling between formal representation and actual practice can be more or less tight (Binder 2007; Hallett 2010). Finally, confidence and good faith can also be seen as a matter of degree, because controls and evaluations on the one hand and manifest non-compliance on the other may decrease confidence and good faith. In such cases they limit the potential for decoupling – but they will not necessarily bring it to an end.

Consequently, we have to conceptualize decoupling strictly as a variable theoretically ranging from 0 (total coupling) to 1 (total decoupling). Second, we have to expect changes in the degree of coupling, and such changes may differ with respect to organizational or environmental characteristics. On that basis, new institutionalism provides insight as to why coupling is sometimes closer to 0 and sometimes closer to 1. It may also explain any changes in either of these directions, because, according to this perspective, coupling varies with respect to (a) the degree to which institutional forces are more influential than technical ones, (b) the feasibility of applying any of the alternatives to decoupling, (c) the organizational balance of confidence and good faith on the one hand and control and distrust on the other.

Such a conceptualization of coupling offers a broad range of comparative perspectives.<sup>1</sup> First, it can be hypothesized for educational organizations that they generally need to be rather sensitive to institutional forces while technical criteria are less crucial. Nonetheless, there are clear indicators for a strengthening of technical forces (Kelly and Kalev 2006; Espeland and Sauder 2007). Generally, this trend seems to be more pronounced in the United States than in Europe, but due to international organizations and networks, such national differences tend to decline profoundly in the case of universities, whereas they are more robust in the case of schools.

Second, the feasibility of applying any of the above-mentioned alternatives to decoupling is rather limited, which sparks the following questions: In what respect have recent developments altered the situation for schools and universities? Has it become harder or easier to resist some environmental expectations and to cut off some external relations – and, if so, which ones? Can or cannot deviant practices and work activities be cynically acknowledged more easily? And, is it more or less appropriate just to promise improvements for the future? Again, answers to any of these questions vary with respect to organizational type (e.g. schools vs. universities) and context (e.g. national characteristic features with respect to competition and regulation).

Third, educational organizations are characterized by comparatively high degrees of professional autonomy and collegial decision-making. Both the legitimation and the technologies to effectively control teaching and other core activities appear to be limited, and structures and processes in educational organization are based on the assumption of high commitment of professionals toward an educational ethos. Such features, generally, can be seen as good providers of confidence and good faith. Nonetheless, we find indicators for changes and heterogeneities. Professional autonomy and collegial decision-making are more pronounced in universities than in schools (Ingersoll 2003), but the overall picture here indicates a decline; legitimation for control and technologies to exercise control seems to be higher in the case of schools, although performance evaluations of the individual professionals are also increasing in universities due to a general trend towards auditing and accounting (Strathern 2000). As the overall trend is not in favor of organizational cultures of

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<sup>1</sup> Though in this paper we discuss comparative perspectives on coupling exclusively with regard to educational organizations in neo-institutional world society research, one should also mention recent contributions to neo-institutional research, in which issues of organizational coupling are discussed in reference to debates on “institutional logics” (Pache and Santos 2013) or the “microfoundation of institutionalization processes” (Bromley, Hwang, and Powell 2012; Hasse and Schmidt 2010).

confidence and good faith, again, a tightening of the degree of coupling can be expected (Meyer and Rowan 2006).

### *Systems theory*

From our point of view, there are two concepts of coupling in systems theory that can be taken into consideration for a comparative perspective vis-à-vis new institutionalism: *structural coupling* and *structure and semantics*. The distinction between *structure and semantics* can serve as a point of entry into the idea of decoupling, if one understands structure and semantics as referring to the distinction between (only) two spheres of social reality.<sup>2</sup> At the societal level, structure then refers to the expectation structure of modern society, which is shaped by different functional systems (like e.g. politics, economy, science or education). Semantics, by contrast, refers to the discursive level of society and its systems. Such discourses are based on the introduction and institutionalization of semantic concepts (such as the state in politics, calculable risk in the economy, probability statements in science), and to formats which help to describe the world (e.g. in the mass media and in the social sciences). While structure signifies the processing of meaning according to institutionalized patterns constituting the differentiation of social systems (e.g. educational system), semantics may be related to unspecific all-encompassing self-descriptions that can refer to structural features of the past or that can be biased towards particularistic interests and persistent ideologies.

As systems theory assumes that structure and semantics are related to each other and co-evolve, the relation between these spheres can be described as being coupled. However, the hypothesis is that one sphere does not determine the other and that there is neither a straightforward one-to-one nor a strictly dialectic relation. Although this resembles the idea of decoupling, the new institutionalism has no equivalent of such a distinction between structure and semantics. Instead, it assumes that semantics (i.e. in an institutional understanding: societal discourses which represent norms and values) tend to be easily inscribed into organizational structures. Systems theory, by contrast, assumes systematic differences between societal systems and organizational systems, seeing them as distinct types of social systems, but it has no complementary concept of those practices beyond organizational communication and decision-making, which the new institutionalism assumes to be decoupled

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<sup>2</sup> Such a distinction (*structure* “versus” *semantics*) is clearly implied in Luhmann's masterpiece about the theory of society (Luhmann 1997), although in other writings structure and semantics are conceptualised as being closely related to each other.



from organizational structures. It therefore has to be concluded that the institutional understanding of decoupling and the distinction between structure and semantics in systems theory profoundly differ from each other.

*Structural coupling*, the second concept of systems theory that is taken into consideration here, addresses the question to what extent social systems impact each other (and themselves) so that changes or variations trigger further changes or variations. Here, coupling is a parameter for conductivity and resonance. Though this concept is mainly used at the societal level and not in reference to organizations, this understanding of coupling is closely related to the organizational concepts of Weick (1976) and Perrow (1972) – and yet it differs profoundly from the new institutional account described above.

As systems theory highlights differentiation and the distinctiveness of societal systems, the concept of structural coupling is rather crucial for any insight into societal evolution. Most importantly, structural coupling is introduced as a compensation for the strictness and rigidity of functional differentiation at the societal level. Such compensation contributes to mutual adjustments of, for example, economy and science or education and politics. These adjustments are considered to be structural couplings. Structural coupling can also be provided by formal organizations (research institutes, schools, business firms etc.), which, unlike societal systems, have the capacity to interact directly with each other. Furthermore, organizations can – selectively and with respect to their decision logic – refer to distinct societal systems and thus deal simultaneously with legal, ethical, technological and other issues. As a consequence, structural coupling contributes to the determination of co-evolutionary processes of modern society.

Issues of coupling can also be discussed with regard to system-internal developments and dynamics. Here, systems theory's starting point is to assume extreme degrees of relatedness and integration. According to this perspective, changes in any part of a system are expected to have far-reaching consequences. They are thus to be characterized as tightly coupled in the sense of Perrow (1972) and Weick (1976). However, systems theory has also focused on issues of decoupling by emphasizing a system's capacity to interrupt internal interdependencies. As a consequence of such interruption, scientific breakthroughs (e.g. recent demystifications of the concept of free will as put forward in neurobiology) may be ignored in other parts of the scientific system (e.g. in economics or in jurisprudence where

acceptance of these neurobiological insights would require extreme modifications). This form of decoupling reduces the need for immediate adaptation and thus helps to avoid stress, and, again, issues of coupling and de-coupling are put forward by organizations. For example, scientific communities – or business firms specialized in industrial sectors – can commit themselves to specific research programs – or in the case of business firms, to certain market niches – as their specific frame of reference.

With regard to differences between schools and universities, systems theory has shed light on a specific feature of the latter: Universities have a dual imprinting, they are parts of both the education *and* the science system, and they thus incorporate both educational and scientific considerations. Regional or national variations, in contrast, have thus far not attracted much attention. As a consequence, it is easier to utilize systems theory for emphasizing differences between types of educational organizations than to focus on regional or national variations from this theory perspective.

The notion of coupling, however, provides a useful starting point for further conceptualisations. With respect to structural couplings and de-couplings, one can first see both the varying requirements for modern education and the demand for an educated workforce and citizenship. Second, systems theory can shed light on the coupling of educational organizations. For example, innovation processes depend to a large extent on collaborations of universities with R&D-departments of industrial companies or with legal firms and other providers of specialized services. The degree to which couplings of this sort vary across time, region and field may help to explain those forms of heterogeneity and change we are interested in. The crucial question, then, is how such variation affects the programmatic content of education.

Although systems theory may be utilized to reflect upon heterogeneities and changes of educational organizations, it differs profoundly from the new institutional perspective. First of all, it focuses in particular on issues of communication, which in the new-institutional perspective are less crucial, because new institutionalists are primarily interested in the relation between work activities (as internal practices which may or may not be based upon communication) and formal organizational features (structures and processes which can be made visible to the environment of an organization). Second, systems theory focuses on the relatedness of many components (or parts) of a focal system, whereas new institutionalism

analytically distinguishes two spheres of social reality: practices and formal arrangements. Third, the notion of coupling in systems theory includes macro-sociological phenomena of functional differentiation, and organizations are taken into consideration based on the extent to which they have an impact either on the degree of coupling at the macro-sociological level or on the degree of decoupling within societal systems such as science, economy, and politics. In new institutionalism, in contrast, decoupling refers to organizations and their need to adjust their structures and processes to external expectations.

The notion of structure and semantics, however, allows one to detect forms of coupling and decoupling that have stronger resemblances with the new institutional understanding. For example, the ideal (semantic) of a totally inclusive education system (lifelong learning as an extreme example thereof) is combined with the structural reality of selection and dropout. In a similar vein, highly institutionalized semantics of equal opportunity, fairness and meritocracy are systematically challenged by robust findings about tracking and sorting according to ascribed criteria. The overall picture indicates robust de-coupling – structural features of reproducing inequalities systematically tend to be accompanied by egalitarian norms and values. However, one also finds remarkable variation: Whereas in the case of schools, equal opportunity demands are manifest on the semantic level (in the United States even more so than in Europe), this issue is less pronounced in the case of universities, where education tends to be driven more strongly by issues of competitiveness and high end-merits. It thus may be concluded that the distinction of structure and semantics offers a broad range of comparative perspectives.

### **3. Heterogeneity and change in schools and universities**

#### *Schools*

Compared with other organizational fields, competition and rivalry between schools have not traditionally been characteristic features. Historically, schools were embedded in philanthropic ideals and organized on a voluntary basis. In the 19th and 20th century, national or regional governments and their administrations became responsible actors in organizing educational affairs. Schools were thus subordinated under a political regime. There was also a strong trend toward professionalization, with academically trained teachers who claimed competencies and responsibilities to deal with students autonomously (Schneider and Keesler 2007). Based on the work of a strong profession and deeply embedded in a political context,

schools came to be characterized as weak organizations. It is thus no surprise that education became the model of choice for examining issues of coupling (Weick 1976).

Since the early work of Karl Weick, John Meyer and others, some profound changes have occurred. First, concerns about educational achievements have triggered a trend toward standardized tests, the results of which, at least in theory, allow for comparing and evaluating individual students as well as schools, districts and entire nations. Second, on the basis of test results, political and administrative decision makers can be legitimized to provide schools with incentives or, to a lesser extent, sanction them (Schneider and Keesler 2007: 198). Third, educational aspirations of the clients have risen and school affairs have become objects of active decision-making for students and parents. According to Brian Rowan, these changes have been so profound that the notion of decoupling needs to be revised substantially. He argues that “new social developments ... have produced novel institutional practices with which institutional theory and research have yet to catch up” (Meyer and Rowan 2006: 2).

Although the notion of decoupling was initially crucial for developing a distinct research program, new institutionalism has found massive evidence for those forms of directed change to which Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Brian Rowan are referring: the setting of standards, the diffusion of evaluations, and the need for decision makers to rationalize and legitimize their decisions, which have become core topics in institutional analyses. It has also been shown that the diffusion of novel organizational forms corresponding with these social developments is an uneven process that depends on a broad range of institutional factors (cf. Schneiberg and Clemens 2006 for an overview). Hence, it would be no surprise if, in the case of schools, one found both substantial inertias and departures from overall trends.

Against this background, it has to be argued that the extent to which the mentioned novelties have been accompanied by appropriate organizational changes at the level of schools is still an open empirical question. Particularly when referring to elementary schools in continental Europe, we find substantial departures from the trend outlined by H.D. Meyer and B. Rowan, although on a strictly symbolical level there are some indicators for change; for example, schools have begun to develop individual profiles, or have started instituting quality management. We also see a general trend toward the professionalization of school management. Principals often need further qualification in management, but, compared with the growing number of professionals who deal with client-related tasks (social workers,

psychologists and other professionals who deal with a broad range of student handicaps), experts for organizational issues are still almost absent at the school level (but not necessarily so in the administrative departments of education). Based on such structural features, organizational reforms of schools predominantly aim at improving governance structures by strengthening the position of the principal, who is to be seen as an interface between administrative authority and teachers. Primary and secondary education is thus still the responsibility of school districts – and competition takes place predominantly within such districts or even at the national level among entire educational systems.

Summing up, we find that schools still often have a weak status as organizations, and in some contexts there is hardly any active management with clear objectives to achieve competitive advantages in contested terrains. Nonetheless, some governance features have changed. Most students participate in standardized, often international tests (IGLU, PISA etc.), and these tests may also inform about the achievements of schools. Test results, however, do not necessarily have profound consequences in terms of sanctions or incentives. In these cases, we find remarkable differences compared with the situation for the United States as described by H.D. Meyer and B. Rowan (2006). It thus may be concluded that the focus on schools directs the attention to heterogeneous organizational responses, which result both from sector specifications (e.g., elementary schools) and from national variations.

### *Universities*

Higher education systems, in contrast, are currently undergoing more profound transformations (cf. Krücken, Kosmützky, and Torke 2007; Trow 2010; Zgaga, Teichler, and Brennan 2013). At the macro-level of world society we can see an increasing inclusion of persons, an increasing number of subjects of study, and increasing individual university mission statements. The second level where we can find changes is at the level of university governance. New Public Management reforms have called into question the traditional mode of governance that was based on the interplay of strong state regulation and academic self-governance. In this process, new actors like accreditation and evaluation bodies or boards of trustees are emerging. A third level where profound changes can be observed is at the university level itself. The university as an organization is transforming into an organizational actor, i.e. an integrated, goal-oriented, and competitive entity in which management and leadership play an ever more important role. As in the case of schools and compared with Europe, the United States is a forerunner in all three respects. Labeling the change process as

“Americanization”, however, would be misleading, because both the embeddedness in a global frame of reference as well as national and organizational path-dependencies have to be taken into account.

We would like to highlight a few conspicuous aspects of the current transformation of the university into an “organizational actor” (Krücken and Meier 2006). Universities are among the oldest formal organizations that are still in existence, but traditionally, universities were not seen as important decision-making entities in their own right. Caught between the state and the academic profession, there was not much legitimate space for organizational management. Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972), for example, pointed to “garbage can” decision-making processes and labeled universities as “organized anarchies”. Although cross-national variation exists, this pattern could be found in very different national systems.

Universities, traditionally seen as institutions (i.e. taken-for-granted units whose activities one hardly has to think about), are currently developing more individual profiles. The most visible sign of this is the development of distinct “mission statements” by universities, but branding activities should also be taken into consideration here. Likewise, organizational accountability is becoming more important. The attribution of responsibility, which in universities has traditionally been much more individualized, is now transforming into an organizational attribute. On that basis, rankings of entire university organizations both at a national level and on a global scale are becoming more significant – not only in the US but also abroad. In order to successfully compete in such frames of reference, universities have become increasingly open to management consultancy, and we see a clear trend toward professionalized management of universities and the emergence of a management profession in that field. Especially during the last decade, many new positions have been created in fields like planning, student services, quality control, and public relations -- fields that contribute to the concept of an integrated, goal-oriented entity (cf. Krücken, Blümel, and Kloke 2013).

In sum, organizational reforms in higher education have supported the take-off of universities as organizational actors. We thus find a strengthening of competition and related niche behaviour. In this context, universities are beginning to develop individual profiles and to relate themselves to competitive groups of similar universities. In the case of highly ranked and research oriented universities, this contextualization occurs at the global level, and leaders such as Stanford University have become world models for many universities. As compared

with schools, management and self-administration of universities are related to this context – and the political, administrative and legal contexts tend to get reduced to a contingency factor, which can be more or less supportive for universities. Tertiary education has become predominantly an issue of an active university management. As compared with schools that are embedded in the education system, educational districts and national policies only have indirect effects, and typically tend to be evaluated according to the degree to which they provide opportunities for universities to develop in the outlined direction. As universities are also embedded in the science system, different systemic logics and environments have to be taken into account.

#### **4. Discussion**

Schools and universities are educational organizations, both of which have become objects of directed change and reforms. However, there are remarkable differences between them. In the case of universities, the transformation of an institution into competitive organizational actors in need of active management prevails. Schools, in contrast, are more profoundly imprinted by institutional factors, which result from their embeddedness in political and administrative contexts. As a consequence and compared with universities, the transformation of schools is more uneven across regions and nations: Some types of schools and some contexts are lagging behind while others represent the cutting edge of reform. In what follows, we will focus on differences between schools and universities by critically reflecting on the explanatory power of new institutionalism and systems theory, both of which have often been criticized for not appropriately addressing issues of heterogeneity and change.

According to the neo-institutional world society concept, both schools and universities enact scripts whose origins are located in the wider socio-cultural environments. Previous research has shown an increasing worldwide standardization of educational models, both with regard to structural features and to the content. Likewise, universities are seen as increasingly shaped by global models that refer to the expansion of higher education and the broadening and standardization of subjects of study and curricula. Changes within educational organizations thus reflect changes in their broader socio-cultural environments. The current trends toward accountability, professionalized management, and transnational comparisons found (not just) in the educational sector give evidence of broader societal rationalization processes. In contrast to H.D. Meyer and B. Rowan, we assume that these changes produce a lot of decoupling in both schools and universities. From a neo-institutional point of view, rapid

institutional change is hardly accompanied by an equally rapid change at the organizational level.

Differences between schools and universities have to be seen with regard to their linkages to world society. It is obvious that universities cannot be seen as isolated entities confined within their national boundaries. At least since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, intensive exchange processes can be observed that have promoted the formation of a common transnational frame of meaning in higher education. According to new institutional research, these linkages are mostly mediated through scientific associations, university networks, and mutual observation processes, which are particularly strong in a field spearheading the rationalization and scientization of society (Drori et al. 2003). As a result, universities perceive themselves as being situated in direct competitive processes in which common standards, role models and rankings are of paramount importance. The strong organizational turn that we described above fosters the orientation toward others, as the idea of the university as a managed organization strengthens the development of individual profiles, competition and comparisons.

In contrast, the linkages between schools and the world society are more indirect: Schools do not compete directly according to global standards, and most of the connections are still mediated through the nation-state. Organizations like UNESCO or the OECD are central points of reference for state action. Very much in line with the basic ideas of the seminal paper by Meyer and others on “World Society and the Nation-State” (1997), nation-states enact collective world society and its scripts through a world organizational frame, in particular the UN system and related bodies. Actorhood and responsibility with regard to school education is allocated at the national level, and global standardized testing provides the basis for state action. This leads to new forms of coercive governance between globally embedded nation-state actors and schools, while the links of universities to world society are much more lateral and decentralized. As a result, actorhood in universities unfolds more at the organizational level as compared to schools.

According to systems theory, common changes and persistent differences between schools and universities have to be interpreted in a different way. If one employs a macro-sociological perspective and not one that is primarily focusing on systems of organization or interaction, one clearly sees that the societal embeddedness differs profoundly between universities and schools. Universities display a double reference to both the science and the education system.



With respect to science, they are committed to the discovery of truths. Information processing and sense-making are thus framed with regard to the code and programs of the science system itself and the global scientific community, not by referring to the logics of other functionally differentiated systems. With this conceptualization, Luhmann builds upon and further develops classical assumptions held by philosophy and sociology of science on the universalism and self-organization of a global science system. However, universities are also bound to the education system. Here, the pursuit of individual careers and related grades are seen as being of paramount importance.

In contrast to science, there is an ongoing scholarly debate on the codes and programs of the education system. This debate originates from the process of assessing the general character of education. As organizational and interactional aspects of education play a very strong role in these debates, education cannot be modeled as a macro-system of society in a clear-cut fashion, independent from other societal references. Schools, in contrast to universities, are organizations whose operations are based on sense-making, which is determined exclusively by the education system. With respect to this characteristic, schools resemble political parties in their exclusive reference to the political system or firms in their exclusive reference to the economic system. In combination, the strict reference of schools to education and the openness of the education system to debates aiming at varying its program explains, from a systems theory point of view, both ongoing changes in schools and the comparatively weak status of school organizations.

Common changes and persistent differences between schools and universities are due to the coupling at the level of societal systems, but also due to the coupling between societal systems, organizational systems, and interactional systems. We do not wish to refer here to the long scholarly debate on how such coupling can be conceptualized within a systems theoretical framework. One prominent example on how to conceptualize change at the macro-level is Peter Weingart's hypothesis that the increasingly tighter coupling between science, politics, the economy and the mass media leads to structural changes within the science system by increasingly incorporating the expectations from politics, the economy and the mass media within the system itself (Weingart 2001). Furthermore, one could explore the coupling between societal systems like science or education and their organizational and interactional bases. Here we see a lot of unexplored terrain for further analysis of changes and differences between schools and universities. We assume that the highly organizational and

interactional character of teaching stands in contrast to the more general and abstract character of science. The university as an organization is highly present when it comes to teaching, while its role in shaping research is much more limited. Likewise, even in the Internet age, most teaching requires face-to-face interactions, while at least parts of the communication structure in the field of scientific research are less embedded in particular local structures. In this, the university combines general features and developments at the level of global society with specific and more locally bound organizational and interactional aspects. The trends in university development we described above can be interpreted along this dual orientation, while the stronger national and local embeddedness of schools and the limits to their organizational actorhood can be seen as a result of their monoreferentiality to the education system.

Summing up, we argue that differences between rapidly changing universities on the one hand and more inert and heterogeneous organizational structures of schools on the other can be understood with respect to both theories. While systems theory sees inherent and task-related differences between these two types of educational organizations, new institutionalism emphasizes direct links of universities to world society – and contrasts these direct linkages with the political and administrative governance of schools at national or regional levels. Against this background it may be noted that change and heterogeneity generally can be related to each other. The relation is twofold: On the one hand, we find that directed change results in heterogeneity at a given point in time because processes of diffusion are fostered or slowed down by specific institutional factors. The common and ongoing change dynamics of universities will thus not result in isomorphic university structures. Heterogeneity, on the other hand, can stimulate directed change when trendsetters and leaders push laggards forward by setting standards and serving as models. In the case of school education this can be observed easily in the benchmarking of school districts or by comparing national education systems. We thus conclude that this interrelatedness of heterogeneity and change provides further perspectives for a focused comparative research based on core concepts of neo-institutionalism and systems theory.

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