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**Questioning the idea of the Ivory Tower:  
Organizational identity as a mediator between  
continuity and change**

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# Background

- Problems in measuring change in higher education: while much change can be identified, continuity seems to prevail
- Perhaps one answer can be found within the intangible aspects of higher education
- Organizational identity: a resource or a burden?

# What is organizational identity?

- Focuses on the symbolic, mythological and cognitive sides of organizational life
- Organizational identity is a social construct about what the organization "is"
- Organizational identity is about how insiders and outsiders try to make sense of (provide meaning to) a given organization – as a form of categorization

# Why is organizational identity relevant?

- De-regulation of higher education systems, and increased competition create the perceived need for institutions to become more profiled
- More autonomous universities are also starting to look like and behave as "normal" organizations – where coherence is important
- Accountability claims force universities to legitimize themselves as being in control of their destiny and their actions

# The many different labels of universities

- Extreme portraits of universities: "ivory towers", "organized anarchies", "entrepreneurial enterprises"
- Change and continuity is perhaps linked in more complex ways that these labels suggest

# Defining organizational identity

- Albert & Whetten (1985) definition:
  - central character
  - temporal continuity
  - distinctiveness
- But, identity may both be "fixed" or "fluid", and may be derived from outside as well as from inside
- The implication is that organizational identity has many potential uses for a university

# Organizational identity as image

- Identity and image closely related concepts
- Image as a device for legitimation  
(adaptation of legit "identities" found in the organizational field)
- Image as a device for branding and marketing
- Image – more than just a symbol?

# Organizational identity as integration

- Organizational identity can be a device for fostering organizational integration (of larger and more complex universities)
- Governance through values, norms and symbols? Identity discussions trigger staff engagement!
- Organizational identity – only a tool for leadership and management?



# Organizational identity as innovation

- Organizational identity is a social construct, and identities is mostly found in various "labels"
- Labels may remain the same, but their meaning may change dramatically over time
- Reinterpretations of old labels to new situations can foster and drive change

# Organizational identity as interpretation

- Organizational identity as a way to translate complexity into meanings, to create order and coherence
- Organizational identity provide recipes of how to respond to new situations
- Organizational identity as a starting point for enacting the environment

## Some reflections

- Organizational identity addresses the cultural changes that is going on in universities - and can inform us about impacts and effects of current reforms
- Organizational identity is a concept for studying how universities are manouvering between modernity and tradition - especially since the sense-making and sense-giving processes associated with the concept also discloses important power struggles