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Towards New Actors in Higher Education Governance: The Emergence of Collective Resistance Platforms

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Abstract

Due to the New Public Management based higher education reforms in the past decades academics have lost their status as key actors in collegial university governance to a high extent. In response to these changes, academics in Europe started creating and collectively participating in cross-disciplinary action platforms against the reform initiatives in order to reclaim their position as influential actors within the higher education governance systems. This paper focuses on these new forms of collective responses in the UK, Netherlands, and Belgium-Flanders since these organizations emerge as new political actors in the system of higher education governance in all three countries, whereas the extent of disciplinary variety in joining such movements varies across policy contexts.

1. Introduction

In the past decades the New Public Management (NPM) based higher education reforms have fostered universities to become more corporate and managerial organizations (Braun and Merrien 1999; Krücken and Meier 2006; Leisyte and Dee 2012), with strengthened role of university managers and external stakeholders, such as representatives of the industry. The influence of external stakeholders and the power of the purse have been especially visible in recent years due to the financial crisis and the consequent introduction of austerity plans by the governments which have led to budget cuts in higher education institutions, forcing them to diversify their funding base (Leisyte and Westerheijden 2014). At the same time, academics lose their status as key actors in collegial university governance, and play increasingly a minor role in university central decision-making (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007; Enders, De Boer, and Weyer 2013).

Academics from different European countries have recently started to respond to these structural changes by creating new action platforms opposing the NPM inspired reforms in universities. In this way, the responses have evolved from self-organized disciplinary communities and individual efforts of academic elites towards national networks which connect the “critical scholars” from a variety of disciplines in a collective resistance against the reform initiatives. These developments pose two puzzles. First, although the policy change and the resulting structural change in universities have started back in the 1990s, the establishment of the resistance platforms is a rather recent phenomenon. Second, contrary to the existing literature which asserts strong disciplinary identity boundary maintenance (Becher and Trowler 2001; Leisyte 2014a), the practice shows that the resistance platforms aim to represent the broader academic community and thus tend to go beyond disciplinary boundaries. This type of collective resistance spanning across disciplinary boundaries in the network governance of higher education is a new phenomenon which is largely underexplored in the literature.

As the emerging platforms are intended to raise organized collective protest against higher education policy reforms and their consequences, we need to have a thorough understanding of the nature of the collective resistance. In this discussion paper, we set out to explore the new forms of collective responses academics undertake in order to reclaim their position as influential actors within the higher education governance systems. We do so

by conducting a preliminary analysis of the structure, topical focus and the action forms of academic resistance networks from three countries which have been at the forefront of the managerial reforms of their university sectors: the UK, the Netherlands and the Flanders region of Belgium. We studied three academic resistance networks in the respective countries: The CDBU (Council for the Defence of British Universities), Platform H.NU (Platform for the Reformation of Dutch Universities) and AHO (Action Group for Higher Education).

The insights gained from this analysis shall provide the impetus for a larger research project that aims to study the changes in academic identity through collective action in response to the policy changes.

2. The managerialist turn in the governance of higher education and its consequences

Within the last quarter of the 20th century, a general trend of downsizing the public sector and reorganizing the remaining public services according to the NPM regime could be observed (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004; Sultana 2012). The overall aim of this new regime is 'doing more with less' (Deem and Brehony 2005; Meek 2003), which is to be achieved through "consolidating controls, reducing budgets, downsizing and freezing new appointments, emphasis on value for money, stimulating internal competition, and putting auditing and regulatory regimes in place through such mechanisms as key performance indicators, and self-monitoring" (Shattock 2008; Sultana 2012, 353).

The NPM doctrine led to waves of public sector reforms in several public sector areas which urged them to adopt market principles in order to improve cost-efficiency. Being traditionally public-funded organizations, higher education institutions have also been subject to these series of reforms which have reshaped higher education governance across Europe in the past decades. Studies have shown that universities have been through significant transformation in European countries due to complex governance reforms covering different areas including the formal structures, management, financing, quality control and evaluation, human resources, course planning, access and internationalization (Amaral 2008; De Boer, Enders, and Schimank 2006; Jarvis 2014; Leisyte 2014b).

The NPM approach has transformed the organization of universities in a way that universities now function with a business mindset, and adapt to the management practices of private sectors (De Boer, Enders, and Leisyte 2007). Universities have been targeted to become more 'complete and corporate' organizations, and this has resulted in more managed universities (Krücken and Meier 2006; Parker 2014). This has challenged the academic self-governance, which is based on the functioning of disciplinary communities and the collegial decision-making practices at universities. In the traditional academic self-governance model academics participate in decision-making processes and decide on the strategic direction of the university, meaning that power rests within the lower units of university.

The NPM inspired management of higher education institutions, widely referred to as 'managerialism', differs from academic self-governance model. It has the following characteristics: accountability based on performance, target setting, funding based on results, shift from collegial to individual leadership and decision-making, marketization, commercialization, bureaucratization, centralized governance, and a loss of professional autonomy for the academics (Amaral, Meek, and Larsen 2003; Verhoeven 2010). Efficiency and effectiveness, quality control and assurance, accountability to stakeholders and decentralization are thus central concepts in the NPM-led managerialism of the higher education institutions that are widely agreed upon in the literature (Deem and Brehony 2005; Meek 2003; Santiago et al. 2006).

One of the most significant side effects of the changes in higher education governance is that the institutional norms governing academic work at universities are changing, with the academic logic guiding academic self-regulation, which encompasses professional and institutional autonomy being challenged by a different type of quasi-market logic which may lead to a very different environment for academic work (Leisyte 2014b). The traditional logic guiding the governance of higher education has been the academic logic (Fini and Lacetera 2010; Sauermann and Stephan 2013), which emphasizes Mertonian (1973) values of science where peer-review is the main indicator of value and prestige. Following this logic science and higher education are for the public good and the principle of collegiality is at the center in governing this sector. In the quasi-market logic, on the contrary, the emphasis is placed on performance criteria which are defined outside the academic community. According to this, scientific value and prestige is described by bureaucratic control and external stakeholders

such as the industry depending on whether or not scientific work has some financial returns (Dill et al. 2004; Gläser 2007). So we can argue that the earlier mentioned changes due to NPM are largely following quasi-market logic.

As a consequence of these developments academics lose their status as key actors in collegial university governance, and play increasingly a minor role in university central decision-making (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007; Enders, De Boer, and Weyer 2013). This means that academics have little or no say on the new managerial practices such as performance monitoring, outcome oriented allocation of state funds, and the increasing number of part-time and temporary contracts which might negatively influence their work. Increasing workloads in terms of teaching, research and grant acquisition, performance pressure, decreasing academic freedom in terms of determining own research topics (particularly in soft sciences) and disadvantaging particular groups of academics such as early- and mid-career or female academics can be counted among the negative consequences of managerialism that have been documented by recent scholarly work (e.g. Leisyte and Dee 2012; Leisyte and Hosch-Dayican 2014).

In the present study, we carry out a preliminary analysis of the extent to which the managerialist reforms are reflected in the emergence of collective resistance platforms of academics. However, we have mentioned in the introductory section that the resistance platforms in higher education have emerged rather late, considering that the policy change and the resulting structural changes in universities have started at least two decades earlier. This indicates that policy change as such do not suffice as an explanation for the emergence of scientists' movements. As the resistance platforms address the demands and needs of a broader group of academics rather than that of a particular disciplinary community, boundary crossing and collective identity formation could provide alternative explanations. Collective identity is manifested by cross-disciplinary collaboration of academics in collective resistance behavior. More specifically, we examine how the collective resistance platforms of academics are able to mobilize traditionally disciplinary oriented academic for a common action.

3. Case selection

Given the differences in the policy context, different countries have implemented the managerial reforms to a different extent in spite of numerous attempts to ensure convergence. This has resulted in a patchwork of state control and quasi-markets coupled with professional and managerial self-governance in European higher education systems (Leisyte and Dee 2012). We selected three platforms from three European countries with differing levels of managerialism for understanding the possible influence of managerialism on the emergence of these resistance platforms. In the following, we will shortly introduce the changes in higher education governance and the extent to which indicators of managerialism can be observed in these countries.

The UK can be defined as a “hard NPM country” where managerial self-governance within universities and performance-based funding are most strongly implemented (Deem, Hillyard, and Reed 2007). Starting with the Thatcher reforms in early 1980s, UK has been the forerunner of the changes in higher education governance in Europe and serves as an example of how drastic cuts in university funding have permeated and changed the university system from a collegial model toward a managerial governance model (Leisyte 2007). Despite the strengthening of organizational autonomy and managerial self-governance however, the governments of the UK still exercise a considerable degree of influence on British higher education institutions through a strongly centralized evaluation of research – such as the Research Excellence Framework which is linked to allocation of state funding for research. Intermediary bodies such as funding councils and research councils mostly fulfil the function of steering higher education institutions in the direction of government policies (Locke and Bennion 2011). Thus a strong top-down policy process can be observed, where management of higher education institutions is powerful in terms of performance monitoring in their institutions, while at the same time, state authorities via funding and evaluation mechanisms steer the institutions.

Flanders has started implementing NPM reforms in the 1990s. In 1991 and 1994, managerial reforms have been introduced by two respective decrees for research universities and universities of applied sciences. These decrees strengthen the principle of accountability of higher education institutions towards the government by introducing internal and external quality assurance measures (Verhoeven 2007). The steps for rationalizing the higher

education institutions in terms of restructuring the study programs (to prevent that too many universities offer the same programs), and the financial autonomy followed shortly afterwards. In order to implement the Bologna Declaration of 1999, two additional decrees have been issued in 2003 (Decree on the structure of higher education) and 2008 (Decree concerning the financing of the activities of university colleges and universities in Flanders). The 2008 Decree introduced outcome oriented financing by the government, such as subsidizing higher education institutions according to the number of issued doctoral degrees. However, as studies of the Flemish higher education system have shown (De Wit and Verhoeven 1999; Verhoeven 2007, 2010), managerialist reforms have not been fully implemented as the government still claims competencies in the management of higher education and higher education institutions do not have full procedural autonomy.

In the Netherlands, state regulation of higher education and research was traditionally strong as the government has played an important role in the coordination of the higher education system. The NPM reforms have been initiated in 1985 with the concept of “steering from a distance,” under which the universities have been given institutional autonomy in hiring academic staff, raising funds, maintaining their own property, and engaging in entrepreneurial activities (De Boer, Enders, and Leisyte 2007; Kickert 1995). Since late 1990s and early 2000s also increased accountability and a strengthened market orientation can be observed in this context. Consequently, the level of managerialism at universities is higher in the Netherlands than in Flanders with a stronger accountability towards government actors and a strengthened market orientation.

Yet the two policy contexts are similar to each other in some respects. Compared to the UK, both the Dutch and the Flemish systems have implemented a rather ‘soft’ version of the NPM reforms in the governance of higher education. Performance and funding of higher education institutions are not as strongly linked as in the UK system in case of research evaluation, although Flanders is moving to more to this direction. In the Netherlands and in Flanders intermediary institutions provide some buffer within a system of state steering, and centralized quality assessment differs compared to the UK. In the Netherlands, performance-based state funding is used only to some extent and depends mostly on number of undergraduate and graduate students, whereas in Flanders quantified research outputs and the number of student credits as well as doctoral degrees are decisive for resource allocation. Nevertheless, basic funding for research is under strain in both

countries as there is increasingly more need to attract third party funding.

4. Analysis

For the purposes of the present discussion paper we conducted qualitative analysis of the websites and position papers of the three platforms. In addition, we made use of semi-structured interviews conducted with their founding members which provided us with deeper insights.

Structure, topics and activities of academics' resistance platforms

The CDBU in the UK was founded in November 2012, whereas the Dutch and Belgian counterparts exist since 2013. CDBU has a tightly structured membership-based organization with 67 founding members and more than 600 registered members. As there is no fixed membership fee, it is financed mainly by voluntary contributions by members as well as contributions and/or donations from non-members. On the contrary, the Dutch H.NU and the Flemish AHO are loosely structured, supporter-based platforms. They are maintained mainly by their founding members (29 for AHO and 25 in the H.NU), and there is no established funding structure. As the interviews have shown, the deliberate choices of founding members account for this difference. The UK platform is more formalized as a result of the founders' intention to create a formal platform, whereas the AHO in Flanders claims to be a "grassroots group" and does not intend to have a formal structure in the near future to be able to keep the openness of the platform for everyone who wants to get involved. Only in this way they believe to be able to remain representative of all academic disciplines and career levels in the country. In spite of these structural differences, all three platforms are strongly linked to similar national and international academics' platforms as well as to groups with similar aims. In the UK, the CDBU is a unique platform which brings academics' interests under one roof, but it maintains connections with and expresses support for other national-level movements and campaigns, such as the Campaign for the Public University and the Students' Anti-Study Fee Movement. In addition, it is linked to similar platforms abroad, although the links are not very strong and do not involve active cooperation with such groups.

In the Netherlands and Flanders, the platforms appear to be more divided. The H.NU is one of the various resistance groups in the Netherlands at the national-level (e.g. Science in Transition) or at the university-level (e.g. *Verontruste VU'ers* – The Concerned Academics of the Free University of Amsterdam). However, it is well networked with these within-country platforms in terms of providing support for their activities by helping in their organization and mobilization, as it appears from the reports on their website. Moreover, the interviewed founding member has stressed the intention to team up with other movements with similar causes such as the students' movement. The links with academics' organizations from other countries are however rather weak, just as in the case of the CDBU. In this respect, AHO of Flanders also does not differ much from those in the UK and the Netherlands. Yet there is incidentally some collaboration with national initiatives such as academic groups with similar topical interests (e.g. "Researchers in Action", feminist academics, or the Belgian branch of the "Slow Science Movement"). Connections to other organizations, such as the Flemish Organization for Students or labor unions are rather rare because of lack of agreement on the core policy stances of the platform AHO. A deliberate distance is kept to political parties as well, since the intention is to be able to influence all kinds of actors within the higher education governance.

The second – and perhaps more distinctive component of the collective resistance to governance changes is the action repertoire: mobilizing and getting involved in contentious collective activism. All three platforms make use of political action repertoire aimed at mobilization of and communication with members and followers. However, they differ from each other in terms of the scope of activities they focus on. While the CDBU makes use of action forms more in line with their formalized structure (such as registered membership, donations, volunteering, or informatory events), the Dutch and Flemish counterparts make more use of grassroots activities, such as petition signing actions, to reach out to the academics.

Further, we observed the extent to which topical frames are used by the studied platforms to organize the larger academic community around their causes and activities. Content analyses of the manifestos and webpages of the three platforms have shown that the NPM-based higher education governance reforms and the fundamental changes in university organization as well as in academic work seem to be the main drives of academics' collective resistance

platforms. The analysis of themes has revealed that resistance against commodification of research, the emphasis on financial criteria, performance pressure and the resulting decrease in research quality, and the precarious work conditions especially for young academics were recurring across the three platforms. Also, a clear emphasis on academic freedom and inclusive academic self-governance could be observed.

The emergence of academic resistance: Long and short term effects

In order to properly address the earlier mentioned puzzle on why collective resistance has emerged rather late, considering that the policy change and the resulting structural changes in universities have started at least two decades earlier, it is important to make the distinction between long- and short-term effects. The interviews with founding members have clearly shown that short-term factors have played a direct role in organizing the resistance against longer term developments in higher education governance. Especially the recent financial crisis and the changes in higher education policies in its immediate aftermath seem to have triggered the criticism towards NPM and its effects on universities in all three countries. For instance, the adoption of severe austerity measures on public spending for higher education in the Netherlands, or the introduction of a decree that re-regulates the financing of the universities in Flanders have been mentioned by the founders as “the right opportunity” to address the issues related to NPM changes in higher education governance. These factors thus were influential for the timing of the formation of the platforms in the respective countries. Also in the UK, the actual stimulus for the foundation of the CDBU was the radical change in higher education funding policy and the dramatic rise in tuition fees right after the 2010 parliamentary elections:

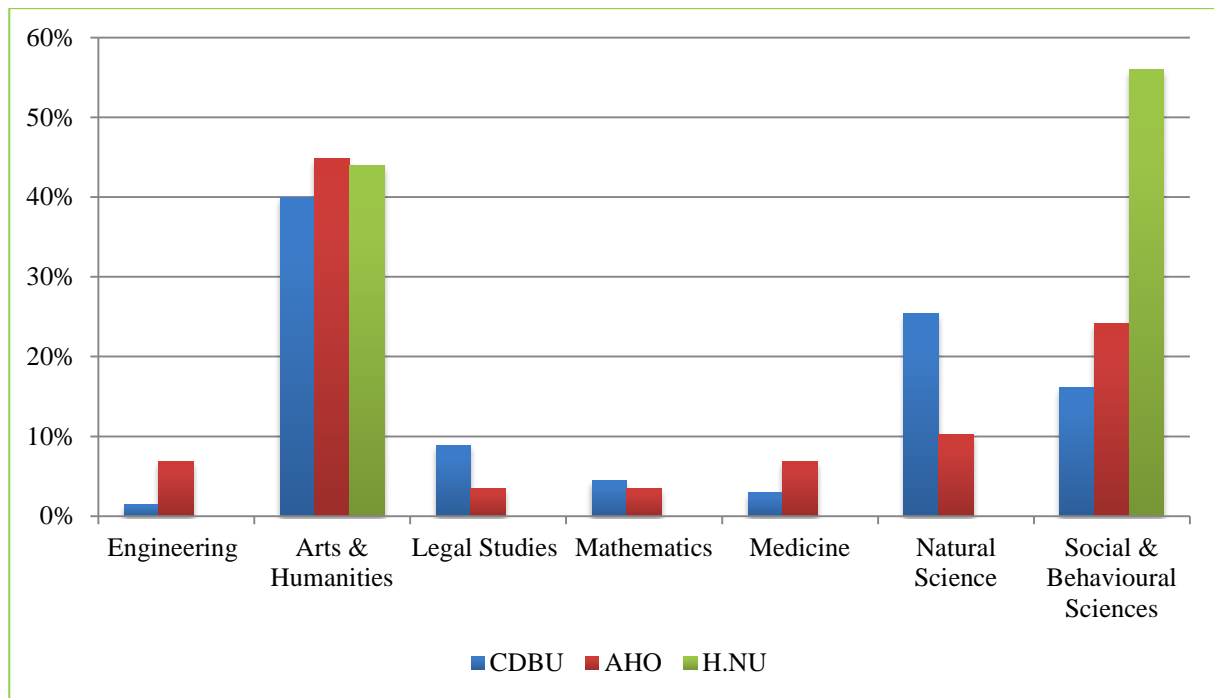
“So the financial crisis was used as a pretext for pushing through radical higher education funding changes, whereas the earlier changes in university governance had been taking place incrementally, for 30 years. And the thing about incremental changes is of course if you are adapted in pushing these things through, you never change things more than the university community is willing to tolerate. So previously we had a long series of relatively incremental changes. But it was the radical change which led to the foundation of our group actually determined to oppose these. And having determined to oppose higher

education funding, we then came to the conclusion that all these other changes to university governance were part of the same picture.” (Founding member CDBU, UK)

The interviewees point to this ‘late’ protest of academics to the NPM based higher education governance reforms and indicated that there was no impetus earlier for being organized. The existing resistance was not very widespread and was mostly observed on an individual basis. Academics would use the media to show their discontent writing opinion pieces, research articles or expressing their opinions in documentaries criticizing the managerialist structural changes at universities. As indicated by the founders, not many academics were aware that the changes were affecting the whole university sector. Thus there was apparently very limited exchange within the broader community of academics about the dissatisfaction created by the governance changes. This supports the notion that boundary crossing and collective identity formation may provide alternative, longer-term explanations for the emergence of collective resistance platforms.

We have examined the three platforms with respect to the distribution of disciplinary affiliation of their founding members. As mentioned before, some disciplines (especially soft sciences like social sciences and humanities) are more vulnerable to the consequences of NPM based policy changes. Thus if the discontent with these shifts is the primary factor determining the emergence of collective actors, we should expect that the founders consist only of academics from these disciplines. On the contrary, a variety of disciplines represented among the supporters of these platforms would provide evidence for the possible role of collective identity on the emergence of these organizations. Figure 1 presents the distribution of founding members of the three platforms among main categories of scientific disciplines:

Figure 1. Founding members of academic resistance platforms per discipline



The Figure 1 shows that academics in the three countries are likely to cross their disciplinary boundaries in collective resistance against the NPM policies, whereas the extent of disciplinary boundary crossing varies across policy contexts. In the UK and Flanders we observe a relatively balanced distribution of founding members across disciplines. However, social sciences and humanities dominate the scene:

“I think it’s probably fair to say that the humanities are disproportionately well-represented, possibly also the social sciences, partly because the humanities feel particularly vulnerable but also because we are most comfortable in engaging in the kind of debates and discussions which this kind of policy making requires. But certainly under the list of founding members we have very distinguished people from across university, from medical fields, from the mathematics, from the sciences and technology and so on. It’s been a little bit more difficult getting people from the scientific community actively involved in the executive committee, for instance. But even there, several of our executive committee members are from the sciences in the social sciences.” (Founding member CDBU, UK)

As NPM policies exist for a longer time in the UK, we can assume that a multidisciplinary collective identity has been gradually formed over the course of time as a reaction to the policies. However, in Flanders, where the policy changes have taken place much more recently, natural and engineering sciences are also represented among the founding members to a comparable extent as in the UK. As the interview with the founding member of the AHO has revealed, this balanced representation of the variety of disciplines has simply evolved since the beginning of the platform formation without further planning:

“We specifically take care from people from all kinds of disciplines. And it works very well. So there is a little bit of bias: We have lots of historians, because that is where this started, but we also have like we have physicists who did a lot, we have psychologists, we have [name], she’s a chemist, we have people from the sociology department, from the law department, so we have little bit of everything. So that is something that worked very well, we really have a group that is quite representative of Flemish academia in general.”
(Founding member AHO, Belgium-Flanders)

In the Netherlands, the founders of the platform H.NU are less heterogeneous in terms of their disciplinary spread: all founding members belong to the disciplines of social sciences or arts and humanities. The straightforward conclusion drawn from this finding would be that the academics’ collective resistance in the Netherlands is still driven to a high extent by dissatisfaction with the recent policy changes, and that disciplinary collective identities still prevail. To further test this assumption, we examined the disciplinary belonging of the supporters of this platform, where we selected a random sample of academics who signed the open manifesto “Towards a Different University” on the H.NU website. We found that academics from natural sciences were also represented among the supporters, albeit to a modest extent. This preliminary finding suggests that the concept of multidisciplinary collective identity might be influential also in this context, but could be a matter of time, which is worth further exploration. Further, the existence of another platform in the Dutch context which is more oriented towards hard sciences “Science in Transition” is also important to mention here, as it shows the ‘division of labor’ in terms of collective resistance work between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ sciences.

5. Summary and outlook on future research

The preliminary findings of this exploratory study show that academics' resistance platforms emerge as new actors in the system of higher education and research governance. The academics are thus returning to the field of the game of governance of higher education; however, since they appear as a collective spanning across disciplinary boundaries, one can speak of new players on the field (compared to the traditional self-governance of academic elites). However, they differ in the extent of the possible influence of multidisciplinary of collective identities, which cannot directly be attributed to their specific higher education policy contexts and the levels of implementation of the new policies.

The puzzles why the movements emerged so late although the NPM reforms date back years ago, and why academics cross their disciplinary boundaries to form collective responses could not be completely solved in this exploratory study. One possible explanation for this late reaction might be that the strict governmental austerity measures and budget cuts at universities as a consequence of the recent financial crisis are more directly felt by a larger number of scholars in recent years and they threaten the core academic values such as academic freedom more directly, which provokes a strong resistance across the board. Yet no hard empirical evidence could be found so far to test this proposition. The formation of a multidisciplinary collective identity lends itself as an alternative explanation yet the reasons for boundary crossing are not yet clear. The findings indicate that the shifts in governance might have served as an initial motivation to politicize the collective identity of academics, which helped them to cross their disciplinary boundaries and unite for the common cause as a collective. However, the extent to which collective identity played a role on academics' decision to assert themselves as stakeholders in higher education governance at the systems level still needs to be verified.

Future research is however needed to understand the reasons and forms of collective resistance and the key characteristics of these new actors in higher education governance. Questions that still need to be addressed include: What are the predispositions that lead academics towards forming the action platforms? What is the composition of the founders in terms of their status in the academic communities and how does this relate to the impact of these platforms on higher education governance change? To what extent and what type of individual academics support these platforms? And what are their motivations in doing so?

Further studies need to focus more extensively on the reasons for these movements to emerge (by studying the founding members' motivations) as well as to explore the potentials and backgrounds of individual participation in such platforms across a variety of higher education governance contexts.

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