ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Revisiting the five problems of public sector organisations and reputation management— the perspective of higher education practitioners and ex-academics

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Abstract

The extant literature has identified five problems related to public sector organisations and their reputation management: politics, consistency, charisma, uniqueness and excellence. This study examines whether and how the problems of reputation management occur in public higher education by collecting qualitative data from 40 interviews. The study sheds light on the perceptions of a group that has been largely neglected in previous studies: namely, doctorates who have exited academia, or ex-academics. In addition to ex-academics, interviewees also included their employers and university leadership. The analysis follows a thematic qualitative approach with an abductive logic. The study provides empirical evidence of the content of the problems in higher education and discusses recent related transformations in higher education. The findings show that, in terms of reputation management, the most challenging matters appear to be knowledge transfer and the applicability of research to practice. These challenges are cross-cutting and apparent from different angles across all five problems of reputation management. This study contributes to the academic literature on reputation management in the public sector by applying prior conceptual categorizations and employing a comprehensive set of empirical data with a fresh perspective. The study presents implications for higher education policy makers and managers and emphasises the need for university management to minimise the duality between different types of workers, as this duality threatens university reputations in general and consistency in particular.

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1 Introduction

Transformation trends in higher education in Europe and beyond have growingly adopted market-driven approaches of new public management (NPM) (Thynne 2013). It has been argued that transformations inspired by NPM have aroused debate and diverse expectations towards universities' contributions to the surrounding societies (Kallio et al. 2016). Furthermore, other business-like models, such as branding and reputation management, have migrated into higher education among other marketisation trends, but challenges have also been reported (Aula and Tienari 2011; Aspara et al. 2014; Suomi et al. 2014; Aula et al. 2015). In particular, the growing interest in branding (e.g. Suomi 2014; Aula et al. 2015) and rankings (e.g. Kehm 2014) in institutional higher education markets (e.g. Czarniawska and Genell 2002; Hemsley-Brown 2011) has highlighted the importance of reputation in higher education. However, the concept of reputation is seldom applied in higher education research. In this study, we apply Alessandri et al.'s (2006, 261) definition of reputation as "perceptions of the organization shared by its multiple constituents over time" to study problems of reputation management in higher education.

This study is conducted in Finland, where universities have traditionally been guided by the Humboldtian idea of universities being national cultural institutions with autonomous and free-thinking scholars persuading a call for the universal values of knowledge and truth (Välimaa 2012; Kallio et al. 2017) and a basic research orientation (OECD 2002). In 2010, the University Act and the core funding model of the universities were introduced in Finland. These new reforms have motivated universities and academics to pursue quantifiable results (e.g. Kallio et al. 2017). Further, in 2014 a new transformation incentive was launched in terms of profiling and differentiating Finnish universities from one another (Tirronen 2015; Nuutinen et al. 2016; Academy of Finland 2018a, b). The rationale behind these transformations is to enhance national competitiveness and innovations in Finland and also in global terms (Haapakorpi 2017). Consequently, Finnish universities were left with little flexibility in choosing their strategic objectives (Kallio et al. 2016; Kivistö et al. 2017a, b). However, they were still left with autonomy in their internal management and strategies (Kallio and Kallio 2014). The number of study credits and degrees produced, and the number of publications, as well as the amount of external funding, have become the key performance indicators in the university funding scheme. Moreover, university employees' salaries are increasingly determined by performance evaluations (Kallio et al. 2017). From the beginning of the 1990s, the share of so-called external funding has increased steadily from almost nothing to a recent 40% of the universities' funding. External funding is competitive funding that is mostly derived from public sources such as the Academy of Finland or Business Finland (formerly called the Finnish Innovation Agency, TEKES). It is not a part of the funding derived from governments' core funding model (Pekkola et al. 2015; Kallio et al. 2017; Suomi et al. 2019).

These transformations in higher education increase competition in academia (Ylijoki and Henriksson 2017), and thus they may create contradicting objectives for

universities and academics (Kallio et al. 2016). Further, academics balance between, on one hand, meeting the surrounding societies' needs in terms of fulfilling a university's third mission by knowledge transfer and, on the other, simultaneously struggling with publishing research articles in highly ranked international journals as well as with taking care of their teaching loads (Ylijoki and Henriksson 2017). By "a university's third mission" we refer here to "all activities concerned with the generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other university capabilities outside academic environments" (Molas-Gallart and Castro-Martínez 2007, 321). Naturally, problems arise when these contradicting needs are simultaneously pursued with limited resources (Ylijoki and Ursin 2013; Suomi et al. 2014; Suomi et al. 2019).

As the discussion above shows, many of these contradictions relate to the fact that Finnish universities belong to the realm of the public sector. Indeed, in their conceptual study, Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) reported five particular problems related to reputation management in the public sector organisations: politics, consistency, charisma, uniqueness and excellence. Further, Suomi et al. (2014) reported problems or dilemmas in reputation management in higher education, but they focused on the educational programme level, suggesting that more empirical research on the field would be useful, concentrating not only on different types of educational programmes but also on different universities. Aula and Tienari (2011), Aspara et al. (2014) and Aula et al. (2015) focused on reputation-building in a university merger.

This study continues by focusing on problems of reputation management in higher education, expanding the view from individual programmes and universities to more holistic scrutiny in the higher education sector. That being said, the purpose of this study *is to examine whether and how the problems of reputation management occur in public higher education*. We use the categorisation introduced by Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) as a basis for our data analysis. The categorisation of Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) was adopted in this study because it elaborates problems of reputation management in the *public* sector at the organisational level. However, Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) neither gathered empirical evidence nor concentrated on any particular public sector context. In short, the study applies a typology of reputation management problems in the public sector to the context of publicly funded higher education.

In this study, 40 semi-structured interviews were analysed to further our understanding of universities' reputation management problems. The interviews were gathered from a group that has been largely neglected in previous studies: doctorates who have exited academia, or ex-academics (see also Suomi et al. 2019). To the knowledge of the authors, prior literature has not covered the perceptions of university reputations as perceived by academic workers who have exited academia and transferred to other sectors to work. In addition to ex-academics, interviewees also included their employers and university leadership. In the study, we follow Wæraas and Byrkjeflot's (2012) suggestion that future research seek to determine the extent of reputation management problems and how they may vary across contexts. Examining the content of these problems in depth in higher education should thus provide beneficial knowledge not only for academics, but also for practitioners, so that they can identify the sources of the reputation problems and thus better prepared for them. As Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) note, a strong reputation may be beneficial for a public organisation in times of scarce resources and rising public expectations, and it is also

beneficial in terms of retaining power and independence. One compelling reason for studying problems of reputation management in Finnish higher education is that although the Finnish education system has traditionally had a strong reputation, for example in terms of being equal and thus accessible for students irrespective of their social background, place of residence or family wealth, the university sector has experienced major reforms in recent years (e.g. Kallio et al. 2016; Suomi 2015).

The remainder of the study is organised as follows. First, academic literature on reputation and its management is reviewed. Second, reputation management in the public sector is discussed. Then, methodology and empirical analysis are described. After that, the results of the study are discussed. Finally, the study ends with conclusions, limitations and suggestions for future studies.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Reputation and its management

A good organisational reputation among the stakeholders can be considered reputational capital for an organisation. Reputation is found to have many positive implications for an organisation. For example, it contributes to organisational stability, performance and market value; protects in crises; and makes it easier to recruit competent personnel and motivate them to stay (e.g. Bromley 2000; Fobrum and van Riel 2003; Luoma-aho 2007; see also Veh et al. 2018). It has been suggested to encompass evaluations by all stakeholders, both internal and external groups (de Chernatony and Harris 2000). The reputation management process starts with the formulation of strategy. At this phase, an assessment of the organisation's current identity is required in order to define an idealised vision of how the organisation should be perceived by stakeholders in the future (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012).

Reputation has been typically approached as awareness, assessment or an asset (Barnett et al. 2006). However, considering reputation as awareness provides a rather limited view, as awareness is actually an antecedent of reputation. Considering reputation as an asset is narrow, as well, because it does not take into account that that reputation may be positive, neutral or negative. Thus, considering reputation as assessment provides the most comprehensive view of the concept (ibid). Although it is acknowledged that each of the stakeholder groups has different relationships with the organisation, as well as different expectations from it, and they thus evaluate it from a different perspective, reputation as a concept is a collective, aggregated perception of multiple stakeholder groups (Szwajca 2018; see also Walker 2010). Thus, it can be regarded as overall assessment or a combination of views and impressions (e.g. Walker 2010; Roper and Fill 2012).

Stakeholders' views are formulated from a range of sources, including their own experiences with an organisation, its advertisement and other paid communication, and unpaid media time. Third-party judgements, in terms of, for example, word of mouth, also influence the formation of reputation (Szwajca 2018; see also Vidaver-Cohen 2007). Further, reputation as a theoretical construct is typically regarded as stakeholders' *overall* assessment of all areas of an organisation's activities, and it is thus accumulated from assessments of economic and financial activities, through

organisational, personal and social ones, up to ethical, legal and moral ones. Consequently, reputation management cannot be limited to activities of one department or function, such as Marketing or PR, but instead it should be considered as a strategic managerial issue (e.g. Szwajca 2018). Indeed, after strategy formulation, the second phase in reputation management is to influence stakeholders' perceptions by designing a programme for the organisation's self-presentation. Messages and promises expressing the organisation's identity can be delivered in verbal and graphical form, for example through logos. The third phase of reputation management is measurement of the target audience's perceptions (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). However, there seems to be some consensus between researchers that formation of reputation takes time, as reputation is been built over a long time (e.g. Herbig and Milewich 1993; Alessandri et al. 2006). This should be borne in mind when measuring reputation. Moreover, reputation management typically involves some comparison between an organisation and its key competitors (Rindova et al. 2005).

2.2 Reputation and its management in the public sector

Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) note that statements reflecting a negative reputation of the public sector among citizens are typical. Nevertheless, it is also argued that distinct sub-sectors within national governments may have dissimilar reputations. At least some of these sub-sectors are considered bureaucratic and lazy (e.g. Luoma-aho 2008) as well as lacking customer or service orientation (Osborne and Gaebler 1992).

In the last decade, reputation management has emerged as a recognised practice in the public sector. However, it is suggested that the reputation of public sector organisations is not formed in a similar way to the reputation of firms, as their functions, scope, stakeholders and goals differ from those of private sector firms (Luoma-aho 2007). Resulting from this, reputation management has been considered problematic for organisations in the public sector (e.g. Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012; Suomi and Järvinen 2013; Leijerholt et al. 2018), particularly because public sector organisations lack the autonomy required to operate as independent organisational actors (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Accordingly, Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) detect five problems that are typical for reputation management in the public sector. Next, these problems are briefly discussed.

Referring to the politics problem, Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) note that a public sector organisation may develop its strategy, vision and mission but those formulations cannot fall outside the political mandate under which the organisation is operating. Because of that, key aspects of the organisational identity of public organisations are mainly predetermined. Further, a public sector organisation is expected to operate with the mission they have been assigned by political bodies, irrespective of what it is and how positively or negatively the general public perceives that mission. In higher education, politics may become visible — for example, in terms of government allocating more resources to certain universities, with the "unashamed aim of creating a 'world-class' university" (Aarrevaara et al. 2009, 98), while other higher-education institutions try to polish their reputations with fewer resources.

The consistency problem refers to challenges in creating consistent reputations. Academic literature on reputation suggests that organisations with positive reputations are those which are consistent in terms of their values, identities and communication,

compared to those with weaker reputations (Fombrun and van Riel 2004; Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). However, studies have reported problems with building consistent identity in the public sector. For instance, in higher education, distinct programmes, departments, faculties and schools may have multiple values and identities, and also rather autonomous faculty members may promote inconsistent sets of values (e.g. Wæraas and Solbakk 2009; Suomi et al. 2013), which hamper reputation management.

The charisma problem relates to the weakness of public sector organisations in creating emotional appeal, as they may not be able to speak freely. Emotional appeal has been suggested as one of the characteristics of organisations with positive reputations. Emotional appeal refers to good feeling, admiration, respect and trust towards an organisation (Fombrun, Gardberg and Sever 2000; see also Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Further, organisations with strong reputations have some kind of "charisma". However, public sector organisations are not usually "charismatic", for example, because they are not able to choose their customers, compared to private sector firms, which may sometimes more or less discriminate against some buyer groups because of their reputation (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012; W raas 2009 in Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Further, many public organisations are responsible for handling difficult problems that are unlikely to go away, such as unemployment, crime, social problems and poverty. As regards higher education, strong and appealing leaders could bring charisma with their personality (Vidaver-Cohen 2007).

Uniqueness is considered a key characteristic of organisations with strong reputations (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Indeed, relevant differentiation from competitors is considered paramount in brand and reputation management literature. However, Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) note that public organisations are probably seen by citizens as more similar than unique because of their common characteristics as political, hierarchical and rule-oriented organisations. Thus, many public sector organisations struggle with the uniqueness problem. Reputation as a concept refers to comparison among organisations (Fombrun and van Riel 1997), but in the public sector context, one should mention the concept of legitimacy, which highlights the social acceptance resulting from loyalty to social norms and expectations (Deephouse and Carter 2005; Kuoppakangas, Suomi and Horton 2013; see also Wæraas 2008). Compared to the private sector, in the public sector, there remain stronger expectations of similarity in values, services and quality, as well as solidarity between organisations (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Thus, it seems that the art is in balancing between securing legitimacy and building reputation (Sataøen and Wæraas 2015). As a result of this, reputation management in a public hospital or university does not mean the same as reputation management in a commercial bank, for example (Wæraas and Sataøen 2014). In the context of higher education, studies have reported challenges in building unique identities and reputations for universities in order to differentiate them from their competitors (e.g. Chapleo 2004; Suomi and Järvinen 2013).

Literature suggests that the best reputation is an excellent one: something that is superior to others and thus excels in the reputation rankings (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). According to RepTrak reputation measures, more public than private organisations struggle with the excellence problem. However, given public organisations' common mission of serving the public interest, pursuing an excellent reputation would indicate seeking to be regarded as superior to the other organisations involved in the same mission (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Indeed, as Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012,

199) put it: "Reputation is a relative construct in the sense that it involves a ranking and comparison of organizations, making the quest for it a zero-sum game." Thus, an attempt to build an excellent reputation may raise questions of solidarity and legitimacy in the public sector context (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012), as someone must lose so that someone else can win (see also Kuoppakangas 2015). These questions also arise in the private sector context, but in the public sector it is more serious, as there are more expectations of similarity in values, services and quality.

In the context of higher education, excellence might be approached in terms of intellectual, network and financial performance. These include recruiting and retaining prestigious faculty and competent students, as well as the ability to obtain funding, which then improve reputation (Vidaver-Cohen 2007). In higher education, reputation especially matters, as it is difficult to evaluate the quality of the educational offering, with long-term consequences for customers, before it is experienced (e.g. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Suomi et al. 2014). Further, because of higher education institutions' organisational complexity, comprising distinct schools, centers and units, along with highly independent academics, consistent reputation management is particularly important but at the same time more challenging than usual (e.g. Wæraas and Solbakk 2009; Suomi et al. 2014).

It is suggested that public sector organisations should acknowledge the resilience of the five problems and the fact that they often can only be balanced, not totally removed. Thus, they may continue to have negative impact on images of public sector organisations. It would be advisable to accept these problems as the starting point and not to aim at eliminating them, as reputation management differs in the public sector compared to the private sector. If universities push for ever-higher levels of consistency, uniqueness, charisma and excellence, they might make their social standing worse and be faced with solidarity problems and lack of trust and even be perceived as silly among their peers (W raas and Solbakk 2012).

3 Methods of data gathering and analysis

The empirical data was gathered between May and November 2017 with 40 semi-structured interviews (see Appendix) as a part of a larger research project in Finland. The interviewees formed three different groups: 1) doctoral degree holders who had academic work experience, as well as work experience from some other sector; 2) representatives of university management (deans, vice-rectors and board members of Finnish universities); and 3) HR and senior-level managers in public and private sector organisations who recruit and employ doctoral degree holders. Purposive sampling and "snowball sampling" (Bernard 2000, pp. 179–180) were applied in selecting the interviewees. All interviewees were first contacted via e-mail or phone and asked to participate in the study. All contacted persons agreed to participate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting 45–80 min. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to help in the analysis and enhance the reliability of the result (Silverman 2001; Patton 2002).

The selection criteria of the first interviewee group (N-18) comprised the following three criteria. Firstly, the interviewee had to have work experience from a Finnish university. Secondly, the interviewee had to be a doctoral degree holder in either social or technical sciences (in this study, the social sciences also include business sciences). The third

condition was that an interviewee also had to have working experience in some sector other than university. In total, the interviewees had working experience at eight universities.

In selecting the second interviewee group, the Finnish universities' internet homepages played a key role. The interviewees include seven deans and four vice-rectors. In addition, interviewees include three senior-level executives (two university board members and one senior administrator). Overall, the 14 interviewees in the second group represent four universities in total and both technical ("hard") and social ("soft") sciences.

The third participant group consists of eight interviewees (seven human resource managers and one CEO) from both public and private organisations that have employed doctoral degree holders. The organisations comprise four Finnish universities, a large state-owned foundation, a large municipality, a consulting firm and a large multinational company.

As mentioned, the data for the study was collected within a larger research project. Thus, the analysis of the data can be considered an iterative process. The pre-understanding of the literature on the concept of reputation and its management led the authors to notice that much of what the interviewees reported related to reputation management, particularly in terms of detected problems related to it (Silverman 2001; see also Kuoppakangas 2015; see also Suomi et al. 2019). Thus, it was decided to revisit the empirical data through the literature on reputation, and particularly the categorisation provided by Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012). Consequently, the three above-mentioned participant groups allowed us to further our understanding of problems of reputation management in higher education from different angles. The 40 interviews can be considered comprehensive qualitative data (c.f. Creswell 1998; Guest et al. 2006), which resulted in data saturation when the interviewees provided repeatedly similar answers and no new information to complement the previously collected data was supplied (Patton 2002; Marshall and Rossman 2006). The current study concentrates on the answers to the following three questions as a part of a larger interview protocol. The interviewees were asked 1) whether academia's and the surrounding society's needs are dividing or unifying and to explain the rationale behind their answers; 2) what obstacles might occur in meeting academia's and surrounding societies' needs as regards knowledge transfer between academia and other sectors; and 3) what changes should occur in order to support successful knowledge transfer between universities and other sectors. Thus, neither reputation nor reputation management was used in the interview protocol as a term per se, as studying reputation management and related problems was not the initial aim of the larger research project. As is typical in a qualitative study, we decided to ask new questions of the data, here, by employing the lenses of the reputation management literature. Reanalysing qualitative data "allows both for reinterpretations and also for new questions of the data. New themes can be studied" (Corti and Thompson 2007, 302). All three questions and their answers are equally important in presenting and discussing the five problems of reputation management.

The empirical data collected from the three interviewee groups was analysed for the current study with a thematic qualitative approach with abductive logic, going back and forth between theory and the empirical data (e.g. Dubois and Gadde 2002) in the following five phases. In the first phase, the transcriptions of the interviews were read several times, bearing in mind the purpose of the study (Silverman 2011). During the second phase, topics of importance were detected and arranged into data-driven themes. In the third phase, the arranged themes were scrutinised by coding, in other words,

finding relevant frequently repeated terms, words, phrases and sentences. In the fourth phase, resulting from the coding process, numerous key topics were recognised and further constructed into the key themes (Silverman 2011). Drawing from the content analysis, in the fifth phase, the key themes were reconstructed into the categories following the five problems in reputation management in public sector organisations detected by Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012).

Importantly, the categories represent collectively the three participant groups of this study, including both hard and soft sciences; thus, none of the categories are solely based on just one participant group's interviews. The authentic quotations are presented to demonstrate the richness of the data and to enhance validity of the findings (Silverman 2001). All the quotations were translated from Finnish to English. In order to ensure the interviewees' anonymity, they were labelled with I (as an interviewee) and a number (from 1 to 40). Next, the five problems of reputation management of public sector organisations, and how they occur in the university context, are reported.

4 Problems of reputation management in public higher education

4.1 The politics problem

Universities are publicly funded entities in Finland; thus, policy issues have a strong role in the strategic steering of academia (Kallio et al. 2016). Here, interviewee I-17 illustrates pressures: "*[…] market economy changes [in higher education] in the big picture aim at results and value for tax-funds.[…] there are pressures from ministries, they want autonomy for the universities but simultaneously they keep controlling in the higher education. […] money is the driving force.*" However, universities still have autonomy, for example related to the distribution of funding: "*In Finland, universities have their own ways in which they distribute the core funding from the government […]*" (I-17). In addition, another interviewee stated: "*How much the political pressures are steering [universities] is difficult to measure […] we continuously discuss the impact and effectiveness of universities in society. The owner [of universities] is the government, and their strategic aims affect us*" (I-9). This forms the core of the politics problem for reputation management.

The interviewees explained how university reform in Finland in 2010 had affected the expectations towards universities, both in publishing more studies in highly ranked international journals and simultaneously meeting the needs of knowledge-based society, in terms of engaging in knowledge transfer with private, public and third sectors (see also Nikunen 2012; Stenvall and Laitinen 2015): "*Then in practice the research is dependent on politics, what the politicians want, since the money is government's and many funding instruments are governmentally owned, e.g. Academy of Finland and TEKES* [called Business Finland since January 2018]" (I-19). When these two objectives, contributing to high-quality international journals and serving the surrounding society, occur simultaneously, they are often on a collision course. One of the interviewees described this as follows: "*When aiming at research publications of high quality, it is really hard to achieve this in the [short project] timeline. It is not feasible. Researchers increasingly have to apply for external funding. Many of the funding instruments, e.g. TEKES, provide a timeline of two years for a development*

project, which has totally different goals than succeeding in [publishing in] top research publications" (I-19).

Further, the first two missions of universities are teaching and research, and the third mission is thus to serve the public good in delivering education and transferring knowledge: "*Of course we can ask how straightforwardly we need to serve [society]: it is kind of a basic dilemma of education. Should we tailor educational programmes for current societal and employment needs, or instead educate people in critical thinking and learning? What kind of knowledge does the society exactly need after 2–5 years*?" (I-30).

Interviewees described how universities have adopted the performance-based management and incentives introduced by the Finnish government (see also Kallio et al. 2016): "*We have adopted the performance management and measurement model [...] in practice we also compete for additional funding. So we have been placed into competition.*" (I-4) Another interviewee (I-2) described matters in a similar vein: "*Of course there is competition for the ministry's [Ministry of Education and Culture] funding. We carefully follow the numbers of publications, degrees and students' credits. If we succeed well with the numbers, it will increase the value and appreciation of the university. And that is how the researchers compete with each other.*" The competition for funding creates competition among academic colleagues, as well, which may result in conflicts among professionals, departments and research groups and thus harm reputation (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012).

The current political atmosphere in Finland seems to have worsened tension between academia and policy-makers (e.g. Sintonen 2015). This was demonstrated as follows: "*One problem is that there is not much understanding at ministries of the nature of the work at universities. The diminishing of public funding for universities has created a situation where universities must carefully evaluate how to steer their financial resources. Peer-reviewed research publications of high quality are the ones that profit the most, because they are measured [by the Ministry of Education and Culture], and universities receive core funding based on those numbers. This is obviously hindering the universities in participating in small development projects with other sectors. [...] These discussions in public and in the media create tensions between government and researchers or between researchers and policy-makers*" (I-7). Several interviewees (I-8, I-12, I-13, I-7) mentioned the Finnish prime minister's exclamation on television about "all kinds of adjuncts", discrediting research knowledge with undermining implications towards Finnish academics (see also Sintonen 2015). Such a political atmosphere may be detrimental for reputation of universities.

4.2 The consistency problem

Interviewees discussed universities' core mission and values. For example: "*Does the university have the courage to be a university and how much it must adapt to external society's needs. [...] It is a fundamental question of the differences between basic and applied research. How much the university conducts basic research for the sake of science, which should be valued. [...] However, we have strong pressures to conduct applied research as well. [...] This is a discussion of identity: what does it mean to be a university? [...] We need to remember that we have service, cultural and educational missions. Those are not always transferred into monetary outcomes*" (I-14).

Pressures to balance between basic and applied research are evident. The interviewees described the contradicting pressures, for instance: "*There are theoretical discussions, but how does it solve meaningful practical problems in society? [...] We need to collaborate with industry and businesses. In practice, this means that we need to balance between two different worlds, that of business needs and that of scientific needs. In order to publish research papers of high quality, we need to collect totally different kinds of data.*" (I-1).

Further, there are governmental pressures to produce degrees and high-quality research (Kallio et al. 2016). As one interviewee points out: "*On one hand, universities have to deliver degrees, and then we also hear [from critics] that the impact [of education] has not grown even though in respect of Finnish GDP we are doing really well. And then we hear that we [university] should have impacts on surrounding society*" (I-17). Interviewees explained how challenging it is to show impacts of research on society: "*It is about understanding research vis-à-vis the surrounding society. How can the research be applied in practice?*" (I-25). There appear to be problems with basic research as it is time-consuming and slow in meeting society's needs, as interviewee I-10 explains: "*The classic basic research methods might not be suitable for contemporary society, where there are multiple ongoing changes and unforeseen outcomes. So how can the research methods better meet the reality of societies?*"

According to the interviewees, there are inconsistencies among university employees' roles and how their university work is constructed (see also Ylijoki and Henriksson 2017): "*I have said many times that there are two different types of worker groups at universities. There are professors and other permanent academic workforce and there are those with fixed-term contracts funded by projects. Those with permanent work contracts talk about the university's core role as an educating entity. Then, the group with fixed-term contracts, applying continuously for research funding, stress more the need for research publications to safeguard their future funding and employment. [...] If we had only the core funding and permanent work contracts, we would not have achieved research outcomes of such high quality and collaboration with business and industry*" (I-34). Fixed-term employment is not a new phenomenon in Finnish universities. However, during recent decades it has changed both qualitatively and quantitatively from what it was earlier. The fixed-term work contracts among academics have emerged since the 1990s because of the changes in funding of Finnish universities (Pekkola et al. 2015; Aarnikoivu et al. 2019). Such a duality between the different types of workers may hinder a university's reputation management in terms of communicating a consistent identity towards stakeholders.

Further, it was also noted that different disciplines and fields differ in their identities and self-presentation: "*When one goes to a laboratory of Cryophysics or something, it is totally different from Education Science or if we go to the School of Economics. Inside the School of Economics, in unit X [where the interviewee worked earlier], when I scrutinised what our research focus is [...] I totally lost my train of thought after everything was so differing [...] All different types [of research foci]. In Management there were pretty different things than in Marketing and Accounting. When I went to talk to guys from Accounting, they were already different compared to when I went to talk to guys from Management*" (I-34). If academics within Economics are considered different from each other depending on their discipline, it goes without saying that

differences are likely to grow between different faculties and sciences. Thus, communicating a consistent identity of a university may be difficult (see also Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012), and thus the consistency problem of reputation management is retained.

Interviewees implied that academic freedom has been stalled by the universities' funding mechanism and that often the research conducted in a university is clearly guided by what sort of funding is received (see also Henkel 2005; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013; Kallio et al. 2016). According to one interviewee: "*It yields for collaboration with the business world. [...] Let us come up with a group of researchers whose names are placed on the research funding application and then suddenly the funding is received. However, we realise that half of the group has left for other organisations and the other half has a huge teaching load. But they have to take up the funded research project which might have nothing to do with their original research interests, and you still need to come up with research outcomes of high quality [...] It might not succeed. However, the funding model pushes in that kind of direction*" (I-38). When a funding mechanism is strongly guiding the research work, the scientific outcomes might not be up to high academic standards. This contradicts with academic values. Further, as regards reputation, substantial turnover within personnel during the project does not communicate a positive signal towards funding parties and other stakeholders.

4.3 The charisma problem

Interviewees highlighted communication challenges and how it would be important to find common language with stakeholders outside academia (see also Haapakorpi 2017). One interviewee stated: "*Especially communication with civil servants on what has been learned via research which could be valuable for decision-making. [...] Communication both ways and receiving feedback. Finding common language among us*" (I-6). In addition, interviewees explained how contemporary societies are full of information available via the internet, for example, but there are risks in evaluating the accuracy of this information. "*Maybe the communication between researchers and civil servants might strengthen understanding of research-based knowledge and the limitations and possibilities of it*" (I-6). Nevertheless, researchers are reluctant to provide unrefined information to external stakeholders, and that causes problems in delivering timely knowledge: "*But it is built inside a researcher that you cannot deliver unfinished results and thus you cannot say or comment. However, while working on your research proposals, you have worked on vast literature reviews, and that information gained on existing research could be useful to share*" (I-25). Lack of timely and applicable knowledge, or communicating information which is considered too theoretical, may cause academics to be considered overly theoretical, slow and isolated in an "ivory tower". This can be related to the charisma problem of reputation management, as academics might not be considered as dynamic collaboration partners among stakeholders outside academia.

Further, even though basic research seems slow to meet the current societies' needs, interviewees discussed reconciliations in the following vein: "*For anticipation and views we need more reflection and discussion with surrounding society. [...] Discussions at different stages of the research process are important. In addition, the discussions on the applicability of the possible research results and knowledge transfer.*

It is more than just the research publications, it is active participation in different forums and discussions" (I-25). According to the interviewees, the slowness of doing basic research and communicating its results is often connected to publication processes in international refereed journals. In addition, those journals are not easily accessible by stakeholders outside academia. However, academic incentives and the universities' funding mechanism push academics to concentrate on journal publications instead of producing popularised versions of the articles.

Interviewees reflected on how collaboration with business and industry needs to be valuable for all parties in order to enhance mutual respect and trust (see also Styhre and Lind 2010): "*From the business point of view, if they find the collaboration beneficial, they are willing to participate. Some are participating only when it profits their image. For example, one firm commented that they had developed their product concept with university x and by doing so had gained legitimacy and credibility. Companies find it valuable for their brands if they have collaborative projects with universities, and they are ready to collaborate*" (I-19). Moreover, there were discussions on differences in the operation mode and working culture between academia and industry/business, particularly in terms of the slowness of basic research compared to the fast-moving industry and business: "*A researcher knows the limitations of the research results. There are tensions between communicating results and waking interest among external audiences and balancing them with research ethics. The straightforward management models of industry and business compared to critical academic discussion culture might create tensions between the two different cultures*" (I-30).

Here again, as described above in relation to the politics-related problem, interviewees paid attention to the degrading of academics and research-based knowledge by even the highest-level politicians in Finland, which seems to have affected respect and trust for academia among other politicians, as well as the general public: "*The discussion among the current parliament not only on public funding of education and universities, but also the attitude and atmosphere that has resulted from it [is negative]. There is no understanding of what kind of value basic research knowledge offers. It seems that the politicians' appreciation of universities and academics is diminishing*" (I-7). Further, it was noted that academics themselves could be more active in marketing and opening up their competencies: "*In my opinion, in the university world it has not been branded in a positive way everything [worklife competencies] that you learn when you are in a research project, for example*" (I-18).

Interviewees mentioned that stakeholders outside academia appear to maintain lots of stereotypes and prejudices regarding universities and academics. Thus, reputation management in terms of designing organisations' self-presentations to influence stakeholders is needed (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012): "*So...that we could shake off that image of 'all kinds of adjuncts' and sophistry towards solving real issues...it takes lots of time. And it should be done systematically*" (I-13), and further: "*We have great knowledge that we produce to a bookshelf [...] How could we bring it to the benefit of surrounding society...so actually it is selling work. It is selling of a university's knowhow*" (I-13).

Stereotypes, if unchanged, are likely to maintain a lack of emotional appeal among stakeholders and thus jeopardise reputation management (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012): "*We are imagined to be* [among stakeholders outside academia] *Gyro Gearlooses with gadgets on our heads, let the discipline be whatever...that we cannot*

respond to any practical challenges. Mental locks…deconstruction of the 'ivory tower' should help and that work must be done" (I-5).

4.4 The uniqueness problem

The uniqueness problem stems from the lack of relevant differentiation between an organisation and its competitors. However, interviewees described how in recent years the policy initiative of profiling and differentiation has been introduced in Finland (Academy of Finland 2018a, b): "*Resulting from the differentation and profiling of the university, our municipality and area need us. It has been presented even by the ministry that our area needs us*" (I-8). Thus, the uniqueness problem might be diminishing in Finnish higher education, but profiling of the universities has also caused challenges: "*Ministries offer all sorts of carrots which we run after. We even compete inside our own universities instead of uniting strongly and competing together*" (1–4).

Competition was described to have caused negative consequences, which are unlikely to project positive images of universities towards stakeholders: "*It seems that there exists jealousy among universities, not wanting to share good ideas. […] The differentiation and profiling are important, we use it as a strategy and we apply it in understanding and collaboration with other universities and businesses. However, there have been problems with some industry parties saying that we are not allowed to work such development areas which are not within our profiling, and they are not willing to collaborate in certain development areas with us since they work with some other university on that particular area […] in my opinion the industry parties are not up to date here, as we should strive for collaboration and in mutual understanding. So aim at that and in engaging all our partners in that. In this way Finland would do well, rather than competing with each other […] The profiling is a good initiative but it takes time.[…] And what happens to those employees who do not fit the new profile?*" (I-16).

Universities in rural areas are in a weaker position to lobby their knowledge and build industry and business collaboration than their counterparts in the biggest cities in Finland. In addition, employees not fitting into the profile might create disappointments and even unemployment among the academics. In general, the consequences of profiling were found to be both positive and negative by the interviewees.

4.5 The excellence problem

In connection to excellence in academia, the interviewees referred to the aims of publishing research in highly ranked international journals (see also Nuutinen et al. 2016): "*It is that these refereed journal articles are some kind of a guarantee of high quality in research. They have been produced by following research ethics and they are the best excellence we can achieve*" (I-6). Furthermore, another interviewee explained how some prominent Finnish universities have shifted from intense industry and business collaboration back to more basic research — in other words, producing more high-quality research publications — due to government performance incentives. "*The hype wave* [collaboration with industry] *has changed towards aiming at scientific excellence. There is a turn towards basic research, which is not bad, but industry*

needs hands-on development and collaboration. I think the technical universities have it easier" (I-13).

Furthermore, interviewees reflected the universities' excellence and specialisation in terms of profiling the universities in the following vein: "*There is discussion on retaining strong basic research-oriented roles of universities. However, when looking outside Helsinki in Finland, it is important to connect with the surrounding society and keep communicating with the outside world. Say that you have focused on applied research and doing what the surrounding society needs so you might survive better. In an extreme case, we could have only a few big universities, with basic research-orientation. It goes without saying that the economy of Finland would suffer. Especially businesses that need applied research*" (I-31). In terms of universities' excellence, interviewees discussed knowledge transfer to other sectors. The fact is that universities receive their core funding from the State based on numbers of publications in journals ranked by the Publication Forum Project (JUFO) of the Finnish Learned Societies, as well as degrees and student credits, not on knowledge transfer. However, many additional funding instruments, e.g. Business Finland (Business Finland 2018), focus on applied research and collaboration with business and industry. Thus, it seems that excelling in research and excelling in knowledge transfer are in contradiction (see also Suomi et al. 2014).

When reflecting on excellence of academia, in terms of scientific publications, it seems that what universities have not yet sorted out are the unstable, hard-to-predict fixed-term work contracts of a notable part of their academic employees (Pekkola et al. 2015; Aarnikoivu et al. 2019). Short fixed-term contracts do not allow employees to focus and spend years on journal publications, as they must be concerned about future employability and apply for funding. This is likely to create stress and tension and may thus lead to negative reputation of a university employer among internal stakeholders, i.e. academic employees. In the worst case, it may become visible among external stakeholders as well.

5 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether and how the problems of reputation management occur in public higher education. In this, Wæraas and Byrkjeflot's (2012) categorisation of five problems of public sector organisations and reputation management was adopted as a basis for the analysis. The five problems relate to politics, consistency, charisma, uniqueness and excellence. In order to respond to the purpose of the study, 40 semi-structured interviews altogether were qualitatively analysed. The interviews were carried out with 1) doctoral degree holders with work experience from academia and other sectors, 2) representatives of university management and 3) people employing doctorates outside academia, to see how these groups make sense of universities' problems of reputation management.

All five reputation problems were detected in the context of higher education, and they are partially connected and overlapping with each other (see also Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Table 1 summarises the empirical findings of the study. After that, each problem is briefly discussed.

Table 1 Five problems of reputation management in higher education

Public sector organisations and reputation management – Five problems (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012)

Politics	Consistency	Charisma	Uniqueness	Excellence
• Public ownership and steering guides the formulation of a university's strategy, although some autonomy is still left for the universities to choose their strategic focus • Perceived degrading political atmosphere towards academics • University reform • Diminishing core funding and search for external funding • Performance measurement → Contradicting aims	• Basic vs. applied research • Tension between focusing on producing journal publications, degrees and study credits vs. focusing on knowledge transfer with private, public and third sectors • Duality between different types of workers • Identities and self-presentations may vary between faculties and sciences, and also within the same science between different disciplines.	• Challenges in finding "common language" with stakeholders outside academia •Lack of timely and applicable knowledge provided for external stakeholders • Image among stakeholders of academics in an "ivory tower" • Lack of marketing and opening up skills of academics	• Current profiling policy serves as an answer to the uniqueness problem, but there are challenges related to that → Competition between universities, future uncertainty for universities outside centers of growth, uncertainty of academic employees' future if one's expertise does not fit the profile of the university	• Academic excellence, in terms of publication in high-quality international journals, is not fully understood outside academia • Short, fixed-term work contracts do not allow researchers to concentrate on publications in high-quality international journals • Turbulent external funding race does not support excelling in academic research

The politics problem was evident in the empirical data because Finnish universities are publicly steered and funded (Kivistö et al. 2017a, b). The government and the Ministry of Education and Culture play the key role of pushing universities to meet the diverse needs of non-academic stakeholders (Kallio et al. 2016). University reform, budget cuts to universities' core funding and a very strong performance orientation in the provision of core funding have created a new reality for academic work. Additional external funding instruments, such as those employed by Business Finland, support knowledge transfer between universities and private, public and third sector organisations (see also e.g. Stenvall and Laitinen 2015), though university performance measurement still fails to measure the societal impact of research. The reputation problem arises when the needs and expectations of universities and non-academic stakeholders do not meet. This problem seems to be somewhat less recognised within the technology, business and medical disciplines, but nevertheless, all of the interviewees discussed the matter and found it problematic for universities' reputations. Although the core missions of universities, teaching and basic research, are still officially unchanged, the surrounding societies' expectations towards universities have shifted to vaster demand (see also Kallio et al. 2016). Discrediting of academics by high-level politicians in Finland seems to be connected to a lack of understanding of the nature of academic work and the role of basic research in building long-term wealth and knowledge in society (see also Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). This degrading is

naturally likely to hurt the reputations of universities and academics alike, particularly if it remains unchanged.

As regards the consistency problem, the empirical data implies that balancing between staying true to universities' original Humboldtian identity and wiggling between the political pressures, is bound to produce contradicting aims, which is harmful to universities' reputation (see also Kallio et al. 2016). Hence, this is in line with Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012, 196), who argued that public sector organisations must often deal with ranges of values that are conflicting and inconsistent. The empirical data indicates that universities' original identity has been questioned by politicians and stakeholders outside academia. However, to hold positive reputation, universities must clarify their stances towards their original mission: that is, their values, identity and self-presentation (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Many Finnish academics agree on the original Humboldtian identity of the university; however, due to the transformation and political pressures, academics are re-evaluating their values (Välimaa 2012; Kallio et al. 2016). The question is, therefore, to what extent should academics adapt their behaviours according to external pressures (see also Ylijoki and Ursin 2013)?

In this study, it was also found that there are two different groups of academics, based on whether they have permanent work contracts or fixed-term contracts, which are often short (see also Pekkola et al. 2015). These two groups are likely to face different challenges and expectations, at least to some extent, and they may thus communicate the university's identity inconsistently to stakeholders. The permanent faculty members often present themselves as teachers or research-lead teachers, and those with fixed-term contracts present as researchers who are more collaborative with external stakeholders. Earlier research has scrutinised changing careers of early-career researchers with fixed-term contracts at universities (Pekkola et al. 2015; Aarnikoivu et al. 2019). This study discusses academic employees' fixed-term contracts as well; it considers them to be problematic in terms of reputation management in higher education, as they maintain the consistency problem. Academics in Finland find the balance related to monetary incentives to challenge and often contradict their values (Kivistö et al. 2017a). However, the state funding is taxpayers' money, and therefore the owners' expectations for universities' contributions and services to surrounding society can be seen as legitimate. On the other hand, academic freedom may result in added value to the society in the long term.

Further, the above discussion takes us to the charisma problem in the context of higher education, where the failure to create good feeling, admiration, respect and trust is at the core of the problem. Hence, when universities answer to the surrounding society's needs, they may create positive reputation. Here, the NPM-influenced performance measurement of universities are in line with Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012), who explained how the NPM methods have been introduced to promote the efficiency of the public sector, and they might enhance charisma and build positive reputation accordingly. However, our results imply that NPM methods, and performance measurement in particular, are in fact directing the university work more towards journal publications than toward collaboration with stakeholders outside academia (Kallio et al. 2016). Due to long processes required in publishing research in journals and publications' theoreticality, researchers may be considered to be slow and isolated within an "ivory

tower", which is likely to retain the charisma problem related to universities' reputation management.

Creating common language and communication between universities and stakeholders outside academia helps to build understanding, trust and respect. However, different operational cultures in terms of critical and analytical thinking in academia and more straightforward decision-making in other sectors, particularly in the private sector, creates challenges for finding a common language (see also Styhre and Lind 2010). Finding ways of improving communication of research projects in a timely manner with policymakers and other relevant stakeholders at different stages of the projects might help in reconciling such situations. The empirical data suggests that if they are asked for advice from stakeholders in outside academia, researchers may provide research results but seldom explain how to apply them into practice. This tends to create disappointment in stakeholders instead of good feeling, and thus it hurts reputations of universities and academics alike. According to Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012), the charisma problem in public sector organisations also occurs in connection with media culture and news. It is common that negative rather than positive news is noticed by media. However, universities also receive positive media attention, for example as regards research breakthroughs and Nobel Prize wins, and such media coverage builds positive reputation for the fields of higher education in question.

At its best, successful collaborations in research and development projects with businesses provides legitimacy for universities. Our empirical data suggests that such endeavors serve the surrounding society in knowledge transfer and build positive reputation for universities. Although such projects rarely produce journal publications of high impact, or they are harder to achieve than in fully academic basic research projects, they are still valuable in terms of building good feeling, admiration, respect and trust. It goes without saying that unsuccessful collaboration in projects, in turn, may jeopardise a university's reputation. When expectations and experience of stakeholders do not meet, it is likely to hurt a university's reputation. As Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) mention, public sector organisations seldom can choose their consumers or partners. However, in higher education, the situation appears to differ from many other public sector organisations (e.g. tax offices, public health and social care). Although there is a policy of equal access to higher education in Finland (Suomi 2015; Kallio et al. 2016), students are chosen based on their success in entrance exams or in the matriculation exam at the end of their studies in an upper secondary school. In addition, collaboration projects with surrounding society are often based on mutual interests of academics and stakeholders outside academia. Thus, it seems that universities have more options and freedom in choosing their customers and collaboration partners than do many other public organisations (see also Rüegg 2004; Kallio et al. 2016).

Turning to the uniqueness problem, public sector organisations may find it challenging to search for differation since they are traditionally expected to be similar in order to be legitimate (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). However, our results show that Finnish universities are growingly differentiating their core strategic focus and thus profiling differently from one another (Academy of Finland 2018a, b). Such a phenomenon has been seen globally in higher education, and it has been recently introduced as a political incentive in Finland (e.g. Tirronen 2015; Academy of Finland 2018a, b). Further, the main incentive is the core funding of the universities, which is

coercively pushing universities to differentiate, specialise and build heterogeneous profiles (e.g. Tirronen 2015). Competing for uniqueness raises solidarity questions in universities, because academics are more reluctant to share information and ideas with each other in a competitive situation, and this is in contradiction with universities' traditional moral symbols, such as openness, trust and care (Christensen and Gornitzka 2017). However, it is yet to be seen how profiling activities will affect Finnish higher education.

Scholars have discussed the Finnish government's "Harvard Here" in a pursuit of creating a "world-class" university by injecting funding into one merged university in the capital of Finland (Aarrevaara et al. 2009; Aarrevaara and Dobson 2016). Further, "merger mania" describes the intense push for university mergers in a search for improved efficiency and effectiveness by diminishing the university network in Finland (Aarrevaara and Dobson 2016). However, worries about smaller rural universities' survival is relevant. Moreover, contradictions and controversies may occur because of mergers, and accordingly rebranding processes may face internal resistance and conflicts (see also Wæraas and Solbakk 2009; Aspara et al. 2014; Aula et al. 2015), which is likely to have negative impact on a university's reputation, particularly if it becomes visible by stakeholders outside academia (see also Suomi and Järvinen 2013).

The universities' profiling policy is also connected to the excellence problem to some extent. Reputation is a relative construct where organisations are compared and ranked against each other (e.g. Rindova et al. 2005; Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). It may well be, for example, that students find it more appealing to receive a degree from one of the "reputable" universities in a particular field than from a lower-ranked university with a less specified focus (see also Engwall 2007), however, the students may not know exactly what rankings hold inside (e.g. Vidaver-Cohen 2007). Further, the empirical data of this study implicates the universities' wiggly funding scheme, which does not support turning fixed-term work contracts into permanent ones. Academic employees who have been placed in fixed-term contracts are living under uncertainty, which seems to create stress, tension and disappointments (Aarnikoivu et al. 2019; Pekkola et al. 2015; see also Ylijoki and Henriksson 2017).

6 Conclusions

This study contributes theoretically to the academic literature on reputation management in the public sector by applying Wæraas and Byrkjeflot's (2012) categorisation of five problems of reputation management in public sector organisations to higher education. As Wæraas and Byrkjeflot's (2012) categorisation was solely conceptual, this study expands our understanding of the topic by analysing a comprehensive set of qualitative data from Finnish higher education to describe the dynamics in the public sector. All five reputation problems were detected in the data. The study provides empirical evidence derived from semi-structured interviews on the content of problems in higher education and discusses related recent transformations in higher education. As such, the study provides novel insights into and perceptions of a previously under-researched group in reputation management: ex-academics, their employers and representatives of university leadership (see also Suomi et al. 2019).

It can be concluded that the politics problem is fundamental in the higher education context and closely related to all other reputation problems (see also Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). In terms of reputation management, one of the most problematic matters appears to be knowledge transfer and applicability of research into practice, as it is not supported by the current funding model of universities or related performance measurement of academic employees. The challenge related to knowledge transfer cross-cuts all five problems from different angles.

The study provides further understanding on the current division between employees with permanent and fixed-term contracts in universities (Pekkola et al. 2015; Aarnikoivu et al. 2019; see also Ylijoki and Henriksson 2017). This division is likely to create tension and competition between academic colleagues and thus problems for reputation management as regards the consistency problem (see also Suomi and Järvinen 2013). Further, it appears that academic freedom has somewhat diminished after NPM methods were introduced to universities (see also Ylijoki and Ursin 2013; Kallio et al. 2016). A conclusion could be drawn, in line with Wæraas and Solbakk (2009), that trying to eliminate the reputation problems may lead to other problems, such as solidarity problems, as the example of the current push for profiling in Finnish higher education implies.

The empirical contribution of the study lies in its use of comprehensive and rich qualitative data with a fresh perspective, focusing on doctorates who have exited academia and their employers and university leadership. The key empirical findings, which are structured in Table 1, summarise the findings and serve as a basis for future research in the field and beyond the Finnish context.

With respect to policy implications, we suggest that the Ministry of Education and Culture and policymakers might re-evaluate the universities' performance measurement to better meet the needs of the surrounding societies. Positive – not to mention excellent – reputation is hard to attain with the contradicting expectations that universities currently face. In order to build and maintain positive reputation, universities themselves will have to re-evaluate their Humboldtian core mission, research and education, and how it is situated in contributing to the contemporary societies' needs.

Further, the current policy of profiling in higher education, if successful, may enhance clarifying identities of universities' identities. Strong identity builds charisma and uniqueness among other players in the higher education field. However, in a global comparison, Finnish universities are rather unknown and small players; thus, joint marketing efforts might yield better results in attracting international students than efforts of individual universities.

The study suggests that managers in higher education should acknowledge that a university's reputation can only be as good as its reputation among its employees (Suomi et al. 2014). Indeed, universities should consider their internal reputation among academics as important as the external one, because academics play a critical role in building a university's external reputation and brand, not only at their workplace, but also through interactions with families, friends and networks (e.g. Morokane et al. 2016). Thus, academics' support and trust is essential in building positive reputation for a university. Further, we suggest that managers in higher education focus on reducing the duality between different types of university workers, as this duality threatens universities' reputations in general and consistency in particular.

This study focuses on the problems of reputation management in higher education in the Nordic country of Finland. Thus, the results of the study should be applicable to other Nordic countries with similar public higher education systems (see e.g. Hansen et al. 2019). As regards future studies, it would be valuable to evaluate the outcomes of universities' profiling activities in terms of reputation management, because it is too early to do so yet. Further studies concentrating on other educational systems and cultures, to see whether they come up with differing results, could prove beneficial. Further, as Wæraas and Byrkjeflot's (2012) categorisation was conceptual, further empirical studies could expand the research beyond higher education to other public sector contexts.

Appendix

Table 2 Interview participants

Interview participants ($N = 40$)								
Group I: Ex-academics ($N = 18$)			Group II: Employers ($N = 8$)			Group III: University ($N = 14$) leadership		
Gender	F	9	Gender	F	5	Gender	F	3
	M	9		M	3		M	11
Firm		8	Firm		1	Vice-rector		4
Public organisation		6	Large municipality		1	Dean		7
Large multinational company		1	Large multinational company		1	External board member		2
Large state-owned foundation		3	Large state-owned foundation		1	Senior administration		1
Field of science	Social	8	University		4			
	Technical	10						

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