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Administrative structures of higher education institutions - connection with the experience of professional agency of teaching staff

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ABSTRACT

In educational organizations, the teaching staff has traditionally had a lot of influence on the content of their work and the pedagogy. Within the last two decades, changes in educational organizations can be defined as the shift from this administrative loose coupling toward tight, more managerial coupling. This study utilizes a qualitatively driven mixed-method approach and seeks to determine the potential connection between the loosely, tightly, or simultaneously coupled administrative style and the experience of professional agency of teaching staff in Finnish higher education institutions. The data was gathered through semi-structured thematic interviews and a quantitative survey from 21 informants. The findings revealed that all three administrative styles had both benefits and challenges for the interviewee's experience of professional agency but with the emphasis on challenges from the tightly coupled features. The results highlight the potential connection with the expert organization's administrative style and the organization's most valuable asset: a motivated and committed staff.

Introduction and background

In educational organizations, teaching staff has traditionally had a lot of influence on the content of their work and the pedagogy. Their work has not been strongly administrated, and hence, they have been able to fulfill their professional goals, and have had possibilities for decision-making. (Hargreaves, 2000; Meyer, 2002a; Vähäsantanen et al., 2012). Changes in the last two decades in educational organizations can be defined as the shift from this loose coupling toward tight, more managerial coupling, which diminishes teaching staff's possibilities to influence the content of their work, and to negotiate their professional goals. (Meyer, 2002a; Vähäsantanen et al., 2012.) The coupling concept refers here to the aspect where different elements in organizations are seen to be connected, that is coupled, through linkages of varying strength (Meyer, 2002a; Rowan, 2002; Weick, 1976). In the literature, the terms loose and tight coupling usually appear together, in a relative sense (Pang, 2010).

The professional agency of teachers has been researched before, to a certain extent (e.g., Toom et al., 2015; Vähäsantanen, 2015; Vähäsantanen et al., 2020), and the agency here refers to the teacher's abilities to negotiate the contents and conditions of their work (Hökkä & Vähäsantanen, 2014). However, according to Vähäsantanen et al. (2020), professional agency is relatively unexplored, albeit an urgent topic in higher education contexts, and conclusions on its extent and characteristics are needed. In this study, the teaching staff is represented by the subgroup of study counselors and other guidance staff of higher education institutions, who, in Finland, usually have teacher education and extensive teaching experience. To date, the professional agency of study counselors has not been studied. In this study, agency, and especially professional agency, will be considered within a subject-centered socio-cultural framework by Eteläpelto et al. (2013).

Regarding the higher education and guidance background of this study, the higher education system in Finland is dualistic. After primary and secondary education, a person can apply either to a science University or to the University of Applied Sciences (UAS). Both higher education institutions award bachelor's and master's degrees, but only science Universities award doctoral or licentiate degrees. (Valtioneuvosto.) There are together 13 Universities and 23 multidisciplinary UAS's in Finland, and higher education institutions in this study are among the UAS's. In Finland, higher education institutions are obligated to organize study guidance and counseling for their students. However, the guidance is not required to be organized through educated study counselors, unlike in secondary level, but higher education institutions are autonomous in this context also.

In addition, the terminology for teaching staff in higher education is manifold. In the Finnish context, the higher education faculty in teaching are named, for example, 'senior lecturer' and 'principal lecturer' in UAS's, and 'university lecturer' and 'professor' in science universities. In international context, the term "lecturer" is also common, but, for example, in the North American context, the higher education faculty are named "instructor", "faculty" or "professor". For the consistency, in this paper, the term teaching staff is used to cover the variety of different terms and ranks in higher education institutions.

This study seeks to determine the potential connection between the administrative style and the experience of professional agency of teaching staff in Finnish higher education institutions, and offers continuation for two previous studies (Hautala, Helander & Korhonen,2018; Hautala, in preparation). The research question of this study was: *What is the connection between the experience of professional agency of teaching staff, represented by the study counselors, and the administrative style of the higher education institutions?* In this paper, first, the theoretical framework of socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and especially the contrast of structure and agency (Archer, 1995; Giddens, 1984; Parker, 2000) is introduced, after which the literature review in the topics of structure, that is administrative couplings, and professional agency, is presented. Then, the qualitatively driven mixed-method approach, used in this study, is explained. The data gathering and analysis of the study combined quantitative and qualitative phases, and a quantitative questionnaire was used as a stimulus during thematic interviews (Törrönen, 2002). Hence, the analysis phase

also combines quantitative and qualitative methods in a unique way. This is followed by the results, and finally, the discussion and conclusion are presented.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and more precisely within that, on the contrast of structure and agency (Archer, 1995; Giddens, 1984; Parker, 2000). Hodgson (2004) defines a social structure as a set of significant relations between individuals. These relations can lead to causal interactions. In this study, the structure is represented by the administrative style of the higher education institutions, and especially by the continuum of organizational loose and tight coupling (Hautala, Helander & Korhonen, 2018).

Agency, on the other hand, is connected to the question: to what extent individuals themselves and to what extent society and the economic and social structures and cultural norms guide the choices individuals make (Eteläpelto et al., 2011). Archer (2003) states that the structures and individuals each have their unique features, which should be considered when defining agency. In the debate of the concepts of structure and agency, the side of post-structurationists (Archer, 1995; Mouzelis, 1995) is chosen in this study. Archer (1995) and Mouzelis (1995) stress the importance of both structure and agency. They insist that the two must be understood as analytically distinct, and structure exists outside individuals (also, Elder-Vass, 2010).

Literature review

Structure – administrative style of the educational organizations

According to Hautala, Helander & Korhonen (2018), loose coupling in educational organizations impact innovativeness in the individuals and organizations, contributes to the autonomy of individual teachers and organizational subunits, and distances supervision and instruction in schools. Tight coupling in educational organizations, on the other hand, highlights rules, regulations, monitoring and certification, binds members to the organizational goals, and endeavors organizational effectiveness.

In loosely coupled educational organizations, an atmosphere conducive to innovation has been developed (N S.K. Pang, 1998; Pang, 2003, 2010; also, Meyer, 2002b), and the presence of individual and organizational autonomy is a significant feature of these types of educational organizations (Aurini, 2012; Cheng, 2008, 2009). According to Aberbach and Christensen (2018), academic freedom and the autonomy of academic institutions are core values in contemporary academic life. Broad patterns, such as segmentation, may be widely characteristic of universities, and, for example, public universities in the USA have been explicitly designed to be loosely coupled 'multiversities' pursuing multiple missions simultaneously. (Cho & Taylor, 2019.)

Furthermore, one aspect of loosely coupled organizations is the lack of connections between the core operations of institutions and their management activities (Murphy et al., 1985), and the relatively weak linkage between the institutional environment and its instructional activities. (Aurini, 2012; also, Hautala, Helander & Korhonen, 2018; Pajak & Green, 2003.) In these organizations, teaching staff must develop individual professional

skills, and behave as self-managing professionals in order to work effectively (Cheng, 2008).

In tightly coupled organizations, tight coupling comes as a result of procedures, schedules, hierarchy, authority, sanctions and rewards. Tight coupling also includes organizational and hierarchical structures facilitating and enhancing the achievement of school goals. (Cheng, 2008.) Additionally, accountability, through rigorous assessment of effectiveness of the instructional programs and curriculum, is a relevant characteristic of effective, tightly coupled educational organizations. Hence, tight coupling in educational organizations enables administering continuous changes, with the aim of profitability and effectiveness. (Meyer, 2002a; Rowan, 2002; also, Hautala, Helander & Korhonen, 2018.)

According to Buller (2009, p. 29), educational administrators 'should always see a bright red flag whenever anyone starts adopting military or corporate language in an academic context'. Nevertheless, a tightly coupled administrative style, and within that, the New Public Management (NPM) has grown prominent also in educational institutions (Meyer, 2002a; Rowan, 2002). The NPM demonstrates the classical bureaucratic model of educational administration (Goldspink, 2007; also, Meyer, 2002a; Rowan, 2002), and assumes that there is a tight coupling between education policy (e.g., curriculum) and the way teachers teach (Goldspink, 2007). However, teachers have seen the application of NPM as a negative tendency, and one example of the effects of this tight management is that it might demand teachers either to adapt to or to leave the organization (Hökkä & Vähäsantanen, 2014).

Moreover, Hökkä and Vähäsantanen (2014, p. 132) have stated that in the context of market competition, 'professional independence and a culture of trust are being replaced by ideals of efficacy, productivity and rapid service delivery' (also, Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009), and changes that have taken place in the last few decades, impact also on academic freedom and autonomy. These changes include the increase in catering by universities to stakeholders, professionalization of university administrations, and an evolving pattern of broadening authority over university's internal decision-making. (Aberbach & Christensen, 2018.)

As indicated here, both loosely and tightly coupled administrative styles entail both benefits and challenges. However, in the middle grounds of the continuum of loose and tight coupling, it is the simultaneous coupling that refers to organizational components varying in the looseness or tightness of their couplings within different relationships and situations (Hautala, Helander & Korhonen, 2018; Pang, 2010; Weick, 1976; also, Boyd & Crowson, 2002). Simultaneous loose and tight configurations benefit these educational hybrid organizations 'as loose coupling allows innovativeness and autonomy – and job satisfaction – of individuals and organizational subunits, and tight coupling entails supervision, instruction, and regulation as tools for binding members to the organizational goals, and for enabling organizational effectiveness' (Hautala, Helander & Korhonen, 2018, p. 252).

Agency – professional agency of teachers

Due to the growing emphasis on more tightly coupled and NPM – lead administrative style, there are concerns of connections between educational organizations and

teachers' work, with the stress on teachers' sense of professional agency (Hökkä & Vähäsantanen, 2014). According to Vähäsantanen et al. (2020), professional agency is manifested in influencing at work, developing work practices, and negotiating professional identity. The professional agency influences teachers' individual learning processes at the individual and collective level in educational environments (Lai et al., 2016; Tao & Gao, 2017; Vähäsantanen et al., 2020).

Agency in general, and especially professional agency, has mostly positive connections with creativity (Sawyer, 2007), motivation, well-being, and happiness (Welzel & Inglehart, 2010). The agency is also connected to subjects' autonomy and self-fulfillment (Casey, 2006). In this role, agency may act as a force for resistance to structural power and manifesting intentional action (Giddens, 1984). Additionally, professional agency can manifest, for example, as taking a critical stance toward reforms suggested from outside (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009), and Boylan et al. (2018) consider agency broadly as the account of agents that instigate or produce change processes. However, according to Eteläpelto et al. (2013, p. 46), 'in its most active and positive forms, manifestations of professional agency can be seen as subjects' creative initiatives and suggestions for developing existing work practices' (also, Littleton et al., 2012; Paloniemi & Collin, 2012).

In this study, the agency will be considered within a subject-centered socio-cultural framework (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Professional agency as a subject-centered socio-cultural phenomenon is manifested when professional subjects and/or communities take up influence, make choices, and take stances in ways that affect their professional identities and/or their work. The practice of professional agency is closely connected with professional subjects' work-related identities containing their professional and ethical commitments, ideals, motivations, interests, and goals. Eteläpelto et al. (2013, p. 47) consider that at the societal level, 'agency is seen as necessary from the point of view of combining an effective and flexible economy with people's well-being'.

Materials and methods

This study utilizes a qualitatively driven mixed-method research approach (Hesse-Biber, 2015). In mixed-method research, the quantitative and qualitative components can be integrated in a single study, and the integration can take place at various stages of the research process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Hesse-Biber, 2015). This study can be defined as a mixed-method study utilizing both complementarity and development purposes. For complementarity, the qualitative and quantitative methods were used to measure overlapping, but also different facets of a phenomenon in question. For the development purpose, the sequential use of qualitative and quantitative methods was utilized, and here the quantitative method, ergo survey of the administrative structures of HEIs (Hautala, in preparation), helped to inform the qualitative method (Greene et al., 1989), ergothematic interview regarding interviewees' experience of professional agency. The quantitative and qualitative components were utilized in both data collection and data analysis phases in response to the research question (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) of this study. Therefore, in the data analysis phase, the integration offered a unique study design for this research.

Sampling and data collection

Sampling

During spring 2018, the call for participation to the study was sent to the contact persons in participating UAS's, with the request to send the call for all guidance actors in their organizations. In order to gain as rich data as possible, interviewees were called from any field of study, any amount of yearly resources in study counseling, and any level of guidance task, that is study counselors, tutor teachers (meaning the teacher responsible for the guidance and practicalities, e.g., keeping track of credit accumulation of a specific class of students), and other guidance actors according to the contact persons' judgment. However, personnel guiding merely theses or practical training were excluded. Potential interviewees were asked to contact the corresponding author directly through e-mail in order to safeguard interviewees' anonymity. Together, 21 (n = 21) interviewees from 10 Finnish UAS's, sixteen female and five males, who all had the task of study counseling in their institution, agreed to participate. In the beginning of the interviews, written informed consent was received from all participants.

Data collection

The research data was collected during the autumn of 2018 through semi-structured thematic interviews and a quantitative survey. For the interviews, the semi-structured interview guide (Kallio et al., 2016) was used in the interviews, and the guide covered the list of themes in professional agency, as well as expertise that is not discussed in this paper. Agency related themes of the interview were drawn from Eteläpelto et al.'s (2013) framework of professional agency as a subject-centered socio-cultural phenomenon. According to Eteläpelto et al. (2013), professional agency is manifested when professional subjects take up influence, make choices, and take stances in ways that affect their professional identities and/or their work. From these theoretical features, the interview themes of 'taking up influence', 'making choices', and 'taking stances' regarding inter-viewees' work were formulated. In the beginning of the interviews, the interviewees were asked to describe their experiences with the themes as such.

Inclusion of the structural aspect to the interviews took place in the second phase by using a structured questionnaire, in the topic of administrative loose and tight coupling, as a stimulus. Replying to the questionnaire was voluntary, but all interviewees agreed to reply. The questionnaire (five scale Likert) was developed through the operationalization of the features of administrative loose and tight coupling in educational organizations (Hautala, Helander & Korhonen, 2018). In Hautala (in preparation), the developed questionnaire was piloted with 378 respondents from Finnish UAS's. By using Principal component analysis, five principal components were extracted: two principal components for loosely coupled administration (LC 1: support for innovation and autonomy (Cronbach's Alpha, α = ,695) and LC 2: loose administrative control (α = ,721)), and three components for tightly coupled administration (TC 1: meaning of organization's strategic values and goals (α = ,928); TC 2: organizational efficiency and accountability of actions (α = ,849) and TC 3: normative and tight administrative control (α = ,699)). Additionally, the reliability of this analysis was verified through the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, which both showed the applicability of the analysis. For the principal

component analysis of loose coupling the KMO -measure was,806 and Bartlett's Sphericity p = ,000. For tight coupling, the KMO -measure was,841 and Bartlett's Sphericity p = ,000.

After filling in the questionnaire, the agentic interview themes were gone through for the second time. The fourth phase of the interviews included replying to the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument (OCAI) by Cameron and Quinn (2006), after which the interview themes were processed for the third time. However, the phenomenon of organizational culture is not discussed in this paper either.

The interviews, together ca. 29 hours, lasted from 46 to 122 minutes, the average being 83 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim giving ca. 575 pages (font 12 and space 1,5) of data. In this study, both interview data and quantitative questionnaire data were used, and the qualitative analysis and results concentrate on the part where the interviewees reflect the experience of professional agency in connection to the administrative style of their organization.

The interviewee's age varied between 36 and 64 years. Most of the interviewees were teachers in their fields and had additionally a role in study counseling. Nearly half of all interviewees had a role of tutor teacher. The interviewees' tasks, fields, resources in study counseling and work experience in the guidance task are presented in Table 1.

Analysis

The individual questionnaires in the topic of administrative loose and tight coupling were filled in paper form and collected from all 21 interviewees during the interviews. The interviewees' individual means for the sum variables of principal components of loose and tight coupling were calculated and re-checked manually. From the found principal components (Hautala, in preparation), simultaneous coupling was interpreted to manifest the support for innovation and autonomy (LC 1), shared meaning of organization's strategic values and goals (TC 1) and organizational efficiency and accountability of actions (TC 2). From here, the classification of loosely (LC 1 and LC 2), tightly (TC 1, TC 2, and TC 3) and simultaneously coupled (LC 1, TC 1 and TC 2) organizations was executed when analyzing the quantitative results according to the emphasis of the individuals' sum variables, and categorizing the interviewees to their organization's respective administrative styles.

The thematic interview data was analyzed through qualitative content analysis which consists, according to Elo and Kyngäs (2007), of inductive and deductive approach. In this study, the deductive approach was selected. A deductive approach of analysis is used when the structure of the analysis is operationalized on the basis of previous knowledge. Both inductive and deductive analysis processes are represented as three main phases: preparation, organizing, and reporting. (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007.) Next, these phases of content analysis will be presented.

In the preparation phase, according to Elo and Kyngäs (2007, p. 111), the researcher can use either structured or unconstrained categorization matrix. For this study, an unconstrained matrix was developed from Eteläpelto et al. (2013) framework of professional agency as a subject-centered socio-cultural phenomenon. The matrix included the agentic interview themes of 'making choices', 'taking stances' and 'taking up influence', regarding interviewees' work.

Table 1. Background information of the interviewees.

Task in study counseling		Field of study/unit		Resources in study counseling (% of 1600 h/year)		Work experience in the guidance task	
Coordinating task in study counseling	3	Healthcare and Social work	3	1–10 %	4	1–2 years	5
Lecturer/Study counselor (+ Tutor role)	11 (5)	Healthcare	5	11–30%	5	3–4 years	6
Study counselor	1	Social work	1	31–50%	3	5–10 years	5
Lecturer/Tutor role	1	Technology	3	51–70%	3	11–15 years	3
Lecturer/Head of degree program/Tutor role	1	Information technology	1	71–100%	6	16–20 years	-
Education coordinator/Tutor role	1	Forestry	1			More than 20 years	2
Education coordinator/Study counselor	1	Tourism and catering	2				
Study psychologist	1	Business administration	1				
Project planner in guidance project	1	Humanities, education and culture	1				
		Central administration	3				

In the organizing phase, the Atlas.ti software was used for selecting all citations regarding the phase of the interviews, where interviewees described their experience of professional agency in relation to the administrative style. From there on, all primary citations were read through, and relevant contents, from phrases to paragraphs, connected to the agentic interview themes, were coded in Atlas.ti.

Through the quantitative analysis of the administrative style of the organizations, three main categories of loosely, tightly, and simultaneously coupled organizations were formulated. The first generic category was formulated by combining the agentic themes of making choices and taking stances in analysis stage due to them being connected also in the interview data. The second generic category was the theme of taking up influence. From there on, the quotations were classified through inductive process and interpretation as to which content to put in the same sub-category (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). Finally, abstraction for formulating the categories was conducted (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). Main, generic, and sub-categories formulated through the analysis process are presented in Figure 1. in results.
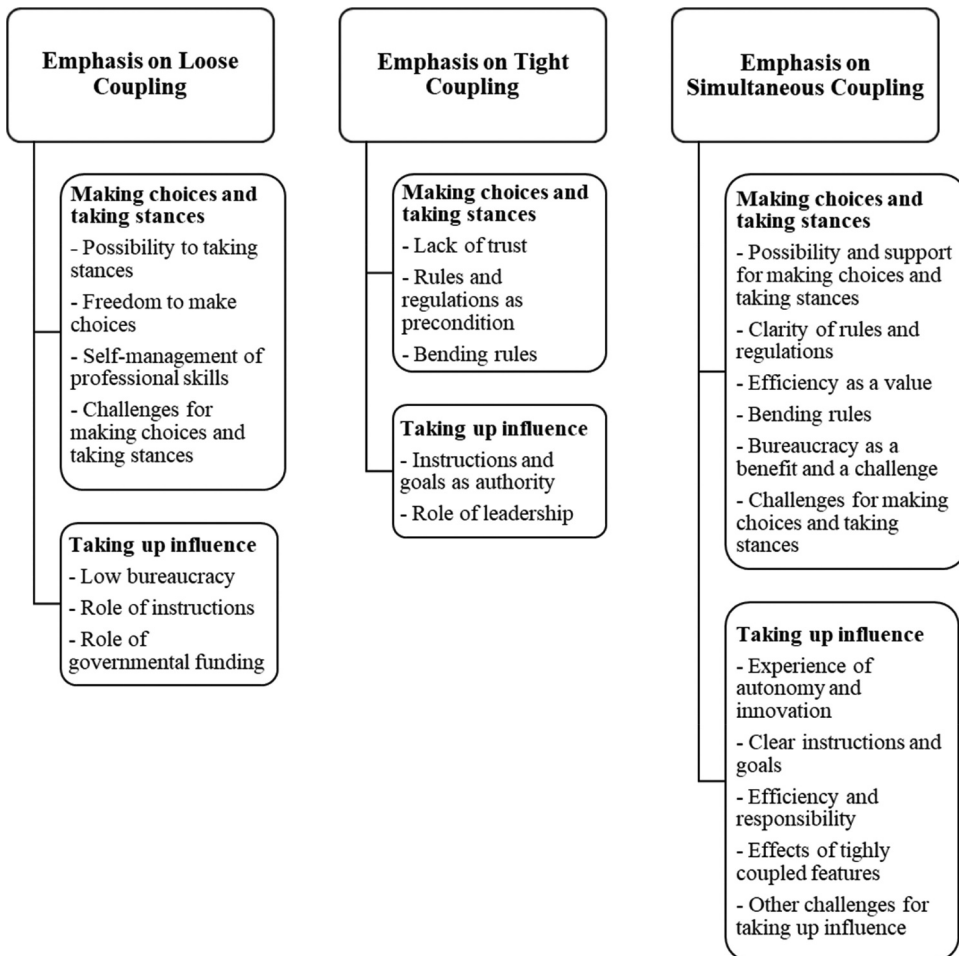

Figure 1. Main, generic and sub-categories formulated through the analysis process.

For the reporting phase, in the following sections, firstly, the quantitative results presenting the administrative style of the UAS´s will be described shortly, highlighting the structural features of the UAS's. Second, the structural features and qualitative results will be combined as the connection between the structure and agency is described. In the qualitative results, quotations, translated by the authors, will be used to clarify the made analysis, and as a generalization, all interviewees will be referred to as study counselors.

Results

Administrative style of the UAS's

According to the previous theory and analysis (Hautala, Helander & Korhonen, 2018; Hautala, in preparation), there were two main components for *loosely coupled* administrative style: support for innovation and autonomy (LC 1); and loose administrative control (LC 2). Of loosely coupled components, the majority of the interviewees considered that the administrative style of their organization supported the experience of innovation and autonomy (LC 1). The results show that the individual means of the sum variable of LC 1 (Likert 1–5) varied between 3,00 and 4,75. Most of the interviewees were able to exercise individual discretion and were committed to their organizations. If the interviewee did not experience support for the autonomy and innovation from the management, there was seen a connection to the diminished commitment, or even loss of commitment, to work. The second component for loose coupling, loose administrative control (LC 2), had individual means between 1,90 and 3,60, indicating at the lower end, for example, relatively clear organizational instructions and organizations' control over the execution of individuals' tasks. At the higher end, there was seen an experience of difficulties in managing changes in organization due to, for example, lack of monitoring organizational subunits.

For *tightly coupled* administrative style, there were three components (Hautala, in preparation): meaning of organization's strategic values and goals (TC 1); organizational efficiency and accountability of actions (TC 2); and normative and tight administrative control (TC 3). Of tightly coupled components, the meaning of organization's strategic values and goals (TC 1) had individual means between 2,63 and 4,54. At the low end, the interviewees did not share, for example, the values or vision of their organizations. An example from the upper end is that the organizational goals were known and shared by the interviewees. The experience of organizational efficiency and accountability of actions (TC 2) had individual means from 2,70 to 4,75. The higher the mean, the more significant role efficiency and accountability, and their control, had in the organization. The third component, normative and tight administrative control (TC 3) had individual means between 2,20 and 4,40. Here, lower means were majority, indicating that the interviewees considered their organizations not having, for example, lot of routines or rules. However, there were some exceptions, and in these organizations, the work of teachers was more tightly controlled, and interviewees experienced that possible mistakes might even lead to a punishment.

In order to clarify the deductive analysis of the qualitative data, the administrative classifications were categorized into three categories by comparing the individual means of components: interviewees presenting organizations with the emphasis on loose

coupling (highest means in LC 1 and especially LC 2), emphasis on tight coupling (TC 1, TC 2, and especially TC 3) and emphasis on simultaneous coupling (LC 1, TC 1, and TC 2). When considering the administrative style of the interviewees' organizations, there were traces of individual experience of several types of hybrid organizations, as well as more clearly loosely or tightly coupled organizations. There could be seen an emphasis on loose coupling (LC 1, and LC 2), including the positive experience of meaning of organization's strategic values and goals (TC 1) pertaining three interviewees (F8, M1, and M3).

Normative and tight administrative control (TC 3) was considered as a significant feature of tightly coupled organizations, and if this component was emphasized in interviewee's responses, the interviewee was categorized to an organization emphasizing tightly coupled administration. Relatively clear emphasis on tight coupling (TC 1, TC 2 and TC 3) was seen among two interviewees (F10 and F16). Additionally, one interviewee (F14) experienced relatively high support for innovation and autonomy (LC 1), meaning of organization's strategic values and goals (TC 1) but also for TC 3. Furthermore, one interviewee (F15) indicated low experience in support for innovation and autonomy (LC 1) and, in addition, in meaning of organization's strategic values and goals (TC 1). This interviewee had the highest, even though quite low, scores in loose administrative control (LC 2) but also in organizational efficiency and accountability of actions (TC 2) and normative and tight administrative control (TC 3). One interviewee (F12) also experienced simultaneous coupling but combined with normative and tight administrative control (TC 3).

As stated earlier, the administrative style most beneficial for educational organizations and their staff is the simultaneous coupling containing support for innovation and autonomy (LC 1), shared meaning of organization's strategic values and goals (TC 1) and organizational efficiency and accountability (TC 2) (Hautala, Helander & Korhonen, 2018; Hautala, in preparation). Half of the interviewees experienced their organizations as being hybrid organizations that had relatively clear simultaneous coupling (F1, F2, F4, F6, F7, F9, F13, M2, M4, and M5). Additionally, two of the interviewees (F3 and F5) had the experience of high LC 1 and TC 1 but lower TC 2, and one of the interviewees (F11) experienced high support for innovation and autonomy (LC 1) and relatively high organizational efficiency and accountability (TC 2). When discussing the results combining structure and agency, these administrative classifications of loose, tight, and simultaneous coupling will be used. Interviewees presenting these combining classifications are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of the combined administrative classifications.

Type of organizations administrative features	Highest scoring components	Interviewees
Emphasis on loose coupling	both LC 1 and LC 2	F8, M1 and M3
Emphasis on tight coupling	TC 1, TC 2 and TC 3	F10, F12, F14, F15 and F16
Emphasis on simultaneous coupling	LC 1, TC 1 and TC 2	F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F7, F9, F11, F13, M2, M4 and M5

LC 1: Support for innovation and autonomy
LC 2: Loose administrative control
TC 1: Shared meaning of organization's strategic values and goals
TC 2: Organizational efficiency and accountability of actions
TC 3: Normative and tight administrative control

Connection between the administrative style and the experience of professional agency

In the deductive analysis, the administrative styles, that are emphasis on loose coupling, tight coupling, or simultaneous coupling, formed the three main categories, and agentic features of making choices and taking stances, and taking up influence formed the two generic categories. These categories, and the found sub-categories, are presented in Figure 1, and are discussed in more detail in the following chapters. In the following results, bolded phrases refer to generic categories and Italic phrases refer to sub-categories. Original concepts, phrases, and sentences are presented in double quotation marks in Italics, and within the text.

Administrative style with the emphasis on loose coupling

There were three interviewees (F8, M1, and M3) who, according to the results of the questionnaire, experienced their organization as emphasizing loosely coupled administrative style. In addition to the higher means in the main components LC 1 and LC 2, all three interviewees also had relatively high mean in the shared meaning of organization's strategic values and goals (TC 1).

Regarding **making choices and taking stances**, the experience connected to administrative style with the emphasis on loose coupling had both beneficial and negative effects on the interviewee's experience of professional agency. For *possibility to taking stances*, the loosely coupled administrative style had positive effect as it was *'difficult to imagine that there would be a punishment for bringing something up' (M3)*. However, it seemed that the right connections were sometimes needed in order to get things done. For example, according to M1, *"we don't have anything systematic but when you know the right people you can bring the things forward to them"*.

The *freedom to make choices* made it possible to innovate, and the loosely coupled administrative features made it *'easy to make decisions, as there is almost no monitoring at all, or you don't have to give reasons for our decisions'* (M3). It was stated by M3, that this freedom was utilized even up to the level of curriculum, and *'no one monitors if you teach the things that are in the curriculum'*. What can be considered as a challenge for the organization, even though agreeable for the employees, is that according to, for example, M1, in loosely coupled organization, *'all educational subunits do their things as they please'*. However, this was also seen as *'dangerous'* as *'if [interviewee M1] had been the director, the director would have no idea where the "ship" was going'*. The management was considered to be quite distant. As M1 stated, *'the administrative features don't play a significant role, they [management] just are there, in the background'*.

Self-management of professional skills was both a benefit and a challenge for the interviewees in loosely coupled organizations. If the individual was inclined and able to manage one's professional skills, loosely coupled, 'self-guided' organization could enable that. Self-guidance was even seen as a future of educational organizations. On the other hand, if there was reluctance for the self-management of professional development, according to M1, it was possible that *'individuals just wait that there would be this prime mover from outside, who would tell what to do'*. Taking responsibility was considered also challenging in these situations – *"everyone just waits that someone else would take the initiative"* (M1).

Clear *challenges for making choices and taking stances* were also mentioned. Regarding the task of study counselor, one challenge was that the content or the responsibilities of the task were not known to the management. According to F8, "*[the task] is seen as somewhat small and concise . and making the choices and taking stance in this task cannot be done with one hand tied behind the back . . . when you could make a decision, but your manager makes it instead . you feel like your hands are tied.*" In addition, the nature of loosely coupled organization also affected the interviewees (M1 and F8) in a way that it was difficult to know if "*the said things* [when taking stance] *will ever reach the top management*".

Concerning the agentic feature of **taking up influence**, the loosely coupled organizations are known to be characterized with *low bureaucracy*, and all three interviewees (F8, M1, and M3) brought up this characteristic. The low bureaucracy manifested especially in a way, that it was easy, and possible, to exercise discretion. M3 stated that "*these administrative features . . . don't really dictate, in good or bad. You can do the guidance work as you want*". The interviewees described that the management was seen as 'separate', and that, and the fact that "*there was no monitoring*" made it easy to carry on as before, even if new procedures were presented by the management. It was also possible to make decisions regarding one's professional development, and execute the guidance task as everyone saw fit, which was seen as the manifestation of the professional agency. However, this freedom was also seen as a challenge if you had no previous experience on study counseling.

The *role of instructions* consisted mainly of the negative features, especially, if the instructions were seen as unclear. According to M1, '*before we had these very clear instructions and teachers didn't have to think anything themselves*', and after organizational change, "*the freedom and responsibility of thinking and taking up influence was given to the teachers, and this . created this vacuum, as unclear instructions left people without directions*" (M1). This phase of not knowing the direction was described as "*transition*", and "*people are waiting for someone from the above* [the management] *to show the direction again*" (M1).

A feature that created boundaries for taking up influence was the *role of governmental funding*. Even if the instructions were experienced as unclear, it was stated by M1, '*that the funding presents these figures, where to aim*'. Aiming the figures measuring the efficiency of the organization, and which were given 'from above', included two aspects where it was possible for the study counselors to have effect on the number of students reaching 55 credits/school year and the number of students graduating. However, it was stated also, that "*it is not possible to have effect on all figures*" (M1).

Administrative style with the emphasis on tight coupling

There were five interviewees (F10, F12, F14, F15, and F16) who experienced their organization as emphasizing tightly coupled administrative style. The main reason for categorizing these interviewees to the tightly coupled administrative style was that among other tightly coupled main components, they had relatively high mean in the main component TC 3, normative, and tight administrative control.

Regarding **making choices and taking stances**, one experienced feature of tightly coupled organizations was the *lack of trust*. For example, it was stated by F15 that the tightly coupled administrative features made it difficult to make choices and decisions,

"*especially if you don't see eye to eye with them* [the management] ". This situation led F15 to '*feeling that there is this constant mistrust, that the tasks won't be done*'. For taking stances, the uncertainty of organizational circumstances made F15 "*dumbfounded, and there is this atmosphere of fear . one just survives*". Regarding the lack of trust, interviewee F10 also stated that when considering how occupied the managers are, they could use more the knowhow of study counselors – as "*when you are an educated study counselor, do you always need to ask the manager, that can you do this and that . or would it be enough, that the manager knows that you have done your job well?*" Other way of showing lack of trust was the way certain tasks were given to the study counselor. For example, F15 stated, that "*you have to prepare for the task* [presentation] *and this is very clever way from the management to make sure you do your work*".

Rules and regulations had a significant effect *as precondition* on making choices and taking stances in tightly coupled organizations. Rules were described by F16 as "*the precondition for making choices and decisions*" in the guidance work. Regarding clearly defined rules, they had both benefits and negative effects. According to F10, the benefit of clear rules was, that "*if one knows the rules and regulations, it is easy to make choices and decisions*". Clear rules could make it also difficult to taking stances, as "*rules are rules, one can't change them*" (F10). However, even in this situation, it could be possible to discuss the different possibilities with the management. On the other hand, if the rules and regulations were not known or they changed relatively often, it made it challenging to work if "*one hasn't had time or remembered to read the e-mail stating the new rule*" (F12), or "*if the rules and protocols change every week*" (F14). The differences in rules and regulations also existed between different study fields. Even though there was an attempt to integrate processes in different study fields, F14 stated that "*there are differences, and it is up to the tutor teacher that if they do according to the processes.*" In tightly coupled organizations, different tools to measure the efficiency were used, but these tools might also vary. According to F12, "*one doesn't always know what the most important measurement tool at the moment is,*" and this caused uncertainty in everyday work. Sometimes the rules and regulations were also seen as questionable but even here, the rules and regulations were followed, as the hurry in the work affected the person in a way that "*one doesn't have enough strength to object to everything*" (F12). This was challenging especially when the person considered it necessary to obey the rules and regulations – "*no one wants to go it alone*" (F12).

Despite the significant role the rules and regulations have in tightly coupled organizations, it was also possible to *bend the rules*. One of the interviewees described herself as "*a bit of an antiauthority*" (F16), and the rules didn't dominate or stop from doing the work. The rules and regulations were also described as interpretative, and F10 stated that "*one can always interpret when it comes to working with people . everything is not black and white.*" For making choices and decisions, if there was no support from the rules and regulations due to their unclarity, F14 brought it up that, "*the decisions have to be made anyway . at some point one just stops asking and acts anyway*".

When it comes to **taking up influence**, the role of *instructions and goals as authority* were presented by all interviewees presenting organizations emphasizing tightly coupled administrative style. The instructions and goals were described both in favorable and challenging manner. In the positive end, the goals were described as clear, and the instructions as existing even though numerous. In the negative end, the instructions

were described as limiting, interpretative and fragmented. Overall, all interviewees in tightly coupled organizations experienced that the instructions and goals had a significant effect on taking up influence regarding their work. The experience of autonomy was also limited by the instructions, "*and one can't just do what you want*" (F10). Moreover, it was considered challenging if the instructions changed often, and especially if, for example, the instructions in the web sites were not keeping up to date with the changes. For goals, one described feature, stated by F12, was that "*they had to be met but not exceeded*".

The *role of leadership* in taking up influence was experienced as challenging among two of the interviewees from tightly coupled organizations. One challenge was that, according to F14, there were "*insane number of rules, and everyone applies them in different ways.*" This caused confusion when utilizing the organizational processes. Regarding the leadership, it was stated by F14, that '*it is allowed by the management to act past the rules and regulations, even though the strategy, vision, values and protocols are known by the staff*'. In addition to this, it was also stated by F15, that '*it is unclear that who has the power over you . . . as these* [managers with different titles] *have power over us, and it seems to be very strong . or they affect our work in other ways*'. This multitude of persons with power over the interviewee F15 affected the possibilities to take up influence in a negative way – "*if it was up to us to solve certain problems, even though within our limits, it would have been done already.*" The same interviewee (F15) had the lowest mean in main component L1, support for innovation and autonomy. In connection to the leadership, the interviewee F15 described that, " [due to some challenges within my manager's work-related issues], *I have been in this dog house . and this affects me in a way that I don't have any need, desire or possibility to take up influence in my work*".

Administrative style with the emphasis on simultaneous coupling

For **making choices and taking stances** in organizations emphasizing simultaneous coupling, there were several features found from the interview data, the most prominent of which was the *possibility and support for making choices and taking stances*. Most of the interviewees (F1, F4, F5, F6, F7, F9, F11, F13, M4, and M5) presenting hybrid organizations explained that there was possibility and support, sometimes even demand, for making impact on the daily aspects, and even larger scale issues, regarding their work. Two interviewees (F7 and M4) described that the possibility to have an impact included mostly routine decisions. Additionally, according to F4, the possibility to make an impact was best utilized '*in the preparation phase of different processes and regulations*', and one possibility to make choices and taking stances was when an organizational change was occurring – "*in this situation we are encouraged and supported to take an initiative.*" Another possibility was to reply to employee surveys, which were done regularly according to two interviewees (F11 and M4), even though utilization of the results could also be questioned (F11). The beneficial features of the possibility and support for making choices and taking stances were that when the manager was experienced to be "*a person who really wants to hear our opinions and thoughts, it makes me happy that I have these possibilities*" (F4). The interviewee F13 also described that "*I can do that as far as I feel comfortable to, and then I can get support from my manager as soon as I need it.*" If the decision required more power, the managerial board could be addressed.

Clarity of rules and regulations was brought up mostly in a positive way among the interviewees. Clear rules and regulations were described as "*limits and boundaries*" (F3), "*bringing safety*" (F5), and "*support to which one can lean to*" (F11). Even when the rules and regulations gave boundaries, the clarity of the processes allowed the study counselor to work relatively independently. Due to the clarity of the processes "*one knows how to proceed*" (F1), and "*there has never been a situation where different actors in our organization would have disagreed on topics*" (M4). In addition, three of the interviewees (F1, F6, and F11) experienced that clear boundaries and processes also gave back up to the decision-making when working with the students – for the study counselors themselves and for the students. However, the role of rules and regulations was not described only in positive connotation as unspoken rules and regulations also existed. This potentially caused problems when new staff members were acquainted to the work. Moreover, for making choices and taking stances, the clear, and even rigid, processes could make it also difficult to have effect on them. According to M2, if there was "*a need to make changes, extensive negotiations are required.*" Additionally, F3 stated that 'if the rules and regulations, or job descriptions, are unclear, there could be major difficulties in cooperation'.

Efficiency is a feature from the tight coupling, and it was brought up *as a value* in the interview data. The valuation came from both individual's personality and from the organization. F2 stated that "*these values and this alignment of how to work are how I mostly want to work anyway . and I think this requirement of efficacy is a good thing in that sense.*" And this was in line with F7, who described that "*you both have to be and want to be effective.*" Additionally, the personal feature of solution orientation was connected to the requirement of efficacy.

Even though there was a relatively strong experience of being able to make choices and taking stances, also in hybrid organizations the necessity for *bending rules* was evident. As the study counselor had the possibility to use individual discretion, "*the decisions of the gray area are also sometimes done, and there has not been punishment for them, but we have discussed the matter with the management*" (M5). The job descriptions could also be interpreted, or some tasks were neglected, even though this was usually done due to the reason that there would be more time for face-to-face guidance with the students. The main reason for bending the rules or "*going past the bureaucracy*" was described to be "*the benefit of the student*" (M5). Another reason was that, as F5 stated, it could be the way to take care of one's wellbeing at work – "*it is up to one's personality to say also no, if new tasks are transferred from above*".

Bureaucracy was described as both a *benefit and a challenge* among the interviewees presenting simultaneously coupled organizations. Bureaucracy was considered as a benefit when it controlled the decision-making processes, and hence, allowed the transparency toward the students. If the bureaucracy was low, according to F7, there was a need to "*know the right people in the network in order to get things going*", and the "*possibility to contact even the vice president of the organization*" (F13). However, the challenge of the bureaucracy was that it slowed the decision-making process, if the management wanted to have a significant role. F1 brought up here a question, that "*if the head of the degree program has agreed of the decision, why does the director also have to have a say on things?*"

In hybrid organizations, there were also *challenges for making choices and taking stances*. These challenges were mostly connected to the lack of recourses and, additionally, to the school administration systems. Two interviewees (F2 and F7) brought up the lack of recourses to the guidance task. According to F2, there was "*no possibility to have a say on the recourses, as the explanation is that there is no money to anything else either*." This was considered challenging, for example, by F7, who stated that "*the workload is newer ending . even though I am really effective and not a laggard*." Additionally, three interviewees (F2, F5, and F11) had the experience of the school administration system, making it difficult to make choices and taking stances. The system "*created bureaucracy*" and was "*impractical for making decisions*" (N11). Moreover, there was no possibility to influence the system selection but "*the systems just come and then you have to make it work with them*" (F5). It was also possible that the '*system could be designed another task than guidance in mind*' (F2) and that created even more challenges.

Considering **taking up influence**, interviewees presenting organizations emphasizing simultaneous coupling described clear *experience of autonomy and innovation* in their work. Their position was presented as "*independent*" (F1, F3, F4, and F6), "*you can do the* [guidance] *work just like you want to*" (F3, F4, F5, F7, M4, and M5), you were able to use "*your common sense*" (F2) and "*your own personality*" (F5 and F9), and the work was not "*tied to a certain place or time*" (F9). One explanation to the experience of autonomy was that according to F2, the '*management was now more interested in qualitative than quantitative results*'. Another explanation is derived from one of the challenges of loose coupling, as F3 stated that "*if there is a change and we begin with it, the things quite quickly return to the same way as it was before the change*".

Clear instructions and goals had positive effect on taking up influence, and interviewee F13 described that they even had "*a positive effect on the well-being at work*". Clear instructions supported the guidance task and work according to F1, F2, F6, F7, and F13, and "*help in the jungle of guidance*" (F7). Interviewee F13 had even "*constructed the guidance processes through these instructions and goals*". Clear goals, whether given by governmental funding or the organization itself, clarified the role of study counselor (F1, F2, and M4), and diminished the discretionary of processes (F7).

Efficiency and responsibility were considered as mostly advantageous and beneficial features among these interviewees. The work of study counseling was considered both effective and responsible, and according to F6, "*one has to know the existing legislation and norms . and where things are going in the national level*." Efficiency consisted of, for example, "*numeral and qualitative goals and boundaries set up by the organization*" (F13). In some cases, described by F2, efficiency had "*demanded regeneration of old means of guidance as the goals would not have been met with the old ones*." Responsibility was manifested according to F1 by "*doing one's job as well as possible*." However, meeting the goals connected to graduation and students doing 55 credits per school year, was "*not only up to the study counselors but also to other staff members*" (F1), and sometimes "*you are not ready to do the most detrimental decision from students point of view*" (F9).

The challenging *effects of tightly coupled features* in organizations emphasizing simultaneous coupling were most clearly manifested as the effects of tightening funding by the government, legislation, and hierarchy. The governmental funding was described by F2 and M2 as "*zero-sum game*," which made it difficult to work together with other universities of applied sciences, and predisposed "*this more protectionist way of action*

in the organizations" (M2), and "*this continuous pursuit for money*" (F2). The discussion of "*diminishing resources*" was also brought up in this connection by F5. Taking up influence was also challenged by the legislation and norms, which, according to F6 "*could even contradict the organizational strategy, but the legislation is in that situation the guiding principle.*" Moreover, the existing hierarchical structures made it difficult to have influence. In this connection F4 stated that "*one doesn't know if the decisions have actually been made already before asking the staff for opinions.*" The hierarchy could even cause an experience of "*not being a human* [of same value], *and this stiffens the possibilities to be creative*" (M2). However, the possibilities to be creative and innovative were considered as the organization's abilities for the future.

In addition to some tightly coupled features, *other challenges for taking up influence* were also found. These challenges were mostly the same challenges that have been described already: the resistance for change (F3, F9), unclear instructions (F9), the bureaucracy caused by administrative software systems (F3, F11), being in a 'cross-fire' between students and organization (F1, F9), and a value conflict (F13). Moreover, challenges were also, finding a shared meaning among the actors (F2, F3) and the study counselors' facilities in isolation (F1). According to F2, a '*shared meaning construction could be found through discussions including self-reflection and changing ideas of participants' roles*'. For the facilities in isolation, the challenge arose from the fact that it was difficult for the students, and other staff members, to get to the study counselor. In this situation, F1 stated that "*an e-mail could be the main source of information*".

Discussion

To date, only few studies have addressed the professional agency of higher education institutions' personnel (Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). This study aimed at answering the following research question: *What is the connection between the experience of professional agency of teaching staff, represented by the study counselors, and the administrative style of the higher education institutions*? Agency was considered here within a subject-centered socio-cultural framework (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), in which professional agency is manifested when professional subjects and/or communities take up influence, make choices, and take stances in ways that affect their professional identities and/or their work.

According to the results, all three administrative styles bring about both benefits and challenges when considering the connection between the administrative style and the interviewees' experience of professional agency. However, for simultaneous coupling, the challenges mostly arise from the tightly coupled features. Whether tightly coupled features were experienced as a benefit or a challenge, it seemed to be connected to the personal preferences and features of individuals. Figure 2. demonstrates that the found administrative features increasing and decreasing the experience of professional agencies.

When considering the *features increasing the experience of professional agency*, the loosely coupled administrative style had a clear increase in the possibility to taking stances and the freedom to make choices. As stated in a previous international research, the presence of individual and organizational autonomy is a significant feature of loosely coupled educational organizations (Aurini, 2012; Cheng, 2008, 2009). Moreover, according to Murphy et al. (1985), one aspect of loosely coupled organizations is the lack of connections between the core operations of institutions and their management activities,
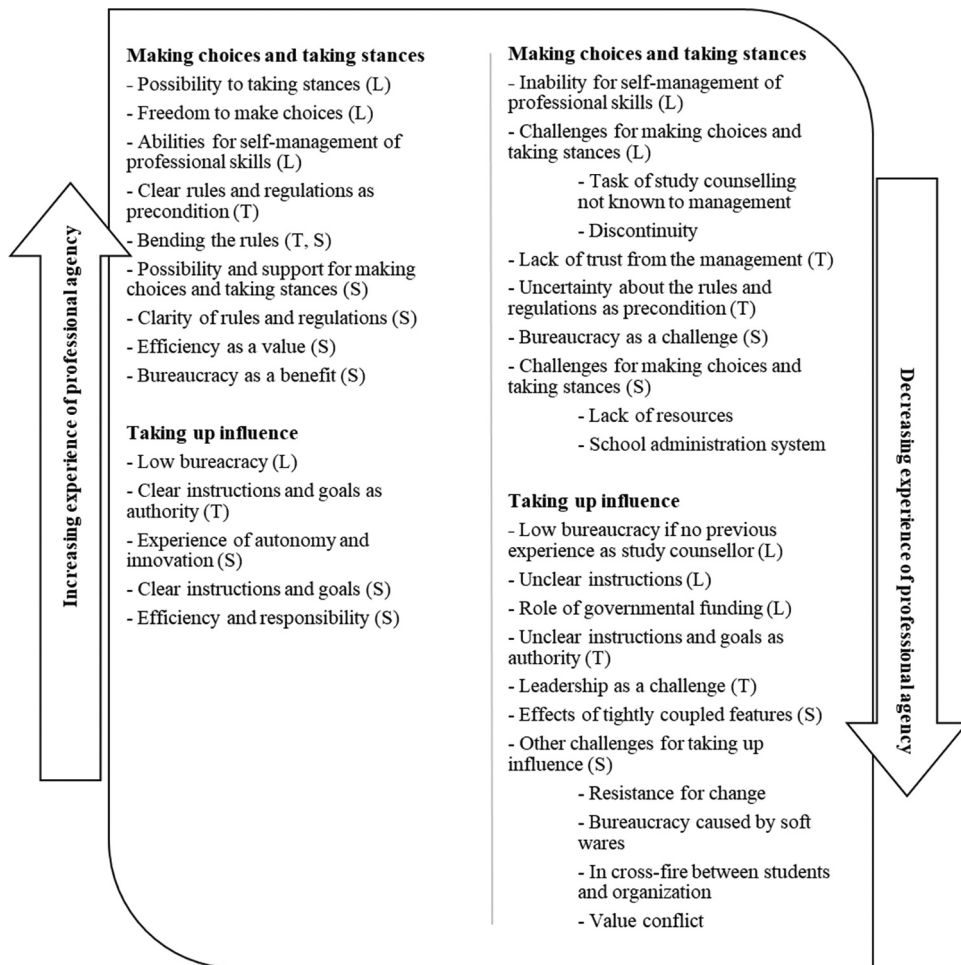
Figure 2. Administrative features increasing and decreasing the experience of professional agency (L = Loose, T = Tight and S = Simultaneous coupling).

and these features are potentially the reason for the results also seen in this study. If the individual has the abilities for self-management of professional skills, a loosely coupled style makes it also possible to use them, and this enhances the experience of making choices and taking stances. The benefit of this result is that autonomy, described here, has a strong connection to professional agency, and through that to a positive connection with creativity (Sawyer, 2007), motivation, well-being, and happiness at work (Welzel & Inglehart, 2010).

Simultaneously coupled administrative style corroborated the possibilities and support for making choices and taking stances. Other beneficial features with the simultaneous coupling were the clarity of rules and regulations, efficiency as a value, and bureaucracy as a benefit. The clear rules and regulations, efficiency and bureaucracy are mostly tightly coupled features in simultaneous coupling, and the experienced benefit was due to the clarifying effect these features had on, for example, educational processes. Moreover, clear rules and regulations as preconditions were also present in tightly

coupled organizations. As stated by Cheng (2009, p. 284), tight coupling manifests as organizational and hierarchical 'structures built to facilitate and enhance the achievement of school goals', and here the clarity of rules and regulation has a significant role. However, both in tightly and simultaneously coupled organizations, even if interviewees experienced that rules and regulations had a significant role, they found ways to bend them if they considered it necessary. This result is in line with Aurini (2012), who has stated that even within tightly coupled educational organizations, members may actively induce institutional directives and align them with their perceptions of the organization's purpose and goals.

To increase the experience of professional agencies when considering taking up influence, the loosely coupled feature of low bureaucracy was a clear precondition for the experience. One reason to this can be that loosely coupled organizations have a relatively weak linkage between the institutional environment and its instructional activities (Aurini, 2012; also, Hautala, Helander & Korhonen, 2018; Pajak & Green, 2003). Moreover, according to Willower (1981), indirect supervision loosely coupled to instruction is likely to encourage good teaching to a greater extent than a more authoritative supervision would.

In tightly and simultaneously coupled organizations, the clear instructions and goals as authorities were brought up again in connection to taking up influence. In addition, in simultaneously coupled organizations, the loosely coupled features of experience of autonomy and innovation were highlighted. This has also been noted in the previous international research (Meyer, 2002b; Pang, 2003, 2010; N S.K. Pang, 1998), where loose coupling was stated to induce an atmosphere conducive to innovation. Moreover, tightly coupled features of efficiency and responsibility were also highlighted in organizations emphasizing simultaneous coupling, and this result is in line with previous research (Hautala, Helander & Korhonen, 2018; Pang, 2010).

When considering the *features decreasing the experience of professional agency* in the area of making choices and taking stances, loosely coupled features of inability for self-management of professional skills was one of the challenges. Similarly, according to Cheng (2008), in loosely coupled organizations teaching staff must develop individual professional skills and behave as self-managing professionals in order to work effectively. This might cause controversy if self-management is not natural for an individual. Moreover, it is important to notice that teachers' agency has significance in facilitating their career development to align their identity commitment, especially in a shifting educational context (Tao & Gao, 2017). Other challenges for making choices and taking stances manifested if the task in question (here study counseling) was not known to the management, and additionally, as the experience of discontinuity when individuals aimed for change in their organization. In tightly coupled organizations, especially the lack of trust from the management and uncertainty about the rules and regulations created the most prominent challenges for making choices and taking stances. The lack of trust can be seen as a potential product of NPM type of leadership (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Hökkä & Vähäsantanen, 2014). It is important to notice that if leaders see their role solely as recognizing the flaws in employees' actions, this might induce an atmosphere of mistrust, and the fear of being blamed causes employees to become reluctant in sharing bad news (Buller, 2009).

In organizations emphasizing simultaneous coupling, the bureaucracy was described as a challenge, as well as a benefit. Other challenges for making choices and taking stances in hybrid organizations were the lack of resources, and the rigidity of organization's computerized administration systems, if they were originally designed for another purpose than guidance in mind. This result deserves future investigation and needs to be taken into account when planning for acquisition or change of administrative systems in educational organizations.

For the agentic feature of taking up influence, the features decreasing the experience of professional agency were mostly connected to the bureaucracy and instructions. It has been noted also previously that bureaucracy is a much more relevant characteristic of tightly coupled educational organizations, where rigorous assessment of the effectiveness of the instructional programs and curriculum takes place (Meyer, 2002a; Rowan, 2002). Loosely coupled feature of low bureaucracy was considered beneficial, unless the individual had no previous experience as a study counselor. This is again in line with previous research (Cheng, 2008), where behaving as self-managing professionals is needed in order to work effectively. Other challenges were unclear instructions and the role of governmental funding, which caused the zero-sum game kind of situation, where higher education organizations were forced to compete. In tightly coupled organizations, unclear instructions and goals caused uncertainty, and leadership as a challenge was manifested as the lack of interest from the management.

In organizations emphasizing simultaneous coupling, hierarchical features, and some other effects of tight coupling, created boundaries for taking up influence. This can be due to the trait that in tight coupling, administrative orders might diminish teaching staff's possibilities to influence the content of their work, and to negotiate their professional goals (Meyer, 2002a; Vähäsantanen et al., 2012). Moreover, other challenges for taking up influence were described as loosely coupled feature of resistance for change, bureaucracy caused by software, and the situation where the study counselor had a role of buffer between students and the organization.

In a situation where there was a value conflict between the individual and organizational values, this caused personal conflict for the study counselor. The experienced value conflict can be seen as a threat to the experience of professional agency, as according to Eteläpelto et al. (2013), the practice of professional agency is closely connected with professional subjects' work-related identities containing their professional and ethical commitments, ideals, motivations, interests, and goals. In addition, people should be able to practice agency in terms of coping with their lives outside working life. (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Evans, 2007)

Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the potential connection with the expert organization's administrative style and the organization's most valuable asset: a motivated and committed staff. Features supporting the teaching staff's experience of professional agency include the autonomy and support for making choices, taking stances and taking up influence; possibility to innovate; clear and durable rules, regulations, instructions, and goals; low bureaucracy and hierarchy. In addition, supporting features include efficiency and even tighter bureaucracy, but this seems to be connected to the individual

preferences of teachers. Moreover, higher education organizations should ensure the experience of trust for the staff, continuity of information progression, comprehension of all areas of expertise and functions of the organization, cooperation instead of zero-sum game, sufficient resources, and thorough acquaintance of new staff members.

Finally, as Eteläpelto et al. (2013, p. 47) state, at the societal level, 'agency is seen as necessary from the point of view of combining an effective and flexible economy with people's well-being'. This statement emphasizes the importance of these results and makes it possible to create a win–win situation for both organizations and their staff through commitment and well-being at work. Of the administrative styles, emphasizing simultaneous coupling offers ways to utilize the 'best of both worlds' – loosely coupled features highlighting trust, innovativeness and autonomy, and tightly coupled features creating effectiveness, clarity for processes and instructions, and sharing of goals.

Limitations

Especially the use of sequential methods can be seen as a potential limitation in this mixed-method research. The questionnaire was developed by the authors, and in addition to the quantitative pilot study (Hautala, in preparation), this is the first comprehensive study where the questionnaire has been used. If the results from the first method had been flawed, this would affect the results of the second method negatively. However, several previous research studies regarding the loose and tight coupling, and these couplings connected to professional agency, provided theoretical confirmation for the found results, and this offers a level of verification for the used questionnaire. Nevertheless, the questionnaire must be used in other research also in order to gain even stronger verification.

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