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北京師範大學
BEIJING NORMAL UNIVERSITY



RUIXUE CHEN

Investigating the Role of Intermediary Organizations in University Autonomy from Management Perspective: Case studies in the EHEA

*Master's Thesis for the completion of the Erasmus Mundus programme, Master in
Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MaRIHE)*

*To be presented at Department for Continuing Education Research and Educational
Management, Danube University Krems, Austria on 6 July 2016*

Supervisors: Dr. Filiz Keser Aschenberger, University of Vienna, Austria;

Mr. Thomas Estermann, European University Association, Brussels.

ABSTRACT

This study employed qualitative multiple case study methodology to exam how the two well-known intermediary organizations from different European higher education settings advocate university autonomy by exploring the main difficulties they face as well as the actions in countering the difficulties. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected employees from the two case organizations, and through website analysis as well as review of the relevant documents, striving to present solid evidences to support the findings.

Thematic analysis of data resulted in the generation of the four major themes from the massive information collected through the multiple data collection tools, which altogether answered all the research questions posed at the beginning, additionally, the matters related to the concept of university autonomy were also addressed. One major finding of the study is that the two organizations, though practicing in different levels of the European higher education settings, both working for university autonomy with the exclusive focus on strengthening the institutional leadership, regardless of the autonomy of individuals in the university. A second major finding pointed to the various sources of the difficulties the two organizations receive in relation to the advocacy of university autonomy. Though the difficulties were distinct in either substance or the degree to the two organizations, an amicable solution of friendly communication and active negotiation were adopted to triumph over those moments. At last, the paper concludes with critical examination of the study along with along with implications for practical issues, academic communities and possible suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Intermediary organization, EHEA, university autonomy, qualitative study, higher education institution, educational authority, external challenge

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EU - European Union
HE - Higher Education
EHEA - European Higher Education Area
EUA - European University Association
UNIKO - Österreichische Universitätenkonferenz/Universities Austria
IHEOs - Intermediary Higher Education Organizations
IIEP - International Institute for Educational Planning
UNESCO - The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
NGO - Non-governmental Organization

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to express my distinguishing gratefulness to my supervisor Dr. Filiz Keser Aschenberger, for her continuous guidance and rigorous comments on the thesis since the very first beginning of the thesis writing, and accompanied me till the last moment of finalization.

I would also like to deliver a special gratitude to MaRIHE (Master of Research and Innovation in High Education) program director Dr. Attila Pausits, for his continuous help, care, and guidance throughout the thesis writing process as well as the program duration. Without his support, I would not have arrived at this stage of my study, then to complete the thesis.

I owe my deepest gratitude to the director of Governance, Funding and Public Policy Development Unit of European University Association (EUA) Thomas Estermann, who is also my second thesis supervisor. His unconditional and kind-hearted help from the beginning of my thesis writing has greatly encouraged me to stick to my academic belief, and continue with the research regardless of the obstacles. My thanks also go to the Deputy Director Enora Pruvot and Project Manager Anna-Lena Claeys-Kulik from the same Unit of EUA. Their expertise in the European higher education systems and patient attention to my professional development during my internship period at EUA enabled me to develop the basic idea of the thesis subject.

I am also grateful to Prof. Zhu Zhiyong from Beijing Normal University, whose academic guidance helped me to start formulate the research questions and understand the selection rationale of the applicable theories at the initial stage. His excellent insight opened up my mind on the topic and lead me to a look at issues at broader perspectives.

Besides the professors who provided me with unfailing intellectual support, I must express my thanks to my colleagues Aleksandar Avramovic, Damaris Clark, Isil Guney, Marsela Husen, as well as Mihaela Rozman and Tatjana Stamenkovska from the Centre for Educational Management and Higher Education Development of Danube University Krems, who made me not alone and always there for me during the whole life of the thesis.

I would like to thank and express my appreciation to all the participants to this study. Thank you for the time you dedicated, for the effort that you made in the process, and for your cooperation for the data collection.

Last but not least, I give my regards and blessings to my families and friends in China, who I am indebted to, who made available their support in a number of ways, and who always embraced my academic pursuits with unwavering love.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on the background introduction of the topic of intermediary higher education organization, associated with the issue of university autonomy in Europe. It then presents the research problem, research gap, and context of the study, explains the research purpose and the research questions, and discusses the significance of the research. The chapter concludes with the structure of this study.

1.1 Background of the study

University autonomy has long been conceived as the crucial factor to aid achieve the basic goals of the universities, which normally refer to the creation and preach of knowledge, the impartation of human civilization and the promotion of social development (Zhang, 2012). Therefore, since Medieval era, the academics have started fighting against the public authority for higher degree of university autonomy (Yuan, 2006). Brubacher (1967) described the fight in early time as the tug-of-war between the layman (external stakeholders, such as government, society) and the experts (academics, professors, etc.) for the power in determining the HE policies. Gradually, more players (industries, etc.) joined this game, leading to the intensification of the fight. Intermediary organizations emerged and their roles were developed, during the intangible fight in the HE systems, as the decentralising mechanisms between the educational authorities and the HE systems, concurrently, as the extra buffer to safeguard academic freedom or/and institutional autonomy of the HE institutions to be free of political control (Temple, 2002).

It is noted that, across the world, the higher education systems have undergone sweeping changes in many aspects such as policies, management, all resulting directly in the alteration of quality and quantity of the universities and colleges. Meanwhile, the systems are becoming more complex, and have been injected in new players or stakeholders so to say. One of the most notable is the various stakeholders that the intermediary organizations often function as buffers in-between, often appear to have different or conflicting interests in the higher education results. For instance, Neave (1992) pointed out that, differentiations of the interest exist between the government and the universities, between the students and the universities, between the society and the universities, between the employers and the universities. Taking into consideration of the various

existing forms of the intermediary organization, this paper will pay special attention to the interplay between this type of body and the government authorities, the university, other external entities from the society and the academic community, to help identify any possible influences from the external context in the roles of the intermediary organizations in university autonomy. In this respect, we may start from depicting a triangle, in an attempt to describe the environment of the intermediary bodies, the universities being located in the centre of the triangle.

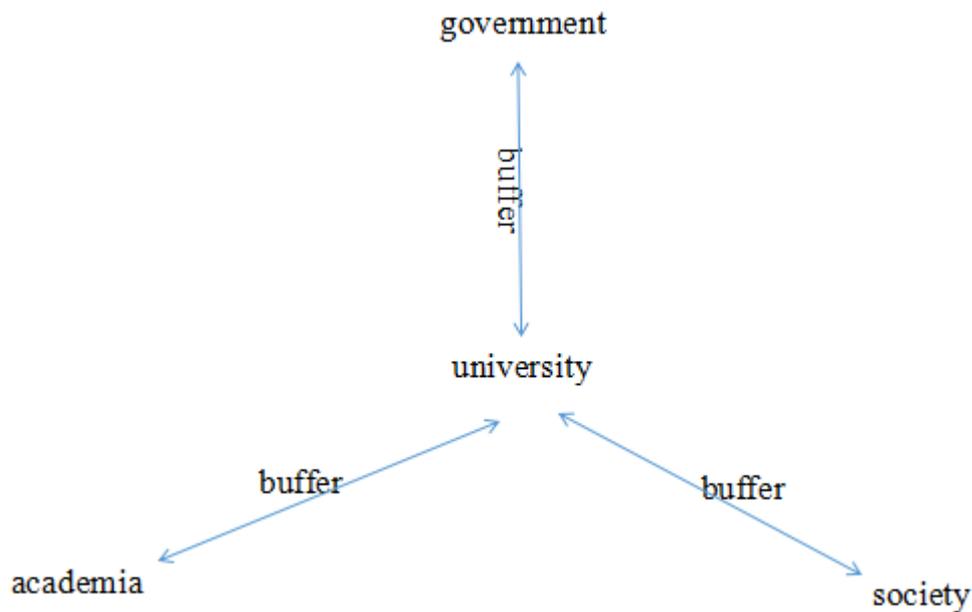


Figure 1: The Intermediary Organization in Higher Education and its Environment

It is worth mentioning that the arrows between the players as indicated in the figure represent the mutual forces or impacts between the two, owing to the different goals, values and expectations of the higher education services and outcomes (Frackmann, 1992). The names of the players are simplified to some extent in order to offer an intuitive view.

Besides, it is not difficult to notice that this figure is an extension and transformation of Triangle of Coordination (Figure 2) developed by Burton Clark (1983). Clark's typology put together the three forces, state authority, market and academic oligarchy in a triangle, showing how the higher education system is coordinated through the interaction and impacts of the three. Each corner of the triangle represents the extreme degree of one element and the minimum degree of the other two (Clark, 1983).

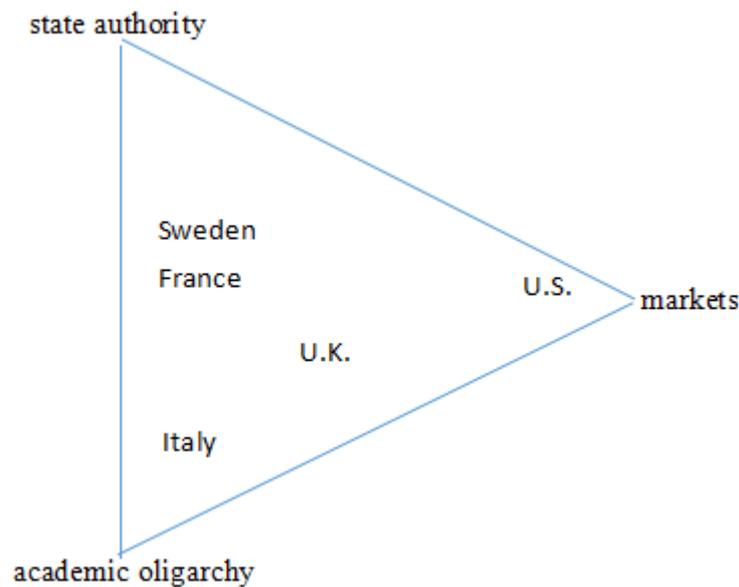


Figure 2: Clark's Triangle of Coordination

According to the research conclusion of F. van Vught (1993) on the international comparison of the higher education systems, that most of the western European countries are located more to the left side of the triangle as indicated in Figure 2. Therefore, the market force is erased in Figure 1, being replaced by external powers from the society, accounting of the changes occurred in the European higher education systems since 1990s, also because the higher education systems from outside of the EHEA are excluded by the scope of this study.

In 1993, F. van Vught (1993) asserted that the relationship between the government and the universities have been changing a lot since the 1980s, partly because the quality of higher education is taking a more decisive role in the economic growth as well as the global competitiveness of the country. As such, the government tends to put the higher education provider, primarily the universities, under their control to assist achieving its political and economic goals (Luanna, 2007). However, the concept of university autonomy has already been growing in the higher education community, and has also gained a common cognition that university autonomy is inevitable for the quality enhancement of the higher education services (Trick, 2015). Thus, tension between the government needs and the university's proposition of autonomy is sustained.

Since universities depended on state funding, it became not easy for them to retain a complete say in either academic rights or institutional issues such as the ratio of the research to teaching, the formulation of institutional development policies, the management of the fund, and the appointment and promotion of the staff (Clark, 1983). Thus buffer body was created to help coordinate between the government and the universities to establish friendly dialogues for negotiation for the larger jurisdiction of the universities particularly over the issues regarding university governance, as the intrinsic characteristics of the buffers were “*understand the institutions*” and “*sympathetic to their needs*” (Clark, 1983, p. 141).

Yet the roles of the buffer bodies become more complicated and overwhelming than the time they were created. At the first place, the nature, function and status of this kind of intermediary organizations varies as the higher education systems are of different states throughout the globe. Not to mention that the radical changes of the national situations and the higher education conditions in each country and region have been putting high requirement on the coordinating capabilities of the intermediary organizations, which is to be sensitive enough to adjust their working patterns to the new circumstance (Luanna, 2007). Typical examples of the national changes related to higher education are the arrival of the mass higher education era after the 2nd World War, the austerity measures since earlier this century particularly in EU countries, and the increasing demand on the application of the educational outcomes to practical issues (European Commission, 2010). Situation is even tougher for the buffer body in centralized political systems, because the government control is too influential that leaves rather limited space for them to function or coordinate (Varghese & Martin, 2014).

Confronting the unceasing pop-up of the new challenges and demands, higher education systems have introduced various reforms at regular basis. Accordingly, the intermediary body is also transforming in terms of reorienting their tasks (Trick, 2015), extending their existing models from national level to international, or multinational level. During the process, certain flaws of this body become more visible, along with the reality that some intermediary organizations are considered to be the tool of the government control over the higher education institutions (Neave, 1992) although it is understandable in view of their inferior power to the mighty authority of the government (El-Khawas, 1992). It even happened in last 1980s that some countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, had

eliminated intermediary organizations from the higher education system and direct governmental administration of the universities was substituted (Neave, 1992).

In this respect, it makes great sense to scientifically contrast the performing practices of certain well-known intermediary organizations, discuss their coordinating schemes while facing the underlying tensions which may influence their effectiveness and vulnerability (El-Khawas, 1992), as well as identify key features which make some intermediary organization successful while some do not. Moreover, examination on their role in university autonomy is especially imperative at present in considering that the definition of university autonomy is updating and the government supervision has taken novel forms (Trick, 2015), and higher education is at the critical moment of another round of transformation.

1.2 Context of the study

As the existing formats of the intermediary organizations vary to a large extent across the global HE contexts, in conjunction with the fact that Europe is also diverse in the HE governing models across regions and countries, the scope of this study is physically delimited in the maturely developed higher education systems within the EHEA, more precisely, the area of Continental Europe. This sub-section will briefly present the Bologna Process emphasizing on the background and status quo of the EHHA.

The Bologna Process started with the signing of the Bologna declaration by ministers of education from 29 European countries in 1999, at the university of Bologna, Italy. It is a collective effort of “*public authorities, universities, teachers, and students, together with stakeholder associations, employers, quality assurance agencies, international organisations, and institutions, including the European Commission*” (European Commission, 2016), aiming to “*create the European higher education area (EHEA) by harmonising academic degree standards and quality assurance standards throughout Europe for each faculty and its development by the end of 2010*” (Bozkurt, 2016). The substance of its reforms includes but not limited to the introduction of the degree programs of bachelor, master and doctor, a European Credit Transfer System, cooperation of quality assurance in higher education, and promotion of social dimensions in European higher education (Bozkurt, 2016).

The background of this Bologna reform proposal is that mobility within Europe for the students, faculties and job seekers was much hindered by the widely diverse education and training systems (European Commission, 2016). At this point, a compatible educational framework would surely bring convenience to the Europeans when it comes to the qualification recognition among different European countries. In addition, a unified higher education system would help the Education universities to be more competitive and attractive to the rest of the world.

A decade after the inception of the Bologna Process, the EHEA was launched during the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference. Back to past decade, lots of efforts were put into the creation of the EHEA. To consolidating the EHEA and to charting the progress along with shaping the work ahead, continuous work such as the consensus on the meeting every two years, production on Bologna implementation report, has been undertaken.

By 2015, the BP reforms are not only influential within Europe, but also affecting to a broader extent especially with the globally adopted concept of internationalization in higher education. The EHEA priorities are updated to the topics of internationalization in higher education, employability of the graduates, widening accessing to higher education regardless of the social background, etc. (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). The number of the participating member countries are, at the same time, increasing within the EHEA, and it has reached 49 according to the recent statistics (EHEA, 2014).

In spite of the attainment after the BP, challenges and problems exist. For instance, the member countries are moving in the same direction as agreed in the EHEA yet at widely different pace, as well, the grasp of the potential of digital technologies to perform learning, teaching and research is not utilized by all the countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). Another recent example is that the countries are hit at varying degree by the economic crisis, thus the consequence of austerity measures in higher education are manifested differently across the countries. All of these results amount to the difficulty in further bringing the EHEA. Joint effort, therefore, is constantly required. Thus, those intermediary bodies with the nature of multi-government are of extraordinary help in bringing together the EHEA members to the same dialogue,

in mediating among the members to ease the conflicts and to reduce the disparity among the higher education systems.

1.3 Purpose of the study and research questions

The immediate purpose of this case study is to identify the role of intermediary higher education organizations among various external challenges, notably between the government authorities and the universities, in terms of serving university autonomy within the European Higher Education Area. By showcasing organizations from two different scopes of the higher education systems, respectively the EHEA and Austria, the paper thus attempts to analyse the impact of these organizations on the institutional autonomy of the universities, reveals the challenges they often face, as well as how they mediate under the external pressures to achieve the mission.

Meanwhile, the information resulting from this study will provide the higher education authorities and managerial administrators of the intermediary organizations with a comprehensive view of the mechanism upon which these organizations work.

Responding to the problems stated in the opening section, along with the reviews of the previous studies and the expected outcome of this study, the research questions are formulated as follows.

Main research question

What is the role of the Intermediary Higher Education Organizations (IHEOs) in different systematic levels in terms of university autonomy in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)?

Sub research questions

- a. In what kind of political, economic and social context do IHEOs function at different levels in the EHEA?
- b. How do IHEOs identify their roles and impact on university autonomy at different levels?
- c. What are the challenges and problems that IHEOs face in relation to university autonomy at different levels?
- d. How do IHEOs at different levels tackle the challenges?

- e. What are the similarities and differences between different levels in relation to the impact of IHEOs on university autonomy in EHEA?

1.4 Significance of the study

The findings of this study will redound to the benefit of the society considering that higher education is extremely important in the organization of the modern society, and also the higher education institutions play irreplaceable role in preparing qualified employees for the marketplace. Thus, the intermediary organizations servicing the better functioning of the higher education sectors are justified to work towards the same or even greater expectations. Specifically, this study of intermediary bodies in higher education awaits to contribute to several major aspects.

Firstly, this study serves to meet my personal interest. The topic of this study was developed during my internship period last summer in European University Association. I was assisting with finalizing the reports on some European higher education projects, reviewing key higher education initiatives in the aftermath of the Bologna Process occurred within EHEA and also drafting newsletters for upcoming EU events notably politics related. During which, I could not help but doubting that, where does this non-governmental intermediary organization gain the power to conduct such superior actions as bringing institutions or educational ministers together to discuss common issues, advocating educational initiatives, and also how does this organization own jurisdiction over one or even multiple areas in higher education. After pondering, I became interested in deeply investigating this kind of special organizations in the context of the EHEA so as to enable me to better grasp the managing rationales behind their existence.

The second aspect is the academic contribution to the field of the study on intermediary bodies in higher education. Returning to the first and foremost reason behind the initiative of this study, it is the increasing importance of the intermediary bodies in more and more higher education systems. However, hypercriticism on the side effects of the processing mechanism (Visakorpi, Stankovic, Pedrosa & Rozsnyai, 2008) and the external pressure on pushing these bodies to transform or even diminish at the higher education arena intensify with time. At this moment, studies picturing the integral system of this special body and revealing its intrinsic characteristics with scientific approaches are necessary. The research exhibiting how IHEOs function within its limited power

under the pressures from the stakeholders will help lay the foundation for future examinations on this type of organization. On the other hand, the study or research on intermediary organizations is rather limited in both quantity and extent, which can be easily verified by a simple desktop search. When comes to the field of higher education, few studies have been conducted recently on the intermediary higher education organizations which are actually influential not only to the well-functioning of the national higher education institutions but also to the national higher education system in terms of the educational policy formulation, public financial allocation planning, as well as the reform of the national steering mechanisms on the quality of higher education.

The third expected contribution is adding up to the scope of the comparative education study which is rather narrow in terms of the research objects and the analytical approaches on the research data. Currently comparative education is an emerging and popular discipline developed upon the study of two or a group of countries by using data and insights drawn from the country/countries to exam on the others (Little, 2000). The case countries/regions are usually those with very different educational systems, concepts and the educational outcomes also vary (Little, 2000). Thus it somehow creates the illusion that the comparative education is restricted to be the study between the good educational system/s and the poorer educational system/s. Regarding this, the current paper employing the single analytical approach of synthesizing the good experiences from the two cases which are both located in EHEA will refresh the rigid cognition of comparative educational study. Other than this, the results of the comparative education are usually intended to serve to one of the case system/s, however, this study decides to keep the applicability of the research results open to all the systems which find them useful.

Meanwhile, it is also expected that the practical outcome of this study is to be served as a benchmark of the intermediary higher education organizations for the entities of similar type in emerging systems or systems which attempt to introduce the mechanism of intermediary bodies. As the very few research found on studying the educational organizations primarily attends to international education organizations which are endowed with a global focus, for example, OECD, UNESCO, World Bank, this study of the intermediary higher education organizations with national and regional focus will probably offer novel insights and more applicable practices for other countries or

economic/political zones to learn from, and also a distinct perspective for the government authorities to consider when formulating future educational plans.

The findings of this study also seek to benefit the higher education practitioners within the field. For instance, to help the managers identify weaknesses in their own organizations and the working process, to analyse the factors resulting in the dysfunction in the management or even the failure. Thus the organizations are easier to come up with fine solutions in ameliorating the issues, as well as advancing the professional skills of the staff.

All in all, the study will fill the gap of researching on intermediary higher education organizations from the management perspective by looking into the cases with different scopes, via the analytical approach of both comparison and combination. In this way, it attempts to challenge the stereotyped perception of the comparative education study approach and expects to be accepted as a novel basis and reference for the future research.

1.5 Structure of the study

The master thesis comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 (INTRODUCTION) is the introductory presence of the study background, which opens up the whole paper. Study purpose, research gap and the structure of the study are also included in this section. Chapter 2 (LITERATURE REVIEW) consists of two parts. The first section surveys the previous researches concerning topics of intermediary higher education organizations and university autonomy, notably those published by accredited scholars, researchers, and acknowledged journals. An assessment of the literature, e.g. the discussion of the strength and weaknesses is provided afterwards. The second section is an overview of the theoretical frameworks built upon triangle of coordination and institutional isomorphism for analysing the rationales of the research. Chapter 3 (METHODOLOGY) outlines the formulated research design, data collection, the cases profiles as well as the higher education environments they are located. It also presents validity and reliability issues. Chapter 4 (CASE STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION) describes direct outcomes of the two cases based on the data collected through a combination of website analytics, document review and semi-structured interviews. In the discourse of description, discussion of the results drawn upon the comparison of the two organizations were also presented. In Chapter 5 (CONCLUSIONS), a summary of the research findings which

were demonstrated in the previous chapter was provided, with reflection on research questions and response to the research aims. Followed is the presentation of major limitations addressing three major issues. Last is the interpretation of the research outcomes in the practical field with a broad perspective. To close the whole paper, suggestions for the future researchers are elaborated through reviewing the whole data collection process and criticizing the shortcomings of the study caused by certain constraints

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into two main sections and sequential subsections. The first section will present a thorough review of the literature concerning the research purpose and research questions stated in Chapter One. It will elaborate from two primary areas. The first area tries to clarify the concept of university autonomy in respect to its evolution over time as well as the various approaches adopted to study it, during which the connection of university autonomy and IHEOs will be addressed. The second area examines the previous research on IHEOs, encompassing key issues in this kind of organization. The other section will put forward two theories associated with the relatively critical views in their usefulness in applying to the study, to provide a solid underpinning for the research.

2.1 Exploring the concept of university autonomy

Yuan (2006) made a conclusion, that the substance of university autonomy is not static in timeline nor identical geographically (Yuan, 2006), so there is no unified definition of the term of university autonomy (Zgaga, 2010). As this study draws on the aspect of university autonomy among the many missions the buffer organizations in European higher education carry, it is necessary to discuss the related literatures, reports and legal documents stating the concept of university autonomy so as to comprehend the rationale of the changing concepts of university autonomy.

2.1.1 Defining university autonomy

The term of university autonomy frequently appears in academic papers, panel discussion, government conferences and legal documents in relation to higher education governance. However, the definition of university autonomy varies and the cognition of its concept is limited to the HE scenario at the given time at large.

Since Medieval HE era, the autonomy of the university was seen as critical for the advancement of the higher education quality and the enhancement of the national competitiveness. According to the research of Brubacher (1939), university autonomy at that time was claimed as the freedom of the academics and guild from the religious power and royal authority, to decide on their own affairs. After 1970s, with the emergence of the management fad in Western higher education, university autonomy was

then acclaimed as one of the “*new approaches to university leadership*” (Shattock, 2014, p. xii) and the unique form of organizational management in higher education governance (Clark, 1984). Meanwhile, private universities prospered, notably in the U.S. scholars attributed most of their excellence to the feature of the high degree of autonomy in the management, thus endeavours from the government side in a way of reforms, introduction of external governance elements (buffer organizations, etc.) were taken to increase university autonomy. In this context, the autonomous university was perceived equally to “*competitive institutions*” (Shattock, 2014, p. 1), distinctive from its earlier definition of the freedom of universities and institutions from state control to set their priorities, determine their goals and decide the approaches in realizing their goals (Johnstone & Bain, 2002; Richardson and Fielden 1997; van Vught, 1993). Similar definition was posed in a few years by Saint, but with a closer attachment to the perspective of universities.

“For a higher education institution, it means a freedom to determine its own goals and priorities; to select its own leaders; to employ and dismiss staff; to determine enrolment size and rate of growth; and to manage its own budget, including the reallocation of funds amongst budget items and right to retain for future use any savings generated.” (Saint, 2009)

By this stage, it is easy to note the complex nature of the concept of university autonomy. Martin (2014) asserted, the expectations and causation of university autonomy are multidimensional which cover a broad range of reform measures. To tackle this issue, Robert Berdahl, in the early 1970s, proposed to divide the concept of university autonomy into two groups, substantive autonomy - “*the authority for the institutions to take decisions, and carry them out, concerning the goals and programmes under their purview*” and procedural autonomy - “*administrative freedom without the real authority to take decisions on substantive priorities, but with greater authority over their implementation*” (Berdahl, 1971). This proposal is meaningful in providing a category that roughly dissect the complex and various concept of university autonomy. However, this category is not qualified to view the definitions developed after 1990 when more stakeholders were engaged in the university governance, more missions were infused into the university agenda.

Legal documents, in light of the fact that university autonomy is included as key reference in the discourse of updating legislative frameworks in national higher education systems, inevitably involve in the definition of university autonomy, but for the state purposes. In the *Magna Charta Universitatum* which was drafted in Bologna in 1988, university autonomy was described in detailed under the section of Fundamental Principles,

The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power. (Bologna Declaration, 1988)

Under this EU framework, the national legislation gradually defined the degree of autonomy. As a result, legal characteristics were endowed to the concept of university autonomy.

Another argument in conceptualizing university autonomy is that “*autonomy is contextually and politically defined* (Neave, 1988, p.31)”, which is agreed by Tapper and Salter (2006), and they reaffirmed in their book that, the degree of university autonomy was always granted within prescribed boundaries, and always practised within defined political contexts. Furthermore, Tang (2001) supported this perspective with the results drawn from his comparative research between universities in developed HE systems and those in Asian countries, one of which is that the universities in developed HE systems does not own an absolute autonomous status from the government, though enjoy greater freedom compared to the majority of the counterparts in Asian countries, on the contrary, they are always being steered and directed in one way or another by different stakeholders from the external environment. Another Chinese scholar Yuan (2006) further researched university autonomy in this direction. He found out in some countries typically China, the dependence on each other increases between the university and the government. Pertaining to this phenomenon in the Chinese HE system, the scholars who are pursuing university autonomy attributed the intimate tie between the government and universities to the missing of neutral buffers. Consequently, academic freedom in such systems is impaired (Xu, 1993)

In the numerous presence of university autonomy, academic freedom is always related. The previous sections mentioned the traditional correlation of these two concepts, but Berdahl (1971) argued that “*academic freedom and autonomy, though linked, are not the same*”, which is corresponded by CEPES paper (1992), “*university autonomy and academic freedom are the two basic rights of the university, but, they are separated from each other*”. This paper demonstrated further the distinction between them in the Romanian conference, which states,

Academic freedom should be regarded ... particularly as forerunners of freedom in society. Academic freedom is the beacon towards which the aspirations of many professions are directed, while university autonomy should be considered a forerunner in the process of decentralization and of the delegation of decision-making powers to lower echelons, a phenomenon which is becoming more and more evident these days in management and in the democratic organization of society. (CEPES, 1992)

This statement implies academic freedom is of more public interest than university autonomy. As such, in terms of conflicts between freedom and autonomy, Lingenfelter (2006) proposed at the IMHE/OEAD seminar held in Paris a principle that, “*the principle of academic freedom should receive precedence*”.

2.1.2 Relevant empirical studies

Since decades ago, the subject of university governance has been extensively explored, in which the issue of university autonomy is significantly addressed. Among them, the comparative case studies exposed the concept of university autonomy is perceived dissimilarly in different HE systems, particularly, between different continents. This view is clearly presented in the Chinese scholar Wang (1995)’s research on the self-governance of the universities between the European countries and the Asian countries. These research findings showed the ratio between the institutional autonomy and the state intervention differs much in conceptualizing university autonomy in two geographically remote regions, which also results in the different adoptions of the feasible university governance mechanisms. However, this research is inadequate in providing an in-depth analysis of the differing conceptualization of university autonomy in different HE systems, as the examination stayed at macro level.

To capture the importance and indispensability of university autonomy in effective university governance, further exploration on the conceptualization of university autonomy is imperative. Shortly after, Yuan (2006) described another research briefly in one of his papers, which observed and analysed the connection between the universities' rankings and the degree of autonomy of universities. The case universities selected for the research were of different nature and located in different systems. The findings are twofold: the private universities enjoy more autonomy than the public universities, no matter which HE systems they are in; the higher ranked universities are more autonomous (Yuan, 2006). This research is highly meaningful in looking at university autonomy internally, additionally, it provided valuable evidence for the higher education policy makers as well as for the administrator, managers in HE institutions. Still, this research is not fruitful enough for the field, due to the limited size of the project.

Fortunately, after the formation of New Public Management theory and the advent of the Knowledge Economy era, governments and international organizations gained more realization in the importance of the increasing university autonomy, hence, a series of influential studies embedded with international visions on this subject have been conducted. The outcomes were so far contenting, as they have progressively served not only the practical needs for the HE practitioners but also the academic needs on constructing theoretical frameworks of evaluating the degree of university autonomy. Another contribution these studies made is that they employed new approaches to probing the status of university autonomy by countries, one of which is evaluating the relationships between the national government and higher education institution.

The first example is the international study conducted in the 27 Commonwealth countries by Richardson and Fielden in 1997. Comparative analysis and results on the government involvement in the university affairs were presented, therefore suggestions on increasing university autonomy within the national framework were integrated. The next study also targeted at examining the university autonomy with international perspective. The report was completed by Anderson and Johnson in 1998, in which the relationships between the national government and higher education institutions were revealed. Based on the results, the universities were categorized into three groups featured by different traditions of university autonomy, and they are Anglo-American group, European group and Asian group. This classification could be considered as an added value of the report, though it is

not novel in the field of culture. However, these two studies are over academically analysed, limiting the value of tackling the practical issues encompassing university autonomy. So the third example selected is of a stronger merit in applying to practical problems or dilemmas in higher education governance, that is the continuous project of University Autonomy in Europe carried out by European University Association. Till now, two reports have been completed under this theme. The first one released in 2009 is much of an exploratory study covering 34 European countries specifically “*providing the foundations for a Europe-wide database of comparable information on different aspects of university governance and autonomy*” (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009). In this regard, this study is a milestone in framing a detailed structure of comparing and evaluating the various components in the autonomy of the university, not to mention that it also empirically verified that “*the relationship between the state and higher education institutions can take a variety of forms*” (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009). Following the methodology built in examining the institutional autonomy of the university, the second study completed by 2011 is the autonomy scorecard project, which brought to the field a vivid comparison and benchmark of levels of institutional autonomy in 28 European HE systems in conjunction to an exposure of the discourse of measuring, weighting and scoring different elements of institutional autonomy. The substance is rating and ranking the selected and participated HE systems from four dimensions (Figure 4) which are organisational autonomy, financial autonomy, staffing autonomy and academic autonomy of the HE institution. Under each dimension, indicators were listed, in relation to which, sets of restrictions were explained. Hence, this whole project on university autonomy is a breakthrough in providing a practical tool in ranking HE systems in terms of university autonomy, by which the policy makers are enabled to accurately quantify the institutional autonomy of the universities. But of course, it has to be pointed out that the definition of the institutional autonomy of the university upon four dimensions is more structural than strategic.

4 Dimensions:

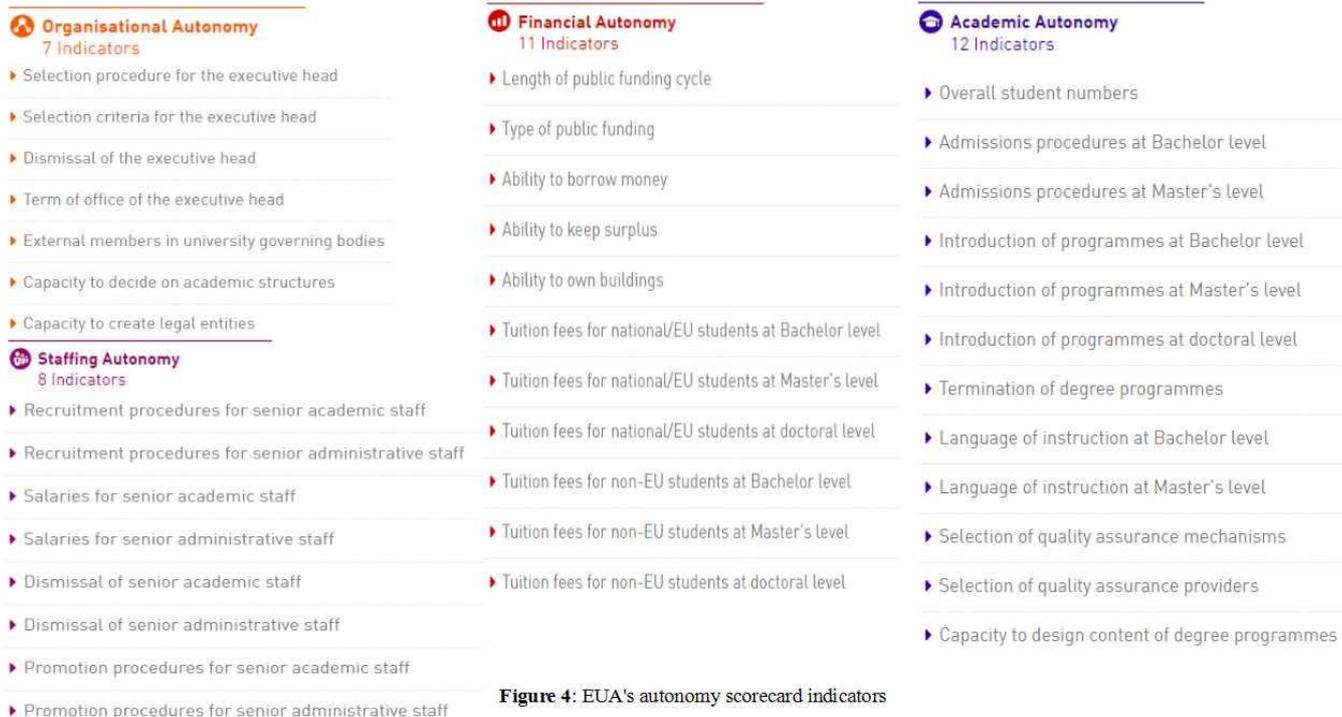


Figure 4: EUA's autonomy scorecard indicators

2.2 Previous studies on IHEOs

Throughout Western Europe and the U.S., IHEOs, or “buffer” bodies, or the third sector (used in China) are widely made use of, as a neutral organizational layer, by the higher education systems to stand between the government and the HE institutions, to safeguard the positive development of the system. With the various presence of applause, distrust or critics, this special body has been developing steadily, and even entered many new systems such as the whole Central and Eastern European HE systems (Temple, 2002). As such, scholars started to research and discuss over this phenomenon, though the attention is not yet much, it is important to track academically the nature, the subtle changes and the actual functions of IHEO. Based on the academic work produced around this body, this sub-section will try to exhibit a sound landscape of it with critical understanding.

First of all, IHEO is a body that is complex and dynamic. Regarding the fact that there is no agreed definition of this body, nor a unified form of its existence, one categorization was proposed to distinguish them into three groups: “*those have powers of allocation, those that advise and coordinate, and those that serve as arenas for debate and discussion*” (Neave, 1992, p.10), which seemed to cover the existing types that are active in the intermediary position in HE, except for the fact that many IHEOs undertaking

multiple missions was ignored by this categorization. For example, one of the two case organizations in this study, UNIKO is not only the advisory body but also an arena for debate and discussion. So, Neave (1992) suggested that the cross-sectoral nature of the IHEO need to be taken account of when constructing the categorization of the IHEOs. Nevertheless, more efforts are still required in reaching a formal classification of IHEOs, because a lot other attributes of an intermediary body are missing in the classification. For instance, many IHEOs are created with the executive powers which protect the relatively significant central intermediary function at the national level (Saglam, 1995), the typical of which are the Turkish Higher Education Council, the Quality Assurance Agency in the U.K. However, some are established upon the efforts of the academic community like the famous Rectors' conference in Europe. Perhaps a formal definition of it ought to be developed prior, in light of the fact that much confusion and doubts exist towards this intermediary body.

The subtle interplay between the state authority and the university is another key issue for IHEOs to be attentive of. So scholars are keen to study the intermediary body in this perspective. El-Khawas (1992) described the role played by this kind of body as “*precarious*” (p.18), and attributed part of the reasons to their “*vulnerability*”. He argued that it is this “*vulnerability*” (p.18) that caused the IHEOs to be unable to sustain their traditional neutral position, leading to the consequence of “*tilting toward one or the other of their constituencies*” (1992). Indeed, the observation of El-Khawas is of great significance in understanding the changing roles of IHEOs, also, it is a big advancement in the study of IHEOs that takes note of the influential impact from the political field to the traditional role of the intermediary body. However, his conclusion could be more persuasive and scientifically acceptable if case study methodology had been utilized. As it is universally acknowledged that any academic conclusion without data nor theories is not considered solid.

Concerning the extended roles, as well as the corresponding challenges emerged in the discourse, studies on the countermeasures of this kind of body are necessary and urgent. Spoonley (1992) thinks, in response to the new impediment derived from the changing circumstances, both the universities and the buffer bodies “*have no choice but to become more innovative*” (p. 24). This viewpoint is novel and highly constructive in tackling the problems and dilemmas IHEO face in different systems, unfortunately not many scholars

detailed in this angle. Researchers in higher education field are tended to give suggestions to the government departments or the university sector whenever problems appear in higher education, it seems seldom to occur to them that it might be easier to transform the intermediary organization!

2.3 Theoretical frameworks

This study examined two European IHEOs which function in differing levels of higher education settings to explore the possible external pressures that European IHEOs receive in the process of advocating university autonomy, and how they respond to these pressures. Two dominant theories - triangle of coordination and institutional isomorphism - were employed to understand and analyse the issues embedded in the research questions. Therefore, this sub-section will elaborate how these theories are utilized in this study to explain the research problem addressed.

2.3.1 Triangle of coordination

Higher education system is a combination of several participants, as what described by Burton Clark (1983), basically including three players which are the state authority, the academic oligarchy (mostly refers to the university nowadays) and the market. These three players interact with each other, thus generates forces to impact on each other's activities. Clark concluded the performance of this sort within the higher education system in a diagram of triangle (Figure 2). The detailed explanation of this triangle under sub-section 1.1 sufficiently substantiated that Triangle of Coordination theory is useful in presenting the fundamental external environment in which IHEOs emerged and function, as well as in underlying the tangible and intangible interrelationships between the intermediary bodies and other players.

One feature lies in the triangle concept is the zero-sum effect of the model, assuming *“each of the modes of coordination to be at least partially mutually exclusive from one another”* (Maggio, 2011, p.6). Specifically, there is no normative or fixed position within the triangle for any system as the interrelation of the three primary coordinating forces are dynamic. The stronger effect from one force is bound to pull the system closer to its mode of integration, entailing it is further away from one of the other modes (Lang, 2015). Namely, when an HE system is in the process of moving towards a state dominated mode of coordination, it necessarily receives weaker influence from either the

market or the academic oligarchy. Maggio concluded this phenomenon of coordination as “the identified forces each exert some amount of influence to arrive at a final integrated mode of coordination that reflects the input of all three” (p. 6). Thus, the zero-sum effect is best in analysing how IHEOs are able to identify their role in the coordination, their impact on the university autonomy, as well as the possible difficulties that might appear when they deliver the mission. For example, when the system is in either state controlled or market dominated modes, the IHEOs should probably refocus themselves to come up with a better solution in promoting university autonomy. Likewise, both the state and the market will try to hinder or produce difficulty to the IHEOs within their given ability if the universities are too autonomous.

Later on, with the advent of the knowledge economy era, more factors are engaged in this triangle, such as the society whose connection to higher education system is well conveyed by the third mission of the university, and the intermediary organizations that exist in distinctive formats serving as buffers between the university and the rest players (Figure 1). However, this perspective is slightly challenging Clark’s coordination model (1983), as he sees the intermediary organizations at that time the expansion of either “central collegial bodies” or “faculty interest organization”, exerting intangible forces to safeguard the academic oligarchy in countering the other two forces in the triangle, rather than a substantial group of entities worthy of a granted position in the HE system. Under the new perspective, the external environment of a higher education buffer therefore can be limned as how Figure 5 illustrates, the state authority, the university, the social expectation of higher education outcomes, and the industry-orientated claims.

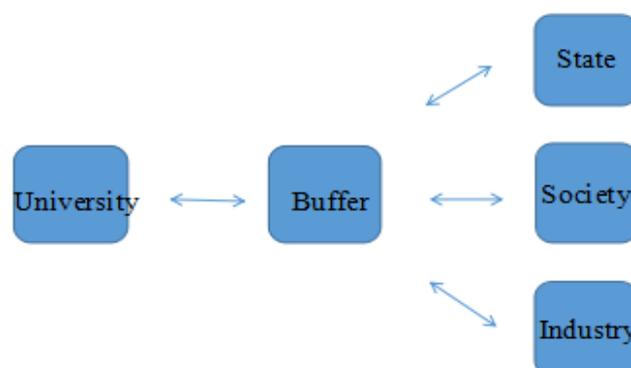


Figure 5: external environment of higher education buffers
- developed upon Triangle of Coordination (Clark, 1983)

One concern is withheld behind the possible new environment that more powerful players might be involved in this environment apart from the three dominant factors, due to the differences of the higher education systems. This is also one area that this study tries to explore.

The core of this concern is supported by Salazar and Leihy, two scholars in higher education studies who argued in their paper that the framing of the triangle was of a particular time in higher education development, that “*could be ably used to illustrate major differences in how coordination took place*” (Salazar & Leihy, 2011), but the features and assumptions of the triangle are in the state of alteration due to the subsequent sweeping changes in higher education coordination. This argument pointed out that the changes in the constitution of salient forces shall be observed and expected, which in another word implies the triangle possibly need to be recasted to the new state of the higher education coordination. Nevertheless, this paper is limited in portraying the profound changes occurred in the higher education system, in which new factors have been empowered to get into the triangle to assist coordinate the forces among the players. For instance, the aforementioned intermediary organizations and social expectations can best exemplify the new players.

Clark’s triangle, a proved resilient analytical tool, is widely seen as one of the most influential models in analysing higher education governance and the relations among different HE authorities such as the state, the university’s academics (Maggio, 2011). However, this perception in respect to certain fields of the contemporary HE scenario has been challenged. One of the most recent studies conducted by Lang (2015) examined the effect of the two HE financial instruments, incentive funding and incentive-based budgeting, on the relationship between the state and the university which were foreseen by the triangle model (Lang, 2015). He found out that the interconnection of incentive funding and incentive-based budgeting in function, though they were equipped with differing purposes, is able to “*alter the zero-sum balance between the state authority, market and academic legs of the triangle*” (p. 3) which is fully contradictory to the closed system notion that Clark’s Triangle describes. In addition, the study implied that the perspectives of resource dependency and principal-agent theories are more appropriate in precisely analysing and understanding the universities’ behaviours and interaction with other players in the HE environment.

2.3.2 Institutional isomorphism

In sociology, an isomorphism refers to “*the similarity of the process or structure of one organization to those of another, be it the result of imitation or independent development under similar constraints* (Bolman & Deal, 2016)”. Powell and Di Maggio (1983) noted this unique processing of institutional similarity and proposed two concepts out of it: competitive isomorphism and institutional isomorphism. The former originated from “*population ecology*” (p. 157), emphasizing the causation between isomorphism and the market competition, while the latter focuses on the importance of legitimacy and the logic of appropriateness in the homogenous process (Chen, 2009) which conforms to providing insights on how IHEOs should prepare themselves for confronting the external pressures.

Kanter (1972) introduced that any group of organizations of similar sort tends to be pressed by forces towards accommodation with the external world, well supplementing to the concept of institutional isomorphism (Powell & Di Maggio, 1983). Relating it to the HE field, one implication could be that IHEOs will become institutional defined through the increased interaction with other groups of organizations such as the state, the university and the related IHEOs in different levels. Guided by this perspective, one solution for the national level of IHEOs or that of a less influential HE system to react to the external pressures in promoting university autonomy is to study the practices of IHEOs of a more developed HE system or learn from the actions of supranational buffer organizations which are usually more powerful and more smooth in the process of implementing the idea of university autonomy. This approach of learning from and imitating the standard responses is defined as “*mimetic isomorphism*”, one of the three mechanisms identified by Powell and Di Maggio, through which institutional isomorphic change occurs.

The second mechanism of the three is coercive isomorphism, stemmed from “*formal and informal pressures exerted on organizations by other organizations upon which they are dependent and by cultural expectations in the society within which organizations function*” (Powell & DiMaggio, 1983, p. 150). In HE, a considerable part of organizational changes in the university and the IHEO are determined or even restricted by the state regulation. In the context of the EHEA, where policy transfer among the member states as well as the insemination of the grand EU policies into the national systems are feasible, coercive isomorphism happens more frequently and profoundly.

Chen (2009) discovered that, within the framework of the EU, economically and politically weaker nations show tendency to seek the greater power of the larger social system and its supranational network to eliminate difficulties or provide assistance (Powell & DiMaggio, 1983). As such, the existence of a common legal environment, hereby referring to the EU, affects many aspects of the behaviour and structure of the universities, the IHEOs and even the national policies (Powell & DiMaggio, 1983).

It is also noted that within coercive isomorphism, those seemingly ceremonial changes directed by the government mandate in an organization can be significant, pointed out by Powell and DiMaggio (1983). More specifically, the IHEOs in Europe commonly adopt the practices of lobbying, bilateral meeting, discussion, policy suggestions to advocate university autonomy in the society, particularly when conflicts appear amidst the HE stakeholders. All these actions are capable of altering the power relations within the HE environment over the long run, asserted by Ritti and Gouldner (1979).

A third source of institutional isomorphism is normative pressure, which is resulted from professionalism. To understand professionalism, Powell and DiMaggio offered their explanation as:

“the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work, to control the ‘production of producers’ (Larson, 1977:49-52), and to establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy.” (1983, p. 152)

Besides, they indicated that professionalism consists of two aspects. One is the formal education and legitimation produced by the university specialists based on cognition and the other is the development and expansion of professional network, premised upon which the new models diffuse rapidly (Powell & DiMaggio, 1983). The logic behind this phenomenon is that, the same education indoctrinates the same or similar normative rules to the organizational managers and professionals, which basically encouraged the dissemination of these norms and then the legality of the norms during the organizational transaction, hence leading to the isomorphism of the organizations (Powell & DiMaggio, 1983). Following this mechanism, the notion of university autonomy picked up by the group of HE professionals can be expected to spread to the interactive organizations or from one nation to other nations notably within the EU ascribing to the more unified educational frameworks. Likewise, the management mode of the supranational or

national level of IHEOs can also be deemed to be transported to other IHEOs of lower levels during the interaction and information exchange of the organizational managers and staff.

As the concept of institutional isomorphism is considered to be the useful analytic tool in investigating organizational behaviours (Powell & DiMaggio, 1983), studies on regional integration have the preference of utilizing this theory to understand the fields like politics, education, economics, etc. A paradigm of this is the research conducted by Radaelli (1997) on supranational public policy transfer in the EU. He examined and compared the transfer of monetary policy, tax policy and media ownership policy among the EU member states. When assessing the potential of isomorphism, he found out that the institutions of the EU level are capable of overcoming the problems existing in selective nations by catalysing the isomorphism process which means stimulating the policy transfer by diffusing the EU policy solutions into national political systems. At the end, the author concluded that in the EU, institutional isomorphism serves as a source of legitimacy in certain circumstances. This study is a good example of presenting the application of institutional theory - institutional isomorphism to explain specific issue in the field of the EU public policy implementation. Though admittedly, this studies could have achieved a more meaningful conclusion if it paid attention to the theory's key limitation that institutional isomorphism does not necessarily improve organizational efficiency. As efficiency is usually deemed to be a major element to be taken account of in the process of implementation.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter displays the research design and justifies data collection techniques which were employed in the empirical collection of data for this study, including website analytics, document review and semi-structured interviews. Details on the research settings are provided, together with an explicitly explanation of the analysis technique for the data collected. In addition, the potential limitations of the chosen approach to this research are discussed, in terms of validity, reliability and neutrality.

3.1 Research design

Among the three major approaches to research, which are quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2013), this research adopts qualitative methodology, in attempting to address the research issues identified in previous chapters. Explanation for this adoption is twofold. First of all, during the past two decades, qualitative research method is more and more frequently utilized by academic scholars when they try to describe and understand complex systems, as well as to observe and evaluate the stakeholder relationships (Heck, 2008). For the latter research, the traditional way is the quantitative approach, but the argument is that this method is incapable of identifying the nature of the relationship, and also not able to obtain evidence on why the participants describe the relations in this or that way, while qualitative methods can not only eliminate these shortcomings but also gain more depth information from groups such as administrators, managers, organization leaders who may often not respond to questionnaires. Moreover, with qualitative methods the researchers may develop better relationships with the participants which undoubtedly will contribute to the more truthful assessment of the relationship study (Grunig, 2002). Secondly, drawing on the research questions which were set forth earlier, the ultimate research objective is to explore and understand the role of a particular type of organizations in serving university autonomy, within the defined context of European higher education area. Similarly, the study purposes elaborated are centred around the examination of how these organizations make sense of the given status and privilege, as well as how their understanding of the surrounding area influences their behaviour in resolution of certain issues. Then the question comes to, what exactly qualitative research is. Creswell (1994, p. 472) stated its nature as “*An inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of*

informants, and conducted in a natural setting.” Tight (2012, p. 180) added that it is to “*exploring a particular phenomenon of interest in depth and in context, using the respondents’ own words (e.g. collected through lengthy, semi-structured interviews), and without making prior analytical assumptions*”. In addition to these, Bogdan and Biklen (1998, pp. 4-7) further demonstrated that qualitative research is the “*use of descriptive data*” which implies all kinds of verbal and symbolic data, including interviews transcripts, field notes, memos, photographs, official documents (Filiz, 2012). Therefore, the qualitative method corresponds with the objectives of the study. The nature of qualitative research coincides with the author’s preference for in-depth analysis from “human” side on the social phenomenon by using the combined tools of website analytics, document review and semi-structured interviews.

Being one of the most frequently used qualitative research methodologies in educational research (Yazan, 2015), case study methodology is what this study opts for, so as to achieve an in-depth exploration and analysis of the issues addressed in Chapter One. Yin (2013) included case study as one of the several ways to conduct social science research, while the other ways are “*experiments, surveys, histories and the analysis of archival information*” (p.1). Also, the type of the research questions posed in this study has determined the appropriateness of the case study instrument, but not any other strategies. Because Yin (2013) pointed out in the same book that the approach of case studies is favoured and appropriate in answering questions of “how” and “why”, particularly when a contemporary phenomenon within real-life context is to be investigated. Another element in Yin’s (2013) definition of case study is the unclear, blurry boundaries between phenomenon and the context, which reinforced that the selection of case study for this research is in line with what this paper is about.

The current study falls on two cases that are situated in different systems yet under the general framework of the EHEA, hence the analysis is to be performed in perspectives of both comparison and combination of the research data. The rationale behind the selection of two-case over single-case study is not only in consideration of the aims of the study that includes the achievement in benchmark for the IHEOs, but also lies in the attempt of offering a more compelling and robust argument. Therefore, the study results and outcomes are to be regarded as more convincing, candid and probably with a greater value for application.

3.2 Research setting

The cases chosen for this research are two intermediary organizations. The first case is European University Association (EUA) which is located in Brussels. The other organization is Universities Austria (UNIKO) located in Vienna. These two organizations are picked among the various existence of IHEOs in Europe mainly for two reasons, that is, their consistent promotion of the concept of university autonomy and their constant independence from the government authorities. Additionally, they are the typical examples of the intermediary organizations as they respectively function in the two currently popular contexts which are the regional/multi-governmental level of higher education system, and the traditional/common model of national higher education system. It is noted that UNIKO is slightly different from the common perception of a national level organization, as it is the Austrian Rectors' conference. In Europe, National Rectors' conference is a network in higher education which exists in many systems with different types, different sizes but all representing the interest of the national universities. Correspondingly, UNIKO is the voice of all the Austrian public universities, which accompanied the universities during the journey when the national higher education system moved from much regulated to highly autonomous.

3.2.1 European University Association

As what is stated at the homepage of its official website, EUA is a representative of all European universities. To get a comprehensive understanding of this organization regarding its position in the transformation of European higher education, its contribution to shaping European Higher Education Area and its engagement in the implementation of Bologna Process at the national and institutional levels, it is necessary to begin with reviewing its foundation basis.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, research and higher education became important elements in the national political systems in Europe and other developed countries. Dramatic increase in student enrolment at universities were not only a response to the growing employment options but also a result of the higher cultural and social expectations (Nyborg, 2014). Facing the new challenges, higher education institutions had to transfer their role to partners in society, meaning taking an active position in societal development. Hence, to meet to discuss the challenges of an oncoming mass

education became necessary for the university leaders, which led to the first conference held in 1955 participated by Western European rectors and vice-chancellor, and the second one in 1959. The 1959 conference provided a root for the creation of Conférence permanente des Recteurs, Présidents et Vice-Chanceliers des Universités européennes (CRE), which afterwards turned into Association of European Universities with the jointly merging of the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences (EUREC) in 2001 (Nyborg, 2014).

To wrap up the root of its establishment, EUA was founded partly because of the increased contact and cooperation between CRE and the Commission given rise to the EU programs for mobility of students and staff and for institutional cooperation. Along with the apparent need for European universities to speak with one voice towards EU authorities, particularly after the Bologna Process being born in 1999 (Nyborg, 2014).

As an outcome of the merger of two European organizations, EUA has an innate mission that is to provide one voice for the university sector in the changing higher education policy discourse in Europe. In conjunction with the factor that it was born shortly after the Bologna Process, EUA currently plays an influential role as one of the consultative members to the Process (Elken and Vukasovic, 2014). After fifteen years of its existence, it has developed a mature organizational structure consisting of President, Board, Council, General Assembly and Secretariat (Figure 7), which lays basic foundation for its independent nature.

<p>President</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The President, elected every four years by members, leads and represents the association. • The Board appoints two Vice-Presidents to deputise in his/her absence. 	<p>Board</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nine current or former rectors (including the President). Four members are elected every two years by members. • Supervises the implementation of EUA policy and work programmes. 	<p>Council</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presidents of the national rectors' conferences. • Adopts EUA policies and positions and defines overall priorities. 	<p>General Assembly</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All EUA members. • Elects the President and Board and determines the strategic direction of EUA.
<p>Secretariat</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based in Brussels, EUA's secretariat (around 40 staff), managed by the Secretary General, ensures the daily management and implementation of all EUA's activities. 			

Figure 7: How EUA is Governed (EUA Information Brochure, 2004)

Up till today, EUA has attracted more than 85 members in 47 countries including universities and national rectors' conferences. Together with its members, EUA

endeavours to “*influence decision-making at all levels, enhance institutional development by sharing expertise and act as the voice of European universities globally*” (2004, p.3). Meanwhile, the members are offered the “*unique opportunities to influence and shape future European policy and initiatives affecting higher education and research*” (2004, p.2). On the other hand, EUA updates its priorities regularly to keep pace to and prospect the development of the European higher education sector. The overall activities are reflected in the five thematic areas, which are learning and teaching, research and innovation, internationalisation, governance and funding and institutional development including specific member services (EUA, 2015). On the whole, EUA aims to make sure that the interests and concerns of universities are taken up with all key stakeholders, for instance, the European Commission, Parliament and other key decision-makers (EUA Information Brochure, 2004).

3.2.2 Universities Austria/UNIKO

The name of Universities Austria was given in 2008, and before that it was referred to as Austrian Rectors' Conference. It is a non-profit organization established under Austrian private law and has long been recognized as the highest ranking representative body of the 21 public universities in Austria (UNIKO, 2016). Sticking to its defined mission which is speaking for the member universities, UNIKO strengthens their role in the Austrian society and economy, unites them with each other during each stage of the higher education development and transformation and also mediate for them among different higher education stakeholders within the country or occasionally at the EU arena.

UNIKO has a history of over one century, and underwent several major transformations in its role and influence in higher education which was mainly caused by the political changes. A brief exploration of its establishment shows that this organization was merely an initiative in 1910 by the rector of one Austrian university for an assembly of Austrian university rectors. Nevertheless, the association was formed shortly after its first meeting in Vienna where all the public universities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire were included. That time, only the University of Vienna was made permanent chair due to the simple fact that it was the largest institution in size that was capable of hosting this big event ((UNIKO, 2016). The first turning point of this association appeared during the final years of the Empire, resulting in the withdrawal of the Hungarian speaking universities. After WWI, the association was re-established as Austrian Rectors'

Conference, however, WWII paused the meeting until later 1945. The second turning point of the Conference was the enactment of the Higher Education Organisation Act (Hochschulorganisationsgesetz) 1955 which granted the Conference a legal basis, thereafter, its role was expanded to a large extent which included preparing bills upon the experts' opinions, organizing research and appointing committee. At that time, the restructuring of the association was called on and a Secretariat was set up consequently, with which started the Conference's independent role in representing the Austrian universities (UNIKO, 2016). In spite of that Austrian Rectors' Conference was functioning under the public law financed by the government before the University Act 2002, the Conference was able to act independently to a large extent (Höllinger, 2004). The most recent turning point of the Conference was the change of its legal basis from public to law, accordingly, its financial source was changed to the member fees of the universities.

Up to today, UNIKO retains the structure that comprises the plenary, the president, the board and the policy committees (Figure 3), each bearing certain responsibilities. Its duties have been further expanded resulting in an influential role in advancing Austrian higher education system along with its 21 member universities.



Figure 3: Structure of UNIKO

3.3 Data collection

The methods for the data collection are website analytics, documents review and interviews. All the three tools were applied to both the cases, therefore gathers ample data for the scientific analysis. An additional reason to employ three different tools is to triangulate the research data which is similar to the idea of cross checking, and in this

study entails to verify the results with the three different means, thus ensures the same result is to be produced.

Website analytics is widely used as a robust and efficient tool in the commercial world, notably for the purpose of measuring the status quo of the competitiveness or improving the existing marketing performance, by analysing the competitors' websites. But this tool also benefits this study particularly at the initial stage of the research, as it is of vital importance in providing the most timely and synthesized information of the case organizations. In this respect, web analytics could be seen as one of the sampling strategies for selecting the suitable cases and the appropriate participants for the interviews (Sen, Dacin & Pattichis, 2006). Indeed, during the sampling process of this research, viewing the page of organizational structure and missions helped the researcher picture the general image of the organization to answer the essential question of "who they are". Then skimming through the page of projects or activities helped embed vivid elements to the first image so that the second basic question of "what they do" is replied. The final step was to check the website traffic of the potential organizations (sometimes it could be replaced by consulting with the academic supervisors as they are usually the experts of the research field), which is the integral part of the sampling for this research. The result of the website traffic is used to reflect the visibility of the organization, so as to avoid picking an organization which is not influential enough to serve one of the study aims that is to benchmark.

Simultaneously, documents related to the topic and the case organizations were reviewed, in order to get additional information and a full picture of the issue. The core documents selected include but not limited to, institutional data such as working papers, project reports, project analysis and roadmaps, legal registration papers of EUA, survey reports of university autonomy, Trends report on European HE, and Austrian University Act (2002). The data were used as a supplement to formatting the interview questions.

In qualitative research, interviews are suggested to understand participants' perceptions and convey their understandings in particular issues to the researchers who usually do not have direct experience. They are also useful in reconstructing events to which the researcher is not privy or in which the researcher did not participate (Patton, 2002). Hence, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected participants from the

two organizations who are the key persons working closely with university autonomy, to collect the primary source of the data for the research. An interview protocol was first prepared which contains the opening paragraph of the interview, the guiding questions formulated upon the research questions and purposes, the list of the interview techniques such as the use of prompts during the interview in order to elicit further responses from the participants on certain issues. Admittedly, a few modifications were made to the guiding questions before or during the interview in light of the different positions or types of tasks the participants hold in the organization. All the interviews happened during April and early May, each lasting approximately 1 hour. Prior to the interviews, email invitations were sent to each of the participants to kindly asking them to join the interview. A follow-up email was sent to those who agreed to the participation to arrange the specific time and place for the interview which were decided to the biggest convenience of the participants. Considering that EUA is located in a different country from where the researcher resides, electronic interviews were adopted to some participants. For both forms of the interviews, a consent letter was sent by email to the participants days before the interview, introducing the researcher and the research purpose, explaining their rights, as well as the promise of confidentiality. All the one-on-one interviews were held in the office of the participants for the consideration of efficiency and the comfortable feeling of the participants, while the electronic interviews were performed with the help of computer, internet and the mobile phone. All the interviews were conducted in English language, and voice recorded with the permission of the participants which serves to the single purpose of accurately transcribing the conversations afterwards. Among all the transcriptions, some were sent to the participants for further editing to prevent any misunderstanding from happening. Occasionally, follow-up questions were sent to the participants through emails, because on one hand, certain theme requires more data for the in-depth analysis, on the other hand, ambiguity of expression need to be clarified by the participants.

3.4 Data analysis technique

The purpose of data analysis in qualitative research, as explained by Pilot and Beck (2008), is to organize, categorize and extract the underlying meaning of the received data by means of interpreting, connecting and synthesizing the original data. Another expression of it is to uncover or understand the big picture which was depicted by the data. The consensus in the differing analysis strategies is transcribing and coding by

which the data is rearranged under a structure thus ready to be compared between them (Yin, 2009).

Based on the consideration that thematic analysis is consistent with the researcher’s philosophical view that underpins the research, this approach was picked among the various types of qualitative data analysis techniques proposed by the scholars. The same analysis procedure was applied to both the cases, while the analysis was primarily done separately in a way that sorting the data into two different folders beforehand. For either case, the initial step was the completion of transcribing all the interviews, then use the themes extracted from the research questions to categorize the data after carefully read over all the written transcriptions, as well as the notes made during the reviewing of the website and documents (see Figure 6).

THEMES	INTERVIEW RESULTS		DOCUMENT REVIEW		WEBSITE ANALYSIS		SYNTHESIS
	EUA	UNIKO	EUA	UNIKO	EUA	UNIKO	
Organization description	<i>Response 1</i>	<i>Response 1</i>					
	<i>Response 2</i>	<i>Response 2</i>					
	/	<i>Response 3</i>					
Political, economic & society context	<i>Response 1</i>	<i>Response 1</i>					
	<i>Response 2</i>	<i>Response 2</i>					
		<i>Response 3</i>					
Identification of role & impact of uni autonomy	<i>Response 1</i>	<i>Response 1</i>					
	<i>Response 2</i>	<i>Response 2</i>					
	/	<i>Response 3</i>					
External pressures against uni autonomy	<i>Response 1</i>	<i>Response 1</i>					
	<i>Response 2</i>	<i>Response 2</i>					
	/	<i>Response 3</i>					
Confrontations with external pressures	<i>Response 1</i>	<i>Response 1</i>					
	<i>Response 2</i>	<i>Response 2</i>					
	/	<i>Response 3</i>					

Figure 6: A print screen of data analysis process in Excel

Then O’Connor and Gibson’s (2003) step-by-step guide to qualitative data analysis was employed to analyse the data obtained from the interviews. The first step was viewing the whole data set in one location while keep in mind of the research questions. As the data set was immense in quantity, the method of prioritizing those which were directly included in the research questions was used, leaving aside the rest at this stage. Therefore, an excel sheet was created to organize and display the data. The second step was to look for frequently appeared words or phrases in each different answer to one question, and try to read the underlying meaning out of them so that aid in exporting the concepts which were to put in the column of Codes. Another work done during this step was highlighting

the unexpected or extra meaning from the data, as this information was valuable in updating the defined structure of the themes. The next step in the analysis procedure was merging the codes into the themes, including adding the new developed themes to the structure.

3.5 Trustworthiness

The fourth step stated by O'Connor and Gibson (2003) is to ensure the reliability and validity in the data analysis and in the findings, and they are also believed by the academic community as the fundamental cornerstones of the research method. So this sub-section is to demonstrate the issue of trustworthiness of this research through three facets.

From a quantitative point of view, Joppe (2000) defines reliability as: “...*The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable.*” (p. 1) And in qualitative study, the researchers “*employ techniques to show that, if the work were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods and with the same participants, similar results would be obtained*” (Shenton, 2004). In particular, they all showed strong preference to link the issue of reliability to dependability since the close ties between credibility and dependability were identified. The above information thus conveys that reliability examines to which extent the data and the results of the study are consistent if the research is replicated, based on which, great efforts were made in the choice of research methodology during the period of proposing the research. Accordingly, the combination of multiple data collection tools was adopted, associated with the concept of triangulation, to illuminate the consistency of the findings and maximize the reliability this study. In addition to this, the actions of inviting the participants to edit on the transcriptions and posing further questions to them were also an attempt of raising the degree of reliability.

Validity in qualitative research refers to the accuracy with which a method measures what the researcher intends to measure and the findings are applicable in other contexts (Ary et al., 2002). This definition contains the two concepts of validity, the credibility and the transferability of the research findings (Ary et al., 2002). With regards to

enhancing the credibility of the findings, this research collected data from several independent sources. Also, triangulation of both data and methods were used in the data collection procedure, which was explained previously. Towards transferability of the findings, the choice of double - case study over single - case study is in another way of contributing to it.

Neutrality in qualitative study is often interpreted as the extent to which the research bias is reduced in a qualitative study. The solution adopted in this research was trying to get as many different viewpoints as possible by means of interviews, informal conversations with the people working in the two organizations, and engagement in the field work which was realized by the researcher in the way of short-term internship. Besides, the researcher tried to reach a balance in gender among the participants for the interviews, which in conjunction with the effort of inviting participants from different age groups, different units of the organization, contributes to a higher degree of neutrality.

CHAPTER FOUR: CASE STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The content of this chapter is split into two sections. The first section reframes the two case organizations with the data collected from the research, mainly by adding their explicit missions regarding university autonomy as well as how they advocate it. The second section presents the results of the case studies pertaining to the research questions stated in Chapter One. Following O'Connor and Gibson's step-by-step guide to qualitative data analysis, four key themes were extracted from the interview guide to offer a structured layout for the data processing result. Under each theme, the findings of the two case organizations are described respectively, along with a synthesized discussion achieved through comparing and contrasting the empirical findings from both organizations. Thus, this chapter describes, compares and discusses all the findings of the case studies, with reflections from literature review.

4.1 Revisiting EUA & UNIKO

As an intergovernmental HE organization, EUA was established and is operated at the EU level. Encompassing the keynote of speaking for the universities in Europe, this organization incorporates the promotion and protection of university autonomy into its organizational structure, vision and mission statement.

There are four different levels of work that EUA is undertaking, which are European, national, institutional and global. In each level, it disseminates the influences of the members in the HE governance through its specific actions in the sections of learning and teaching, research and innovation, internationalisation, governance and funding and institutional development (EUA Information Brochure, 2004). Among its actions, university missions are also addressed and covered. During the discourse, autonomy has been developed as a key concept for universities to best fulfil their missions.

Apart from the continuous contributions to university's basic missions of teaching and researching, EUA is also a loyal actor in the role of the Bologna Process and Bologna Follow-up groups, which were verified by both interview participants. During the process, helping the HE institutions become more autonomous, enabling them to determine the strategy and to freely choose the partnerships (European University Association, 2004) were conceptualized and advocated by the organization. To optimize the working

outcomes in relation to the promotion of university autonomy, EUA has been taking numerous ways of endeavours. One example pointed out by the respondent is the interactions with the key stakeholders of the university sector such as the governments of different levels, HE-related organizations, and the universities. It is noteworthy that the interactions were realized via distinctive approaches. as summarized from the words of the two respondents. Specifically, at the EU level, main effort is centred around the actions such as developing the European higher education guidelines, constructing frameworks in selective areas in European higher education, thus to assist in shaping the European higher education policy which respects the best interest of the HE institutions in Europe. Generalized from the substantial projects and work reports carried out by EUA, equal efforts are made to dialogue with the HE authorities in the member states and network the national and international counterparts working for university autonomy. One respondent stated “...*European HE and European research areas are much better linked so everything that we do is always looking at it from the perspective of the universities*”, indicating directly the positioning of the European universities throughout EUA’s work. Furthermore, the corresponding actions in disseminating the concept of university autonomy are not limited to expanding its influence among the member states of the EU, attempts have begun of spreading this concept globally by facilitating international cooperation with non-EU universities. Take The Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE) as an example, which is one of the two special membership services that “*contributes to the development, advancement and improvement of doctoral education and research training in Europe*” (EUA, 2004), it is now featured by international cooperation both inside Europe and across the continents. Evidence was offered by one, “...*and in terms of research, basically speaking, everything is related with international research, which we call it doctoral joint programs in doctoral education...internationalisation is embedded in every area of the HE, such as internationalization in quality assurance, internationalization in funding, internationalization in innovation policies...*”.

UNIKO has a lot in common with EUA, and it also represents universities, yet at the national level instead of the EU level. Being the Rectors’ conference in Austria, it devotes all its resources to supporting the 21 public member universities in all matters, for instance, teaching and research, student affairs, internationalization, and quality assurance. Apart from these, UNIKO also take part in the activities related to developing

the national HE frameworks, as one respondent stated “...*the national qualification framework is a very current issue to us, and it involves lifelong learning, employability, as well as the introductory phases when the students start at the university.*”

Both UNIKO and EUA had undergone structural transformations during the last decades, as responses to the changes in Austrian HE system as well as in the overall EU frameworks. But specific differences were identified between the substance of their transformations. One difference is that UNIKO’s structural transformation is associated with the changing of the legal name which are mostly subject to the major national HE reforms during the past 2 decades. Consequently, its role in the national HE was changed to certain extent, which could be concluded by combining what is written on the official website “*It was involved in preparing bills. The Conference’s responsibilities were expanded to include the organisation of research and the appointment of committees.*” and the statement from one respondent “*During that period of time (1993 - 2012), the organization changed completely in legal terms and the name was also changed.*” So, before University Act 2002, UNIKO (Rector’s conference) not only had a larger remit than the current intermediary status, but also it somehow owned certain authority as a public organization financed by public funds, while currently it sees itself more as an adviser to the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy (referred to as ministry), a coordinator in the Austrian higher education system. It thus reflects that, the Austrian higher education has been moving from a traditional, highly regulated system towards a more autonomous system.

It is necessary to mention some of the key differences between the supranational and national organizations, which refer to the varying degrees of the influences as well as the performing approaches. Indeed, EUA looks at the EU level, connects the member states in higher education issues, networks its members including European universities and the national Rectors conferences, aiming at building stronger European universities. Not to mention that EUA has the unofficial responsibility of guiding and directing the national bodies in higher education matters. In addition, EUA outshines in the number of the comparative studies it has done while UNIKO is not much engaged in that. Turning to UNIKO, it has more concrete focus on advancing the Austrian universities, with more attention to the institutional affairs of the universities.

As a whole, EUA also distinguishes itself out as a dominant NGO in higher education field within the EHEA by its salient performance in stakeholder debates, conferences and its Institutional Evaluation Programme (Estermann, Nokkala & Steinel, 2011), thereby to influence and take part in the construction and development of the modernisation of Europe's universities. This is primarily about its work in policy structuring at both the EU level and the national system level which UNIKO is not capable of as a national player. Nevertheless, both organizations have strong focus and interest in further developing university autonomy except that EUA performs at a much broader level in terms of developing the concepts and bringing this to relevant policy makers while UNIKO is concretely involved in various reform processes of further developing university autonomy for the Austrian universities.

4.2 Theme 1: Social, economic and political contexts

Though EUA provides higher education services to universities, associations and governmental authorities at both European level and national level, both of the respondents emphasized on the impact of the political atmosphere at European level when inquired to describe the social, political and economic context in which EUA functions. One respondent explicitly explained that EUA works in different political contexts since one of the organization's membership categories is the national university associations from 34 European countries which are highly diverse politically. Further expounded by this respondent is how the organization delivers their missions in the context of European level, *“At European level, we are involved in many formal consultation processes to speak on behalf of the university sector. So we are involved in consultations done by the European Commission, we engage with the European Parliament, with the European council and we also speak with the European Court of Auditors. All in all, we represent university's voice via all important European actors.”* By contrast, EUA provides services with a different focus at national level, added by the same respondent, *“We are also active at national level where we provide in many cases the European comparative view in many reform processes.”*

With regards to the impact of these contexts on the intermediary bodies as EUA, one respondent addressed the changes in the European political context by exemplifying the current hot issues in the European higher education sector, that is the much affected EU higher education sector particularly the universities by the intense refugee crisis. Because

the external political factors can have very strong impact within very short time and the institutions need to respond to them. Indeed, the refugee crisis is the major challenge for Europe, universities as important actors engaging in this area have been reacting on that. So it also greatly influences EUA and UNIKO, and they are active in helping with finding out solutions. However, the actual discourse is not very smooth as the issue of university autonomy is raised. The reason is that, the universities are presumed and expected by either the society or the government to accommodate the refugee students, in this sense, the academic autonomy of the university is challenged as the universities should have the complete say in students' admission.

Meanwhile, a lot of money were inputted to solve the refugee crisis, and one consequence is that the economic environment by which higher education could be greatly influenced is changed. Thus austerity measures were brought put in HE. In relation to this issue, EUA conducted lots of activities such as the development of the public funding since 2008, in which the situation was monitored and analysed. One response has reflected in this issue as well, *“regarding austerity measures, we work a lot on public funding observatory. We are very close to all these policy agendas so the big issues like the refugees and austerity were felt by us on the first day.”* The respondent also revealed that the organization has been active in not only bringing out feasible countermeasures but also working on carrying out possible precautions against serious issues like the refugee crisis and austerity, however the result is still somehow frustrating, *“we try to respond to the issues but we often found that we are already in the middle of the issues. We know we should be ahead but most of time we are not able to.”*

Regarding the political, economic and social contexts of EUA as well as their impact on the organization, the responses received reflected a different picture of the situation in the current Austrian HE system compared to those about EUA, although they both need to respond to the changes in the political and economic context in Europe. For example, the temporary introduction of the tuition fees in Austria was a big challenge to the national system at that time, and it was triggered by the legal change in the political context and strongly impacted the university financing. UNIKO got involved immediately to help ease the tension and eliminate the after-effect. Then the issue addressed is the social context and its impact on UNIKO, one respondent believed the Austrian HE society has changed to be fairly autonomous thanks to the several major reforms. However certain

change in the legislation of higher education such as the issue of the temporary introduction of the tuition fees was far reaching regarding its influence on the HE institutions, especially on the 21 members of UNIKO as the public universities are more vulnerable in that sense. From this perspective, UNIKO is easier to be impacted by the political context, since their member universities would be directly affected by any legislation change in higher education. Regarding the link between UNIKO and other fields, another respondent pointed out UNIKO does interact with the industry judging from the fact that the linkage between the universities and the industry nowadays gets stronger in the areas of fundraising, graduate employability, research projects collaboration, and so on. Besides, another respondent showed that UNIKO is in the bilateral HE contexts, *“we are a member of the European University Association like most of the European rectors conferences are members. We get together on different levels. So, on the one hand we have meetings with EUA and on the other hand we have national meetings on the government level.”*

Therefore, drawn from the comparative results of the responses from two organizations, it is easy to see they have certain things in common despite of the different remits. One is that among the political, economic and social factors relevant to the missions of EUA and UNIKO, they all have direct impact on what they do. The other commonality is, both organizations are very responsive to the changes in the external environment especially when it is related to university autonomy. However, the type of the responses is distinctive. For example, UNIKO has to react very concretely to the legal changes in Austrian HE system while the changes in the national systems do not result in the same degree and content of the actions for EUA.

4.3 Theme 2: Views on university autonomy and its importance

While the academia has been providing different definitions of university autonomy or institutional autonomy from various perspectives, the two respondents from EUA shared their views on this term based on their years' of work in the association. One of them clearly demonstrated that the university autonomy that EUA has been advocating is differentiated from academic freedom or any kind of the individual autonomy inside the HE institutions, and actually it is about the autonomy of the university leadership, *“when we talk about university autonomy, we are talking about the university leadership autonomy which is the leadership of the rectors and its team.... It is not the autonomy of*

any individual researcher, or individual faculty, or anything like this.” Consequently, the promotion of this type of university autonomy often receives resistance from the university researchers, supplemented by the same respondent. Overall, their understanding of university autonomy that EUA has been working on is compatible with its vision of “*stronger universities in Europe*” stated at the front page of its website. The respondent also specified the concept of building the stronger European universities “*strong universities in Europe. That is the university with strong leadership so that they can do what they want. For example, to have good quality assurance systems, to facilitate innovation in learning and teaching without being dependent on somebody coming from outside and giving restraints on what they can decide.*”

Furthermore, EUA has detected that one key aspect to conceptualize university autonomy is to probe the relationship between the HE institutions and the government authorities. Therefore, four dimensions (see Figure 4 in Chapter Two) were developed based on the various autonomy assessment indicators to describe, visualize, evaluate, compare and rate the institutional autonomy status of any individual university or any HE system those who contributed the data to the project. The motives behind the design of this instrument was disclosed by one respondent, “*within these four dimensions we look at very concrete aspects of the institution if it is free to decide on the aspects themselves, if some aspects are regulated somewhere, or if there are limitations.*”

In addition, both respondents expounded how important both EUA and the HE institutions in the EHEA see university autonomy. Firstly, EUA considers it essential to the quality assurance of HE, so the association not only performs its own quality assurance service in the requested institutions, but also strongly encourages the universities to develop their own quality assurance systems. One respondent underlined, “*we think that universities should do that (develop quality assurance system) and they are strong enough to do that by themselves in terms of quality assurance.*” One reason for this suggestion is somehow associated with the economic concern, revealed by the response of “*we train them (the universities) to do that (perform quality assurance) because it is cheaper to do it by themselves.*” Apparently, to be able to perform quality assurance on themselves is symbolized as one of the autonomous action of the universities. Pertaining to the HE institutions, the causation of university autonomy and the excellence of the universities is explained by one respondent “*university autonomy is*

a very important aspect for the success of the HE institutions, and this is shown obviously when they deliver their missions in teaching, research, innovation and other directions...more autonomous institutions usually have better internal quality which is related to what kind of the assurance systems they have...more autonomous institutions also perform better in university rankings.” This statement exhibited the positive results university autonomy can bring to a university and it is evidenced based from the studies on university ranking and Trends reports produced by EUA.

The responses collected from UNIKO provided a dynamic picture of the Austrian university autonomy. One respondent introduced that, university autonomy in Austrian higher education was for the first time raised *“when the last grant university law was discussed under the circumstances that universities were supposed to get more autonomy”*. Later on, with the promulgation of the University Act 2002, the autonomy of the university leadership was obviously strengthened. In contrast, one respondent remarked that the autonomy of individual research was consequently decreased. The reason of the diminishing autonomy of the individual researcher was explained by one respondent, that the researcher was able to directly negotiate with the ministry for all the matters relevant to the research projects, typical of which is the amount of the research funding, but this right was transferred into the internal affairs of the universities after 2004.

Responding to the shift of the university autonomy content in the national system, the Austrian universities notably the public ones were immediately and greatly affected. In this respect, the change in the content of university autonomy does influence UNIKO through their member universities. The new degree of university autonomy was regarded as the milestone in the modernization process of Austrian higher education, because *“they (universities) can now negotiate the performance contracts (with the ministry) then they know how much money they will have for the next three years”* said by one of the respondents. Indeed, the introduction of performance contracts in the Austrian higher education system at least ensured the university’s autonomy in the internal allocation of funds. Moreover, the negotiation approach reflected a rising cognition in university autonomy among the Austrian HE authorities.

As a conclusion, both organizations agree on the importance role of university autonomy in many aspects of the development of the HE sector, and they actively advocate university autonomy within their remit. But respectively, the focus of EUA's work done regarding university autonomy is on conceptualising autonomy as well as bringing it forward to very concrete level, while UNIKO has been contributing much to concretely making the transition of the national HE system from relatively regulated to more autonomous. One example of the result of UNIKO's concrete actions is the University Act 2002. Further, EUA has made much effort in promoting the idea of university autonomy at the European level, while at the same time also strives as much as possible to address in concrete terms what it means in different systems. All in all, EUA assists in the policy dialogue of the European level, and supports that of the national level. UNIKO engages with the Austrian HE authorities in very concrete actions in issues such as developing the HE laws, implementing the regulations in the universities.

4.4 Theme 3: Interplay with the stakeholders

As Figure 1 illustrated, the key stakeholders of the IHEOs concerned in this study are mainly the educational authorities at different levels and the universities. Data showed that both EUA and UNIKO must act in the interest of their members, which literally means they cannot say or do anything out of the interest of the members. Therefore, the first challenge in their work is pointed out, which is derived from the diversity of their membership. Both organizations have to face the relationship with their members, and try to keep a friendly and cooperative lie between them. Regarding this, EUA obviously need to deal with a much broader sense of stakeholders than UNIKO, due to the fact that its membership consists of individual universities and Rectors' conferences, then the other key stakeholders of it are the policy makers of both European level and national level. It has to be addressed that within each group, diversity is very much embedded. Firstly, the individual universities are of different sizes, types, missions, etc. The Rectors' conferences then are endowed with their own national HE systems which are of diversified characteristics, for instance, the U.K. governance model is completely different from the Norwegian model which results in the distinctive presence of things like quality assurance system, funding strategy, internationalization mission, and so on. The same diversity also applies to the group of the policy makers from the national HE systems that EUA has to interact with. Besides, the coverage of 46 countries by its member universities also brings up another challenge which was originated from the

diversity of the cultures and understanding of autonomy across the countries, that directly complicates the organization's work particularly when it comes to the comparative studies such as the project of university autonomy in Europe. Within its European level of the policy makers, EUA still meets challenges as it is often the views inside them are divergent. For example, one of the two respondents showed that inside the European Commission there are *"lots of different aims, lots of different incentives and agendas and it is not always clear"* for the organization to capture the official message coming from it. So, it is not surprising that *"you need to guess the reality"* of the European level of the authorities. The last challenge, also might be the basic principle of EUA, is to keep consistent with the members on different higher education matters taking account of the divergent backgrounds of the universities and Rectors' conferences. One respondent stated that *"we have to have consensus with our members, and need to be accountable for our members"*. In order to achieve this smoothly, a lot of commitment from the membership is highly required. As for UNIKO in the issue of dealing with the members, it is much more simple as its members comprise of only public Austrian universities and its other key stakeholder is the national policy makers in Austria.

After all, the overall responses from UNIKO are not much far away from those of EUA in terms of the degree of the pressures coming from outside of the organization regarding university autonomy. Other than that, the concrete difficulties UNIKO face are quite different from EUA as explained in previous paragraph. Additionally, the specific relationships among UNIKO and the two stakeholders were revealed by the respondents. Firstly, all the three respondents showed the same opinion in the relationship between UNIKO and the Austrian ministry, which is very good and closely connected. But when it comes to the correlation between the government and the 21 member universities, two of them believed that conflicts often happen so that UNIKO has to step in to moderate and mediate the tension. One particular example offered by one respondent is that *"the universities sometimes have to agree on the (government) policies while they actually do not agree"*. Another difficulty that the respondents mentioned is that consensus sometimes difficult to be reached among their 21 members, which certainly requires the organization to spend extra effort to coordinate internally to help tackle this issue. Actually this difficulty is seen as *"the biggest complication from the members on our work"* by one of the three respondents. Additionally, the organization is often not content with the frustrating fact that the universities do not get the whole picture of the value of

their work, as introduced by one respondent. Other than the overall pleasant interplay between the Austrian ministry and UNIKO, one of the three respondents expressed the sort of dissatisfactory feeling toward certain behaviour of the government officers that they are sometimes too obedient to the instructions or directions given by the European Commission particularly in the area of the Bologna Process. Among the responses, a quite distinguishing point was showed by one respondent, that the opposing voices from the university individuals were often capable of impacting UNIKO, at least it was strong enough to be received by the upper management level of the organization.

Therefore, regarding the possible forces from the external environment which may hinder or complicate the organization's work in university autonomy, the results from EUA and UNIKO are quite different, but both concluded that the overall interruptions were actually small. The reasons are multiple dimensional, and the basic one lies in the different systematic levels at which these two intermediary organizations are practising. In another word, diverse external environments and the organization natures result in various minor factors that influence or hamper the work of the organizations in terms of university autonomy.

4.5 Theme 4: Actions towards the problems

Since both EUA and UNIKO are seeking the best interest of their members which refers to the universities and intimately related Rector's conferences, they adopt similar approaches in facing either the challenges or the pressures from the external contexts. The common and key strategy for them is communication, but the specific practices they use are different according to the interview responses.

Regarding the divergent messages from the policy makers at European level, which sound quite confusing to EUA, what the association does is *“trying to interpret the EU policies, and sometimes they develop our own visions based on the diversified messages received from the European level of the authorities in Brussels”*. Another pattern of communication employed by EUA, in the situation when the association does not hold the same view as the proposed EU policies or actions by the government authority, is to *“speak out their thoughts by presenting empirical evidences collected from their member universities and the national conferences”*. Unlike the seemingly proactive attitude embedded in the approaches used by EUA, UNIKO tends to tackle the external problems

in a relatively moderate way. As its biggest challenge is that the members often have their own opinions in educational matters which are not the same between them, the organization has to get involved shortly to help consolidate a common position among them by *“bringing them to meetings, coordinating between them, trying hard to convince them that it is will better to go together rather than to be alone in your own way.* As to another challenge when contradictory opinions shown between the universities and the Austrian ministry, one respondent described it with the word of *“struggle”* which directly conveyed that it is a complex and even awkward situation for UNIKO. Besides the common solutions of negotiation and communication, sometimes *“they also try to speak to the ministry, in that sense deliver the discomfort of the universities to the ministry”*. But sometimes, UNIKO seeks help with the media such as the press release.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents the summary of the research findings, limitations of the study and implications of the results, by relating the findings to prior research. The summary is a brief synopsis of the results of the data analysis of the interviews, the websites and the documents. The limitations addressed the defective parts derived from several aspects. And the implications are the practical interpretation of the study's results, as well as the recommendations for the future research interested in further exploration of the analogous topics.

5.1 Summary of the findings

For the purpose of this study, the paper showcased how the two well-recognized IHEOs in different European systematic levels advocate university autonomy by exploring the possible challenges they meet in delivering this mission as well as how they combat them. Furthermore, this study examined the evolutionary concepts of the university autonomy and the various definitions of intermediary organizations in higher education. Still, there is a need to recapitulate the findings presented in the previous chapters, so as to ensure that all the research questions listed in Chapter One have been adequately answered.

Firstly, the political context was emphasized by all the respondents from both organizations because any change in the higher education legislation plays powerful impact on the intermediary organizations as the universities have to comply with the state regulations. The responses also generally indicated a high consciousness of the significance of a greater autonomy to the HE quality in the European higher education environment, meanwhile, the collaborations between the HE institutions and the industry were increased. Regional variations of the political contexts between the European level and Austrian level organizations were also shown in the responses, that EUA is exposed in the powerful and intense political atmosphere where the EU power games from the political arena are vibrant and influential to other fields such as education and economy while the Austrian ministry maintains relatively harmonious and regular interactions with UNIKO.

Secondly, the respondents from both organizations showed that they have similar perception of university autonomy, moreover, the mission of advocating university

autonomy had been embedded in the foundation of the organizations. Though the interview participants are from different units of either organization, they all pointed out that their notion of university autonomy stresses the strengthening of the overall university leadership rather than academic freedom or any autonomy of the individuals in the university. The perception of this notion is compatible with the simple fact that UNIKO is the national Rectors' Conference in Austria and EUA is the association of the European universities aiming at strengthening the universities in Europe.

With regards to the organization's impact on university autonomy, a conclusion could be easily reached from the responses from the interviews, that both organizations have been playing positive effect on university autonomy in their functioning systems though with distinctive approaches. While some intermediary bodies such as the Higher Education Council in Turkey, are criticized by owning excessive power which usually belonged to the government thus resulting in too much interference with the autonomy of the universities (Visakorpi, Stankovic, Pedrosa & Rozsnyai, 2008), one respondent from UNIKO made explicitly that they have been keeping away from the universities' internal affairs, and the organization's remit has been mainly limited to facilitating the collective view of the 21 member universities.

Thirdly, difficulties exist with respect to the advocacy of university autonomy to both EUA and UNIKO. Some of them are derived from the HE stakeholders such as the education authorities, the member universities, some are brought about by the political turbulences and austerity which sometimes also appear as weighty impediments to the advocacy. However, neither of the two organizations see the difficulties strong enough to hinder what they aim to achieve, though they could be disturbing at certain period such as the situation of austerity in overall Europe these years. Regarding these, both organizations actively react to all the problems emerged and strive to surmount them with the peaceful approaches of communication and cooperation.

5.2 Limitations of the study

The nature of the study and the methodological approaches introduced prior determined not only the strength and validity of the results, but also necessarily some of its limitations. Combining with other negative factors, three major limitations have been detected in this study.

The first limitation is resulted from the time constraint for conducting the research, which inevitably affected the quality of the research preparation and the numbers of the interviews could be conducted. For example, the interview questions were not tailor designed to each potential interview participant due to the insufficient time to conduct a more profound desk research on their professional background information. Likewise, there was also not enough time to review all the collected reports which are highly relevant to the case organizations as well as their HE systems. The other limitation lies in the availability of the intended interview subjects, both the case organization and the interviewees of it. The initial plan of this study is to collect data from three intermediary organizations from different European HE systems, aiming to display a more diversified landscape of the practising IHEOs in different systematic levels, as well the attention will also be given to the types of the organizations which are a supranational body, a national body from international organization and a purely national body. Ultimately, the number of the cases had to be narrowed down to two as the selected purely national organization was unable to provide data before the deadline of the study. Of course, back-up plans for this situation were prepared, however, the fourth case organization was not able to join my study for unexpected concern. Besides, the researcher attempted to contact some staff working in the unit of Research and Innovation as well as the unit of Communications, Marketing & Events of EUA, however, none of them were available for interview.

Secondly, while the semi-structured qualitative research design endowed the research with the opportunity to explore in-depth insight on the phenomenon of university autonomy in the European higher education, the focus of the intermediary organizations determined that the findings and results were generalized exclusively from the perspectives of the HE institutions. As a consequence, the research could not provide comprehensive observations about university autonomy from the influences of the government authorities or other stakeholders in the European higher education, though the interplay in university autonomy between the intermediary organizations and certain external stakeholders such as the European Commission, Austrian ministry were also noted.

Another limitation may also be noticed, that the study was mainly relied on the materials and data produced in the language of English due to the language constraints of the

researcher. The literature written in Chinese was supplementing to the study, but since the research objects of this study are European organizations and systems, the information obtainable in the Chinese language therefore are second handed or interpreted by the Chinese authors which may already contain certain research bias of the particular authors.

5.3 Implications

Based on the findings and the theories that were presented prior, this study is expected to be of significance in the implications for the practical field, and also conclusions were made about the possible directions for the future research of similar topics.

The first major contribution of the research findings is targeted at the existing HE issues relevant to university autonomy or the intermediary organizations. The study explored the possible problems stemmed from the external environment the well-known case organizations from two distinguished systematic HE levels, and the actions the organizations take to deal with them. Accordingly, it provided much needed empirical data to the intermediary organizations which are seeking solutions to similar problems. Besides, the empirical evidence on the enhancement of university autonomy that EUA and UNIKO have prompted is sufficient to be treated as the learning materials for many developing HE systems, either in Europe or the rest of the world, which are seeking effective measures to accelerate university autonomy. Also, this study examined the organization's management in confronting external problems coming from different places, the findings of which is vital importance in the sense that it will allow the EU and Austrian policy makers, the related stakeholders as well as the two organizations themselves to conduct self-examination on how they are doing in university autonomy and where they actually are in contributing to the mission of building stronger universities. For example, it happens that some HE administrators or the intermediary organizations pick up illusions on what they should be doing when the mission is long-term and requires persistent effort.

The second important implication of the study findings is also of practical value, but to the regional communities such as the EU, ASEAN, East Asian Community which plan to establish supranational IHEOs or are in the middle of refining the existing intermediary organizations. Moreover, given the fact that very few research has been done on

supranational organizations, not to mention those in the field of higher education, the findings of this study became very important. Other regions thus could derive the managerial experiences of EUA or even UNIKO taking account that it is a national body of the inter-government HE network - Rector's Conference, in Europe.

Bearing the nature of exploratory and interpretative, it is apparent that this study allows opportunities for future research. In another word, more research could definitely dedicate to improving the methodological construct of this research and further elaborating the study findings. First of all, this research falls short of bringing forward a concrete figure of the impact that the external stakeholders brought to EUA and UNIKO, as well as the influences of the two intermediary organizations play on university autonomy in EHEA and Austrian higher education. Hence, further studies could extend to statistical exploration with the help of quantitative research method or mixed methods, on the basis of the qualitative findings of this study. On the other hand, researchers interested in this topic could maximize the practical value of the study by applying the findings to specific issues that HE stakeholders are concerning about, namely, carrying out practical solutions or suggestions to each stakeholder notably the policy makers, HE institutions, and the IHEOs. Admittedly, given that the angle of this study is the excellent practices of the positive examples among the IHEOs, the research does not include any defective parts or the futile actions of the two organizations have done in terms of advocating university autonomy. Thus, more research could be conducted in this aspect. Apart from these, future researchers could also attempt to define university autonomy suitable for the HE scenario nowadays, as well as to categorize the IHEOs covering all the notable types in the current higher education globally.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Consent Form

Title of research: Investigating the Role of Intermediary Organizations in Serving University Autonomy from Management Perspective: Case studies in the EHEA

Researcher: Ruixue Chen

Thesis supervisor: Filiz Keser Aschenberger & Thomas Estermann

Details of the research:

You have been invited to take part in a research study conducted by Ruixue Chen from Donau-Universität Krems in Austria. This research is intended to represent the master thesis for the fulfilment of the master program Research and Innovation in Higher Education. The purpose of the study is to identify the role of intermediary higher education organizations in European Higher Education Area in terms of institutional autonomy, by analysing the impact these organizations on the institutional autonomy of the universities, how they mediate between different stakeholders, and how they tackle the challenges resulting from the relationship between the stakeholders in order to achieve the mission.

Participation in the research:

You will participate in this research by agreeing to be interviewed. The interview is on voluntary basis only. Each interview will be at a time and place convenient to you. The interview will be held in English language, and it will contain questions from your own perception. You have the right to skip any questions that you do not want to answer, and to stop the interview at any time or for any reason. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded solely for the purposes of accurately transcribing the conversation. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes, but its duration may be extended if you volunteer to offer additional information and have available time.

Confidentiality:

The data collected will be treated with utmost confidentiality, used only by me and my supervisors and for academic purposes only. Every precaution will be taken to protect the confidentiality. Interview data will be held and used on an anonymous basis, with no mention of your name, and the interview tapes and transcripts will be kept under lock. They will not be used other than for the purposes described above and third parties will not be allowed access to them (except as may be required by the law). However, if you request it, you will be supplied with a copy of your interview transcript so that you can comment on and edit it as you see fit.

Contact:

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. Please also feel free to contact me if you have any questions related to the research and the interview process at the following e-mail address: ruixue.chen@edu.donau-uni.ac.at.

A copy of this form will be given to you to keep for your records.

Statement of consent:

I have read the above information and I voluntarily agree to participate in this research.

I give my consent for the data to be used for the purpose specified above.

I give my consent for the interview to be audio recorded.

Name of participant	Signature	Date
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Name of researcher	Signature	Date
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Appendix B: Interview Guide

Research Topic: Investigating the Role of Intermediary Organizations in Serving University Autonomy from Management Perspective: Case studies in the EHEA

Dear XX,

Thank you very much for accepting my interview! My research is to the completion of my master thesis, and the topic is the role of intermediary organization and the institutional autonomy in European Higher Education Area. The purpose of the research is to identify the role of them from different system levels (hereby, supranational and national level) in actual operation in terms of university autonomy. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes, but it can be extended if you are willing to contribute more time or offer more information. During the interview, I will audio record if you don't mind, which is only for the accurate transcription of our conversation. For your privacy, anything you said during the interview as well as your personal information will be kept with utmost confidentiality. Do you have any questions about me and the interview?

Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been working at EUA/UNIKO? What are your main responsibilities?
2. Could you describe me the role of UNIKO in Austrian higher education system and European Higher Education Area respectively? How do you locate yourself in this large system of universities? What are the tasks of UNIKO?
3. Could you describe me the role of EUA in the EHEA and the national HE systems of the member states respectively? How do you locate yourself in this large system of universities? What are the tasks of EUA?

4. How would you describe the political, social and economic context that EUA/UNIKO functions in? And what are the impacts of these contexts on the functions of EUA/UNIKO?

5. How would you describe the connection between the EU educational authorities and EUA?

a) How strong is this connection? What is the influence of this connection on the work of EUA?

6. How would you describe the connection between the educational authorities in the member states and EUA?

a) How strong is this connection? What is the influence of this connection on the work of EUA?

7. How would you describe the connection between the Austrian government authorities and UNIKO?

a) How strong is this connection? What is the influence of this connection on the work of UNIKO?

8. How would you describe the connection between the member universities and EUA/UNIKO?

a) How strong is this connection? What is the influence of this connection on the work of EUA/UNIKO?

9. What do you think of university autonomy? How would you define institutional autonomy from the perspective of higher education institutions? What is the importance of institutional autonomy for higher education institutions? And for EUA/UNIKO?

10. In recent years, some scholars argue that some intermediary organizations play negative effect on universities' autonomy by interfering too much into the universities' affairs or taking away certain freedom. How do you evaluate EUA/UNIKO in this issue? Does it contribute or does it limit?

11. Could you share with me any pressures or obstacles from external environment that hinder or complicate your work in relation to university autonomy? Any examples? What are your usual measures to confront them?

12. How does EUA/UNIKO face or work out these problems? Or what are your usual measures to confront them?

13. Based on your experience as functioning as an intermediary body between the state and the universities, what are your suggestions for other intermediary organizations esp. those in emerging higher education systems in European Higher Education Area? And in a global context, for example, buffer organizations in Asian countries where the political control is stronger?

14. Is there anything else you would like to add to what we have been talking about? Any concluding remarks you would like to make regarding the role of EUA/UNIKO in university autonomy?

15. May I contact you by email for any possible further questions?

Thank you again for participating in this interview and contributing to my research as your participation will be very crucial for this study.