

Between organizational and disciplinary identity: diversity of research units profiles in Swiss communication sciences

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1 Introduction and background

The aim of this paper is, first, to systematically analyze and compare activity profiles of a set of research units (RU) in Swiss communication sciences and, second, to investigate to which extent these profiles are related to three different factors, namely the institutional context of the considered RU, the scientific subfield to which the unit belongs inside communication sciences and, finally, the history and strategic orientation of the unit itself.

Our work draws on previous studies on the concept of profiles of RU, which shows that profiles are useful instruments in order, first, to conceptualize and, second, to measure the different patterns of activities of these units and thus to understand diversity inside institutions and scientific fields ((Larédo & Mustar, 2000; Probst, Lepori, De Filippo, & Ingenhoff, 2011; Schmoch, Schubert, Jansen, Heidler, & von Görtz, 2010).

Additionally, the paper builds on previous work concerning the strategic profiles of research units, their life-cycle trajectories and their relationships with their context ((Braam & Van den Besselaar, 2010)), but, thanks of the availability of a systematic set of indicators which has been developed in a project funded by the Conference of the Rectors of Swiss Universities ((Probst et al., 2011)), extends this analysis to a broader set of units, allowing to address systematically the issue of the relationship between RE profiles and characteristics of its environment.

The objectives of the paper are thus the following:

- First, to quantitatively analyze and compare the activity profiles of research units in Swiss communication sciences.
- Second, to inquire to which extent observed differences in profiles (if any) are related to two main environmental factors: first, the organizational context, notably, the main objectives and strategic directions of the HEI where the unit belongs to, respectively to the larger social and political context (e.g. linguistic regions); second, the disciplinary identify and social structure of the scientific domain where the unit is located.
- Third, to provide some insights on the mechanisms driving strategic choices of research units concerning their profile and, more, specifically on the balance between conformity to social codes of the disciplinary field and resource dependency ((Oliver, 1991)).

2 Data sources and methods

The data used for this analysis come from a large-scale project mapping Swiss communication sciences funded by the Conference of the Rectors of Swiss Universities and realized in close

collaboration with the Swiss Association of Communication. In the project, the notion of profile has been operationalized to a set of indicators, which are then used to construct unit profiles, as related to the benchmark of the whole sample. To this aim, suitable procedures for aggregation, normalization and benchmarking have been developed to transform a set of about 20 indicators into a unit profile in the six dimensions considered (see (Probst et al., 2011) for a description of the methodology). The current sample includes 14 RU in 7 Swiss universities, but it will be extended during spring 2011 to about 20 units, including also some units in Universities of Applied Sciences.

Dimension	Indicator	Total	Average
Sample composition	Number of RU	14	
	universities covered	7	
Human resources	Total FTE	88.55	6.32
	Professors (FTE)	18.67	1.33
	Senior researchers	8.47	0.65
	Post-docs	13.45	0.96
	Doctoral students (FTE)	47.96	3.43
External funding	Total funds from public agencies (CHF)	1'902'784.0	158'565.3
	Total funds from public and non profit organ	3'022'850.0	215'917.9
	Total funds for private organization (CHF)	375'056.0	26'789.7
Research training	N doctoral theses	51.00	3.64
	N doctoral students	116.00	8.29
	N Hours organized PhD	432.00	30.86
	N Hours taught PhD	254.00	18.14
Teaching BA	N. theses	175.00	12.50
	N Hours organized	3432.00	245.14
	N Hours taught	2932.00	209.43
Teaching MA	N. theses	140.00	10.00
	N Hours organized	5114.00	365.29
	N Hours taught	3300.00	235.71
Teaching FE	N. theses	8.00	0.57
	N Hours organized	933.00	66.64
	N Hours taught	221.00	15.79
Science	Funds from public agencies	1'902'784.0	158'565.3
	Total N of publications	940.0	67.1
	Total N scientific awards	93.0	6.6
Private	Total funds from private organizations (CHF)	375'056.0	26'789.7
	Presentations to private companies	27.0	1.9
	Research reports	26.0	1.9
Public/non profit	Total funds from public and non profit organ	3'022'850.0	215'917.9
	Presentation to public and non-profit	34.0	2.4
	Research reports	58.0	4.1
	Mediapresence	40.0	3.1

Table 1. Descriptive presentation of the sample

For the analysis, these observed profiles will be matched with following additional information.

a) Descriptive information on the characteristics of the Swiss higher education system and, especially, on differences between individual institutions in their mission and strategic orientation, including specialization on specific subject domains, cultural and linguistic traditions (e.g. between the three linguistic regions of Switzerland) and, finally, the differences between universities and universities of applied sciences (Fumasoli & Lepori, 2011; Lepori, 2007). This will highlight to which extent environmental conditions drive to different pressures expectations on RU, e.g. concerning their focus towards research rather than education, the priority domains inside communication etc.

b) Information on the diversity of traditions inside Swiss communication sciences from previous studies, which will be matched with the declarations of heads of RU concerning their current and future subjects of specialization ((Lepori & Probst, 2009)(SGKM Schweizerische Gesellschaft für

Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft, 2004)). This is highly relevant as communication sciences are known as a field with different traditions, borrowing largely from other disciplines and where distinct communities are present (e.g. publishing in different journals. Hence, the specific domain in which subunits are active is likely to also influence their profile and behavior especially concerning publication activities.

c) Information on the strategy of the concerned RU coming from interviews of heads of RU declaring their current and future strategic priorities concerning the RU profile and its growth; these data will be integrated with descriptive information on the history and recent evolution of these units derived from websites, reports and other available sources. This information is relevant as the profile of the RU might be to some extent determined by historical factors and by deliberate choices of their heads, being the influence of environmental factors.

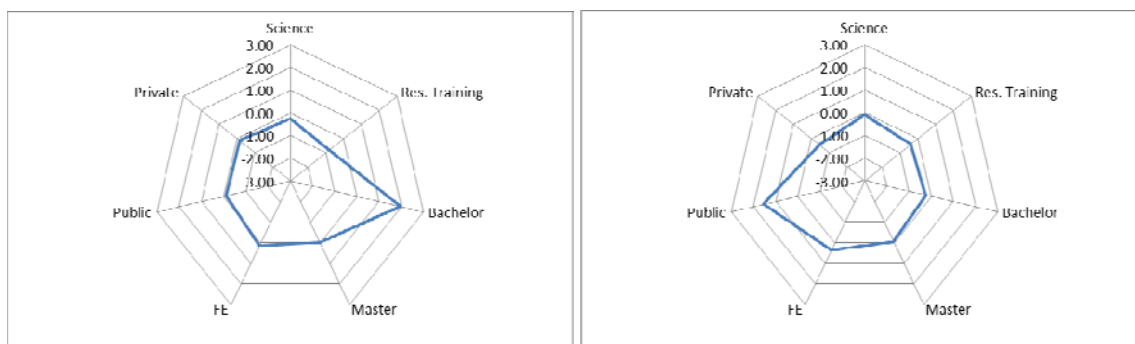
3 Preliminary results

From currently available data and analyses, following preliminary results can be derived.

a) First, the developed quantitative instrument is able to depict reasonably well the diversity of activity profiles in the field and displays significant differences between the units, despite the fact that the sample is rather small. This diversity is reproduced both at the level of individual indicators (e.g. the share of publications in journals), as well as in the aggregated profiles. Moreover, discussion with heads of units themselves shows that they feel their profile of activity correctly represented by these indicators.

Methodologically, we conclude that, first, the notion of profile is a suitable tool in order to depict and analyze diversity of RU in a field and, second, that it is possible to operationalize it through a set of simple and available indicators which can be collected from the unit's themselves. This result is quite important for future studies of social sciences and humanities.

b) Second, even inside a small field and with a limited number of units, differences in orientation are important (see Figure 1). Preliminary analyses display systematic differences between dimensions: thus, variation between units is lower for dimensions concerning science and research training, as well as bachelor education; much stronger differences emerge for master education, orientation to the public sector and, especially, towards the private sector (including continuing education). In the paper, a systematic analysis of these variations will be performed and attempts will be made to group units with similar profiles.



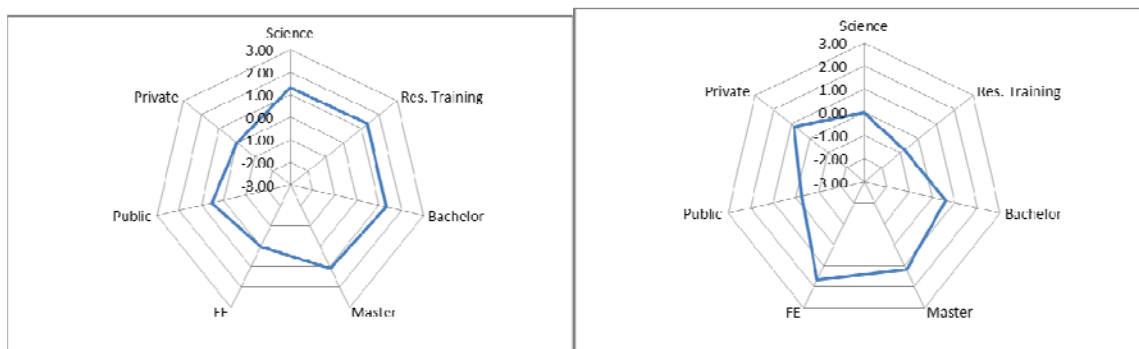


Figure 1. Profiles of RU in Swiss communication sciences: four examples

c) Third, preliminary evidence displays that belonging to different subdisciplines of communication sciences represents the main explanatory factor of the observed differences and that most units can be grouped into three clusters, namely those belonging to the traditional German-speaking cluster of media communication, those related to the Anglosaxon-oriented tradition of communication sciences and finally those related to economics and management (media management, corporate communication). To some extent, disciplinary traditions and institutional orientations match themselves, as in the case of the University of Sankt Gallen, with its focus on economics and management.

d) Forth, there is evidence that, inside these disciplinary orientations, resource dependency is a major driving factors of the choice of the profile. Two major orientations emerge in this respect: focusing on public contracts and transfer to the public sector in the domains where there is a large social demand, like education or health communication to one side and focusing on undergraduate education in domains where there are large number of students like corporate communication or mass communication.

In the full paper, these preliminary results will be further developed and supported with empirical evidence.

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