

# Institutional logics in higher education: What we learn from the existing research and suggestions for future research

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## Abstract

This paper reveals those institutional logics discussed in the higher education literature and suggests a route towards optimising institutional logics analysis in higher education research. The findings and arguments presented in the paper are based on, and extend from, the authors' recent publication on 'Institutional logics in higher education research' (Cai and Mountford 2021) and their presentation at CGHE webinar on the same topic on 18th January 2022.

*Keywords: Institutional logics, institutional theory, university, higher education research*

## Introduction

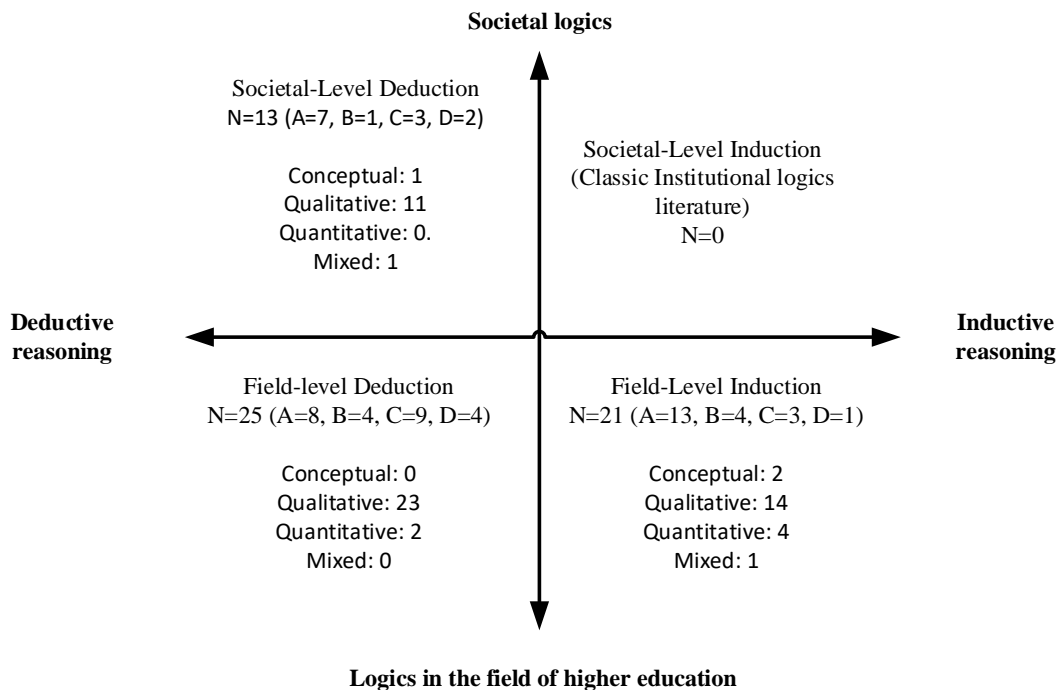
Institutional logics were initially introduced by Alford and Friedland (1985) and further developed by Thornton and Ocasio (1999) and Thornton et al. (2012) to describe contradictory practices and beliefs inherent in modern societies that shape individuals' actions and influence institutional changes. Institutional logics are defined as "the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton and Ocasio 1999, 804). According to Thornton et al. (2012), there are seven ideal-type institutional logics in Western societies: family, community, religion, state, market, profession, and corporation logics.

Since 2015, there has been growing literature applying institutional logics in higher education (Cai and Mountford 2021; Cai and Mehari 2015). This is understandable

since higher education increasingly represents a complex institutional system containing plural and even contesting institutional logics (Bastedo 2009). For instance, Oertel and Soll (2017) build upon Gumpert (2000) to warn that multiple logics and the challenge of balancing competing institutional demands may now be the rule rather than the exception in higher education. While more and more researchers have engaged in institutional logics analysis in higher education studies, they often encounter challenges in analysing the complex institutional environment of higher education. Readers may be justifiably surprised and confused by proliferating institutional logics presented in the higher education literature. In response to these challenges, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: What approaches are taken to institutional logics analysis in higher education? What institutional logics are identified/applied in higher education studies? How can we optimise institutional analysis in higher education research? The answers to the questions are mainly based on the authors' recent article 'Institutional logics in higher education research' (Cai and Mountford 2021). This study outlined the state-of-the-art application of institutional logics in higher education studies by scrutinising 59 articles that apply institutional logics in organisation studies in higher education. Meanwhile, in the present paper, we further integrate our reflections on our previous publication, which were presented at the CGHE webinar on 18th January 2022.

### **Approaches to institutional logics analysis in higher education studies**

We found that approaches to institutional logics analysis in higher education studies can be positioned on a two-dimension typology (Figure 1). In the first dimension, we distinguish two ways of identifying institutional logics that are respectively associated with inductive and deductive reasoning. In the second dimension, we contextualise the use of the institutional logics approach based on whether the logics are identified at the societal or field level. We further allocated the 59 reviewed articles to the quadrant associated with the primary approach employed. While the approach of Societal-Level Induction is typically only seen in the classic institutional logics literature, the approaches discovered in our analysis of higher education studies include Societal-Level Deduction, Field-Level Deduction, and Field-Level Induction. (Cai and Mountford 2021).



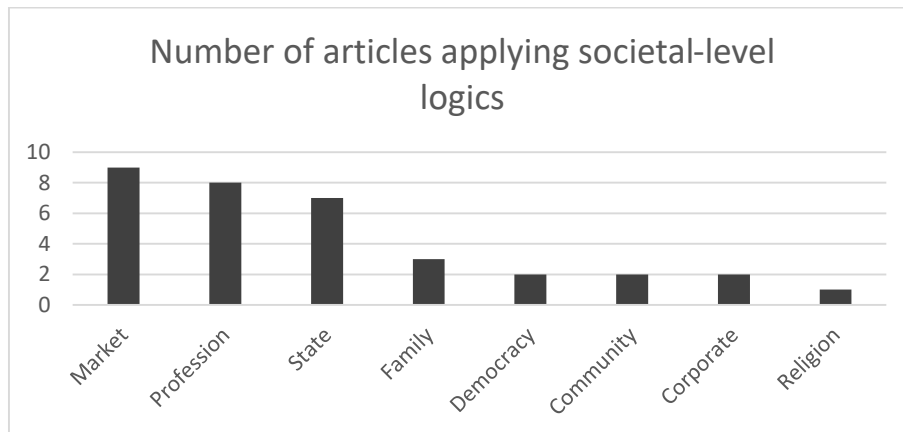
N: Number of articles of higher education research  
 Conceptual: Number of conceptual papers  
 Qualitative: Number of qualitative papers  
 Quantitative: Number of quantitative papers  
 Mixed: Number of mixed methods papers

A: Higher education journals  
 B: Journals including higher education research as a sub-field  
 C: Management and business journals  
 D: Other social science journals

Source: Cai and Mountford (2021)  
 Figure 1. Typology of institutional logics applications.

### Institutional logics identified in the different approaches and related challenges

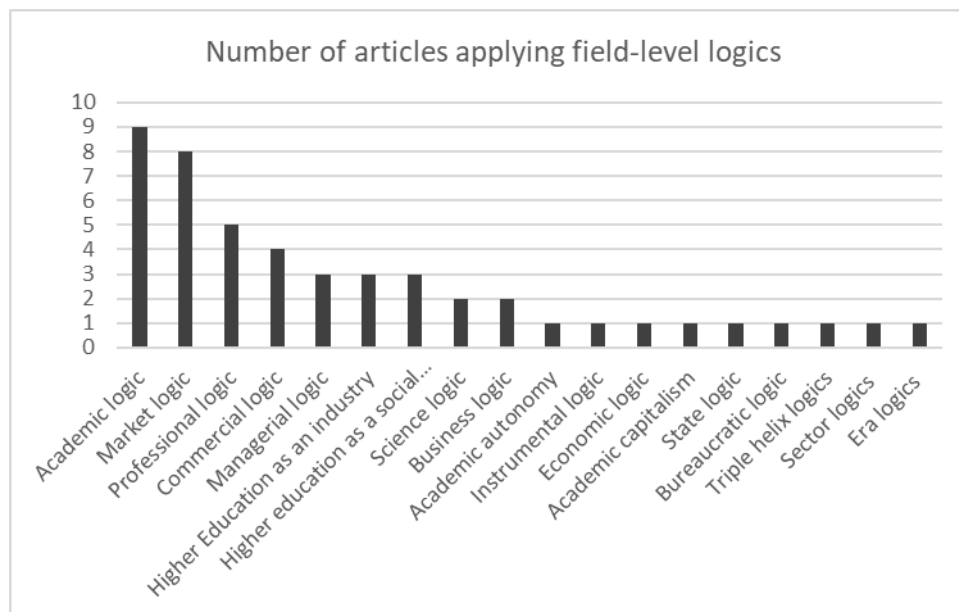
This quadrant 'Societal-Level Deduction' includes those empirical studies that directly apply the societal institutional logics defined in classic institutional logics literature. All the eight societal logics, as ideal types of logics proposed by the classic literature of institutional logics, i.e. the seven logics by Thornton et al. (2012) combined with democracy as proposed by Friedland and Alford (1991), were mentioned in the reviewed articles in this quadrant (Figure 2). In each individual study, 2-5 logics were applied: 5 logics (2 articles), 4 logics (3 articles), 4 logics (5 articles), and 2 logics (3 articles). The most popular logics discussed in the literature are market, profession, and state logics.



Source: Cai and Mountford (2021)

Figure 2. Logics applied in the approach of societal-level deduction.

This quadrant ‘Field-Level Deduction’ combines field level logics with deductive reasoning. It includes those studies that cite certain field-level institutional logics from other sources as ideal types to guide their empirical analysis. Altogether, we found 18 such logics applied in the literature in this camp (Figure 3).



Source: Cai and Mountford (2021)

Figure 3. Logics applied in the approach of field-level deduction.

The final quadrant ‘Field-Level Induction’ houses those studies that inductively analyse their empirical data without initial reference to previously identified institutional logics at either societal or field level. The studies using this approach often, though not always, result in the modification and/or expansion of the range of logics at field or actor levels. Altogether, more than 30 new logics were created. Some examples are as follows.

- Managerialism vs traditional colloquialism; Collegial, efficient-collegial, managerial archetypes;
- Profiles of research groups through the lens of institutional logics (e.g. Basic scientific research profile, Broad strategic research profile and Applied service profile);
- Service-oriented logic vs. German specific classical logic;
- Logics of economic sustainability vs. market endowment vs. education;
- Academic identities through the lens of institutional logics (e.g. Lecturers with an academic degree, National lecturers-researchers, Would-be integrators into the global research community, Engineers).

### Suggestions for future research

Our study found two problems in institutional analysis in higher education research. One is the problem of too few logics. If eight institutional logics, as societal-level ideal types, have been identified, then there is no room for further discovery of how particular logics of specific institutions are at work. The second threat is an excessive proliferation of logics. If logics become simply a particular organisation's engrained practices, sense of identity or sense of purpose, detached from a tight coupling with societal institutions, then an institutional logic becomes an empty concept. These call for improvement in institutional analysis. Below are our suggestions.

First, as studies applying societal-level logics and field-level logics tend to take different analysis approaches and understand institutional logics differently, there is a need to differentiate the definitions of societal-level logics and field-level logics. While the definition of institutional logics by Friedland and Alford (1991) can be understood to specifically refer to societal-level logics, the definition by Thornton and Ocasio (1999) or Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) can be more flexibly applied to logics at both levels. It seems, however, that authors of our reviewed studies are not always sensitive to such distinctions.

Second, we call for rethinking field level logics. While logics at the societal level have been well elaborated and are, for the most part, widely understood and accepted, at the field level, logics are not necessarily so clear. In our ongoing research, we propose that societal logics can appear as field-level instantiations or merge to form hybrids. Also, new field-level logics can also emerge but often these are confused with ideologies thus limiting the theory-building potential of the institutional logics approach.

Third, the challenges regarding conceptual rigour in institutional logics analysis in higher education call for optimal methodological approaches that help realise a 'theory-method fit' (Gehman et al. 2017). Different levels of institutional logics are related to separate, though interrelated, theory building levels concerning institutional logics. To achieve the theory-method fit, the four approaches to institutional logics

analysis (Figure 1) could contribute to the building of institutional logics theory at different theory levels (grand, middle and local) and synergy building between the approaches is required.

Finally, when conducting institutional logics analysis, one must be aware of the key components in the analysis, namely institutional systems, actors and their actions, and templates of institutional logics. Institutional systems are different from organisational fields, which are central to neo-institutional theory analysis (Cai and Liu 2020): An institutional system may cut across several organizational fields (Mountford and Geiger 2021). An organizational field is characterised by a structuration that results in less diversity while an institutional system is comprised of mingling and conflicting institutional logics. Institutional logics can only be observed through individual actors' perceptions and behaviours. When identifying institutional logics in the field of higher education, it is recommended to start with existing templates, either ideal-type society logics (Alford and Friedland 1985; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012) or well-elaborated field level logics in higher education literature, but researchers should maintain a sharp eye to discover possible new logics beyond the templates.

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