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Higher Education Reform in Roman Catholic Ecclesiastical Institutions: Responses from French institutions to quality management imperatives

Marine Condette^{a*}

International Centre of Higher Education Management, University of Bath, England, UK

*Corresponding author: Marine Condette, Email: mc2906@bath.ac.uk
Address: *University of Bath, England, United Kingdom*

Abstract

This study aims to observe and explain how Roman Catholic higher education institutions in France are adapting to the Holy See's modernization agenda through quality assurance (QA). Using a mixed-method research design, the study aims to unearth differences in policy implementation, and to understand these differences through the lens of organizational ambidexterity. In particular, it will look at managerial actions influencing the level of adaptation to change of the institutions. The findings of this research in-progress will contribute to the under-researched area of ecclesiastical higher education, and to the organizational ambidexterity literature in a non-business environment. Understanding the factors influencing QA implementation will benefit practitioners but also policy-makers working on future regulations across the globe.

Cette étude tend à observer et expliquer comment les établissements d'enseignement supérieur catholiques en France se sont adaptés aux exigences de modernisation du Saint-Siège, et plus particulièrement par le biais de nouveaux processus d'assurance qualité. Cette étude utilise une méthode de recherche mixte et cherche à explorer les différences d'implémentation de la nouvelle politique qualité, et de comprendre ces différences sous l'angle de l'ambidexité organisationnelle. Les actions managériales influençant le niveau d'adaptation au changement sont analysées dans un deuxième temps. Les résultats de cette analyse en cours contribueront au domaine peu étudié de l'enseignement supérieur ecclésiastique et à la littérature sur l'ambidexité organisationnelle dans un contexte non-commercial. Mieux comprendre les facteurs influençant l'implémentation de politique d'assurance qualité bénéficiera également aux praticiens et décideurs pour de futures régulations partout dans le monde.

Keywords: ecclesiastical higher education, quality assurance, organizational ambidexterity.

Introduction and Context

In 2018, the Roman Catholic Pope launched a higher education reform with the promulgation of a new Apostolic Constitution, *Veritatis Gaudium* (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020; Pope Francis, 2018). With 792 institutions across the globe, it has been viewed as one of the largest educational reform attempts worldwide (Matthews, 2020; Vettori et al., 2019).

Veritatis Gaudium represents an attempt to modernize ecclesiastical higher education institutions (EHEIs), with a redefinition of their roles to be more in line with today's world, by collaborating with other disciplines, institutions and religions, increasing the research production, and addressing contemporary world challenges (Pope Francis, 2018). It was referred to as "a radical paradigm shift" for ecclesiastical higher education (Pope Francis, 2018, p.4). Central to its implementation is the role of AVEPRO, the Holy See's Quality Assurance (QA) Agency. AVEPRO is charged to promote and evaluate quality at all EHEIs. An analysis of AVEPRO's quality policy shows a dual goal of consolidation of the current educational and missionary activities of the institutions, while encouraging change and innovation. This new "efficiency and innovation" or "stability and change" mandate presents an organizational dynamic that can be explored through the concept of ambidexterity, which, in the management literature, refers to an organization's ability to pursue two disparate sets of activities (Duncan, 1976; March, 1991). This study will shed light on the state of implementation of the new QA policy and modernization agenda of an under researched higher education system, contributing to the literature on QA implementation and providing practical takeaways for policymakers and QA practitioners.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research on policy response patterns is extensive. In the QA context of this study, neo-institutionalism (Bromley & Powell, 2012; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and organizational culture (Cameron & Sine, 1999; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Tadesse Bogale & Debela, 2024) first appeared as evident go-to theoretical constructs to observe and understand organizational behavior. The review of both theories pointed to two important notions. First, change is a complex process and can be achieved successfully only if a balance is found between the maintenance of institutional norms, values and activities, in other words stability, and the need for adaptation or innovation. This will occur if the organizational culture allows for such equilibrium (Boin & Christensen, 2008; Hwang, 2023). Second, leadership plays a key role in conducting organizational change, by shaping and influencing the organizational structure and culture (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Csizmadia et al., 2008; Knight & Trowler, 2000). The theoretical braid of these two notions led to another construct within organizational management theories, organizational ambidexterity (OA). It arose as a particularly relevant theoretical lens, with its focus on how organizations deal with situations where they must handle diverse sets of activities. Leadership, or more specifically managerial actions, has been identified as core drivers of ambidexterity (Lubatkin et al., 2006; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008; Swart et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2016), linking back to its importance when observing and explaining QA implementation behaviors.

Ambidexterity literally refers to one's capacity to be agile with both arms. It looks at how organizations can manage the tensions between the preservation of existing practices (labelled *exploitation*) and the adoption of new ones (*exploration*) for effective change and sustainable performance (March, 1991). OA seems therefore to provide an insightful lens for investigating the response of EHEIs to the QA policy and by extension the modernization agenda of the Church. I therefore propose the following definition of ambidexterity for this research context:

Ambidexterity is the ability to both sustain and refine current practices (exploitation) and develop new practices (exploration) on the basis of quality processes, in an effort to ensure organizational performance.

Prior research points to key managerial practices or actions that can enable exploration and exploitation behaviors (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; Floyd & Lane, 2000; Petro et al., 2019; Swart et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2016). Synthesizing the previous scholarly work, four categories of managerial practices can be identified: communication, role-modeling, task-fulfillment and relation-focused activities.

Research Aim and Questions

Through the lens of organizational ambidexterity, I will address the research aim through three main research questions:

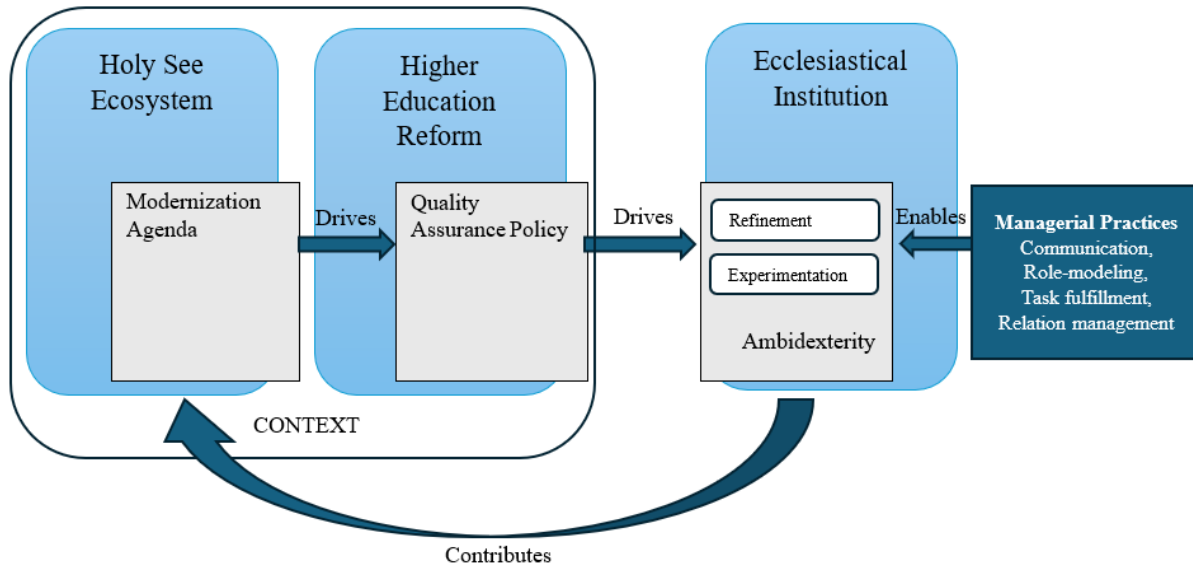
1. To what extent have ecclesiastical institutions managed to handle both gradual and radical change as per the QA policy? i.e., to what extent have EHEIs developed as ambidextrous organizations?

2. Are institutions showing different radical and incremental change patterns as a result of QA? i.e., are they showing more exploration or exploitation patterns, or is it balanced?
3. What do managers do to support the QA exercise as intended? i.e., how do they support ambidexterity?

The conceptual research framework is illustrated below.

Figure 1

Conceptual research framework (by author)



Methods

The study focuses on institutions based in France and a sequential mixed-method comparative research project will be employed, with each stage informing and guiding the next one. The methods developed by Swart et al. (2019) and Soares et al. (2018; 2021) were replicated, with the use of a survey to measure ambidexterity level and maturity, complemented with in-depth interviews at selected institutions to confirm the ambidexterity posture (stage 1) and detect the managerial actions that support the management of exploitation and exploration activities (stage 2).

Choice of France

France has been chosen for the number and diversity of the ecclesiastical higher education setting of the country. There are currently 16 faculties offering canonical degrees housed across eight institutions, as summarized in table 1 below.

Table 1

Ecclesiastical higher education institutions in France (by author)

Type	Institution	Faculty
Faculties embedded in a Catholic University	Catholic University of Lyon	Faculty of Philosophy
		Faculty of Theology and Religious Sciences
	Catholic University of Lille	Faculty of Theology
	Catholic University of the West UCO Angers	Faculty of Theology
	Catholic Institute of Paris	Faculty of Philosophy
		Faculty of Canon Law
		Faculty of Social Sciences, Economics and Law

		Theologicum - Faculty of Theology and Religious Sciences
	Catholic Institute of Toulouse	Faculty of Canon Law
		Faculty of Philosophy
		Faculty of Theology
Stand-alone Faculties	Loyola Paris Faculties	Faculty of Philosophy
		Faculty of Theology of Paris
	Ecole Cathedrale	Faculty Notre Dame
		Higher Institute of Religious Sciences
Faculty embedded in a Public University	University of Strasbourg	Faculty of Theology

Stage 1 - Measuring ambidexterity

The first stage is made of a survey sent to all EHEIs in France, with the intention to produce quantitative information on the ambidexterity level, contributing to the first research question. It will also permit the detection of differences in ambidexterity level, therefore responding to the second research question.

The survey is based on Lubatkin's (2006) methodology to measure exploration and exploitation activities within an organization. This method has been adapted and/or replicated multiple times to measure ambidexterity levels in varied contexts (Junni et al., 2013; Mom et al., 2007; Soares et al., 2018; Swart et al., 2019) therefore providing information on the degree of innovation or change mindset perceived by organizational actors. This will allow me to assess to what extent the EHEI has addressed not only the minimum QA requirements in a tick box manner (exploitation), but most importantly the change agenda of the Holy See (exploration).

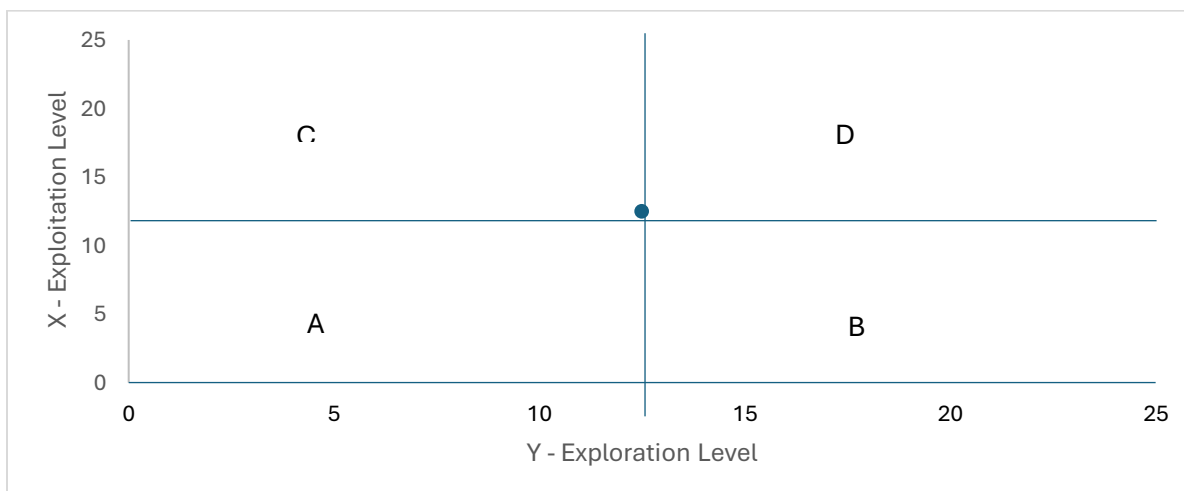
This survey will be sent to EHEIS' leaders, quality managers, staff and faculty members. Differences of ambidexterity level will be presented following Soares et al. (2018)'s two-step method:

1. Differentiating institutions across four ambidexterity taxonomies: A) Non-innovative Organization, B) Organization with high level of exploration, C) Organization with high level of exploitation, and D) Ambidextrous organization.
2. If a clustering occurs within the ambidextrous category (D), then a differentiation by maturity levels will be performed: I) Embryonic; II) Structured; III) Semi-developed; IV) Developed.

The survey will include a Likert-scale which will provide quantifiable information on exploration, exploitation and ambidexterity levels. Institutions will then be presented using a graph categorizing them in one of four ambidexterity quadrants, as shown below.

Figure 2

Ambidexterity orientation of EHEIs (by author)



Stage 2 - Identifying managerial determinants of ambidexterity

The survey will be complemented by interviews at selected institutions to assess the presence of managerial actions.

The choice of institutions will be based on survey results and documentary analysis. Interviewees will be the individuals who are at the center of managerial actions as it relates to QA. In some cases, it may be the dean or president, the vice-dean, the quality officer and/or the head of the department. The leadership function was first identified based on how the organizational structure of the institution is formally presented in the self-evaluation and audit reports, and to be confirmed during the interviews.

In line with other qualitative studies on ambidexterity, a priori codes for exploitation and exploration will be used to analyze the interviews in order to confirm the ambidexterity level identified in stage 1. Another set of coding will be used to assess the managerial actions permitting ambidexterity to develop in the institutions. Each of the six managerial actions will act as a priori codes to analyze the data, also leaving room for other codes to emerge from the interviews.

Documentary analysis will complement these two methods and inform the data analysis. This includes AVEPRO guidelines, publicly available evaluation reports, strategic plans from AVEPRO and EHEIs.

Anticipated Contributions and Conclusion

Using a mixed method approach, the study will fill the research void on the higher education system of the Holy See and provide information on the state of QA policy implementation in France in particular. Yet a research gap does not necessarily need to be closed if it does not contribute to scholarship or practice. Without intending to build generalizations, this case-based research nevertheless observes the phenomenon of differing responses of HEIs to external pressures and radical change, and some of the findings may enrich the literature on policy implementation studies and be utilized in other contexts. It will deepen the knowledge on the mode of implementation of QA policy, and the ambidexterity-related factors that facilitate or inhibit implementation, which in turn can explain differences across institutions based in a common environment. This may provide insights for practitioners and policymakers when implementing or developing policies.

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MARINE CONDETTE. Senior Accreditation Manager, EMEA at AACSB International, in The Netherlands, and currently pursuing a part-time DBA in Higher Education Management, School of Management, University of Bath, England, UK. Her research interests are quality assurance, change management and internationalization in the higher education field. mc2906@bath.ac.uk.