
Quest for university legitimacy: A Papua New Guinea case

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Abstract

Jubilee College is an Assemblies of God (AOG) church backed institution which was one of the newest aspirants to membership of the group of universities in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 2005. Between 2005 and 2009, the debate around Jubilee's status as a university highlighted that two legal authorities in PNG – the National Executive Council (NEC) and the Commission for Higher Education (CHE) (the regulatory body responsible for the higher education sector established in 1983 under an Act of Parliament) – had worked at cross purposes to each other. The NEC in its 2005 decision ostensibly conferred legitimacy to Jubilee College to operate as a university. However, the CHE contested Jubilee's legitimacy to conduct itself as a university based solely on the NEC decision. It argued that NEC had circumvented the CHE established process, protocol and convention to guide aspiring organizations to secure the right to be called a university and benefit from this legitimate status. CHE prevailed when in July 2009 the NEC rescinded its decision thus removing Jubilee's tenuous claim to university legitimacy.

Key words: institution, organization, institutionalization, isomorphism, organizational legitimacy, organizational field

Introduction

Jubilee's aspiration to be a university was not just an aspiration to join the PNG group of universities, it was also an aspiration to join an organization with a history going back to medieval Europe (Perkin, 1991; Wieruszowski, 1966). With such ancient roots, the university's arrival in PNG via Australia in 1965 is a very recent event. There are six universities in PNG with two more engaged in the legitimising process; one of these two is Jubilee, the case under discussion in this article. The other aspirant is the Lutheran University of Papua New Guinea. In 1965, the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) was established, followed soon after by the establishment of the University of Technology (UNITECH) in 1967. Both were modelled on Australian universities. The two have been joined by four more universities. They include University of Goroka, Vudal University (which was renamed University of Natural Resources and Environment), Pacific Adventist University and Divine Word University. All were established under declarations of the Government of the day in 1995. Although they would have been qualified for promotion to university status, there remains questions as to whether a sufficiently rigorous process as per existing standards was involved in their elevation (Commission

for Higher Education, 2009). The emerging concerns with adherence to protocol and convention began an earnest push to define nomenclature and clarify the 1983 Act in order to plug loopholes and better guide the sector.

In this new emerging regulatory context in 2005, the NEC in its decision No. 191/2005 ostensibly conferred on Jubilee the authority to operate as a university. This would have made Jubilee PNG's seventh university, and indeed, Jubilee operated as one on the basis of the NEC decision for at least three years albeit amidst voices of dissent even within the ranks of the Assemblies of God Church. The open contest of Jubilee's legitimacy as a university by the sectoral authority, CHE, in July of 2009, forced the NEC to rescind its decision, in so doing, removing Jubilee's tenuous claim to university status. Jubilee is still contesting the decision (Laepa, 2009; Talu, 2009; The National, 2007, 2010). It seems there was some justification for its contest as noted as there seemed to be no legally constituted conditions under which the title of the university could be used (Commission for Higher Education, 2009).

The fact that NEC reversed its decision was a significant validation of the authority of the CHE. It was also a signal to the public and potential aspirants to university status that a decision from one of the highest political authorities of the land on its own was not sufficient grounds to confer the right to be called a university in PNG. The Minister for Higher Education Science and Technology in the then Somare government, Michael Ogio, reported that the reason for the withdrawal of permit was that proper protocol and procedures had not been followed, hence the requirements necessary to accord Jubilee university status had not been fully complied with. The denial of permit by the legitimizing authority did not, however, deny Jubilee the right to function as an institute of higher learning, a stage in the long road to becoming a fully fledged university.

In this article, Jubilee's thwarted attempt to gain acceptance as a university in PNG is explored through the lens of new institutional theory of organizations and its related conceptual framework. This illustrates the forces that act on organizations to adopt a particular model, and how and why such models gain acceptance or undergo modification. Jubilee's failed attempt is presented as a case of university legitimacy contest in PNG. On a continuum, the shifting forces acting on the university context in PNG is traced in order to locate Jubilee in the shifting environmental contexts which determine the success of aspirations to become a university. The basis of the contest is predominantly regulatory suggesting though there are other forces of legitimacy acting at the same time on Jubilee.

Institutional theory

Many theories exist to explain why and how organizations order themselves and conduct their activities. Some of these theories are resource contingency theory, open systems theory, population ecology theory and institutional theory. Institutional theory accepts that the ways organizations organize their governance structures, strategies and processes, are responses to many different

environmental forces acting on them (Deephouse, 1996). These include political, legal, organizational, market and cultural. This perspective is a position against the closed systems view that accounted for organizational structure through the classical, rationalist and efficiency frame (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1987; Selznick, 1957). However, institutional theory's particular focus is in advancing that some organizational models are a consequence of deeply embedded structures, processes, values and beliefs that are the bases of their legitimacy (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). In other words, culture dictates why and how they organize and do things. But, culture is a concept the definition of which is not easy to pin down as will be seen later in this article.

Institutions, organizations and institutionalization

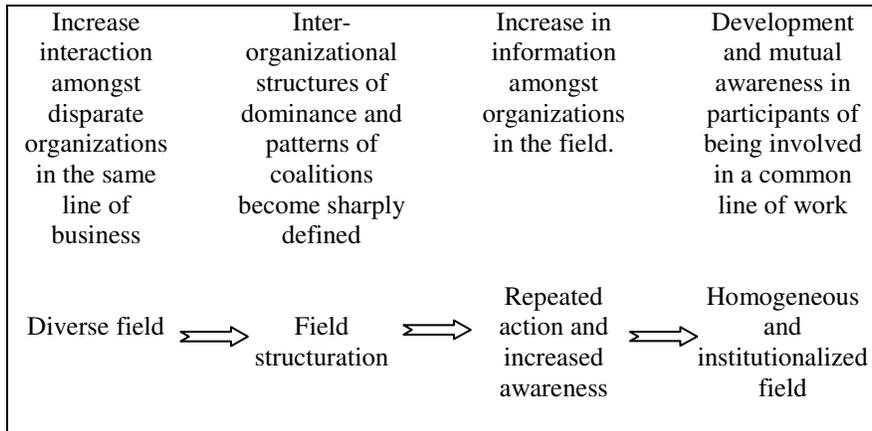
Institutions, organizations and institutionalization are three of the cluster of concepts associated with institutional theory. Other concepts include organizational field, organizational isomorphism and organizational legitimacy. These are defined in this article and used to frame the discussion on Jubilee's experience.

But first, organizations and institutions may often be used as interchangeable concepts, but theorists make a distinction between them. The early views see *organizations* as purely rational and technical devices concerned with adaptation and efficiency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Selznick, 1957). They are designed to accomplish specific tasks at hand for organizational success, and are also predisposed to modification as prevailing market conditions in the environment dictate in order to survive and prosper (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kraatz & Zajac, 1996; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Legitimacy conferred for adherence to culture is not their primary concern.

Institutions, on the other hand, are not mere tools to be easily discarded or modified to keep pace with the dictates of market conditions. They are treated as tangible rules, social facts or communities infused with value and concerned with self maintenance and self-perpetuation as ends in themselves (Selznick, 1957; Zucker, 1987). These attributes ensure institutions persist over time making change incremental and evolutionary rather than disruptive and revolutionary (Scott, 1987, p. 494). Unlike market sector organizations, culture imposed from deep within exerts a strong influence on determining the correct type of behaviour (Salonda, 2008; Schein, 2004). With a nearly 2000-year life span, the university was and is one such institution whose norms and values have been for many years sanctioned by society (Garson, 2008).

The term *institutionalization* here refers to an evolutionary process (see table below) through which some organizations become institutions (Scott, 2004). In other words, these elements become deeply engrained and infused as intrinsic to the culture of the institutions (Selznick, 1957).

Table 1: The process of institutional field definition



After DiMaggio and Powell, 1983

Organizational field definition and institutionalization

Organizational theorists agree that organizations exist in fields (Deephouse, 1996; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1987; Zucker, 1987). An organizational field is a group of similar organizations that come to recognize themselves as constituting a distinct domain of institutional life understanding and sharing a common operational logic which defines them (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1987). As the illustration above shows, the definition of the structure of an organizational field begins when unrelated organizations which are nevertheless engaged in a similar line of work and confronting a similar environmental conditions increase interacting with each other. As the interaction increases over time, this leads to a sharp definition of organizational field structure resulting in a clearly definition of a hierarchy of dominance and relationship norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1987). The repeated patterns of behaviour over time come to be more defined and accepted across the field as accepted modes of behaviour (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1987). These then become taken for granted as natural facts or organizations’ deeply embedded cultural practices (Scott, 1987). As noted the university field definition began in medieval Europe.

Organizational isomorphism

Institutional theory also suggests that heterogeneity or multiple modes of behaviour is not a desired state by organizations engaged in a similar line of work and so organizations will gravitate towards sameness or homogeneity of practice (Deem, 2001; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1987). The tendency for organizations to homogenize or become isomorphs defines the process by which organizations confronting a similar environment will adopt structures, strategies, processes and values to resemble others, isomorphs, in the organizational field (Deephouse, 1996; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The structures adopted by organizations are defined by the forces that predominate

in their environments at any given time suggesting that multiple organizational models can exist at one time. But the influence of culture as a deeply rooted 'social fact' may not be shifted easily to rapidly changing environmental forces.

Sources of isomorphic pressure

The pressure for organizational sameness originates from a number of sources. At any one time multiple forces may exist but with one predominating. DiMaggio and Powell (1983, p. 149) offer two main categories of these forces market-dictating or 'competitive' and culture-dictating or 'institutional'. Culture-dictating forces can be further divided into normative isomorphism and culture-cognitive isomorphism. Scott (2004) suggests a third type, which is regulatory isomorphism.

Market-dictating isomorphism

Market-dictating isomorphism is also referred to as mimetic isomorphism. Mimetic isomorphism results when organizations confronting an uncertain market environment tend to move towards similarity by copying (mimicking) practices, processes, models or strategies that have proven to be successful (Deephouse, 1996; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This trait is common in market sector organizations.

Culture-dictating isomorphism

It is commonly understood that organizations have cultures which influence how they behave. Two types of culture-based forces act on some organizations to conform, normative and culture-cognitive forces (Miner, 2007). Culture and their values and beliefs can be both internally and externally imposed on organizations. In this article, a difference is made between culture as a force derived from deeply embedded institutionalized values, beliefs and basic assumptions and culture as a force whose values and beliefs are predefined and imposed on organizations by specific actors like managers.

Culture-cognitive isomorphism

Culture-cognitive isomorphism is one form of culture-based pressure for conformity. Culture as defined here is the view of culture that is in agreement with institutional theory. Institutional theory is concerned with *culture* as an organizational structure's 'deeper and more resilient aspects' the schemas, mental modes, rules, norms and routines and the process by which these elements of structure become established 'as authoritative guidelines for social behaviour' (Scott, 2004). It refers to values, beliefs and taken-for-granted basic assumptions which are deeply embedded or are part of the DNA of the organization and can no longer be attributed to an identifiable social actor (Salonda, 2008; Schein, 2004; Zucker, 1987). This definition of culture contrasts with organizational culture that is attributed to that which is prescribed and imposed by managers (Salonda, 2008; Smircich, 1983).

In Jubilee's case, culture-cognitive pressure was present at the time it aspired to be a university but it was not the predominant force of isomorphism acting on it.

Normative isomorphism

This type of culture-based pressure to conform originates from the professions. Professional organizations such as Teaching Service Commission or the Nursing Council, or Certified Public Accountants, in the case of PNG, set conditions and methods for their work or practices, (control the production of producers) and establish a cognitive base or mental model and legitimating process for their occupational autonomy (normative change) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Miner, 2007).

At the time of Jubilee's legitimacy contest, normative isomorphism was not the predominant pressure acting on it but it was present given that the institution was delivering professional programs such as the accountancy program. Existing normative pressure would have meant that Jubilee's academic awards would not been recognized by relevant professional bodies.

Coercive isomorphism and legitimacy

Some organizations are coerced by regulations to become similar to others in the field. Coercive or regulatory isomorphism describes the pressure for sameness that originates from legally constituted regulatory bodies which certify or endorse practice as legitimate. According to Deephouse (1996), legitimacy is conferred either by government regulators which have authority over the organization, by the public or by other organizations within the field. 'Regulatory endorsement is the acceptance of an organization by the state agency that formally regulated it', (Deephouse, p. 1025; Miner, 2007). It reiterates Zucker's (1987, p. 443) finding that: 'Adoption of these legitimated elements, leading to isomorphism with the institutional environment, increases the probability of survival'.

In the case of Jubilee, the predominant pressure for sameness at the time of its desire to enter the field is coercive originating from the regulatory environment. The CHE, one of the significant legal authorities, had been ignored as the legitimate 'social actor' to play its role according to protocol that would have conferred legitimacy to Jubilee to conduct itself as a university in PNG. The CHE demanded compliance to established procedures, protocol and stipulated standards. When Jubilee failed to comply, it did not meet the requirements to be awarded legitimacy, which diminished its prospects of survival.

The university context in PNG and shifting forces of isomorphism

The current coercive or regulatory pressure for sameness may now be predominant, but it was not so in the early days of the university in PNG. The

continuum of shifting isomorphic forces and environmental conditions that the university in PNG is subjected to since its establishment are illustrated below.

Table 2: Shifts in forces of isomorphic change in the PNG university context

Socioeconomic environment		
Pre-Independence	Post-Independence	
1960-1975	1976-1980s	1996...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rise of anti-colonial movement and pressure for independence. • Secondary school system just being established to supply University enrolments. • UPNG established in 1965, Unitech in 1967. In addition are many colleges within departments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System fragmentation • Growing elitism leads to pressures for reform and rationalization • Social stratifications concerns • Increasing financial stringent • 1983 Higher Education Act passed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sector rationalization • Internationalization of higher education • Shifting state education priorities • Increased regulatory requirements • Serious financial constraints • Emergence of governance by management • Increase demand for access • Advances in ICT
Culture-cognitive normative	Culture-cognitive Normative coercive-regulative (emerging)	Coercive-regulatory Normative Culture-cognitive
Predominating forces of isomorphic change		

Pre-Independence context

Culture-cognitive pressure was the dominant pressure for conformity in the early days of university establishment in PNG. Political necessity and the pressure from established universities in Australia prevented experimentation and departure from accepted models in PNG, a society without equivalent local institutional models to mimic (Meek, 1982). However, even if experimentation were possible, public perception would have made any deviation from established traditions unacceptable both by Australians and Papua New Guineans. ‘...it is quite likely that indigenous people, especially the first UPNG students, would have felt slighted by any university model that deviated too drastically from the Australian one’ (Meek, 1982, p. 66). Australians and

Papua New Guineans who enrolled would have felt slighted at being offered something inferior had the model deviated too much from the established model; And so UPNG was imported, as Meek describes, 'lock stock and barrel' (Meek, 1982, p. 66).

Post-Independence: First decade 1975 - 1985

The post-Independence period 1975-1985 in PNG was marked by rising social tensions resulting in the challenge to the purpose of higher education even as the sector's primary purpose of training a skilled workforce remained. Emerging social disparity and economic disadvantage posed worrying developments against another goal of education as a tool to forge national integration (Bray, 1997).

The higher education sector also began to face pressure to rationalize the fragmentary system established at independence. It confronted an increasing demand for access coupled with forces of globalization as seen in the opening up of higher education to the market forces. The rising demand held the potential to open up higher education to more providers including both national and international private providers. This led to increasing concerns about the quality of education. The demand for access, however, was met by serious financial constraints and gave rise to the need to explore new funding models on a cost-sharing basis.

The response to these environmental conditions saw the emergence of an increasingly coercive or regulatory environment which would influence how the sector behaved. The foundation was laid to set this off when in 1983, the Higher Education Act was passed by parliament and the Commission for Higher Education was established to regulate the sector.

Post-Independence: 1986...

The forces in play in the social context into which Jubilee entered its first thwarted attempt to become a member of the group of PNG universities is different to that immediately pre and post independence. The predominant pressure to conform is coercive or regulatory. Responding to these changes, the Commission for Higher Education through its executive arm – the Office of Higher Education – developed and continued to expand a regulatory framework which encompasses a suite of policies. Amongst these are: the 1996 'Guidelines for Institutional Accreditation' (Commission for Higher Education, 1996); the 2008 'Guidelines for the Establishment, Accreditation and Declaration of Institution of Higher Education as a University in PNG'; the 2009 'Authorisation for the Establishment of Cross-Border Higher Education Providers'; and the 2010 'Papua New Guinea National Qualifications Framework'.

University field: Looking ahead

In the contemporary global context, the pressure on the culture-dictated model of university has been growing and many in the organizational field are adopting new ways of doing things (Marginson, 1995; Marginson & Considine, 2000; McNay, 1995; Middlehurst, 1995). The environment is one of financial uncertainty as many governments withdraw from public sector spending in favour of market sector logic at a time where the demand for access has increased. The policy mechanism is adopted to regularize practice adding a powerful coercive dimension to ensuring conformity within the higher education sector. One of the consequences of this shift played out in terms of governance has been a move to governance by management (Salonda, 2008). Viewing these shifts from an institutional theory's perspective, the resource stringent environment is pressuring the university to copy or mimic models of organization common in market sector for-profit-organizations (Salonda, 2008). The meeting of management logic and university's normative and culture cognitive logic is the point of contest within the field (Salonda, 2008). The compliance with legally established regulations is the price to pay for organizational legitimacy (Deephouse, 1996).

Conclusion

Coercive or regulatory pressure for sameness was the predominant force exerted by the legal actor of CHE which ended Jubilee's aspirations to be accepted as a legitimate member of the group of universities in PNG in 2009. The National Executive Council's 2005 decision to award it university status had circumvented the validation process and protocol established by the legitimate authority of the Commission for Higher Education. Without legitimacy accorded by the CHE, Jubilee found itself outside the fold of PNG universities and consequently barred from receiving benefits that flowed from being recognized as a legitimate university. Such benefits would have included its vice chancellor membership on the committee of vice chancellors and its students would be eligible for fee subsidies from the government. The contested legitimacy did not enhance its prospects for survival. In 2009, Jubilee's tenuous claim to university status was removed. At the time of writing of this article, Jubilee is engaged in the CHE established legitimizing process and protocol.

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