




# Competition on hold? How competing discourses shape academic organisations in times of crisis

Leonie Buschkamp<sup>1</sup> · Tim Seidenschnur<sup>2</sup> 

Accepted: 15 October 2023 / Published online: 1 November 2023  
© The Author(s) 2023

## Abstract

This research deals with the question of how the Covid-19 pandemic affected discourses on competition in higher education organisations and how other discourses occurred and gained power. Additionally, it focusses on changes which take place in windows of opportunities that occur through discursive change in times of crisis. We show that discourses on competition have been highly influential in the field of academia. However, the pandemic rapidly introduced or empowered new or different discourses. These discourses either replaced existing discourses on competition, ascribed different meanings or redefined the frame under which a specific discourse is important. We merge our observations of such processes into the argument that the Covid-19 crisis has put competition discourses on hold during the first stage of the pandemic. At later stages, we show that competition discourses regained power. To make these contributions, we analyse interviews conducted at two universities at the organisational leadership level and in different departments in subjects such as social sciences, product design, music and engineering. We also examine official statements by the German rectors' conference and further documents such as emails and press releases at two stages of the pandemic crisis. The first stage took place during the lockdowns in 2020 and gives us rich insights into the changes during the pandemic. The second stage took place in 2022 when organisations returned at least partly to their pre-pandemic routines allowing us to analyse changes over time.

**Keywords** Organisation studies · Crisis · Pandemic · Competition · Windows of opportunity · Discourse analysis

Competition has become an increasing and dominant governance mode in higher education. This research deals with the question of how the Covid-19 pandemic as a crisis

---

✉ Tim Seidenschnur  
tim.seidenschnur@uni-kassel.de

Leonie Buschkamp  
leonie.buschkamp@lcss.uni-hannover.de

<sup>1</sup> Leibniz Center for Science and Society (LCSS), University of Hannover, Lange Laube 32, 30159 Hannover, Germany

<sup>2</sup> International Center for Higher Education Research (INCHER), University of Kassel, Mönchebergstrasse 17, 34125 Kassel, Germany

affected discourses on competition in higher education organisations and how other discourses arose and gained power during and after the crisis. The pandemic as a ‘major crisis’ (Ulybina et al., 2022) can be seen as a critical incident or a ‘triggering event’ (Weick, 1988), bringing equivocal input containing elements of shock and surprise into universities (Kudesia, 2017; Weick et al., 2005) and thus reorganises the way how meaning is constructed in organisations. We argue that the Covid-19 crisis introduced new discourses or empowered discourses that were previously less powerful in the organisation. Examples are the discourses on the duty of care and solidarity, digitalisation and the role of science in society in times of crisis. We further argue that these discourses put the competition discourse on hold. Nevertheless, the discourse on competition has not completely disappeared. Instead, some universities, or at least their members, strategically generated competitive advantages for post-pandemic times during lockdown (Yeomans & Bowman, 2020). In fact, since academic organisations have returned to their pre-pandemic routines, the discourse on competition has regained power.

We also explore the extent to which the development of new concepts and ideas takes place. In this context, the rise of new discourses in times of crisis can be understood as a moment in which windows of opportunity arise in organisations (Kingdon, 2003), which we understand as timeslots in which organisational change is more likely to happen. We primarily focus on the organisational level, but also include boundary positions dealing with different reference groups at the organisations’ interface to politics and the individual level (for instance students). Additionally, we look at different disciplines. Since universities are highly fragmented organisations (Watermeyer et al., 2020), the way how members react depends significantly on the different contextual factors in different disciplines, subjects and departments. Moreover, we observe according to which discourses changes are legitimised.

This paper therefore makes three contributions. First, it contributes to organisation studies by investigating how the pandemic changed discourses in the academic field. While extensive research analyses change in organisations caused by internally-induced crises (Seeger et al., 1998), the impact of externally-induced crises on discursive change in organisations has still not been sufficiently examined. Second, it contributes to research on competition in higher education. Organisational research focusing on the field of higher education argues that competition has increased over time and that this increase does not occur linearly but is accompanied by breaks, obstacles and resistance (Krücken, 2017; Musselin, 2018). However, while the reasons for increasing competition have been broadly analysed, there is a lack of research shedding light on moments in which the increase in competition is slowed down or interrupted. We investigate whether and to what extent the pandemic as a crisis is such a moment in which competition is put on hold. Third, we contribute to organisation studies through analysing how organisational change occurs in times of externally-induced crisis. In doing so, we focus on changes of organisational processes that take place in windows of opportunity (Kingdon, 2003; Perez & Soete, 1988).

## **Theoretical approach: organisation and competition in times of crisis**

To understand change caused by externally-induced crises (Ulybina et al., 2022), it is necessary to define the concept of crisis. A crisis broadly involves uncertainty and describes the relationship between an object and an experiential subject for whom the object is uncertain or unknown (Oevermann, 2016). Uncertainty leads to the crisis’s fundamental

routine-interrupting character (Oevermann, 2016). When studying crises, the objects investigated are often certain events, like catastrophes and disasters, or in our case the pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus. The pandemic as a crisis can be seen as a critical incident or a triggering event, transferring ambiguous input and therefore uncertainty into the organisation (Kudesia, 2017; Weick et al., 2005). A crisis and the introduction of uncertainty can lead to discursive change, including that meaning is ascribed differently to events.

In organisation studies, organisational crises are often associated with human-made or organisational-made catastrophes resulting from mistakes, oversights or system deficiencies (Perrow, 1992; Vaughan, 2016), while events caused by nature or mass technological forces are mostly described as disasters (Perrow, 2011; Seeger et al., 1998). The case of the pandemic is in these terms neither a catastrophe nor a disaster. The pandemic came as an external shock, which is not only a natural disaster per se but also involved many political decisions and crisis management measures. Therefore, we choose to characterise the pandemic as an externally-induced crisis.

Furthermore, a crisis is characterised by low probability and high consequence events which threaten the fundamental goals of an organisation (Weick, 1988). We therefore understand a crisis as a moment of disruption and irritation (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) in which it is likely that social values and discourses change. In organisations, a crisis leads to processes in which the organisation purges outdated or inappropriate elements what creates windows of opportunity for growth and change (Seeger et al., 1998). Consequently, a crisis is marked not only by its routine-breaking nature, but also by its potential for change.

Our understanding of a crisis combines these elements and thus establishes a perspective on organisations entering into an externally-induced situation of crisis. This crisis leads to new processes of differentiating, fixing, labelling, classifying and relating, which are all processes that shape how meaning is socially constructed through discourses (Chia, 2000, p. 513). Therefore, crises lead to discursive change, and, subsequently, changing discourses can lead to changing organisational practices.

In regard to powerful discourses in German higher education, competition is seen as a dominant and growing mode of governance (Musselin, 2018; Naidoo, 2018). However, one has to keep in mind that competition, understood as a triadic relationship in which individual and collective actors compete for the favour of a third party that is distributing the scarce good (Simmel, 1903; Stark, 2020; Werron, 2015), is far from new in academia, but its relevance in the field of higher education has reached a new level. Individuals compete for research grants, high quality publications and better positions; organisations compete for public funding, ranking positions, students and talented staff; both can compete for attention from external stakeholders or societal impact. Research observing this growing role of competition attests that an increasing number of academic activities are being transformed in a competitive way (Waaiker et al., 2018). Another reason for increasing competition is the changing character of governance by the state. The state's role has changed significantly with the growing influence of New Public Management in higher education (Bleiklie et al., 2017). A common denominator in these changes is the changing relationship between state-provided basic funding and competitive funding for universities, with the latter gaining importance over time. Finally, and in addition to the dynamics from the academic system and the state, the literature observes a transformation of universities into organisational actors, meaning that academic organisations are changing from loosely coupled expert organisations into strategically oriented actors (Christensen et al., 2019). The university's orientation during such strategic processes is largely competitive because different dimensions of multiple competitions and a growing number of scarce goods to compete for (reputation, personnel, students, unique selling propositions etc.) have to be

addressed and prioritised (Krücken, 2021; Werron, 2015). Literature on universities turning into organisational actors argues that this increase of competition does not occur linearly but is accompanied by breaks, obstacles and resistance (Krücken, 2017; Musselin, 2018). However, there is a significant research gap regarding moments at which the rise in competition and competition discourse is put on hold and on the circumstances and obstacles that cause such a development. Our research addresses this gap and contributes new insights.

Windows of opportunity are also relevant for our research. We assume that changes in the discursive landscape triggered by the pressure on organisations to adapt to the crisis open such windows and lead to changing organisational practices which go beyond narrative changes. Dramatic or shocking events interrupt organisational routines and create opportunities for innovation (Moralli & Allegrini, 2021) and change. Such timeslots in which change is more likely to happen, for example, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, are called windows of opportunity (Ulybina et al., 2022). Windows of opportunity are theorised in different contexts. The first identification helped for instance to explain why electronic innovations occur outside the most industrialised nations (Perez & Soete, 1988). In policy studies, the emergence of new policies could be explained (Kingdon, 2003), and in the business sector, three different types have been distinguished: the technology window, the demand window and the institutional window (Lee & Malerba, 2017). Further research added the distinction between exogenous and endogenous windows of opportunity (Kwak & Yoon, 2020). All these theorisations have in common that they mainly address three reasons for their emergence: technological advances (Tyre & Orlikowski, 1994), new administrations or—more importantly here—shocking events (Meijerink, 2005) such as the Covid-19 outbreak. These reasons can open up windows of opportunity on their own, but also in correlation with each other (Meijerink, 2005).

In the window of opportunity provided by the pandemic, new ideas and concepts are likely to be developed because unknown problems occur and the degree of disruption and irritation is high (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). In a post-crisis situation, organisations may either keep these changes up or partially return to old routines, even though these routines may still carry traces of change. In universities, the way in which members react to these disruptions and irritations and consequently how working processes can be transformed depends significantly on the different contextual factors in different disciplines, subjects and departments, because universities are highly fragmented organisations. A study of two UK universities, for example, showed the opportunities provided by technology, especially for studying and teaching during the first month of the pandemic (Yeomans & Bowman, 2020).

## Empirical approach

### Discourse theory and discourse analysis

Crises like the pandemic are powerful occasions and raise questions as which discourses gain or lose power and, consequently, how people think, what they know and how they speak about the world (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). In our analysis, we focus on two dimensions. On the one hand, we analyse how the construction of meaning takes place in different discourses since this is one essential interest of discourse analysis (Seidenschur et al. 2020; Traue et al., 2022). Following Foucault (1972), discourses determine

how actors talk and think about certain events in terms of interpretative schemes and present vocabulary. On the other hand, we focus on power relations between discourses, as discourses depend on being reproduced by actors in order to remain powerful over time (Magalhães & Veiga, 2015). As we have already argued, the pandemic can be seen as a potential moment of change concerning power relations between discourses.

Thereby, our focus lies primarily on the organisation. In organisation studies, numerous studies analyse the role of discourses in and for organisations, for instance, focussing on the role of societal discourses for organisations and how societal discourses can be transformed or translated when entering organisations depending on the organisational culture and narratives (Cooren, 2001; Latour, 2000), or focussing on discourse and the construction of meaning in organisations (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001), showing how the discursively constructed meanings that reside in our minds impact processes of organising (Grant et al., 2004). Our study continues this stream of research analysing discursive change at German universities.

In our empirical approach, we refer to Wrana (2015). Wrana highlights four dimensions deduced from Foucault's work on discourses. First, the materiality and situationality of narrations given by the interview partners or in press releases or emails. Here, we reflect methodologically on the type of data we use in our analysis. Second, a field of objects and events to which people refer in the data and which are important in a discourse and differentiate one discourse from others. Third, different semantic elements which include the construction of meaning and the question how meaning is ascribed to the objects and events in a discourse. Fourth, subjectivity, referring to the temporality of discourses and changes of discursive power over time.

### Sampling and coding strategy

We analyse data from two stages of the crisis. We collected our data during lockdown and when universities returned to their pre-pandemic routines to at least some extent. First, we collected data in Germany in 2020 during two lockdowns. In our case selection, we searched for full universities with a broad range of disciplines in order to be able to observe disciplinary differences but which differ with regard to their position in the field and their geographical location to see if that influences discourses. By collecting the data, we followed Mintzberg (1980) and took a vertical slice through the organisation, including management perspectives from what he calls the strategic apex as well as practical challenges faced by the organisation's members in the middle line and operating core. We therefore interviewed actors from different levels, such as the university leadership and management, and academics from different departments including subjects such as social sciences, product design, music and engineering. The interviews are semi-structured and followed an interview guideline, but at the same time, this guideline allowed space for in-depth narrative episodes. Arguments made by the interviewees are communicatively validated (Flick, 2020) in two ways. As data collection progressed in the first stage, we were able to identify significant passages and ask other interviewees about relevant events that prior interviewees reported on to analyse how they ascribe meaning to these events. In addition, in the second phase, we asked the interviewees about their narratives in the first phase in order to examine the discursive change. Both ways provoked discussions and deep narrative episodes while also supporting the data quality. After transcribing the interviews, we coded with a qualitative and open strategy (Mayring, 2000) in order to identify the relevant elements. The identified discourses are the aggregated results of our

open coding strategy. The discourses we present in the analysis are therefore present in and also shape the answers the interviewees gave at very different stages of the interviews.

We further triangulated the data with the content of different kinds of documents (Steinke, 1999). We examined 26 official statements made by the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and 133 further documents such as emails and press releases. We collected the official email communication from the university leadership, the head of administration, further administrative units such as the IT service and as far as possible deans of departments. Both types of documents are relevant since they include politically loaded statements (predominantly the HRK documents) as well as pragmatic managerial statements (more often in the emails) and give insights how meaning is constructed in both perspectives. While the emails and some interviews represent the views of the organisational leadership, we also analyse the interface to politics (HRK) and the perceptions of members of the organisations in relevant positions (in interviews).

In the second stage in 2022, we re-interviewed eight of the ten interview partners from the first stage and asked them how the changes they had reported two years earlier had developed further. In two cases, it was not possible to interview the same person; therefore, we interviewed a person in a similar position. Additionally, we analysed documents such as emails and homepages. The second stage enabled us to analyse changes over time.

## The German case

Universities have always competed for reputation, status and students as well as for financial resources. Nevertheless, universities transformed into organisational actors in the twentieth century (Bromley & Meyer, 2015), a transition that was accompanied by growing competition. Regarding the transformation of universities into organisational actors, the German case can be considered rather representative for international trends that have also been observed in the USA (Ramirez, 2006), the UK (Naidoo, 2018) and the French system (Musselin, 2018).

However, the German case is also one with specific particularities with regard to competition and the distribution of scarce goods. In Germany, the state plays—in contrast to market-oriented systems—a comparatively important role. For instance, Germany does not have tuition fees. Instead, the state distributes money to universities partly based on student numbers, but also on research results and successes in gender equality. Additionally, (international) rankings play a lesser role, while the reputation of universities and individual researchers is especially based on their success in funding contests, especially those run by the German Research Foundation and funded with state money. This may be one reason why reputation is almost exclusively generated through research and not education in German academia (Hüther & Krücken, 2018). However, most recently, the demographic development in Germany is tending to increase competition for students, since student numbers are decreasing. Therefore, questioning whether competition is on hold and focusing on the German system means to consider a system that represents a case with a competitive environment in which the state plays an important role as a power source for the competition discourse and shows how discursive change can occur in times of crisis in such a setting. For further research, it could be interesting to learn more about discursive developments in different types of higher education systems.

## Analysis

### Stage one: are there new or growing discourses and do they put competition on hold?

Crises like the pandemic suddenly confronted universities with different challenges and demands, leading to discursive change. We show that with Covid-19, new discourses arose and that they highlight the duty of care, digitalisation and the role of science in society.

#### a) *The discourse on the duty of care*

The discourse on the duty of care is welfare oriented and highlights an organisation's responsibility to care for the mental and physical health of its members and to maintain their career opportunities. In the situational context of the pandemic, interviews, emails and press releases point to discursive objects and events such as difficulties in students' everyday life, including their problems and challenges caused by the pandemic: 'Well, to address students, to ask them at which point they are at, and to create opportunities to advise them in critical situations in life and so on' (I: 1, 1)<sup>1</sup>. This includes students' situation during the pandemic and refers for instance to their financial situation related to the event of economic downturn: 'especially concerning financial aspects, I received feedback from students that they have serious problems. Many have jobs in branches that are struggling under the pandemic' (I: 1, 2). Other objects are the conditions for receiving the state-financed student loans, which are linked to performance records that could not be provided due to closed universities that had postponed or cancelled exams (email 38), and the changing social situation through education online where psychological consequences through less interaction during the pandemic are highlighted. When it comes to the construction of meaning, the duty to care becomes highly relevant: 'We have to make them keep in contact even if it is only online and I think the university developed some good ideas how that can work, be it via Zoom' (I: 1, 2). This is in line with reports on additional mentoring activities, 'some lecturers tried to get in touch with their students outside the digital classroom and did some kind of mentoring in small groups' (I: 1, 2), and when interview partners highlight the role of time and argue that this increases the duty of care: 'In the beginning, we thought it's a thing of half a year and then its fine. But now it seems like it's a long-term situation and we have to try to reduce the workload and stress in this situation of crisis for students' (I: 2, 1). The HRK therefore announces: 'It's now time to make use of every option to support students in their everyday study routines' (HRK 07/21)<sup>2</sup>

In regard to employees, different objects are present in the discourse, such as family issues, working contracts and working conditions. People from organisational management ascribe meaning according to the duty of care for 'students, employees and guests' (email 3). In terms of family issues such as childcare, 'applications are to be considered favourably by the supervisors' (email 9). There is no known case 'in which I did not approve an application. This is a matter of care. Such things like childcare in difficult situations' (I: 1, 3). In terms of fixed-term working contracts and statutorily regulated

<sup>1</sup> The notation used represents: (stage of data collection: case, interview number)

<sup>2</sup> The notation used represents: (Organisation month/year)

qualification periods, people from university leadership report that they tried to make use of new political regulations to support and care for their staff, such as using ‘options to grant such people additional time, for instance for their PhD or Habilitation.’ (I: 1, 3). They also give reason to the duty of care by referring to the changed working conditions in this regard: ‘if they cannot do field work during the pandemic when this is a key aspect of their research; or if they cannot enter libraries and archives they need for their work; or if they can’t manage to write because they have to care for a family at home, all this is what we now have to deal with’ (I: 2, 1). Overall, the university leaders highlight their awareness of their duty of care in times of crisis as ‘the highest priority’ (email 3). This is also shown by department heads who see themselves as ‘responsible for everyone at [name of the organisational department], especially in the current situation, to be available for discussion needs of any kind. I am readily available at all times, by email, phone or Skype’ (email 22).

Overall, this discourse highlights different logics and is rather not linked to competition discourse. Instead, in the context of the pandemic, objects such as mental health, career challenges and problems with continuing to study are highlighted. Examples of how meaning is constructed occur in terms of the duty of care including the creation of opportunities for advisory and mentoring services, especially for students, support for childcare or extending contracts for PhD students or scientists working on their ‘Habilitation’. Hence, a discourse that is different and in which competition plays no special role gains power.

#### b) *The discourse on digitalisation*

In the discourse on digitalisation, objects such as the changes to academic work due to digitalisation are emphasised. People from administration report on the sudden changeover to digital and remote working as the event that brought the greatest challenge faced by the university: ‘The most relevant change was to switch overnight to online, yes it was from one day to the next, it was a Friday, the 20th of March, when we really closed down the university literally and then sent everyone into remote working’ (I: 1, 3). At this stage, the university leadership asked the teaching staff ‘to put together digital teaching-learning offers for your students with which they can work towards the learning objectives of your courses (...) if face-to-face teaching is not possible’ (email 29).

The discourse on digitalisation further includes objects such as digital teaching, internationalisation at home, the lack of opportunities for informal conversations and difficulties for managing an organisation in digital meetings and ascribes meaning to them. This includes additional stress for teaching staff in particular disciplines: ‘subjects in which it is difficult to teach online you can imagine what a challenge this was for our teaching staff’ (I: 2, 4). Additionally, the extent to which digital teaching fosters social inequalities or at times offers new opportunities to groups which were previously disadvantaged is mentioned: ‘for those who were a bit more silent in the classroom, online teaching may be beneficial, but this does not touch the point that online teaching could foster social inequalities besides this’ (I: 1, 2). Further discussions about the circumstances under which universities will return to teaching in person and which changes to teaching may be retained after the pandemic show some optimism: ‘we should say thank you to the pandemic since we will certainly do much more digitally in the future’ (I: 2, 4).



The object of ‘internationalisation at home’ is used to highlight the importance of internationalisation in academia. The first argument is that the pandemic caused a decrease in academics’ mobility and consequently had a highly negative effect on academic collaborations as it was impossible to meet in person. The second argument is that, nevertheless, digitalisation opened new opportunities to participate online in discussions and events to which scientist would not have travelled even without the pandemic because of the time it would have taken. This opportunity to participate online without undertaking great efforts in terms of time and travel costs led to what other publications call internationalisation at home (Buckner et al., 2022) and is mentioned in the way how interviews ascribe meaning in the discourse of digitalisation frequently as ‘this is when organisational borders melt since events organised in one university are easily available for everyone in the field’ (I: 1, 4).

Regarding the object of academic work, the informal side of work is highlighted when interviewees construct meaning to point out that there is a lack of opportunities for informal conversations in digital meetings (email 70). Interview partners also report less socialising and that they missed the ideas which were generated randomly in such informal chats before the pandemic: ‘The social aspect is also lacking, because you don’t meet others in the corridor or during a break or somewhere and you can’t talk about personal things what would be important for working motivation and random discussions are lacking which are important to work efficiently’ (I: 2, 1). The organisation tried to create digital spaces to compensate for this, for instance by inventing a ‘home canteen’ for a digital lunchbreak to ‘eat together and chat about this and that’ (email 42) or on the departmental level by organising a ‘zoom summer party’ (email 112). However, the interview partners report that digitalisation cannot compensate for networking opportunities and informal conversations.

Overall, during the pandemic, objects and events related to digitalisation gained great importance. The construction of meaning in this discourse occurs in terms of managerial challenges but also regarding the consequences of digitalisation for academic work, science and society. This discourse was present before the pandemic, but it became strengthened through being reproduced frequently.

### c) *The discourse on the role of science in society*

In regard to discourses on the role of science in society, universities were expected to contribute to overcoming the crisis and to discuss ‘solutions to the most pressing issues exposed by Covid-19’ (email 110) through discoveries, while competing with other organisational forms for the prerogative of interpretation. In this context, meaning is constructed on three objects that become visible in the discourse: the invention of vaccines and other technologies relevant to fighting the pandemic, the development and contextualisation of expert knowledge relevant to the pandemic and the relevance of international cooperation to developing new knowledge.

In regard to vaccines, interview partners observe how and where they were invented. Based on such observations, they interpret the universities’ role as research institutions. Some observe that vaccines are often invented jointly in private and public organisations and argue that the pandemic is amplifying a trend in Germany in which science is moving outside of research universities. In their view, they point to ‘the process of developing vaccines’ and argue that ‘universities did not play a major role’ (I: 1, 1). Others locate these inventions in or at least in affiliation with universities. University leaders and academics highlight the university’s contribution and responsibility to overcoming the crisis:

‘Research will also continue, despite all the restrictions. Finally, beyond social distancing and compliance with hygiene measures, we also see it as our duty to contribute to overcoming the crisis’ (email 53). The HRK argues that ‘the last weeks have shown impressively that research and science are highly relevant building blocks for our community’ (HRK 05/2020). In addition to the question of innovation within or outside universities, interview partners observe that the pandemic contributed to a rising demand in society for scientists who discuss research results in terms of the ‘contextualisation’ (I: 1, 4) and ‘authorisation’ (I: 1, 1) of knowledge and discuss the meaning of this trend: ‘Facts need to be contextualised in order to make a sustainable statement, the pure data are not enough’ (I: 1, 4). This includes the idea of researchers’ changing role since they gain importance as authorisers and interpreters of knowledge instead of inventing and creating it. Additionally, numerous comments highlight that research involving national and international cooperation between universities and private enterprises is considered to be highly relevant to overcome the pandemic. The HRK demands for instance that the government provides financial resources for cooperative projects in difficult situations, for instance if businesses can no longer provide their share of necessary funding (HRK 1/21).

Overall, this discourse arose during the pandemic and includes notions and semantic symbols of competition. However, competition is seen as something between universities and other organisational types and fields rather than solely within the field.

### **The relation to the discourse on competition. Is competition on hold?**

From our methodological considerations (on the materiality and situationality of the narrations) and the analysis of objects and events within the three discourses, as well as how meaning is constructed within them, we came to the results we present in Table 1 according to the four elements of discourses proposed by Wrana (2015):

According to these elements, it seems as if the discourse on competition was weakened by the situation of crisis. In this context, we observe that new discourses gained power during the first stage. The relevant objects in the new discourses and the construction of meaning signal other priorities. We rarely find ‘competition’ vocabulary and semantics, especially within the discourse on the duty of care. This discourse is rarely linked to competition discourse. In line with this observation, the discourse on digitalisation is only marginally linked to semantics and elements of competition. The discourse on the role of science in society includes more vocabulary on competition in terms of competing actors (universities competing with private research institutes or national science systems competing with each other) and a scarce good that can be won (especially scientific innovations related to vaccines). However, here the take on competition is that of competition between systems and not between actors in the academic field.

Nevertheless, we sometimes observe that new discourses also bring new elements and chances for competitive games. Competition discourses involve these elements and construct meaning in their own interpretative schemes. One example for such sensemaking during the first interview stage (during the lockdowns in 2020) is when universities try to become more attractive for star scientists or promising future researchers by offering better ‘pandemic’ working conditions compared to others. The German system of public funding, which is not based on tuition fees, is described as a locational advantage in this regard: ‘German universities became even more attractive as an employer because they are part of the public sector and people notice that it is a safe working place’ (I: 1, 3). Another example is teaching staff who justified investing a lot of time in online videos by arguing that

**Table 1** Elements of discourses

<p>(1) Materiality and situationality of the narrations</p> <p>Interviews, emails and press releases in which discourses are reproduced in the organisation or at the interface to the political field and which document discursive change</p>	<p>(2) Objects and events contributed</p> <p>Discourses visible in the material include different objects and events. Discourse on the duty of care: students' everyday life, students' financial situation, student loans, family issues, employees' working contracts and working conditions. Discourse on digitalisation: switch to online teaching, internationalisation, academic work. Discourse on the role of science: invention of vaccines, experts contextualising knowledge, cooperation</p>
<p>(3) Different semantic elements which include how actors ascribe meaning</p> <p>Caretaking vocabulary is dominant in the construction of meaning on different objects and events and characterises the discourse on the duty of care; professional academic vocabulary in terms of research and education characterises the social construction of meaning in the discourse on digitalisation; a vocabulary on inventions, how they are organised and how they need to be interpreted characterises the discourse on the role of science for society</p>	<p>(4) Subjectivity—when actors reproduce discourse, they take positions in a field which is already structured while at the same time reproducing the discursive structure</p> <p>We analysed how this positioning changed during the pandemic. The discursive change made actors in academia position themselves rather in terms of caretaking and their role for society than in terms of positioning in competition in the field for a limited time. We will focus on the second stage in the next chapter</p>

after the pandemic, the videos can be reused and more of their working time can be spent on research to give them a better position on the market: 'I have a colleague who invested a lot of time in creating videos in the first term and afterwards he saved time since he offered the same classes and reused the videos to win time for research' (I: 1, 4).

These quotes show that even if competition was at least partly been put on hold by newly arisen discourses, the competition discourse did not completely disappear. In the following section, we will analyse the interviews and documents from stage two and show that the competition discourse regained power at that time and is additionally characterised by new elements.

### **Stage two: the re-empowerment of the competition discourse**

For the second stage, when universities had largely returned to their pre-pandemic practices, we argue that the competition discourse regained power, and partly became stronger because of new scarcity. This can be observed for instance in relation to funding and financial resources from the business sector, which 'gave money to do research-oriented teaching. (...) This demand has dropped because of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Now, we compete with other units in the university for them' (II: 1, 5). The reference shows how scarcity becomes relevant in the construction of meaning. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine are seen as reasons for scarcity of funds. This brings competition into the organisation, where different departments that were not previously in competition become competing actors (Simmel, 1903).

The competition discourse and the construction of meaning is referring to scarcity what can also be seen regarding students and teaching. The interviewees describe that this development ‘started already before the pandemic, but it [the pandemic] made it worse’. They argue that ‘now we really have a problem with fewer and fewer students in engineering and we look at other universities to see how they design their curricula now and try to become more attractive’ (II: 1, 5). Here, scarcity is seen in the number of available students. Since universities in Germany receive money from the federal states partially according to the number of students, university leaders put pressure on the departments to keep these numbers up in competition with other universities. Referring to the pandemic some interviewees describe that even if teaching did not change ‘during the pandemic because we thought it must take place in person’ changes occurred later on, because the ‘number of students has declined’ and because of ‘other departments, which are not so different from us or departments at other universities like us that make such [online] offers and students do not want to be here in person every day’ (II: 1, 6). Here, students become the scarce good and again different departments and organisations are described as competing actors. Additionally, individuals refer to the developments during the pandemic in terms of competition discourse when it comes to their career ambitions: ‘He said: Look: This is what I have to offer and what I have developed in teaching during the pandemic and what I can do for you now’ (II: 1, 6).

We observe that while some of the changes remain, the construction of meaning has largely returned to the discursive logic of competition, and new competitive games are being played. Organisations and their members are experimenting with ideas for how the achieved changes can be instrumentalised to attain a better position in the post-pandemic field of higher education. Regarding university management, interview partners report that direct (top-down) communication from the university leadership to its members intensified during the pandemic and since such communication channels remain, university leadership uses them to disseminate strategic concerns about competition to their members after the pandemic: ‘The direct communication from the leadership intensified during the pandemic and now they [the leadership] make use of these new channels to address their strategic ambitions after the pandemic’ (II: 2, 2). Overall, the discourse of competition regained power after the pandemic and fosters perspectives that construct or highlight scarcity. Indeed, the scarce goods more generally remain the same: reputation (especially gained in research and funding contests), financial resources and talent. However, the data points to a growing role of students as a scarce good, which is also fostered by demographic change in Germany.

### **Windows of opportunity related to discursive change**

Finally, we can identify in the data how discursive change is related to windows of opportunity in which change and innovation in organisations occur. In times of crisis, individuals and organisations question how the situation can be made more endurable (Bergan et al., 2021) or even used to develop innovative solutions (Moralli & Allegrini, 2021). One example for such changes is digitalisation and online teaching. Different subjects and disciplines are confronted with different contextual factors affecting the extent to which teaching can be conducted online. Depending on such differing conditions, changes in education occur differently; while some changes may remain after the crisis, others may disappear. It is less likely that changes remain in cases where online formats were only used to simulate teaching in the lecture theatre or seminar room: ‘I have courses which are simulations on my

computer. They get a code and I see what they do on my computer and comment on it. (...) It is as if I were in a room with them” (I: 1, 5). In such cases, interview partners report that they switched back to their original in-person teaching practices later on: ‘Teaching is taking place exactly like it did before the pandemic’ (II: 1, 5). Changes are rather reported in subjects in which teaching changed more substantially when it was transferred to the online mode: ‘We are aware that socialising in person is crucial, but education also gained something when we experimented with knowledge transfer to different locations via educational software’ (I: 1, 1). In cases where teaching took place in new formats, interview partners partly report that they make use of these formats in stage two: ‘I included some of the practices to work together online at different times in my classes in person’ (II: 1, 4).

Similarly, we can observe hybrid processes in organisational management, internationalisation and other activities. For instance, one aim is to permanently increase remote working compared to before the pandemic (email 70), which is connected with the belief that remote working works for the organisation. Furthermore, a pilot project was implemented to test and sustain remote working (email 117). In regard to organisational management, interview partners argue for instance that digital formats cannot replace interactions in person, but enable universities to expand their business and complement future activities through the lessons learned during the pandemic. For example, potential students should still ‘see and feel the campus, but we will at least record our presentations and we develop an online format to keep that up in the future after the pandemic’ (II: 1, 2). Another aspect are new formats organised in cooperation with other universities so that it is now ‘possible to meet every 14 days. Before the pandemic, we would have had to travel. But now, there are opportunities like this to create events together’ (II: 1, 2).

In regard to internationalisation, attempts to better look after international students via online formats became standardised because ‘the pandemic has shown us that we have to invest more time when international students arrive and generate contacts and we have more offers now online and in person’ (II: 1, 2). Additionally, internationalisation at home is an important topic. Taking advantage of hybrid formats is an opportunity that universities did not previously have. ‘To hold hybrid formats with international scientist in the crowd became normal’ (II: 1, 4). Overall, we see that these changes are related to the discourses on digitalisation and the duty of care and legitimised by vocabulary from these discourses, most obviously when it comes to caring for incoming students through new formats and digitalisation at home.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This research contributes to two discussions in organisational research: research on competition (and discursive change) and on organisational transformation in times of crisis. Generally, competition in academia is considered to be an expanding process. Such descriptions can be found in research on the marketisation of the academic field (Bok, 2003). Marketisation arguments highlight that more and more economic principles are taking effect in the field of higher education. Naidoo (2018) even observes a competition fetish in higher education. In organisational research, researchers observe how universities are transforming into organisational actors and performing in competition (Kosmützky & Krücken, 2023). Different elements are seen as drivers of this process, such as rankings and evaluations that allow universities to compare themselves with other universities, mission statement documents that universities use to construct their own identity and to take a position in

the field and the power gained by university leaders which facilitates strategic positioning. Management capacities and therefore administrative units grow and add capacities for strategic actions and consultants diffuse management trends in the field (Krücken, 2017). Literature on universities transforming into organisational actors further argues that this transformation and the increase in competition does not occur linearly but is accompanied by breaks, obstacles and resistance and that processes develop at different speed at different times (Krücken, 2017; Musselin, 2018). However, there is a lack of empirical observations of moments at which this overall development of increasing competition, which is still strong in the field today, has been put on hold for a moment. Our research analysed such a dynamic at a moment in which the general trend of increasing competition was put into question with the example of the pandemic. The analysis documents how the discourse on the duty of care and the discourse on digitalisation brought other issues and responsibilities to the forefront of interest and decision-making in academic organisations and their members. Taking care of others and managing transitions in times of crisis put competition discourse partly on hold and at least slowed it down in a context (Germany), in which competition (especially in research) has been potentially the most dominant governance principle in academia. We show the changing emphasis on the discursive level but, according to the interviews, this also affects the action level in terms of time and energy spend on certain issues. It would be promising to delve more deeply into this link between talk and action in future research. Competition on hold does of course not mean that the funding contests in Germany disappeared, neither on the organisational nor on the individual level, but that the attention paid to competition in terms of interpreting objects and events followed different logics for a while. However, the analysis of the interviews conducted during stage two also documents that competition discourse regained power at a stage in which organisations largely returned to their pre-pandemic routines. Therefore, the analysis highlights the pandemic as a case which put competition on hold instead of changing the power of competition discourse in the long run, and it also demonstrates that such interruptions provide new options to play additional competitive games with new stakes in the field. The question of under which conditions the dominant competition discourse may be replaced by other discourses in the long run remains open.

In regard to organisational change in times of crisis, we refer to two strands of theoretical work: The first strand argues that in times of crisis ‘change is an act of deconstruction as much as of creation’ (Biggart, 1977, 410). Here, a crisis such as the pandemic increases the pressure to get rid of old methods in favour of the new. The second strand of research focuses less on the processes of change but rather on the contextual conditions under which these changes occur (Kingdon, 2003). Being under-regulated in terms of specific standards for teaching, for instance, might go hand in hand with being open to new ideas during the pandemic. Organisational research has proposed different concepts and categories for such potential moments of change, such as windows of opportunity (Kwak & Yoon, 2020). Universities are an interesting case since they are fragmented organisations where disciplines still matter. Our results identified different discourses and showed that these discourses correspond with changes in various disciplines, departments and subjects. Examples for such changes in digitalisation are changes in teaching in disciplines in which teaching was not only simulated online but new formats were developed. Internationalisation at home became a label for processes in which digital formats allowed online cooperation with international partners or partners in different locations within the country (Buckner et al., 2022). The duty of care led to some new formats for looking after international students, for instance when they arrive, even after the lockdowns during the pandemic. Hence, our analysis provides us with a comparative lens through which we can view changes in

different organisational spaces that are also legitimised with the vocabulary of the discourses we presented.

Like any other study, ours is not without limitations. First, our sampling could have been expanded to more cases and organisational archetypes. Nevertheless, we could open a discussion about a dominant governance mode that has been put on hold in higher education. Second, we tried to take a vertical slice through the organisation, but focusing on university leaderships more extensively would have enabled us to more deeply analyse the extent to which competing discourses have prevented them, for instance, from working on applications and preparing for funding contests in practice or not. Third, we think that analysing the power bases of the discourses on the duty of care, the role of science in society and digitalisation in more detail would generate valuable results. This means going deeper into other material including additional sources for analysing the public debate.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. This work was supported by the German Research Foundation in the Research Group ‘Multiple Competition in Higher Education (Grant number FOR 5234 [447967785] and [447967785]) and by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (Project: European Universities – Critical Futures /8047-00066B).

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Bergan, S., Gallagher, T., Harkavy, I., Munck, R., & van’t Land, H. (2021). Higher education’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic - building a more sustainable and democratic future. In *Council of Europe Higher Education Series*, 25. Council of Europe.
- Biggart, N. W. (1977). The creative-destructive process of organizational change: The case of the post office. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 22(3), 410–426. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2392181>
- Bleiklie, I., Enders, J., & Lepori, B. (Eds.). (2017). *Managing universities: Policy and organizational change in a Western European comparative perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan/Springer.
- Bok, D. (2003). *Universities in the marketplace: The commercialization of higher education*. Princeton University Press.
- Bromley, P., & Meyer, J. W. (2015). *Hyper-Organization. Global Organizational Expansion*. Oxford University Press.
- Buckner, E., Denenberg, J., Gelashvili, M., Kontelli, M., Marroquin Rodriguez, A., Wang, L., & Zhang, Y. (2022). The internationalization of higher education in the wake of COVID-19: A rigorous review of the literature on short-term impacts. In *CIHE Perspectives (20)*. Boston College (Center for International Higher Education).
- Chia, R. (2000). Discourse analysis organizational analysis. *Organization*, 7(3), 513–518. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135050840073009>
- Christensen, T., Gornitzka, Å., & Ramirez, F. O. (Eds.). (2019). *Universities as agencies: Reputation and professionalization (public sector organizations)*. Palgrave Macmillan.



- Cooren, F. (2001). *The organizing property of communication*. John Benjamins.
- Flick, U. (2020). Gütekriterien qualitativer Forschung. In G. Mey & K. Mruck (Eds.), *Handbuch Qualitative Forschung in der Psychologie* (pp. 247–263). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-26887-9\\_30](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-26887-9_30)
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archeology of knowledge*. Routledge.
- Grant, D., Hardy, C., Oswick, C., & Putnam, L. L. (2004). Introduction: Organizational discourse: Exploring the field. In D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick, & L. Putnam (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse* (pp. 1–36). Sage.
- Hüther, O., & Krücken, G. (2018). *Higher education in Germany – Recent developments in an international perspective*. Springer.
- Khan, T. H., & MacEachen, E. (2021). Foucauldian discourse analysis: Moving beyond a social constructionist analytic. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211018009>
- Kingdon, J. W. (2003). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. Longman.
- Kosmützky, A., & Krücken, G. (2023). Governing research: New forms of competition and cooperation in academia. In K. Sahlin & U. Eriksson-Zetterquist (Eds.), *University collegiality and the erosion of faculty authority (Research in the Sociology of Organizations)* (Vol. 86, pp. 31–57). Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Krücken, G. (2017). Die Transformation von Universitäten in Wettbewerbsakteure. *Beiträge zur Hochschulforschung*, 39(3–4), 10–29.
- Krücken, G. (2021). Multiple competitions in higher education: A conceptual approach. *Innovation Organization & Management*, 23(2), 163–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14479338.2019.1684652>
- Kudesia, R. S. (2017). Organizational sensemaking. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Psychology*. Oxford University Press.
- Kwak, K., & Yoon, H. D. (2020). Unpacking transnational industry legitimacy dynamics, windows of opportunity, and latecomers' catch-up in complex product systems. *Research Policy*, 49(4), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2020.103954>
- Latour, B. (2000). *We have never been modern*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Lee, K., & Malerba, F. (2017). Catch-up cycles and changes in industrial leadership: Windows of opportunity and responses of firms and countries in the evolution of sectoral systems. *Research Policy*, 46(2), 338–351. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2016.09.006>
- Magalhães, A., & Veiga, A. (2015). The narrative approach in higher education research. In M. Tight & J. Huisman (Eds.), *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research* (Vol. 1, pp. 311–331). Emerald.
- Maitlis, S., & Sonenshein, S. (2010). Sensemaking in crisis and change: Inspiration and insights from Weick (1988). *Journal of Management Studies*, 47(3), 551–580. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00908.x>
- Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1(2), 20 <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0002204>
- Meijerink, S. (2005). Understanding policy stability and change. The interplay of advocacy coalitions and epistemic communities, windows of opportunity, and Dutch coastal flooding policy 1945–20031. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 12(6), 1060–1077. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760500270745>
- Mintzberg, H. (1980). Structure in 5's: A synthesis of the research on organization design. *Management Science*, 26(3), 322–341. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.26.3.322>
- Moralli, M., & Allegrini, G. (2021). Crises redefined: Towards new spaces for social innovation in inner areas? *European Societies*, 23(sup1), 831–843.
- Musselin, C. (2018). New forms of competition in higher education. *Socio-Economic Review*, 16(3), 657–683. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwy033>
- Naidoo, R. (2018). The competition fetish in higher education: Shamans, mind snares and consequences. *European Educational Research Journal*, 17(5), 605–620. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904118784839>
- Oevermann, U. (2016). 'Krise und Routine' als analytisches Paradigma in den Sozialwissenschaften. In R. Becker-Lenz, A. Franzmann, A. Jansen, & M. Jung (Eds.), *Die Methodenschule der Objektiven Hermeneutik* (pp. 43–114). Springer Fachmedien.
- Perez, C., & Soete, L. (1988). Catching up in technology: Entry barriers and windows of opportunity. In G. Dosi, C. Freeman, R. Nelson, G. Silverberg, & L. Soete (Eds.), *Technical Change and Economic Theory* (pp. 458–479). Pinter Publishers.
- Perrow, C. (1992). *Normale Katastrophen: die unvermeidbaren Risiken der Großtechnik* (2nd ed.). Campus-Verlag.
- Perrow, C. (2011). *The next catastrophe: Reducing our vulnerabilities to natural, industrial, and terrorist disasters*. Princeton University Press.



- Putnam, L., & Fairhurst, G. (2001). Discourse analysis in organizations: Issues and concerns. In F. M. Jablin & L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research and methods* (pp. 235–268). Sage.
- Ramirez, F. O. (2006). The rationalization of the university. In M.-L. Djelic & K. Sahlin-Andersson (Eds.), *Transnational governance: Institutional dynamics of regulation* (pp. 225–246). Cambridge University Press.
- Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. R. (1998). Communication, organization, and crisis. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 21(1), 231–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.1998.11678952>
- Seidenschnur, T., Veiga, A., Jungblut, J., Magalhães, A. (2020). Hopes, beliefs, and concerns: Narratives in German and Portuguese universities regarding Brexit. *Higher Education*, 79, 867–884. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00443-y>
- Simmel, G. (1903). Soziologie der Konkurrenz. *Neue Deutsche Rundschau* (14), 1009–1023. English translation 2008: Sociology of competition. *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens De Sociologie*, 33, 957–978.
- Stark, D. (2020). *The performance complex. Competition and competitions in social life*. Oxford University Press.
- Steinke, I. (1999). Kriterien qualitativer Forschung. Juventa Tyre, M.J., & Orlikowski, W. J. *Windows of opportunity: Temporal patterns of technological adaptation in organizations*. *Organization Science*, 5(1), 98–118. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.5.1.98>
- Traue, B., Pfahl, L., & Schürmann, L. (2022). Diskursanalyse. In N. Baur & J. Blasius (Eds.), *Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung*. Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-37985-8\\_39](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-37985-8_39)
- Tyre, M., & Orlikowski, W. (1994). Windows of opportunity: Temporal patterns of technological adaptation in organizations. *Organization Science*, 5(1), 98–118. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.5.1.98>
- Ulybina, O., Ferrer, L. P., & Alasutari, P. (2022). Intergovernmental organizations in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic: Organizational behaviour in crises and under uncertainty. *International Sociology*, 37(4), 415–438. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02685809221094687>
- Vaughan, D. (2016). *The Challenger launch decision: risky technology, culture, and deviance at NASA*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Waaiker, C. J. F., Teelken, C., Wouters, P. F., & Van der Weijden, I. C. M. (2018). Competition in science: Links between publication pressure, grant pressure and the academic job market. *Higher Education Policy*, 31(2), 225–243. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-017-0051-y>
- Watermeyer, R., Crick, T., Knight, C., & Goodall, J. (2020). COVID-19 and digital disruption in UK universities: Afflictions and affordances of emergency online migration. *Higher Education*, 81, 623–641. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00561-y>
- Weick, K. E. (1988). Enacted sensemaking in crisis situations. *Journal of Management Studies*, 25(4), 305–317. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.1988.tb00039.x>
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409–421. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133>
- Werron, T. (2015). Why do we believe in competition? A historical-sociological view of competition as an institutionalized modern imaginary. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 16(2), 186–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2015.1049190>
- Wrana, D. (2015). Zur Methodik einer Analyse diskursiver Praktiken. In F. Schäfer, A. Daniel, & F. Hillebrandt (Eds.), *Methoden einer Soziologie der Praxis* (pp. 121–144). transcript.
- Yeomans, L., & Bowman, S. (2020). Internal crisis communication and the social construction of emotion: University leaders' sensegiving discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Communication Management*, 25(3), 196–213. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-11-2020-0130>