



# Formative Ideas of the National University: A Thematic Analysis of Texts from the Long 19th Century

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## Abstract

For the most part, the concept of the “national university” possess significant overlaps with the public/state, civic, and flagship university. Toward enriching the conceptual toolkit of higher education, this study explores what has been meant by a ‘national university’ and how could we identify such an organization empirically. Through a thematic analysis of a digital corpus in English, the study identifies four substantive themes that characterize the national university as it was articulated during the formative period of the nation-state. The core themes of such a concept include functioning as a tool for state development in terms of human capital, cultural identity, and social networks; serving as a nation’s most advanced learning institution; providing meritocratic higher education without discrimination and in consideration of subnational divisions; and possessing a definite link with the central government. Comparing these findings with closely related organizational models in higher education, a key difference of the national university is in its role in articulating a national identity through providing advanced education that is particularly inclusive of subnational divisions. The paper further forwards two contrasting empirical approaches to the national university: a historical–legal de jure approach and a sociocultural de facto approach.

**Keywords** Idea of the university · Textual analysis · Organizational script · Nationalism · State formation

"There never was an Ivory Tower. It was always a figure of speech. There are towers and there is ivory, both quite real; it is their combination in the idea of

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an Ivory Tower which is both imaginary and consequential." (Shapin 2012, p. 1)

Past decades have seen a proliferation of different qualifiers to the university. Following Clark's Triangle of Coordination, these qualifiers are largely shaped by how universities intersect with other spheres such as the market as exemplified by the corporate university (Krause et al. 2008) or with local communities as further articulated in the model of civic universities by Jones (1988) and Goddard (2009), Goddard et al. (2016). This plurality of models not only enriches our analytical toolkit but also influences how institutions behave in the real world. Such an impact has received backlash, however, particularly against the World-Class University (Salmi 2009) and the Flagship models (Douglass 2016, 2017) that both emphasize research as the primary standard of excellence while ignoring other facets of higher education (see for instance, Usher 2017). While most of these models have been sharply delineated, much light may also be found between the closely related. Such is the case in the interchangeable qualifiers of the public, the state, and the national.

For the most part, analysts of higher education institutions (HEIs) typically conflate the *public* with the *national*. As it is considered under methodological nationalism (Shahjahan and Kezar 2013), the central government plays the foremost role in terms of funding. But if we were to demarcate these two, the national can be best distinguished from the public by its possession of a definite character that sets it apart within an international set. Whereas the public university can be imagined in a general way, the national university carries with it a distinction that makes it singular in a sense. Put differently — if we take any publicly-funded university to be faceless institutions, the national university can be distinguished as the “face” a country puts forward to its peers. The very same dynamic can be found when national teams play for their flag in an international sporting competition. Readings (1996, p. 51) even finds the same when stating that the university also has a “cultural position roughly equivalent to that of a national airline.” In the same way that our conception of the public is illuminated by that concept's opposition to the private, the national is also made alive when placed within an international stage. More to the point, it is very much evident presently that countries have invested in excellence initiatives and other policies that seek to raise the profiles of these organizations under periodic HEI rankings alongside their own. Following these then, if we were asked to determine a country's national university, one way could be by looking which HEI is most highly regarded amongst its peers. One major shortcoming of this approach, however, is that it incorporates very subjective impressions of academic standing that may shift over time. Doing so could be fatal to constructing a stable and comparative approach of identifying national universities.

Another way can be by simply looking at the names of such HEIs as can be seen in prominent examples such as the National University of Singapore or the Australian National University. By privileging the symbolic power of their names, this stands in stark contrast to the conventional way of naming universities after the cities these are located in. It is quite obvious that a university *of* a country explicitly signals an imaginary that is larger than the local or regional in its mission's geographic coverage. In contrast with the Australian National University, for instance,

this distinction is stark compared to the University of Canberra which is also a public university located in the same country's federal capital. In this approach, however, there can be instances where privileging the HEI's name could lead to false inclusions or even leave out others that analytically function as national universities. The Florida National University, a private for-profit university, cannot be analytically included alongside the aforementioned examples for our purposes here. If we are to commence from this approach, additional considerations such as its founding history, location, governance, funding, and relationships with other state institutions, among others, would come into play. Unfortunately, these considerations vis-à-vis the notion of the national university have not been analyzed to arrive at a convincing heuristic of determining, which HEIs can be considered as national universities.

From these preliminary approaches, it becomes apparent that the identification and analysis of national universities form a long-term research agenda that is much larger than this paper covers. The overarching point by the discussion above is that the field has not yet clarified conceptually what a national university actually is. Despite being deployed in many scholarly monographs, it is somewhat unfortunate that there has never been any study on the concept of the national university. Yet, across the world, institutions at the pinnacle of their respective education systems bear these words along with laws and policies that also contain these exact terms.

So what exactly is a “national university”? Imitating Shapin — there are nations and there are universities, but what exactly is being referred to when it is mentioned? How could we systematically identify such a thing in the wild?

The outcome that drives this paper is to achieve a conceptual clarification of the national university that can be of analytical use to generate new insights into organizational diversity in higher education. This conceptual development is a necessary exercise if we are to move on to empirically sample which HEIs are to be considered as national universities, setting the stage for comparative study later on. Moreover, this paper examines whether such a particular concept may analytically disengage with previously assumed characterizations, if any, toward critically questioning received conceptions of national universities. Consider, among other things, whether there could be disentanglements between the state and the national university as, specifically, in the matter of public funding which could open the possibility of private universities to be considered under the category of national universities.

In the next section, the concept of the national university is discussed as it has occurred within the field of higher education, focusing on macro-level theorizations while intentionally excluding country studies, studies on organizations, and those that relate to micro-level actors such as students and faculty.

## The “National University” in Higher Education Studies

Much of the literature on higher education in past decades have mostly examined the strands of globalization, marketization, and the role of universities in economic development (see, among others, Altbach 2004, 2015; Deem 2001; Marginson 2011; Marginson et al. 2011; Ozga and Lingard 2007; Porter and Vidovich 2000; Rizvi 2004; Rizvi and Horn 2010; Scott 2000; Varghese 2009). These strands have been

suggested to be intimately interrelated within a setting of international competition that is primarily mediated by the nation-state (Boulton and Lucas 2008; see also Brown and Lauder 1996; Knight 2013; Kosmützky 2015; Miller 1995). At the same time, contemporary developments, as seen in the United Kingdom, the United States, and across Europe, reveal the persistence of nationalisms. Sabic (2017) detects these ongoing movements to be built on “ideas of authoritarianism, populism, and nativism” that threaten current political projects that work toward further international integration. In many ways, these two forces—the global and the national—have been seen across the field of higher education as contending forces with the former receiving increased scholarly attention in recent years.<sup>1</sup> These forces here, however, are not necessarily seen to be in natural opposition to each other. Rather, they are imagined to be concurrent and compatible. In contrast with an assumption that imagines peak globalization as something that has replaced nation-state (re)production, it is imagined here that these nationalisms are not new—that they have been continuing forces that have never stopped from the nineteenth century and should not be conflated with current extremist authoritarian and populist phenomena similarly termed presently (see Douglass 2021; Storm 2018).

So far, there are only a handful of studies that offer focused discussions on the concept of the national university. One related analysis that uses a logic of scope comes from a sociological study of higher education by Jencks and Riesman (1968) titled *The Academic Revolution* where they correlate local colleges and national universities with the level of interests they serve or represent (in Mixon et al. 2004). In another study by Horta (2009, p. 387), meanwhile, he stresses the centrality of the national-level state, particularly in terms of funding, in the creation of “prominent national universities” that could enable a country to compete globally. Similarly, Castells (2017, pp. 39–40) describes the university as being “rooted in a statist tradition” being both an expression and apparatus of ideological struggles, thus becoming “a strategic tool to enhance productivity and competitiveness” only recently. Castells further explains that this scientific imperative to compete globally was preceded by the university’s function as the training ground of a society’s bureaucracy. Supporting this point, Gornitzka and Maassen (2007, p. 81) further mention that such change happened at the end of the feudal period around 1850 with “the development of national social and economic strategies.”

The most extensive scholarly characterization of the national university by far, comes from a study on global citizenship education by Torres (2015, pp. 275–276) comparing national with global universities: “National learning models seem to qualify at the other extreme of the continuum, or what I have called for lack of a better term, the national universities. They tend to be located in cities, nations or regions which are not prominent in the global system and to be more teaching-oriented than research-oriented. They lack the physical and technological infrastructure of the global universities. ... [They] help their communities and draw their principal political legitimacy from this premise.” While this characterization may strongly

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<sup>1</sup> For extended discussions on the evolving tensions between the global and the national in higher education, see Krücken et al. (2007), Hazelkorn and Gibson (2017).

stand on its own as it comes from a nuanced perspective under a notion of a global hierarchy, it does not allow the ascendance of some notable empirical examples. In contrast with the particular conceptualization above that national universities do not have a global presence or tend to be more teaching-oriented institutions, some named national universities such as the National University of Singapore or the Australian National University arguably share characteristics with other prestigious and research-intensive institutions. Evidently, a likely possibility is that the role of a global or world-class university is not mutually exclusive from that of a national university. Forming a key implication, most national universities would, at the same time, strive toward becoming global research universities themselves while retaining a *national* function. Simply put—a single institution may encompass several functions or organizational models at the same time.

Apart from the much-discussed global or world-class university that remains as a generic prescription for any ambitious institution in the contemporary era, I briefly discuss here two models that may further lend pertinent characteristics to the idea of a national university. In the spirit stated earlier of looking more closely at qualifiers that are more closely related despite the many overlaps between models, the civic and flagship universities here are argued to be the closest to the national model or organizational script examined here.

In the civic university by Goddard et al. (2016, pp 10–11), for instance, they forward that this model's most distinguishing feature is its "...sense of purpose: an understanding of not just what it is good at, but what it is good for. It strives to ensure that its cumulative impact on society as a whole is greater than the sum of the parts of its individual activities. It does this by making an explicit link to the wider social and economic domain, which may be expressed as an aspiration to tackle societal challenges or specific problems, be they global or local or a combination of the two." The authors also note that the civic university is "actively engaged with the wider world" and that it takes a "holistic approach to engagement, seeing it as institution-wide activity and not confined to specific individuals or teams." Moreover, Goddard et al. assert further that the civic university "has a strong sense of place" and is "willing to invest in its objectives to have an impact beyond the academy." Finally, the authors remark that this institutional model uses "innovative methodologies such as social media and team building in its engagement activities" and, notably, "is transparent and accountable to its stakeholders and the wider public."

On this model, there is little disagreement that civic engagement is a natural role for the national university. However, the same may also be said for any public university that identifies its stakeholders belonging to a locality (see Charles and Benneworth 2001 in Pinheiro et al. 2012, 2017). In this regard, it is only sensible that the study's conception of the national pertains to the country level and not to any subnational unit. However, certain qualifications must be made. At its core, the concept of a country employed in this study is defined by any sociocultural and political unit that has achieved international recognition by its sociocultural singularity. For instance, while the United Kingdom may be considered as a single nation-state with its sovereignty, it is imagined here to be properly constituted by four separate countries or nations—namely England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales—with each having its own set

of symbols and institutions. Following this construction, it could be entirely possible that a national university may exist for each constituent country.

The other model that may also closely resemble the national university is the American flagship university as primarily articulated by Douglass (2016). He traces its origin to the development of the country's higher education that was inspired by the English residential college and the Humboldtian model but, compared with similar institutions in Europe, was responsive to societal needs. He further notes that the notion of a "flagship" comes from an American nautical reference that embodies the primary means for naval coordination within a fleet. As a product of the American experience, the flagship model fits neatly within the structure of higher education in the USA in the same way that their higher education systems are largely contained within each state. It would be more likely here that only one university within each system would be given this status. In California, for instance, the "fleet" may be composed by the University of California system, the California State University system, and the various community colleges scattered across the state. Within this, the flagship university then would be the University of California, Berkeley, which is also arguably the most highly regarded public university in the world.

Douglass enumerates the following features to characterize this organizational model: first, the flagship institution does not only set standards among tertiary level institutions but also helps develop elementary and secondary level schools; second, the flagship university, being a public institution, is at the same time broadly accessible but also highly selective in its admissions; third, its liberal arts core combined with professional programs enable it to become a comprehensive institution that could directly and readily respond to the needs of localities and regions that are clearly delineated by state borders; finally, the flagship university must also be sustained by sufficient funding and a community of scholars with advanced degrees together with a large enough contingent of graduate students. One critique of this model is its restrictiveness in adopting a single measure of excellence. As Usher (2017) points out, the flagship university model suffers most from its emphasis on having a top-notch research output that US flagship public universities enjoy. If we follow this critique, it becomes apparent that such a model is constrained by its subnational state containers that for all purposes could be treated as a country-level system in itself.

What the review above suggests is that while concepts such as the global, the civic, and the flagship, and the public have all been fleshed out, the national in our ideas of the university has not been thoroughly established. Especially given recent critiques of methodological nationalism, a renewed conceptualization may open up new analytical avenues that can better reflect a narrow but very distinct category of high-profile higher education institutions that receive much resources in many contexts. Given then that there is no consensus yet in the literature on what identifies as a national university, perhaps a data-driven definition can form a first step.



Fig. 1 Google Ngram

Fig. 2 Data distribution

	N	n
1800 - 1859	220	29
1860 - 1919	155	18
1920 - 1959	325	6
1960 - 2020	602	13
	1302	66

## Conceptualizing the National University

This qualitative study undertakes a textual approach to infer the conceptual terrain of a “national university” through a reflexive thematic analysis of digital corpora in the English language publicly available on Google Books. To identify data points, the literal terms “national university” were used. Although different words may pertain to the same object, I follow the lead here of Quentin Skinner (1978, p. 352) when he states that, “The surest sign that a society has entered into a secure possession of a new concept is that a new vocabulary will be developed, in terms of which the concept can then be publicly articulated and discussed.” It is in the same vein that this paper forwards that the appellation of “national” on a university’s name or function is not accidental nor un consequential but rather signals a new imaginary for such an institution. With this qualifier, such organizations are given distinctive missions that distinguish them within the larger set of higher education institutions.

The graph below illustrates the lexical occurrence of the terms “national university” across the historical range (Google Ngram with smoothing = 8; see also Richey and Taylor, 2020) (Fig. 1):

Saturation of the raw data was performed until search results remained relevant while sampling textually rich data points that contain much more than mere passing references to the national university. To further facilitate thematic development, data were collected under four unequal time periods that each reflect the rises and declines in the corpus. The following distribution table details both population and sample for each temporal division (Fig. 2):

The low number of the sample especially in the latter periods is explained by access restrictions to the digitized data. Although Google Books more or less

encompass and penetrate the total literature (see Jones 2010), some items in this public database unfortunately are restricted by copyright issues especially as one comes closer to present time. Despite this restriction to the data, however, the densest and richest data points coded in this study, fortunately, come from the earliest periods from the year 1817 until 1948. As can be easily gleaned, this range represents a preliminary wave of interest on this concept complete with its denouement. Placed within wider historical perspectives, these data points are placed between the birth of the nation-state around the French Revolution and the conclusion of World War II which triggered widespread decolonization afterward.

The data sample then underwent reflexive thematic analysis (after Braun and Clarke 2006; Maguire and Delahunty 2017; Braun et al. 2019) with two subsequent recursive iterations. To further increase validity, I follow the lead of Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006; also Nowell et al. 2017) in employing both an inductive and deductive approach to coding and thematic development. Through this particular way of analysis, the study does not seek to conclusively track the historical evolution of this concept but rather aims to map the thematic terrain—that is what has been imagined particularly during the formative period of the concept.

It must be noted, however, that the predominance of English within the data limits its generalizability. Although other languages such as Spanish, French, and German with considerable digitized texts within the same historical range were also explored, the available data of these languages did not come close to the digital English corpus, pointing to the language's continuing discursive dominance (see Lobachev 2008).<sup>2</sup> Be that as it may, although there is an argument in acknowledging Anglo-Saxon influence in many contexts—albeit through colonial links—such a limitation points to a need for future research which would examine other interpretations of the national university and incorporates the unique historical experiences and linguistic diversity of other countries even including those of other predominantly English-speaking countries that were not covered by the available data.

In the next section, I present and discuss the findings thematically first and then chronologically under each theme.

## Findings

The analysis reveals four overarching essential themes that are imagined to characterize the national university. These are (1) functioning as a tool towards state development; (2) serving as a country's foremost institution of knowledge; (3) being widely accessible to the general population, particularly with regards to religious identification; and (4) public concerns surrounding the institutionalization of a national university. These themes, which can be inferred to define the substance of a national university, will be discussed below by their primary and secondary codes.

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<sup>2</sup> Aside from aforementioned languages, future studies could also consider other significant world languages such as Portuguese, Russian, Swahili, and Arabic that are officially recognized in more than one internationally-recognized jurisdiction.

Themes	Primary Codes	Secondary Codes
<b>State Development</b>	central government	federal republicanism, constitutionalism
	capacity building	human capital, public welfare, colonization
	national identity	cultural identity, homogenization, ideology
	social networks	elite
<b>Country Flagship</b>	advanced study	pinnacle of knowledge
	global reputation	international competition, national pride
<b>Wide Accessibility</b>	inclusivity	secularism, mass meritocracy
<b>Institutionalization</b>	institutional autonomy	political interference
	resource endowment	material support

Fig. 3. Coding table

Each primary code shall be illustrated by a selected exemplary data point although it must be noted that several of the data points share multiple codes amongst themselves (Fig. 3).

## State Development

The first theme of the national university as a tool toward state development should not come as a surprise. What is surprising though is that public welfare was not one of the primary goals that was initially imagined for the national university. In contrast with a civic model that emphasizes the local and regional, the national university was clearly placed within the level of a central or federal government. In the USA, for instance, its founding fathers particularly George Washington, argued for founding a national university from that country's very beginning in 1789 and repeated well into the nineteenth century as these personalities imagined that such an institution was needed in the growing constellation of political bodies that began to grow in the newly-established federal capital (see Castel 1964). One of these calls included an essay in 1835 by a certain Dr. Charles Caldwell (1835, p. 123) who published "On the Advantages of a National University, Especially in its Influence on the Union of the States" in the Oxford Addresses. Here, it becomes apparent that the federal government's stability and future continuity was very much an underlying motivation:

"And this end will be greatly promoted, by the knowledge communicated to youth, and the national spirit cultivated and confirmed in them, by the education received in the National University. That education will be so far federal, as to represent federal principles and measures in their true character and relations, show them to be indispensable to the welfare of the country, and, in this way, implant securely a due regard for them in the juvenile mind. The youth thus instructed will ripen into men, and conduct, at a future period, the affairs of the commonwealth. They will become members of the state and general governments; and may acquire, in time, an influence not to be resisted, in maintaining harmony between them. ... they will be the most competent judges and the safest arbiters, in all cases of difficulty between them. While they will prevent usurpation, on the part of the national » government, they will so far moderate the claims of the States, as to keep them in obedience to the federal constitution."

The same was echoed in 1857 by an anonymous Alabamian in the *American Journal of Education* with defending an idea of an "American University" in that, "[a national university] would greatly augment the cohesive power of the Union, to engage in a vast and weighty enterprise, in which all the States should equally interest themselves, and the success of which should depend upon the permanency of the confederation." Across these, the centralizing power of the federal government in the capital is argued as a desirable source of stability for a nascent nation.<sup>3</sup>

The articulation of the national university as a necessary organization of a central government is further expounded through the varied roles of building human capital, forming a national-level identity, and creating social networks that would facilitate working relationships at the highest levels. On human capital, Dr. Caldwell (1835, p. 123) again argues that "...the National University will benefit us, as a people. It will form, not only great statesmen and legislators, but philosophers, historians, poets, and other men of letters, of similar standing. And each of these classes contributes its part to the power and prosperity of a nation." A similar message was also found across the Atlantic in a 1871 executive committee proposal titled "A National Technical University for Great Britain and Her Colonies" that emphasized an interest in building colonial capacities. Alongside this building of skills, the national university was also seen as instrumental in active homogenization toward a specifically national-level cultural identity to further support the central government.<sup>4</sup> A speech on the Resolution Against Renewing the Charter of the Bank of the USA by Senator

<sup>3</sup> Special attention was even paid to the location of such an institution with the author stating that, "In order to be National it should be located upon common ground. Under existing circumstances it would be wholly impracticable in New York, or Alabama, or anywhere, outside the District of Columbia. The Smithsonian Institute, and the National Observatory, form a worthy nucleus" (*American Journal of Education* 1857, pp 214–216).

<sup>4</sup> This particular theme is subsumed under the theme of state development to reflect the intentional government policy of building national identity as a means of controlling the population. See, for instance, Bavel et al. (2022) as an example of how national identity impacts the efficacy of government policy, in particular in the recent global pandemic.

Tallmadge (1832, p. 20) reflects an anxiety of competing state-level identities that threaten a federal government:

"It might well have been supposed that a University would be the means of bringing together youth from every quarter of the Union, and who might at the seat of the national government, imbibe notions that would have a tendency, when they returned to their respective homes, to allay those sectional jealousies which more or less exist in different parts of the Union. So far, however, from looking to any such benefits, the framers of the constitution feared the influence which an institution thus located might have over the minds of youth to make them forget or overlook the rights of the states which had been so strenuously maintained."

Caldwell (1835, p. 109) further echoes the same anxieties in strongly stating:

"In what are the citizens of the United States, as a people, most dangerously deficient?"—I would answer decisively—in a SPIRIT OF NATIONALITY. ... That Americans love their country, I do not deny. But they love it only in *subdivisions* [emphasis mine]. Their patriotism, as individuals, does not cordially embrace the whole of it.

From living under State governments, and feeling their influence first and most immediately, especially in personal and social interests, they are rendered so sectional in their sentiments and sympathies, as to be much more of state than national patriots."

As seen in these two quotes above, such an institution was conceived as instrumental to the growth of loyalties to a central or federal government. One specific mechanism mentioned toward this goal was the creation of a national canon that would filter down from learned circles unto the populace who would refer to these works and would then form part of their own identities. As suggested by Caldwell (1835, p. 125), "By either producing within itself the requisite elementary works, or sanctioning officially those produced by American learning and talents elsewhere, [the national university] would soon establish a standard of literary taste and authority, which would be adopted by scholars, as well as by the public."

Finally, under the theme of state development, the national university has also been seen as instrumental in the formation of social networks in a polity. In contrast with the notions of human economic capital and cultural identity, these social networks emphasize collective relationships as compared with the Bourdieusian concept of social capital being an individual property. On this, once again, Caldwell (1835, p. 51) suggests the benefits to the federal government of "the result of education, social intercourse, early friendships formed at school by leading characters, and a constant interchange of kind offices..." As can be gleaned above and especially given that these views come from the formative period of nation-states, these social networks can also correspondingly characterized as elitist as well, pointing to their historical political legacy.

## Country Flagship

If we are to regard the national as reflected by quotations so far as the summit within an imagined territory, then any conception of the national university would also place it in a privileged position not only within a country's higher education system but also on a global stage as a representative peer. Under this theme, there are three facets that articulate it.

First, the national university was conceived to be the very pinnacle of knowledge in a country. This was conceived both in terms of amassing or encompassing the totality of knowledge and in the continuous pushing of knowledge's boundaries. Such an objective could have been stimulated by growing competitive international pressures particularly in the areas of trade and security. A speech before Columbia College by the German-American jurist Francis Lieber (1858, pp. 58–59) imagines the national university as this premier fountain of new knowledge:

"You have engrafted a higher and a wider course of studies on your ancient institution which in due time may expand into a real, a national university, a university of large foundation and of highest scope, as your means may increase and the public may support your endeavors. ...

"We stand in need of a national university, the highest apparatus of the highest modern civilization. We stand in need of it, not only that we may appear clad with equal dignity among the sister nations of our race, but on many grounds peculiar to ourselves.

"... a university, not national, because established by our national government; ... but I mean national in its spirit, in its work and effect, in its liberal appointments and its comprehensive basis."

Lieber's conception of the national university above particularly reflects the Humboldtian tradition of comprehensive expertise as opposed to merely being a specialist institution that falls within the Napoleonic higher education tradition. Lieber could have been influenced by the Prussian-established Humboldt University of Berlin which was approaching its first half of a century then and was building its eminence in the natural sciences during this period. What is additionally notable in this speech made before a colonial college founded before the American Declaration of Independence is that Lieber disengages the national university from government bodies.

The debate over the establishment of a national university in the USA would continue up to the turn of twentieth century when it eventually reached the federal level. The following committee report on the topic of a "University of the United States" in 1893 (1896, p. 7) reflects a persistent interest in this institutional form among elites:

"It is the purpose of this bill to make such organization more complete and more worthy of a great and progressive people by creating at the capital of the nation one supreme institution that (1) shall complete the system of American education by supplying the crowning and true university it lacks, both as a means of furnishing upon American soil every possible facility for the highest

available culture, and of exciting a stimulating and elevating influence upon all classes of schools of lower rank; (2) that shall bring together in friendly as well as high intellectual intercourse a large number of the most gifted and aspiring representatives of all the States for the pursuit of the highest knowledge in all departments of learning; thus supplying in endless succession the best-trained thinkers and workers for every field of intellectual activity, with broader views of men and things, as well as increased love of country and a juster regard for the citizens thereof, irrespective of locality, and more certainly assuring to the USA their proper place in the forefront of advancing nations."

As the imagined forerunner in scientific production, the national university was conceived to serve as a repository of national pride within an international arena underpinned not just by economic and security anxieties but also by ideological ones. An entry by an editor of *The Presbyterian Casket* (1852, p. 30) reflects this particular need for representation on a global stage by stating that, "A band of five thousand youth, collected from all the States of this great Republic, dressed in uniform, and educated at the public expense, could not but feel that they were sons of the Republic. They would be practically schooled into the principles of republican equality." Pennwitt (1899, p. 12) offers us the same thoughts more explicitly with describing a "...great national university, the educational metropolis of the great Republic, the home of learning, a Mecca, a Mount Olympus, for the scholars, the thinkers, the artists, the philosophers of the whole world." These assertions may not contain the contemporary emphases on reputation, bibliographic metrics, and other indicators belonging to the World-Class University (WCU) model, but it would be fair to say that motivations to be world-leading is not a recent phenomenon but has been a fundamental force in driving higher education stratification.

## Wide Accessibility

In contrast with elite aspirations of operating at the highest levels of science, the national university was also imagined to be, at the same time, widely accessible to the general population albeit with some qualifications. The most defining qualification forwarded is that this openness is modified by the ideas of secularism alongside mass meritocracy. On the first idea, the following entry titled "National Universities versus The Nation" published by the *Letters of Publicola* (1840, p. 59) was stimulated by religious tests at ancient English universities where the author finds that, "... nearly all institutions for the education of man have been under the exclusive, arbitrary and irresponsible control of the clergy." Such secularism can also be found across the Irish sea as written by Denis Caulfield Heron (1847, pp 201–202) in the *Constitutional History of the University of Dublin*: "Any attempt to provide that our national University should be for the instruction of the Nation, is met with the cry—"The Church is in danger." ... Is there not more danger to your Established Church now, when its existence is ever prominently thrust forward as the great obstacle in the way of all reform in Education, and all attempts to develop the intellect of the country...." This social conflict before Ireland and the United Kingdom further

raises an analytical issue on the correspondence between states and constituent-countries as the Letters of Publicola (1840, p. 62) entry further asks:

"But what is Sir Robert Peel's meaning of a National University? In Wales, the test of all honors, profits, employments and advantages, at these Universities, turn upon points not believed by one man in twenty throughout that country. Surely, Oxford and Cambridge are not National Universities to the Welsh? To Scotland, they are equally anti-national; and to Ireland, they are as anti-Christ. To England, they are national as about one to three. To call these Universities national institutions, is a mere politician's trick."

In contrast with the historical elite background of universities, this secularism alongside the articulation of national interests can be considered to contribute to opening up these institutions toward greater inclusivity. However, this articulation was not radical in its inclusivity. Rather, it was modified after the idea of mass meritocracy as could be gleaned from this *The Presbyterian Casket* (1852, p. 29) article:

"As long as that temple of science and freedom shall stand, pointing its lofty spires to Heaven, and summoning 5000 of the choicest sons of America, to come and receive within its halls the best education the world can afford, so long his name will be held in grateful remembrance. A college of five thousand students—the best and most promising sons of Columbia! Talk of your Oxford or your Cambridge? How not those old aristocratic institutions fade into insignificance, when compared with the great University of our own glorious Republic. They educate their hundreds—the sons of the nobility, and the wealthy. But our American University, without money and without price, educates its thousands! They are not the sons of the rich or the great, but they are chosen on account of their merit and superior promise, from all the States of the Union."

Aside from the distinctions made on achievement and talent that point to the ascendance of egalitarian and meritocratic ideals, one notable idea included in the concept above is inclusion based on constituent political subdivisions. Such an idea would carry over well until the contemporary era as can be gleaned from ranking tables and American practices of marketing measures of how many states students come from.

### **Institutionalization**

The final theme to emerge from the data is a minor one compared to the more substantive themes above but is still very relevant in characterizing relationships between higher education institutions and government. In contrast with the assumption that the natural location of the national university would be within capitals, there are some such as the editors of *The Portico* (1817, p. 359) who warn of a national university "under the auspices and supervision, and in the immediate vicinity, of the federal government, [which] under the auspices of the Executive, they would naturally look to the Executive as the patron and arbiter of their destinies."

Fig. 4. Dual approaches

	De Jure	De Facto
Nature	Organizational Form	Analytical Category
Number	Singular	Plural
Emphasis	flagship (internal)	ranking (external)
Approach	historico-legal	socio-cultural

Perhaps more importantly are further concerns with the material resources that are evidently needed to establish such a high-profile institution. The following passage published in *The Southern Literary Messenger* (1840, p. 30) exemplifies this awareness as it imagined the initial founding of what is today the Smithsonian Institution into a national university:

"An institution of the first class will, in process of time, without doubt, exist in the USA. The wealth of the country could without difficulty procure extensive libraries and museums, mineralogical cabinets, chemical laboratories, botanical gardens, astronomical observatories, zoological menageries. ... But where the means we possess are limited—and it is doubtful whether or not Congress is prepared to make munificent grants—it is better so to shape the action on Mr. Smithson's bequest that his institute may be the germ, which, as time goes on, may develop itself and expand at last into a National University."

In the penultimate section, I propose two contrasting yet ultimately complementary approaches in how a national university may be identified and analyzed.

## Dual Approaches to the National University

While the different data points above reveal rich, overlapping themes toward mapping the conceptual terrain of a "national university," it is also perceived that there was a significant shift in its construction over time. Based on the data, it is apparent that during the formative period of the nation-state, what was dominant in imagining the national university was its singularity within a higher education system. Put simply—earlier, when the national university is mentioned, most would certainly refer to only a single, specific institution. Presently, in contrast, these terms are deployed more to refer to a category as for instance in US News & World Report rankings. Such evolution in usage could have resulted from the global growth in the number of

higher education institutions worldwide and the much-discussed shift from elite to mass higher education which was the dominant case globally at the beginning of the twenty-first century (see Marginson 2020, p. 372). Reflecting this duality, this paper proposes twin *de jure* and a *de facto* approaches in empirically identifying and analyzing the national university. The table below briefly summarizes the differences between these two (Fig. 4).

In both approaches, the national university is widely recognized as a premier university of high performance and recognition that echoes the flagship and the WCU models. This would be a natural consequence given the historical status of such an institution. Both approaches also view the nature of a national university as more of a sort of centralizing arena, particularly for sociopolitical and economic elites. Given the theme of wide accessibility, one additional implication is that such institutions may also be involved in the shift from more restrictive views on community membership such as ethnic nationalism into more civic forms of nationalisms centered on shared values and identity. As such, discussions involving the national university can, over time, naturally gravitate into issues of social cohesion.

As to their differences, in the first approach, the national university is more often than not crowned with official legal recognition coming from either a central government, constituent state, or even by any publicly-recognized agreement of a community that is beyond the local. The likely tendency for this approach would recognize only a singular national university per imagined community (after Anderson 1991). As a logical consequence of this, in the *de jure* approach, a legal document or proclamation would form the first empirical basis for identifying the national university with the overall empirical approach to be described as *historico-legal*. Empirically, the emphasis would be on organizational behavior that is involved in nation-state building, central–national politics, and civic education.

In the *de facto* approach, compared with a straightforward legal approach, the identification of national universities would be more sociocultural. This can take on several empirical approaches. One, for instance, could examine organizational evidence in student admissions in empirically measuring representation based on sub-national subdivisions. Another approach may emphasize what is widely recognized in terms of popular opinion or whether such institutions resonate with a nation's or community's ethos and ideals. With much flexibility, the danger here is that shifting characteristics and impressions are less fixed than a formal declaration and can translate into certain institutions being dislodged from inclusion. As a consequence, treating national universities as an analytical category can further open up consideration of several higher education organizations that may not be formally under government bureaucracies.<sup>5</sup>

In whichever approach, what remains should be a clear link between the national university and a community's shared imagination of its role. Compared with the straightforward *de jure* approach, the *de facto* approach is much more open in

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<sup>5</sup> Given the resource requirements of playing such roles while pursuing WCU goals, state funding would likely be present whether in the form of core funding or in substantial grants such as from excellence initiatives.

reflecting changes as mirrored in current characteristics. This significant element could set apart the concept of the national university particularly in its role in the production and reproduction of a national identity that many institutions embodying this model pursue. As Friedrich (2017, p. 339) mentions in his review of the tome of Douglass (2016), “One distinctive feature (especially of Latin American universities) is that they are heavily politicized, perceiving themselves as an arena of developing and preserving national identity.” A key difference of the national university then, if we are to follow these thematic findings, is not its socioeconomic impact but rather in its role in articulating a national identity through providing an advanced education that is widely accessible and representative of subnational divisions. Such a conceptual differentiation would further put the concept much closer to the semantic meaning of its qualifier which is the *national*.

Although there are noted disagreements between how a national university should correspond to the nation itself or whether it should be located within the capital to be close to central political institutions, by not settling into an equivalence between the federal or central government and the national university, this opens up further possibilities in identifying which would be the national university, whether singular or plural, that should represent a certain country or nation. In a way of conceptual clarification, it can then be said that it is likely that most national universities can be considered as flagship universities, but not all flagship universities can be considered as national ones. To use an example that merges the structural position and the notion of identity, any reasonable observer would assume that the premier public University of California, Berkeley, is involved more with reproducing a national American identity rather than a specifically Californian identity. This particular role in the construction of a national identity perhaps gives us one of the most distinguishing features of a national university and highly suggests that any profiling of the national university must adhere to a strict delineation of scope.

## Conclusion

Based on a thematic analysis of historical texts from the formative period of the nation-state, some of the core substantive characteristics that clarifies although does not conclusively settle the concept of a national university include (1) functioning as a tool for state development in terms of human capital, cultural identity, and social networks; (2) serving as a nation’s foremost research institution; (3) providing meritocratic higher education without any prejudicial discrimination; and (4) possessing a definite link with central government. Mapping the thematic terrain gives us more conceptual clarity which contributes to furthering a plurality of ideas of the university particularly as these organizations relate to competing interests and demands. A potential insight could be that by ignoring its national arena in striving to be world-class, a university may lose critical support in terms of resources and goodwill in the long run. For universities to survive in a fast-changing world, these would need to play multiple roles and expectations well, even when they contend with each other. At the same time, one important insight from the data that shows a compatibility between globalizing and

nationalistic tendencies is how the conceptualization of the national university is used as a tool to further participate effectively within international competition.

Moreover, as mentioned, clarifying these existing models not only enriches our conceptual toolkit but also could potentially influence how organizations operate. For instance, compared to a previous conception of the "Traditional Flagship University" characterized as "...leading universities [which] have, historically, been grounded in national service, but with a limited vision of their role in socio-economic mobility, economic development, and public service" (Douglass and Hawkins, 2017, p. 4), the formative conceptualization of the national university presented here suggest a more expansive understandings of the missions of this particular set of organizations that have not been documented before. The variations in the examined textual data further suggest two possible approaches in systematically identifying the national university. First, the *de jure* approach which emphasizes the historico-legal development and mechanisms, and second, the *de facto* approach, which emphasizes the sociocultural impact and influence of a national university as a reproducer of a community's ethos. These approaches present diametrically opposed understandings in the nature and empirical approaches future studies may undertake. The potential analytical value of the former approach rests in further unraveling the interrelationships between a central state and HEIs while the latter could offer insights on the reproduction of power structures by the same under discourses of inequality.

Future reproductions of this study could benefit from future computational tools for large-scale textual analysis (see Grimmer and Stewart 2013; Baden et al. 2022) and, as noted, further inclusion of texts in other world languages. With further clarifications, it is hoped that the concept of the national university would rest in more solid analytical footing and could stimulate further thinking of organizational models in the field of higher education.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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